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A critical approach to identities in Media Reception Studies

Uma abordagem crítica das identidades nos estudos de recepção

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Resumo: *O artigo apresenta discussão teórica acerca dos obstáculos – criados no manejo de conceitos adotados nos estudos de recepção e consumo de mídia – que impedem a compreensão da vinculação entre experiência sociocultural e práticas de comunicação nos processos hegemônicos de estruturação do tecido social. Observamos que falta nos estudos que tematizam as identidades de classe e gênero a articulação entre diferença e desigualdade, pois usualmente as questões identitárias são problematizadas como questões de diferenças entre indivíduos e grupos sem que a questão estrutural da desigualdade econômica seja abordada. O conceito de classe social é a principal via para retomar a problemática das relações de poder nas apropriações da mídia enquanto também sugerimos os conceitos de reconhecimento e redistribuição propostos por Nancy Fraser.*

Palavras-chave: *Estudos de Recepção; Reconhecimento; Redistribuição; Identidades; Classe Social.*

Abstract: *The article presents a theoretical discussion concerning the obstacles - created in the management of concepts adopted in studies of media reception and consumption - that prevent the understanding of the link between sociocultural experience and communication practices in the hegemonic processes of structuring the social fabric. We observed that studies that focus on class and gender identities lack the articulation between difference and inequality, as identity issues are usually problematized as issues of differences between individuals and groups without the structural issue of economic inequality being addressed. The concept of social class is the main way to return to the issue of power relations*

in media appropriations, while we also suggest the concepts of recognition and redistribution proposed by Nancy Fraser.

Keywords: *Reception Studies; Recognition; Redistribution; Identities; Social Class*

Introduction

A key question in research on media reception and consumption is to reflect on the link between sociocultural experience and communication practices in the hegemonic processes of structuring the social fabric. In that line of inquiry, identities are among the central themes for understanding the relationships between how identifications with worldviews and lifestyles endorse or not the hierarchies that divide social groups into positions of dominance or subalternity. However, as we will see, the issue of hegemony – crucial to Anglo-Saxon or Latin American Cultural Studies, which are fundamental paradigms for reception studies in Brazil – has been losing strength in research.

Escosteguy (2009, p. 4) applied this diagnosis to identity studies within reception research, observing the omission of power relations and the regulation of the personal and private spheres by the media. In other words, "the uses and appropriations of media texts by the receiver without the necessary observation of the limitations imposed by the more general social structuring and even by the media texts themselves" are reiterated.

Returning to this problem, the purpose of this paper is to develop a theoretical hypothesis about the origin of uncritical approaches to identity in studies of media reception and consumption, extended today to investigations that consider the scenario of digital convergence that we refer to here as research on media uses. Uncritical approaches to reception are those that 1) describe interpretations or uses of the media without problematizing the differences found between the recipients in terms of the power relations to which they are subject based on gender hierarchies, ethnicity, generation, class, etc.; 2) do not understand the emphasis on the receiver's resistance to dominant encodings in the light of power relations. The resistance we refer to is what cultural studies define as symbolic resistance, a way of facing contradictions unreconcilable in the spheres of work, family, and so forth.

In our understanding, one of the shortcomings of research is to consider only the cultural or symbolic factors that constitute identities,

disregarding or placing in the background the material factors that direct identifications and dis-identifications according to cleavages arising from the context and the social structure.

García Canclini seems to be the first intellectual to propose a double agenda for the study of identities that considers difference and inequality, accentuating the notion of a narratively and politically constructed difference. This double agenda is necessary for resuming identity conflicts generated for structural reasons, where difference is the tip of the iceberg called inequality. At least for the phenomenon under analysis here, primarily class and gender identities, secondarily ethnic identities, inequality is the hidden element when we deal with social and cultural differences.

For the Argentine anthropologist and philosopher, identities (2001; 2004) do not have a set of traits we can see as the essence of the group – a nation, an ethnicity, etc. Identities emerge from a series of selection operations of elements from different eras articulated by hegemonic groups in a narration that gives them coherence, drama, and eloquence. Furthermore, Canclini's contribution is to deconstruct the notion of identity insofar as intercultural hybridity is the basis for his discussion on identities in Latin America and the role of the media in the decoupling between culture and territory. Among other elements present in the author's work, commented by Escosteguy (1997), we have the loss of the natural relationship between culture and a geographic territory or the process of deterritorialization, as well as the collapse of borders between cultural strata (scholarly, popular and massive) and diverse cultures (local, regional, national and global).

Identity cleavages in Brazilian research are studied separately in investigations focused on gender, ethnicity, generation, and social class. Using Nancy Fraser's classification between identity and class studies (AMADEO, 2014), we have the problematization of identity recognition, on the one hand, and the problematization of inequality, on the other. In this paper, I propose identity recognition in its articulations with media reception can be seen in terms of differences and

distinctions to encompass inequalities, with distinctions being forms of economic discrimination.

