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*The reception of Cultural Studies in Latin America*  
*Between the magic realism and the oblivion of Gramsci*

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## 1. Introduction

Every new perspective which is introduced in a field of knowledge affects not only the field but also the perspective itself. They both get involved in mutual interactions, agreements, struggles and reappropriations that concur in a new symbolic universe. In Latin America, Cultural Studies -at least in Communication and Literature- had a peculiar trend according to the traditions they were based upon. Some used to follow a populist tradition, others the popular catholic nationalism, some others, the tradition inherited from the Enlightenment or different proposition of Marxism in its Latin American versions, to mention just a few of the sources. Although we will not explain it in this paper, I would like to point out that it is possible to distinguish -for the field of culture and education in Latin America during the Colonization - three great predominant projects :

the colonizing project, the enlightened project and the populist project.

- the colonizing project, mainly carried out by the Jesuit missions. They tried to evangelize the aborigines and to constitute a very meek working force. Although the jesuits were thrown away from Latin America in 1767, they left important traces that still remain in the catholic educational systems. It is still possible to observe the cultural intersections between the Catholicism and native cultures in artistic monuments and documents. It is also possible to notice the Indian's survival strategies as well as what the hegemonic culture<sup>1</sup> repressed. Hence important marks of identity have been crystallised. These marks enable us to "identify" the "Latin American"<sup>2</sup>, its peculiar vision and experience of the catholic religion as well as the Jesuit appreciation of the hierarchies and verticalism.

-Another one was the Enlightened project, related to the intellectuals who led the emancipation process from the Spanish Colonialism -white "criollos", who used to read the books written by the Enlightenment's authors-. In the case of Argentina there was a new elite, finally, an oligarchic one, even though their ideas cooperated in the extension of citizenship. During the governments of this elite the compulsory and free education was extended to children from six to fourteen years old - according to the 1420 law, from 1884- and the universal suffrage (for men) according to the Saenz Peña law, from 1912. These acts left traces in the development of the Modern States and their

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<sup>1</sup> In México, Guatemala, Colombia , Brasil or Argentina, the religious art shows these mixtures: angels that have native faces, gifts for the Virgin that come from pagan cults . Also this phenomenon can be appreciated in the religious practices themselves..

<sup>2</sup> When we refer to "identity" and "identification" we bear in mind the analysis of Stuart Hall (1998): "I use identity to refer to the meeting point of suture, between in the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to interpellate, speak to us or hail into place as the social subject of particular discourses , and on the other hand , the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be spoken" (:6) And as regards "identification" he points out in the same book: "... the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed - always in process. It is not determined in the sense that it can always be won or lost, sustained or abandoned. Though not without its determinate conditions of existence, including the material and symbolic resources required to sustain it, identification is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency". (:2, 3)

relationship with the Public. They have also legitimated a way of understanding the culture -as civilisation- identifying barbarism with the processes and cultural crossings of popular strata, of an America before the conquest and of the rural culture that rooted in the traditions of the "caudillos" and landholders.

- Thirdly, the populist projects have had a special response in Latin America. Argentina offers a clear example of this perspective shown in the history and leadership of the "peronism". With its peculiar attempt to harmonize capital and work, populism, at the same time, granted rights to the male workers and civic rights to female workers, and encouraged essentialist conceptions of categories like common people category which was abstractly considered as something good, pure. Such valorisation of these sectors which had never had before access to real citizenship, had (as a counterpart) to erase the traces of every claim which went beyond the established order and favoured projects of social transformation. The populisms fought against left wing parties and conscious trade unions. As cultural heritage of this idiosyncrasy which -as we've already said, had an important response in Argentina- a peculiar form of cultural studies has developed aiming at the convergences rather than at the criticism, a kind of mixture without hierarchy that maintains an affective approach, not only to the products of popular culture but also to the goods that the cultural industries produce to be consumed by the popular sectors.

