

‘Western Communication’: Eurocentrism and Modernity: Marks of the Predominant Theories in the Field¹

Erick R. Torrico Villanueva

Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, etorrico@uasb.edu.bo

Translation by William Quinn

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Abstract

The main communication theories in use have been developed primarily by American and European authors, reflect the characteristics of the industrialized societies of the North, and are framed within the parameters of scientificity as established by modernity. They focus on mass communication, its technological means and its effects. Thus, with a framework constituted above all by positivist epistemology, empirical-quantitative research strategies, and functionalist sociological theory, communication, as a field of knowledge, has structured its profile of scientificity to conform to modern procedural requirements as well as the expansionist objectives of the civilizational model in which it was born. Such theories have reached, in practice, a “universal” scope, a “canonical” recognition and level, and are reproduced in the most diverse latitudes in both training processes and professional practice, as well as in mainstream discourse. Faced with the predominance of this “Western” communication, Latin American critical communicational thought is challenged to seek a new understanding of the phenomenon of communication and its study in the perspective of its de-Westernization.

¹ This article is a translation of Erick R. Torrico Villanueva, “La ‘comunicación occidental’: Eurocentrismo y Modernidad: Marcas de las teorías predominantes en el campo,” *Journal de Comunicación Social* 3, no. 3 (2015). The original article carries a [Creative Commons BY-NC-SA license](#).

Resumen

Las principales teorías de la Comunicación en uso han sido fundamentalmente desarrolladas por autores estadounidenses y europeos, responden a las características de las sociedades industrializadas del Norte y se enmarcan en los parámetros de cientificidad establecidos por la Modernidad. Están focalizadas en la comunicación masiva, sus medios tecnológicos y sus efectos. De esa forma, con una armazón constituida ante todo por la epistemología positivista, las estrategias investigativas empírico-cuantitativas y la teoría sociológica funcionalista, la Comunicación, en cuanto campo de saber, estructuró su perfil de cientificidad a la medida de las exigencias procedimentales modernas como también de los objetivos de expansión del modelo civilizatorio en que vio la luz. Tales teorías han alcanzado, en la práctica, un alcance “universal”, un reconocimiento y un nivel “canónicos” y son reproducidas en las más diversas latitudes tanto en los procesos de formación como en el ejercicio profesional, lo mismo que en el sentido común. Ante el predominio de esa “Comunicación ‘occidental’”, el pensamiento comunicacional crítico latinoamericano está desafiado a buscar un nuevo entendimiento del fenómeno de la comunicación y de su estudio en la perspectiva de su desoccidentalización.

LIKE PRACTICALLY ALL fields of knowledge, communication is dominated by the assumptions, purposes, and scientificity criteria of the "modern" and "Western" world, i.e., those established within the framework of racialized hierarchies and dualistic reasoning² that became the norm when Europe became the economic and political center of the planet after controlling the Atlantic at the end of the fifteenth century and conquering the "New World,"³ which it then proceeded to colonize.

Although there is no explicit agreement among scholars in the field regarding the existence of a canon in the field of communication theory,⁴ the idea is implicitly manifested through the prevalence of a set of ideas and assertions from a handful of American and European authors which are widely seen as canonical. The repeated reference, both in texts for a general audience and in university programs on different continents, to a few notions and theories, as well as to a limited number of thinkers responsible for their elaboration, has ended up sedimenting an accepted way of thinking about communication and of characterizing its analysis, which, almost without discussion, is considered to be of universal scope and validity.

The tangible result of this predominance is a Euro-American conception of communication—basically understood as the transmission of mass messages, through technology, to exert political, business, or religious influence—with an outsized presence and use not only in academia but also in the professional practices of the field and even in non-experts' shared discourse. This "dominant paradigm" sees communication above all as an instrumental resource, supporting the interests of power (of the emitters and/or their financial backers), which is why it confers on its research an immediately practical utility rather than a capacity to generate autonomous social knowledge that can be scientifically and socially relevant.