In reception research[1], differences can relate to the interpretation of the media mediated by gender, ethnic, and generational identities, interactions on the internet, worldviews shaped by their presence in everyday life, and identifications with certain lifestyles, among others. Such ways of appropriating the media may relate to differences purely in situations of social equality or in the classic sense adopted by supporters of identity politics as a claim for their cultural standard against a normative cultural standard. The notions of cultural difference and class inequality or gender difference and class distinction demarcate this dissociation between the issue of recognition and distribution. In other words, regarding recognition, the intention is to understand the search for the right to difference. As for distribution, the aim is to understand the search for equality.

The paper begins with a synthesis of surveys of theses and dissertations in the field of Communication in Brazil dedicated to the study of identities. Then, the subsequent section discusses the concept of identities and the categories proposed by Fraser, which supports my position about the categories of difference and distinction and explains the importance of treating them as irreducible dimensions in critical approaches to the issue of identities in the field of communication. In the same topic, I exemplify the treatment of identities in the terms proposed in this paper in research on appropriations of the media. I conclude by endorsing the dialectical perspective between economy and culture to understand the formation of identities in their relationship with the reception, consumption, and uses of the media.

1 The debate in anthropology is between the right to difference and the right to equality, admitting that anthropological thought has not created solid foundations to integrate the notion of difference with those of equality/inequality (HOFBAUER, 2011).

The approach to identities in reception studies

Diverse studies on the relationship between media and audience have investigated the category of identity since the 1990s (JACKS; MENESES; PIEDRAS, 2008; JACKS et al., 2014; JACKS et al., 2017): reception, consumption, or uses. If media consumption studies focus on the broader relationship with the media, reception studies are interested in the interpretations and appropriations of media content (RONSINI, 2007; TOALDO; JACKS, 2013; SCHMITZ, 2015). Here, the third nomenclature of the uses of the media, linked to the work of Jesús Martín-Barbero (ESCOSTEGUY; JACKS, 2005), can serve to define those that incorporate the transit of audiences between traditional media and interactions on the internet. Given we can associate Barbero with reception and consumption studies, we reserve uses for studies in the convergence scenario. That is, those investigations that, as Jacks et al. (2017, p. 14) comment, expand the practice of reception or consumption to digital platforms, maintaining "a link with media production."

At this point, it is worth explaining this evolution in the treatment of terms. My proposal to adopt the concept of uses to encompass works that combine the examination of reception or consumption with audience interactions on digital platforms seems more appropriate in the current context of the development of studies, as reception and consumption became better characterized in their particularities than in the first moment when associated with Canclini and Barbero. In the presentation of the two aspects of the study of audiences within the cultural studies approach, I partially followed this association by linking the study of reception with Barbero's theory of mediations and because the majority of reception studies proceeded in this way, and those on consumption followed Canclini's approach. This division began to fade because I combined both authors or tried adopting the perspective of mediations in studies on media consumption and internet uses.

So, I return to Escosteguy's diagnosis and resort to research into the state of the art of theses and dissertations in the field of reception and consumption, coordinated by Jacks (2009; 2014; 2017), which maps the

themes, media, and approaches studied and, at the same time, points out the methodological and theoretical shortcomings of the field. From these references, we can ask to what extent some of these failures may be related to the non-problematization of power relations, as pointed out by Escosteguy.

According to Wottrich (2014), in the 1990s, the theme of identities was little explored. However, in the period 2000-2009, there was a significant increase in studies, both in the quantity of works and in the variety of approaches and focuses: gender, ethnic, regional/territorial, youth identities, etc. The author points out that the processes of negotiation of meanings are the focus of the discussions, and there is no indication that the constructed objects aimed at understanding issues of power, which, in our view, is what allows us to study inequalities. In this phase of consolidation of reception and consumption studies, the term appears associated with the internet, the reception of soap operas, "gender" identities and their relationship with series, soap operas, advertising, and talk shows.

In the most recent phase (2010 to 2015), studies on television focused on the theme of identity formation. The category appears in discussions on the role of identities in traditional media appropriation processes and new ways of using media based on interactions between receivers on digital platforms. During this period, the lack of explanation of the receivers' experiences to understand the appropriations of the media is notable.

Regarding the issue of gender identities (TOMAZETTI; CORUJA, 2017), whether considered in studies of women from a feminist perspective, or in queer studies, in investigations of homosexuality and masculinity, it was the one that most evolved into a treatment that addresses gender asymmetries as a product of power relations, even if the tendency to use genders as demographic data or sample constituents remains. Here, we point out two factors that hinder the understanding of the diversity of appropriations of culture as originating in the positions of subjects in the sphere of production and in cultural reproductions that

hierarchize social groups: the lack of depth in capturing the experience of receiver and the gender approach as a sample selection criterion or as a demographic criterion.