In Latin America other projects have also developed, but they did not have a similar hegemony. At least in the South, the left wing groups, not only the ones formed by university intellectuals but also the parties and the urban and rural guerrilla movements, were defeated, missing and murdered by the military dictatorships. In fact, the Cuban Revolution is generally considered the only exception and a sort of paradigmatic example. No doubt that it is an exception to what happened in the rest of the continent. However, if we analyse this, may be with less fervour, also in Cuba, the three projects that we have already mentioned, were present. Moreover, we could infer that Fidel Castro himself is a synthesis of them. He was brought up in a catholic family and was educated in a religious school. He became a militant because of the enlightened environments of La Habana University, where the intellectual and political influence of José Martí's legacy was enormous. Besides, through out his overlong government, he has shown his great talent as a leader and attitudes which are similar to many of the Latin American populist leaders. On the other hand, it is not surprising that Castro should have adopted Marxism in the sixties, when the revision of this conception was part of the atmosphere of those days. Neither is it surprising that he should have given a peculiar character to Marxism due to the effect of the theory of the Dependence.

The restoration of the democracies in South America, in the eighties found countries with high levels of devastation, not only in the economic and political aspects but also in the sociality nets and

the practices of critical culture. In this region, the subsequent process, in the last twenty years, has been marked by the systematic rejection to any kind of violence and authoritarianism in politics and by a deep division of spheres, like a sort of weberian exaggeration: on one the hand, the economy, the politics on the other, the culture in a cheerful or sceptical party, but oblivious of its social and historic constellation.

On this ground, the texts of the pioneers in Cultural Studies -such as *The Uses of Literacy* by Richard Hoggart, translated into Spanish much later, in 1991, *Marxism and Literature* by Raymond Williams, translated in 1980 and *The Making of the English Working Class* by Edward P. Thompson, whose first translation into Spanish was in 1989- have an special actuality. Before the translations, Latin American intellectual as Jesús Martín Barbero and Beatriz Sarlo read these books in its original language.

## 2. A classic of the mediations

In the Introduction to *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams developed his conception of the book saying that it was about a "new and conscious relation with Marxism." (Williams, 1980: 17) Throughout the book, this attitude appears again and again. The analysis of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, the debates about the base/superstructure metaphor or the explanation of the creative act as part of a total social process "that, as it is lived, it is not only a process but an active history made up of realities of formation and struggle" (op. cit. 1980: 241) make it very evident that he is re-thinking Marxism.

On the other hand, the effort that Williams makes in order to move materialist thinking from a binary logic to a three dimensional one: - the conception of the dominant, the emergent, the residual - together with the archaic - comes from a preoccupation with the dialectic movement, for the recovery of the versatility of the living cultures and, finally for the recreation of Marxism. At the same time, we can not forget the controversy with the althusserian structuralism, though it is not explicit.

How was Williams read in Latin America? One of his readers and work re-creator has been Jesús Martín Barbero, specially in his well known book "From Media to Mediations", published in 1987. From the very beginning, Williams is present in a quotation with which Martín Barbero opens the book:

"there are concepts loaded with opacity and ambiguity that only their historical study can let us know what we are talking about..." (Martín Barbero, 1987: 13, from Williams)

Nevertheless, Martín Barbero's work is characterized not by the intent to re-create Marxism, but by another argument: the one between this author and the intellectual generation of Latin

American seventies, the years of splendour of the Dependence Theory, Althusserian marxism, reproductive perspectives and the guerrilla movements. Barbero takes Williams to discuss with marxists but not to so much re-create Marxism.

The book **From Media to Mediations** has three parts:

- The main issue of the first one was the notion of **people** and its cultural practices as seen through history. People would have been the social actor that the Enlightenment needed for its political project but whose culture used to reject because of its "superstition, ignorance and turbulence", says Jesús Martín Barbero.

- The second part of the book put emphasis on the notion of **mass** and its cultural consumption. This let him develop melodrama itineraries in relationship with the urban culture. He expressed it in this way:

" Shattering the image of the folk romantic popular the melodrama talks about the urban-popular: dirty and violent, what geographically extends from the suburbs to the prison, going through mental hospitals and prostitution houses." (JMB, 1987: 149)

The people who have become masses in the cities, which practices are narrated by the melodramas, resulted in "a proletariat without class consciousness". J. Martín Barbero expresses it thus with irony (op. cit.

:150). criticizing who see popular strata only like potential actors of the society transformation. But ,at the same time, the popular stages depicted by this investigator, the efforts to describe popular likes, their tragedies and passions in detail give the urban proletariat certain purity halo.. It is a people's image reminiscent of Macondo and the magic.