In addition, the identification of four "initiators" or "founding fathers" of communication research and theorizing—Kurt Lewin (Prussian, psychologist), Carl Hovland (American, psychologist), Harold Lasswell (American, political scientist) and Paul Lazarsfeld (Austrian, sociologist)—by the American writer Wilbur Schramm not only was and continues to be taken as the word of authority, but also almost rules out the possibility of recognizing any other pre-World War II origin for these matters, or at least of assuming that there was some other contemporary source.⁵ In this sense, even precedents of research and reflection on the press that were found in the sociological works of seminal European thinkers such as Gabriel Tarde, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, or Max Weber⁶ were shunted aside, not to mention those that can be found in Latin American thought from the nineteenth century onwards.⁷

² Racialization involves the adoption of the idea of *race* to differentiate biologically and culturally "superior" and "inferior" populations. In turn, *dualistic reason* is what operates with such binary classifications and is also linked to the emergence of the so-called "two cultures," i.e., the separation between the search for the true (science) and the good (philosophy).

³ Also known as the "West Indies," this geographical space found by Christopher Columbus's expedition in 1492 was called America from 1507 onwards.

⁴ The controversy in this regard is raised in the introduction to the book by Elihu Katz et al., eds., *Canonic Texts in Media Research: Are There Any? Should There Be? How About These?* (New York: Polity Press, 2008), 1–8, which rightly asks whether there are any canonical texts as much as whether there should be.

⁵ Wilbur Schramm, ed., *La ciencia de la comunicación humana* (Quito: CIESPAL, 1965).

⁶ See, for example, Blanca Muñoz, *Cultura y comunicación: Introducción a las teorías contemporáneas* (Barcelona: Barcanova, 1989); Éric Maigret, *Sociología de la comunicación y los medios* (Bogotá: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005); and Paulo Serra, *Manual de teoria da comunicação* (Convilhã, Portugal: Universidade da Beira Interior, 2007).

Consequently, as a field dedicated to the examination of processes of meaningful (inter)relation, communication emerged in the West during the first third of the twentieth century with the stamp of empirical, measurable, and applicable knowledge, linked from its beginnings to the political and economic interests of capitalism, since its first developments took place within the liberal framework of research initiatives undertaken by the government, business foundations, and certain private corporations in the United States of America.⁸

A process of formulating a canon was thus generated, in the sense that the field of communication found itself ensconced, albeit indirectly, in a predominant mode of intellectual organization that conditioned both the apprehension of the phenomena of interest and the constitution of the main currents of theoretical production and dissemination on the subject.

The West's Knowledge

The West, in addition to referring geographically to one of the cardinal points, is a historical metaphor that, in terms of knowledge, prioritizes the founding condition and the supposedly superior capacities of imperial Europe and its North American extension in the "New World," and is therefore also the ideological metaphor of cultures (European and Europeanized) that define themselves as a universal civilizing pattern marked by the ideals of individual freedom, economic accumulation, and endless material progress. This model, apart from being intrinsically connected to technology and its logic of permanent obsolescence, is also directly linked to the rationalist and empiricist concept of science that was perfected within the second modernity from the seventeenth century onwards⁹ and that gave rise to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls "abysmal thinking."¹⁰

This way of thinking granted the monopoly of true knowledge to positive science, disqualified alternative ways of knowing represented by philosophy or theology, and established a *line of the abyss* beyond which there are only "beliefs, opinions, magic, idolatry, intuitive or subjective understandings" and never "real knowledge"¹¹; it also established two key epistemological premises: the symmetry between present, past, and future (which comes from Isaac Newton), and the body-soul dualism (which comes from René Descartes).