Even if not addressing economic injustice, successful studies partially understand cultural injustices in their relationships with media reception, rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication. Defined not by their position in production relations, "but by relations of recognition, the lesser respect, esteem, and prestige they enjoy in relation to other groups in society distinguishes them." (FRASER, 2003ª, p. 13).

On the other hand, taking into account the social class indicator is practically disregarded (RONSINI, 2012; GROHMANN, 2014; JACKS; SIFUENTES; LIBARDI, 2017), one may argue one of the most relevant forms of studying inequalities is almost absent On the other hand, taking into account the social class indicator is practically disregarded (RONSINI, 2012; GROHMANN, 2014; JACKS; SIFUENTES; LIBARDI, 2017), one may argue one of the most relevant forms of studying inequalities is almost absent in Brazilian theses and dissertations in the communication field, leading to the conclusion that the issue of difference must appear when it comes to describing the relationships between media and audiences. Finally, the very direction of research to highlight the recipients' capacity of resistance (JACKS et al., 2008) can also affect researchers' attention to the issue of power relations.

Thus, in most reception and consumption studies, identities are defined based on their association with cleavages of class, ethnicity, generation, nation/region, or gender. Cultural and social cleavages, markers, or processes are how such studies define identity processes. We defend here that the deepening of the concept is precisely carried out through the discussion of categories such as class and gender, class and ethnicity, and so on, according to the research theme. The justification is that the split between class and other categories linked to identity recognition does not allow to address inequality correctly. If the understanding of class inequality and gender injustice is expanded by

combining the two forms of attribution of privileges, we can also treat gender "differences" as the result of cultural and economic injustice. in Brazilian theses and dissertations in the communication field, leading to the conclusion that the issue of difference must appear when it comes to describing the relationships between media and audiences. Finally, the very direction of research to highlight the recipients' capacity of resistance (JACKS et al., 2008) can also affect researchers' attention to the issue of power relations.

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The concept of identities: recognition and redistribution

Canclini argues that identity cannot be defined with the same rigor as culture because it is not objectifiable (2001). The author discusses how to approach identities without presenting a pure concept, but always associated with another term or problem. For example, when reflecting on national identities, he defines identity based on interculturality and the phenomenon of cultural hybridization.

Having no fixed or concrete attributes, they are constituted or take shape based on processes regulated by the interests and values of the groups that compete for the privileges associated with certain identities. In this sense, the formation of identities involves identity policies

translated into struggles for redistribution and recognition to achieve parity with other groups.

With class identities in mind, it was Bourdieu who, even without using the term identity or consciousness[2], defined the markers that define social class as economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capitals. They constitute class affiliations through the complex mechanisms of naturalization of social position and moral recognition or (mis)understanding. Economic and cultural capitals are central to structuring class domination "because modern society does not primarily base its functioning on social capital" (SOUZA, 2007, p. 65). We can infer that the symbolic does not determine this structuring either because the maintenance of economic advantages and cultural assets are the bases for the reproduction of class position. With the exception that capitals are integrated, as for Fraser (2003b), issues of recognition are not epiphenomena of the distributive issue. We believe that it is possible to bring the notion of symbolic capital closer to that of recognition insofar as it signals the value attributed to an individual.

The debate here is limited to the thinking of Nancy Fraser (2003a and b) and related to Bourdieu's ideas, as the focus is to consider the perspective of difference based on the notion of social class. The conjunction of these perspectives is justified because Bourdieu thinks about social class in a way that is more or less equivalent to that of Nancy Fraser due to the centrality of the economic and cultural dimensions for domination. While, for Fraser, cultural norms block participatory parity (2009), for Bourdieu, culture hierarchizes and reproduces domination at the symbolic level. Here, we do not discuss his concept of justice as participatory parity because it does not pertain to the objects of reception research.

In Fraser's initial reflections, according to Lawler (2014), the philosopher understood that class division deals with the issue of redistribution, and the gender and race division encompasses the lack of material and

2 These terms are absent because, for Bourdieu, the incorporation of the techniques of conduct, thoughts, or feelings that guide actors are not conscious but a kind of personal history "naturalized in a spontaneity without consciousness." (SOUZA, 2007, p. 59).

"symbolic" or identity resources. However, from 2001 onwards, the author states that unequal distribution and non-recognition of individual/group value characterize inequality in any form. Gender is – in Fraser's (2003a and b) analysis – a clear example of a type of social subordination that has two dimensions. It is not simply a question of class or status but of simultaneous rooting in society's economic structure and status order.