However, Barbero explained that the melodrama trick would be in the image that it makes of the people, "everything that they have even when not having anything and what they get free from because of their poverty." (JMB, op.cit., :150). This is summarised in everyday language such as: "wealth doesn't mean hapiness", etc. But the author doesn't make more remarks than this about the economy of the popular strata. By means of the mmelodrama (the novelette) Jesús Martín Barbero reaches the mass media. As Clifford Geertz would say (1994), the Latin American author makes an effort to situate himself in "the native's point of view", in this case, in the point of view of the subordinate, the people. Jesús Martín Barbero points out that in this way he has followed Gramsci who, "Instead of going from the text to the author, he remade the way from the people's situation , from the subordinate classes to the text." (JMB, op. cit:151) This point of view, which can be explained and even vindicated in a discussion with those who only considered the people as an object of manipulation,comes from Gramsci's peculiar interpretation. J.M.Barbero seems not to know that when the Sardinian author proposes that the intellectuals should approachto the field that he calls **folk** - belief horizons of the popular strata - it is not to remain there. Such attitude

takes part in a dialectic movement to intervene creatively and to formulate together with the common people a reflexive and critical attitude of what already exists. (A. Broccoli, 1981) This is what Gramsci himself called "creative conformism", a process of educational intervention in the practices of the popular sectors that should not crystallize in the way of populism, by mere satisfaction and acceptance of the established, but to allow a liberating way out from the world of beliefs. In fact, Gramsci's pedagogical proposal is near to the idea of *Verfremdung* of Bertold Brecht's reflexive theatre. Obviously, the getting to know and empowering in situ of the cultural practices of the popular strata are essential in contrast with the mere description of it.

In this sense, there are great differences between Gramsci's and not only Barbero's work but also the works of many intellectuals from the Communication and Latin American Culture field.

In the third part of the book, JMB deals aspects of the features that the Latin American modernity has adopted, As regards politics, this has been characterized by the consolidation of the states first and later by the construction of the national identities. Such statement is interesting because it enables us to understand the role that the mass media, especially the cinema and the radio, played in the initial consolidation of those identities. (We should also add the social uses that the populisms made of the mass media). In fact, J.M.Barbero develops the hypothesis that in Latin America the melodrama and its original creation, the soap opera, staged a Latin American drama which lead to the acknowledgment of Latin American role in the world wide scenary . The author asks himself: Can't the secret link between the melodrama and the history of the subcontinent lie there?

The priorities are the dramas about kinship, the stories about families and neighbours, etc. Couldn't they show a concern for the

basic bonds as the only possible or credible thing in Latin America to the detriment of political and institutional bonds? At this point J.M.Barbero links such socialities to the social movements like actors who, in one way or another, recover those fundamental bonds. Even though the relation between social movements and the media seems to be a forced one, it is still an appealing image. In the book this is related to Richard Hoggart's perspectives in *The Uses of Literacy* who is mentioned in this part.

After a thorough analysis of the wide and changing range of cultures in the continent, JMB's outlook diminishes the word ideology which is replaced by "imaginary and memory" in the thickness of the culture.

At the beginning of his work, Barbero evoked Williams to reflect about the mediations as well as upon the need to historize concepts, and at the end he reveals a sort of sliding where the media turn out to be the place of acknowledgement., the mirrors where ordinary people and

continents look at themselves and the people attempt to show themselves in a reality characterized by exclusions. Marx and Gramsci are left aside and the 70s left wing is stigmatized by the author in confrontation with the "popular forms of hope". The author does not attempt recreating Marxism but rather succeeds in getting rid of it.

When Jesús Martín Barbero, inspired by the 'cultural studies', wrote *From the Media to Mediations*, perhaps he could not realise how populist his discourse were to become.

### **The 'cultural studies' in literary criticism**

Beatriz Sarlo is one of Argentina pioneer intellectuals to spread and re-create "cultural studies". As a critic of literature, she first based her works on structuralistic and semiotic approaches. Her writings, however, quickly began recovering historic atmospheres, by taking literature books as testimonies in the literature/society/history trilogy. So she stated in the prologue of *Literature/Society*, written collaboration with Carlos Altamirano in 1983, where Sarlo specifically refers to Raymond Williams and his idea that 'a sociological perspective cannot stand firmly without asserting the historical perspective at the same time'.