De Sousa himself summarizes elsewhere the fundamental ideas that make up this positivist approach:

... the distinction between subject and object and between nature and society or culture; the reduction of the complexity of the world to simple laws, susceptible of being formulated mathematically; a conception

⁷ Cf. Luis Ramiro Beltrán, "Estado y perspectivas de la investigación en comunicación en América Latina," *SID-COM*, no. 2 (1982); and José Marques de Melo, "Difusão dos paradigmas da escola latino-americana de comunicação nas universidades brasileiras," *Comunicação e Sociedade*, no. 25 (1996).

⁸ See Jefferson Pooley, "The New History of Mass Communication Research," in *The History of Media and Communication Research: Contested Memories*, ed. David W. Park and Jefferson Pooley (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁹ Enrique Dussel, 1492: *El encubrimiento del Otro; Hacia el origen del "Mito de la modernidad"* (La Paz, Bolivia: Biblioteca Indígena, 2008). For this author—and his criterion is shared here—the first modernity began in 1492 when it became possible, with the incorporation of America into universal geography, for history to be unified on a universal scale as well.

¹⁰ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Para descolonizar Occidente: Más allá del pensamiento abismal* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2010).

¹¹ de Sousa Santos, 14.

of reality dominated by a deterministic mechanism and of truth as a transparent representation of reality; a strict distinction between scientific knowledge—considered the only rigorous and valid kind—and other forms of knowledge, such as common sense or the knowledge considered in the humanities; priority given to functional causality, and hostility to the investigation of “ultimate causes” considered metaphysical and focused on the manipulation and transformation of the reality studied by science.¹²

To these features was added the belief in the self-constitution of modern science as a *zero point* of observation, i.e., as a platform from which it is possible to observe the real without being the object of observation—in other words, as a privileged, neutral, and absolute standpoint that would therefore enable the observer to grasp universal truths without distortion or bias.¹³

Consequently, all the knowledge developed in and by the West adopted these epistemological assumptions of modern science and was inscribed within the limits of its perspective, i.e., of its linear self-referential gaze centered on the profiles, developments, problems, and teleology of societies with capitalist and industrial development, which led them to treat other peoples and their ways of conceiving, knowing, and interpreting the world with a subordinating and even contemptuous air.

Even though communication was a latecomer to the field of scientific knowledge,¹⁴ it could not escape this context, and very soon the authors who established this new field developed arguments in favor of empiricism, objectivist evidence, and the instrumental usefulness of knowledge. In a famous article published in 1949, Lasswell not only corrected himself regarding his inaugural qualitative analysis of war propaganda in 1927, but also defended the importance of quantitative procedures to control the uncertainty of data.¹⁵ And it was from that same decade until the 1960s that the still current main line of communication studies was deployed, oriented towards the verification and presumed measurement of the effects produced by the mass dissemination of messages, opting for statistical and even experimental methods to verify said effects.¹⁶

Thus, with a framework consisting primarily of positivist epistemology, empirical-quantitative research strategies, and functionalist sociological theory, communication structured its profile of scientificity to meet modern procedural requirements as well as the expansion objectives of the civilizational model in which it was born. This is the origin of its “Westernism,” i.e., its adherence to the nature, characteristics, and purposes of Western science but at the same time to the purported supremacy of “Western culture” and its global capitalist designs.¹⁷ Moreover, this is also the origin of its *Europhony*,¹⁸

¹² José de Souza Silva, “Desobediencia epistémica desde ABYA YALA (América Latina): Tiempos de descolonización y reconstrucción en el pensamiento social latinoamericano” (paper presented at the Primer Congreso Internacional Pensamiento Social Latinoamericano, Cuenca, Ecuador, June 2008), 41–42.

¹³ Cf. Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel, eds., *El giro decolonial: Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global* (Bogotá: IESCO-Pensar, 2007), in particular 79–85; and Santiago Castro-Gómez, *La hybris del punto cero: Ciencia, raza e ilustración en la Nueva Granada (1750–1816)* (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2010).