However, there is no validity in considering that gender-inflicted damage results from a lack of cultural recognition or appreciation and class-inflicted is the result of a lack of resources if recognition and distribution characterize both. Class belonging encompasses damage caused by unemployment, work, underpayment, and the suffering of being seen as having an intellectual disability or moral deficit. In other words, these normative criteria may not determine class position, but they interfere with professional opportunities and participation, affecting agents' economic position. Of course, for demands for distributive justice, the strategies generally used are related to implementing changes in the economic structure. For recognition claims, the objective is to remove cultural impediments and develop policies that allow the construction of the intersubjective prerequisites of participatory parity and economic policies for minority groups.

Having established the theoretical bases of the debate, we need to articulate them with research on the relationships between class and gender identities and their modes of appropriation mediated by the media. Research into the reception of soap operas observes media outlets are problematic sources of individual and collective recognition because they pay little attention to debating class and gender inequalities. There is an avoidance or obscurity regarding the topic.

Usually, receivers and consumers appropriate these meanings in the direction intended by the dominant ideology (RONSINI, 2012; RON-SINI et al., 2017; RONSINI et al., 2019), as the majority of the audience reproduces class hierarchies and gender. Revisiting these investigations in the light of the categories of "recognition" and "redistribution," one realizes that the concealment of inequality and the

exaltation of difference by soap operas forms worldviews in which the recognition of femininity or social class draws from individual idiosyncrasies or, at best, cultural models.

The research did not develop from Nancy Fraser's theoretical categories of recognition and distribution. However, I approached this theme and these concepts through other means and authors. Firstly, through the debate on identity recognition with authors such as García Canclini and Martín-Barbero, among others. Secondly, through the debate on the category of social class, whether with cultural studies authors such as Murdock (2009) or Morley (2006; 2009) or with Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of reproduction. Then, I articulate the reception of soap operas with identifications or disidentifications related to class and gender attributes connected with everyday experience based on the material conditions of existence systematized by the categories of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Like Nancy Fraser, we understand that gender differences lead to exclusion, loss of rights, and unequal treatment, and economic division generates an unfair division of labor according to gender. Thus, this study could think about the role of media reception in the devaluation of status, the normalization of androcentric standards, the denial of full rights to women, the devaluation of wages for work performed by women, etc.

Recently, Honneth's[3] category of recognition inspired research on the motivations of middle-class individuals for living in rural ecovillages and their relationships with the uses of the media. Subsequent research adopted Fraser's recognition and redistribution in conversation with Honneth's categories, dealing with the reconfigurations of urban middle-class identity in the transition to rural areas. In the first project, on the Uses and Non-uses of Communication Technologies and the Meaning of Life in Common, we were interested in discussing the relationships between social esteem and self-esteem through this search for a "good life" in sustainable communities in rural areas. The second (in

3 In the field of Communication in Brazil, the works of Rousiley Maia (2018; 2019) and Bruno Campanella (2021; 2023) stand out for their adoption of Axel Honneth's ideas to think about the relationships between media and recognition.

progress), entitled Communication Practices and the New Identity of the Middle Class, deepens the "redistribution" category to understand a practical struggle for the preservation of rights such as housing, food, health, and leisure, which also required the lowering of middle-class consumption standards and the adoption of a way of life based on simplicity and that evokes the virtues of traditional communities and small farmers. The study uses the tripartite characterization of recognition – affection, rights, and social esteem – proposed by Honneth to emphasize the last two: the middle class seeks recognition, on the one hand, for the realization of rights taken away by the impoverishment generated by the Brazilian economic crisis and, on the other, by emulating the virtues of an ecological way of life.

Conclusion

In short, we cannot study identity only as an abstraction because the substrate of the identity we construct is the social and material organization itself. One way is to understand it as a process constituted by difference and inequality; that is, epistemologically, by examining the modes of recognition and the modes of unrecognition. A question that needs better assessment in future studies concerns the practical results in the fight for equality, whether class or gender. We need to ask whether, as Federici (2023) states, we cannot change our identity without changing our material condition of life and that this implies ending capitalism or, inversely, if we can change our identity because, in some cases, equality comes without changing the class condition, such as for middle-class women who may identify with libertarian models of femininity, whether or not inspired by media standards, assuming that cultural changes will occur and translate into gender equality even within capitalism.

In Barbero's (2009) thinking, identity is the social bond that connects us to others. That idea can support the argument developed in this paper that there is no abstract bond but only those originating from political, economic, cultural, and media power structures and the potential opened by the struggles for recognition and distributive justice. If

Canclini is the author who dedicated himself most to showing the issue of inequality, from our perspective, resorting to Nancy Fraser's concepts is a fruitful way to approach situations of non-recognition and denial of rights that interconnect for a complete understanding of the formation of identities.

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