Within Beatriz Sarlo's works, *A Peripheral Modernity: Buenos Aires 1920-1930*, published in 1988, would be the most significant to the academic field. This book is essential for analysing the particular development of 'cultural studies' in Argentina. As early as in the prologue, the author recognises the influence of Carl Schorske, Marshall Berman, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, and of course Richard Hoggart, Edward Thompson and Raymond Williams<sup>3</sup>. In the prologue the author also point out: "I deliberately wrote a book of mixture about a culture (urban culture in Buenos Aires), also of mixture I don't know which kind of discourse this book belongs to. If it relates to the regime of cultural history, intellectual history, history of ideas...". (B. Sarlo, 1988;5). Beatriz Sarlo's approaches were significantly akin to the "cultural studies" simply through her trans-disciplinary attitude, her sharpness in grasping cultural processes from literature mirrors, and her detachment from structuralism. Moreover the

author considers herself, indebted to the tradition of Williams, Thompson and Hoggart.

The book is organized in eight chapters. Its universe is literature considered as formation and discursive practice that emerges within a historical atmosphere, while providing a testimony of a here and now. Modernisation processes in peripheral cities such as Buenos Aires austanded the citizens.

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<sup>3</sup> Beatriz Sarlo herself made an interesting interview to Raymond Williams, published into Punto de Vista magazine, which was the only interesting cultural media during last military dictatorship.

Such processes usually laid an imagery of speed, comfort, and even equality for the poorest sectors, the migrants and the urban poor.

Beatriz Sarlo analyses and unravels these new sensitivity instances. Upon an inquiry of her own, but also as we have already put forward under the influence of the 'cultural studies', the author develops the following main topics:

- The city/country relation and the mythical construction of country life in the character of the noble *gaucho*, as taken from the book *Don Segundo Sombra* by Ricardo Güiraldes. This approach, Beatriz Sarlo explains, is largely originated from Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*.

- (Another topic) Women in the literature of the '20s and '30s. In this chapter, the author analyses the special gender situation of these writers: Norah Lange, Alfonsina Storni, and Victoria Ocampo, who left important traces not only in literature but also in Argentine cultural and artistic production.

- (A third topic) The works by left wing poets in the '20s and the '30s, specially Raúl González Tuñón's.

- The artistic and literary vanguards gathered in magazines like *Martín Fierro* and *Proa*.

- The marginality, and frontiers of the city. In fact, when the author refers to the literary works that incorporated the suburbs as a topic in the '20s and the '30s ( from Borges, to Nicolás Olivari, etc.) she bears in mind the concern about Otherness. 'The scenery of the borders is no longer the literary habitat of the Others, considered as definite foreigners, as a threat against social order, established moral, pureness of blood, traditional habits. (Is is not Others whom are to be understood and redeemed either). They are others that can make up a 'we' with the literary ego of poets and intellectuals. They are other fellow men, and maybe oneself.' (Sarlo, op. cit. 1988:180).

Beatriz Sarlo accepts that the literature of those days founded 'the suburbs' from aesthetic and ideological mixtures. Illustrating this topic, let's make a significant quotation: 'Borges makes the universal literary tradition *criolla*<sup>4</sup>, while universalising the still undefined borders between the city and the country.' The cultural studies and also perhaps Walter Benjamin's works, who articulated culture, aesthetics and politics in a poetical way, would seem the lens from which the author watches and analyses.

Another topic are the essayists of those times whom the author calls 'historical imagination'. She shows to what extent some of them, such as Ezequiel Martínez Estrada and Eduardo Mallea<sup>5</sup> refer to an American soul, an essence, which finally inserts history in the ground of fictional games.

Even more, such authors see American and its mixtures as a degradation

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<sup>4</sup> "criolla"( adj. fem.) "criollos" were Latin American people who resulted from an thnical mixture between Spanish and Indians.

<sup>5</sup> Beatriz Sarlo specially studies the work *Radiografía de la Pampa* by Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, and she also analyses *Historia de una pasión argentina* and *La ciudad junto al río inmóvil* by Eduardo Mallea.

of some dream of pureness. The rage against immigrants and a deep scepticism caused by the disappointment about an imagery of a country that had never existed appeared frequently in their essays. Beatriz Sarlo proposes to study these books from their capacity to build up the Argentine myths and (following Raymond Williams) from the particular 'structure of feeling' that they show rather than from the historiographical viewpoint..