¹⁴ This emergence took place in the late 1920s, with Lasswell’s first analyses of war propaganda (cf. John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson, eds., *Mass Communication and American Social Thought: Key Texts 1919–1968* [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004], 47–50), but its relative consolidation began twenty years later with Lasswell himself and the other three “initiators” already mentioned.

¹⁵ Harold D. Lasswell, “Why Be Quantitative?,” in *Language and Politics: Studies in Quantitative Semantics*, ed. Lasswell and Nathan Leites (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1949).

¹⁶ See Schramm, *La ciencia de la comunicación humana*; and Abraham Nosnik, *El desarrollo de la comunicación social: Un enfoque metodológico* (Mexico City: Trillas, 1991).

¹⁷ Cf. Walter Mignolo, *Historias locales/diseños globales: Colonialidad, conocimientos subalternos y pensamiento fronterizo* (Madrid: Akal, 2003).

i.e., its condition as a terrain of expression of the Western epistemological order in one or more of the European languages that have dominated scientific production, publication, and debate for centuries: English, French, and German (in that order of hierarchy), followed far behind by Spanish.

However, it should be added that, despite all this epistemological, theoretical, and methodological subjection, communication has not yet been fully admitted into the privileged circle of consecrated disciplines due to, among other things, the unresolved discussion regarding its object of study¹⁹ or its theoretical shortcomings.²⁰ The elements of relativization introduced since the mid-1980s by the post-modernist and *cultural studies* currents, although they contributed to opening other fronts of analysis such as transdisciplinary or postdisciplinarity,²¹ did not provide a concrete solution to the problem of the secondary position of the field of communication in the spectrum of established academic knowledge, or to the question of its scientific status.

Locus, Features, and Actors of "Western" Communication

The basic ideas about communication that prevail at the international level, as well as the contours attributed to the field of communication, are above all the product of Euro-American elaborations, as has already been pointed out, that obviously respond to the nature and needs of the social orders within which they emerged.

As early as 1976, in a seminal article, Luis Ramiro Beltrán referred to this fact, concluding that communication (communicology, for him) was born of this same process:

Understandably and legitimately, the United States designed and constructed, in philosophy, object and method, the type of social sciences that corresponded to its particular structural circumstances (cultural, economic and political). They were, eminently, sciences for adjustment, oriented fundamentally to studying conformity with the prevailing needs, goals, values and norms of the established social order, in such a way as to help the ruling system achieve "normalcy" and avoid "deviant" behaviors.²²

And in 1978 Jesús Martín-Barbero argued that Latin Americans' dependence in this field should not be seen only in the practice of repeating imported theories but also "in the very conception of science, of scientific work and its function in society" that prevailed in the region; he also added that "The 'science' of communication is born controlled and oriented toward perpetuating the 'North American style of democracy.'"²³

¹⁸ Cf. Ousmane Kane, *África y la producción intelectual no eurófona: Introducción al conocimiento islámico al sur del Sáhara* (Madrid: Oozebap, 2011).

¹⁹ For several decades, disagreement has persisted about this question, during which time the preferences of authors have shifted the identification of the object of communicational study from the fidelity of technical transmission, the peculiarities and habits of the audiences, and the manifest and latent meanings of the messages, to the competencies of the receivers, cultural mediations, and the alleged democratizing benefits of technologies.

²⁰ The latter issue is discussed in Luiz Martino, ed., *Teorias da comunicação: Muitas ou poucas?* (São Paulo: Ateliê, 2007).

²¹ Cf. Immanuel Wallerstein, "El eurocentrismo y sus avatares: los dilemas de las ciencias sociales" (paper presented at the Future of Sociology in East Asia, Seoul, November 1996); and Eduardo Restrepo et al., eds., *Sin garantías: Trayectorias y problemáticas en estudios culturales* (Popayán, Colombia: Envión, 2010).

²² Quoted in Miquel de Moragas, ed., *Sociología de la comunicación de masas* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1982), 103.

²³ Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Procesos de comunicación y matrices de cultura: Itinerario para salir de la razón dualista* (Mexico City: Gustavo Gili, 1987), 20, 21.

Thus, the initial *locus* of enunciation of communicational knowledge was specifically marked by a geographical location, a historical situation, an epistemological conception, a notion of science, a methodological criterion, and a linguistic-cultural device, as well as by historical-social interests and purposes aligned with the Eurocentric civilizational designs.

Within this framework, thinkers and analysts of the capitalist North, imbued with the facts and aspirations of modernity, granted prerogatives of scientificity to mediatized communication and devoted most of their explicatory efforts to it, leaving aside the basic fact of meaning-bestowing human (inter)relation itself. These factors, in the end, shaped the “Western” intellectual tradition that continues to prevail as the main reference in the field.

Towards a Brief Profile of the “Western” Viewpoint

But what are the distinctive aspects of this predominant communicational vision? In order to answer this question, below is a brief approximation to the proposals of eleven theorists from Europe and the United States of America whose texts were and continue to be widely used in university training and research processes in Ibero-America.²⁴ The books and authors selected for this purpose are the following:

<i>Title</i>	<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Year</i>
<i>Theories of Mass Communication</i>	Melvin L. DeFleur	American	1966
<i>Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction</i>	Denis McQuail	English	1983
<i>Teorie delle comunicazioni di massa</i>	Mauro Wolf	Italian	1985
<i>Cultura y comunicación: Introducción a las teorías contemporáneas</i>	Blanca Muñoz	Spanish	1989
<i>La pensée communicationnelle</i>	Bernard Miège	French	1995
<i>La science de la communication</i>	Judith Lazar	French	1996
<i>Historia de las teorías de la comunicación</i>	Armand and Michèle Mattelart	Belgian	1997

<i>Title</i>	<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Year</i>
<i>Teorías de la comunicación: Ámbitos, métodos y perspectivas</i>	Miquel R. Alsina	Spanish	2001
<i>Sociologie de la communication et des médias</i>	Éric Maigret	French	2003
<i>Teoría de la comunicación: La comunicación, la vida y la sociedad</i>	Manuel Martín Serrano	Spanish	2007

* The original titles and the years of appearance of the first editions are cited here.

A look at the aspects of each of these books that relate to the notions of scientific knowledge, science, theory, and communication; and at the theoretical sources used by their authors, at the lines of specialized thought they identify or else the type or types of communication they favor, and at the geographical areas they consider relevant in the origin of the ideas or theories may allow us to outline the defining features of what we have come to call "Western" communication. See now briefly each of the cases based on this initial evaluation scheme.

Book by Book

The title of Melvin DeFleur's book already gives two valuable clues for what we are interested in examining here: he speaks of theories, in the plural, and of mass communication, which quickly establishes the orientation adopted by this author, who in this book summarizes and explains a small group of psychological and sociological theories²⁵ of communication based on the use of mass media, all of them related to the idea of media influence on individual behaviors. Thus, DeFleur finds only a reduced range of scarcely elaborated theoretical approaches to the mass communication phenomenon, which is why he demands a "theoretical integration" (which, however, he does not consider very feasible), while he also proposes the need for a logical and empirical strengthening of the existing theories. In this respect, he says that these theories are in fact "pre-theories" due to their degree of simplicity, the vagueness of their formulations and their lack of both systematicity and supporting evidence.²⁶

DeFleur distinguishes human communication from that of other non-human organisms, to which he attributes a lack of conscious processes, learning, and culture, while affirming that the key to human

²⁴ The bibliographic and state-of-the-art accounts of communication theories in Latin America list each of these texts at least once among the theoretical reference materials considered to be fundamental. See Jesús Galindo et al., *Cien libros hacia una comunicología posible* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México, 2005); Luiz Martino, "Teorias da comunicação: O estado da arte no Universo de Língua Espanhola" (paper presented at the XXIX Encuentro de los Núcleos de Investigación de la INTERCOM, Brasília, August 29, 2007); and Raúl Fuentes Navarro, "Bibliografías, biblionomías, bibliometrías: Los libros fundamentales en el estudio de la comunicación," *Comunicación y Sociedad*, no. 10 (2008).