*A Peripheral Modernity...* covers Argentine literature from the key topics of the cultural studies: city, gender, left wing literary groups, vanguards, difference, frontiers, myths, and imagery. Literature as a discursive plot for urban affairs shows to be dense enough for a critical study where it is not only literature but also the social imageries that literature helped to build up that are discussed. In contrast with that of Jesús Martín Barbero, Sarlo's perspective is not associated with populism. It is rather the enlightened project, specially its reflection on the educational system and the formation of educators that seems to prevail in her thought.

As the cultural studies were considered to be heirs to Gramsci's at least at in its origins , perhaps we should wonder for the role to be played by Latin American intellectuals within the framework of that cultural heritage.

### **Gramsci as a Flag and as Oblivion**

Both Jesús Martín Barbero and Beatriz Sarlo, perhaps more the first than the latter, tough- refer to Gramsci, in many cases under the influence of 'cultural studies' and specially as far as the concept of hegemony is concerned. As far as the Colombian researcher, Gramsci is vindicated primarily for opening up the study of popular cultures without the intellectual halo of underestimation for the popular and secondly because of his intellectual rescue of the notion of hegemony. However, Barbero assumes that hegemony is associated to covenants, negotiations, and general consensus by and among different politico-cultural projects. We have already indicated the special meaning given by Barbero of the *folklore* concept, setting aside the place assigned by Gramsci to the educational task therein.

Gramsci's figure has other connotations in Beatriz Sarlo. As we have seen, during the time of the last dictatorship in Argentina, Sarlo created along with a group of intellectuals the *Punto de Vista* magazine. Gramsci, among others, was discussed from that cultural forum. But what Gramsci was discussed there? Was it the one rescued by the researchers linked to cultural studies? This is an interesting question since it refers to a cultural genealogy: Some intellectuals related to the *Punto de Vista* magazine had participated, many years before, in the '60s, in another Argentine anti-establishment magazine, born in the city of Cordoba, called *Pasado y Presente*. At that time, Gramsci's adherence had to do with discussing Lenin or Stalin. Some of these youngsters such as José Aricó, that would then appear in

*Punto de Vista*, were communist militants and found practically an abyss between that political party and the Gramsci's proposals of construction of an hegemony, valuation of the civil society, bet on a cultural change. Then they gathered and after leaving the Communist Party they created the *Pasado y Presente* magazine, of definite Gramsci's inspiration. Consistent with this inspiration, they shared the intellectual tasks with a calling for commitment in social life. The *Pasado y Presente* magazine group became linked even with the combative unions, with the guerrilla movements and specially with the Montoneros organisation, and obviously it had missing members, exiles, and death to undergo. Many

years afterwards, in 1987, José Aricó himself explained in *Punto de Vista* magazine:

“The kind of Marxism that we try to appropriate and for which the highest encouragement and contribution came from Gramsci did not intend to find its principle of validation in itself; it looked for such principle in its capacity to match itself with the facts of a reality under transformation.” (J. Aricó, in *Punto de Vista*, N°29, 1987:10)

Moreover he pointed out two Gramsci's categories that the group from the *Pasado y Presente* magazine, specially appreciated i.e. **criticality** and **historicity**, which had enabled them to approach reality, not dogmatically as the Argentine left had done in the '60s, but equally critical of the existing order. Despite the fact that these reflections and recalling integrate an article in the *Punto de Vista* magazine under the edition of Beatriz Sarlo, such Gramsci's beliefs have no longer the same strength. After the dictatorship experiences in Argentina and upon the exile suffered by a great number of Gramsci's intellectuals, return to public life was characterised by the adherence of the group itself to socialdemocrat political perspectives. The Gramsci who had enriched the left wing culture was not longer the one read in connection with the 'cultural studies'. Cultural thought prevailed on participation for social change. In general, literary criticism, as well as the essays on the expansion of soap opera on television sent Gramsci's thought into oblivion, despite the fact that they still his image in the way of flag and homage. Once again the cultural field was overthrown by the thought that abides by reality as it is.

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The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was a research centre at the University of Birmingham, England. It was founded in 1964 by Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart, its first director. From 1964 to 2002, the Centre played a "critical" role in developing the field of cultural studies. The Centre was the focus for what became known as the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, or, more generally, 'British cultural studies'. After its first director, Richard Hoggart departed in 1968, the Centre

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