²⁵ These are theories of individual differences, social categories, social relations, and cultural norms.

²⁶ Melvin DeFleur, *Teorías de la comunicación masiva* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1976), 223–28.

communication systems lies in the achievement of "isomorphism of meanings" among those who participate in the "symbolic interaction."²⁷ Although he speaks of this "communicative exchange" between individuals, the descriptive model that he introduces shows a one-way relationship that goes from a "source" to a "destination" mediated by a technical "transmitter" and a technical "receiver."²⁸

Among the authors on which DeFleur bases his ideas are Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, Joseph T. Klapper, Charles Osgood, Charles Wright, Robert Merton, Carl Hovland, Elihu Katz, Harold Lasswell, and Wilbur Schramm.

Denis McQuail's book assumes, in the title itself, that it is feasible to speak in the singular of "the theory of mass communication," although in its content (first contradiction) he provides a rather long list of different theoretical elaborations.²⁹ His second contradiction has to do with the fact that he doubts the existence of the theory he claims to affirm because "it tends to be imprecisely formulated" and has "made little progress in the constitution of a 'science of mass communication,' in the sense of a set of firm theses that can be used to improve the effectiveness of communication media."³⁰

The other element that should be highlighted in McQuail's text is that it focuses exclusively on the *mass media* form of communication, from which we can derive a practical equivalence between the phenomenon itself (which the author does not define in any precise sense) and the technological media in which this phenomenon manifests itself: press, book, radio, television, cinema, and recorded music.³¹

The authors McQuail most frequently cites in his bibliographical references are Bernard Berelson, Jay Blumler, George Gerbner, James Halloran, Elihu Katz, Paul Lazarsfeld, Everett Rogers, Karl Rosengren, Gaye Tuchman, Jeremy Tunstall, and Charles Wright, who all belong to a similar ideological register, although he also mentions Theodor Adorno, Raymond Williams, Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci, Armand Mattelart, and Stuart Hall, occasionally used to account for what he calls "alternative approaches to mass communication."

In his book, Mauro Wolf offers a chronological overview of the currents and theories that have marked the trajectory of mass communication research, leading to what he describes as "new trends" of this "dominant paradigm."

As in the preceding case, while the original title speaks of theory in the singular, the content of the text presents at least nine different traditional theories and another three later ones,³² all related to the use of mass media to communicate, and the author admits not only that it is not always accurate to use the term theory to design-

²⁷ DeFleur, 121, 137–38.

²⁸ DeFleur, 140.

²⁹ In general terms, these refer to the relationships between mass communication, society, and social change, as well as to the objectives, functions, roles, contents, audiences, and effects of mass media.

³⁰ Denis McQuail, *Introducción a la teoría de la comunicación de masas* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1985), 267, 268.

³¹ McQuail, 17–37.

³² The author details them: "the hypodermic theory, the theory linked to empirical-experimental visions, the theory derived from empirical field research, the theory of the structural-

nate the explanatory tables in use—since, he says, they are sometimes far from being sets of coherent and verified propositions and hypotheses—but also that the object to which they refer varies: it is sometimes identified as the “mass media” and sometimes as “mass culture.”³³

The main authors considered by Wolf are Theodor Adorno, Raymond Bauer, Umberto Eco, Carl Hovland, Elihu Katz, Paul Lazarsfeld, Denis McQuail, Claude Shannon, Gaye Tuchman, and Charles Wright.

For Blanca Muñoz it is possible to articulate a “theory of communication” on the basis of concepts derived from theories that came out of social philosophy, as well as the sociology of knowledge and empirical sociology, but such a theory concerns an area that in her opinion is delimited by the relationship between communication and mass media and by an effective equivalence between “communicative system” and “cultural system.”³⁴

This author assumes the validity of the Lasswellian model as a “methodological perspective” (idem) and recognizes “two major lines of research” in the field of communication: “the North American paradigm,” concerned with effects, and “the European paradigm,” centered on ideology.³⁵ Consequently, her focus is on mass communication as a phenomenon of contemporary society and her central proposition is that the two lines that nourish the “theory of mass communication” converge, in the end, in the “analysis of the formation of symbolic processes in post-industrial societies.”³⁶

Therefore, Muñoz finds theoretical unity possible and argues that, consequently, communication theory becomes a kind of superior synthesis of the descriptive (sociological) and interpretative (philosophical) approaches to social reality and that it also serves as a “bridge” between them.

Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Daniel Bell, Walter Benjamin, Umberto Eco, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer, Claude Lévy-Strauss, Herbert Marcuse, and Max Weber are the authors most frequently mentioned in the book’s bibliographical references. The only Latin American who appears in this bibliography is Eliseo Verón.

The multiplicity and disconnection of specialized scientific production are probably the two main features that Bernard Miège looks at as he examines the stages of development of “communicational thinking.”³⁷ This is clearly reflected in the very organization of his book, in which it is very difficult to find a consistent organizing axis.³⁸ Thus, when he refers to the fact that “there are three founding currents,” it must be deduced that these are “the cybernetic model,” “the empirical-functionalist approach to the media,” and

functionalist approach, the critical theory of the media, the culturological theory, *cultural studies*, the communicative theories.” Mauro Wolf, *La investigación de la comunicación de masas* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1987), 22. In the second part (155ff.), he adds the theories of long-term effects and those of the sociology of emitters.

³³ Wolf, 22

³⁴ Muñoz, *Cultura y comunicación*, 2, 1.

³⁵ Muñoz, 3.

³⁶ Muñoz, 419

³⁷ “Even if it has reached a certain level of elaboration, which allows it from now on to understand the complexity of the phenomena it is trying to explain, this thought is not unified, and is not ready to present itself as such.” Wolf, *La investigación de la comunicación de masas*, 114.

"the structural method and its linguistic applications," even though he then proceeds, without making any distinction as to the foundational or derivative character he attributes to them, to expound on his appreciations of the "sociology of mass culture," "critical thinking," "psychology," and "McLuhanian thought."³⁹

Apart from this, however, what is interesting is the author's use of the notion of "communicational thinking" to refer to the set of existing ideas and theories on communication, which, while understanding it as the fruit of modernity, he defines as a "requisite for facilitating the modernization of social structures."⁴⁰

Miège states that this thinking "participates at the same time in speculative reflection and scientific production," has diverse disciplinary origins, and is concerned with observing a variety of phenomena ranging from state policies to the practices of social actors; he also notes that it assumes a more practical orientation in the United States of America and initially a more critical one in Western Europe.⁴¹ Finally, he points out that as a product of theoreticians, practitioners, and social activity itself, this thinking has partially become an ideology in the sense that it produces and circulates myths in contemporary society.⁴²

Miège's bibliography includes Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Bernard Berelson, Régis Debray, Patrice Flichy, Jürgen Habermas, Elihu Katz, Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, Claude Lévy-Strauss, Marshall McLuhan, Armand Mattelart, Edgar Morin, Herbert Schiller, Wilbur Schramm, Lucien Sfez, Claude Shannon, Warren Weaver, Paul Watzlawick, and Raymond Williams.

Judith Lazar, for her part, is categorical in affirming the existence of a "science of communication," the nature of which would be based on the fact that communication "has become a well-established, rigorous discipline with university departments, doctoral programs, research methods, publications and scientific organizations."⁴³ To this she adds that this "science" encompasses the individual, interpersonal, intergroup, organizational, and mass levels, the last ranking highest because it is related "to the totality of social life."⁴⁴

As for its object of study, citing Steven Chafee and Charles Berger, she says that it would be "the production, processing and effects of symbols and sign systems," which can be observed using quantitative and qualitative procedures and which ties in with the "universe of social science research."⁴⁵

In terms of what interests us here, the book offers in its first two chapters a brief overview of the history of communication research starting with the "Chicago School" and the "founding fathers," then

³⁸ The book is structured in three parts: "The Founding Currents (1950s and 1960s)," "The Expansion of the Issues (1970s and 1980s)," and "Current Questions." It is clear that this delimitation does not follow a substantial homogeneous criterion. Bernard Miège, *El pensamiento comunicacional* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1996).

³⁹ Miège, 13–43.

⁴⁰ Miège, 10.

⁴¹ Miège, 9.

⁴² Miège, 115–16.

⁴³ Judith Lazar, *La ciencia de la comunicación* (Mexico City: Publicaciones Cruz O., 1995), 6.

⁴⁴ Lazar, 7.

⁴⁵ Lazar, 6–7.

describes the “diverse orientations”⁴⁶ and presents four “general approaches”: “cybernetics,” “anthropology,” “psychology,” and “semiology and structuralism.”⁴⁷

The main authors referred to in her bibliography are Carl Hovland, Elihu Katz, Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, Kurt Lewin, Marshall McLuhan, Robert Merton, Wilbur Schramm, Roland Barthes, Gregory Bateson, Ludwig Bertalanffy, Umberto Eco, and Erving Goffman.

In their survey of the history of communication theories, Armand and Michèle Mattelart assume from the outset a polysemic vision of this notion, and therefore a multiplicity of issues and of analytical approaches to the study of the phenomenon of communication.

The overview they present follows the “order of appearance” of the “schools, currents or trends” that have dealt with issues related to communication—from the development of communication systems (means of transportation and channels of communication) to the economic, political, and subjective implications of mass media processes and technologized networks—thus providing a complex panorama of the complementary or opposing ideas generated in different fields and from the perspective of different specializations.⁴⁸ Hence, the Mattelarts speak of “the plurality and fragmentation of this field of scientific observation” and emphasize the impossibility of positing a linear and chronological history of communicational theories.⁴⁹ At the same time, they note that there has been a generalization of “administrative research” that “goes hand in hand with the liberalization of the mode of communication,” which has impregnated with pragmatism “even the ways of saying communication” and feeds an instrumentalism that hinders the attainment of “true legitimacy” for the communicational field.⁵⁰

The bibliography used by the Mattelarts is one of the most extensive; in addition to classic Western authors such as Louis Althusser, Bernard Berelson, Umberto Eco, Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, Stuart Hall, Elihu Katz, Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, Marshall McLuhan, Herbert Schiller, Wilbur Schramm, and Raymond Williams, it includes references to important Latin American thinkers: Luis Ramiro Beltrán, Juan Díaz Bordenave, Oswaldo Capriles, Paulo Freire, Néstor García Canclini, Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, Antonio Pasquali, Héctor Schmucler, Jesús Martín-Barbero, and Eliseo Verón.

Miquel Rodrigo Alsina, who accepts the existence of “communication sciences,” maintains that “the object of study of communication theories is human communication in its manifestations in everyday life,” although he indicates that “mass communication” constitutes “a preferential object of study” for these sciences.⁵¹ He then identifies

⁴⁶ Among these “orientations,” she cites, for example, without resorting to any criterion of order: political economy, cultural imperialism, the use of media, the diffusion of innovations, dependency, technological determinism, agenda setting, and the spiral of silence (26–32).

⁴⁷ Lazar, 33–46.

⁴⁸ Armand Mattelart and Michèle Mattelart, *Historia de las teorías de la comunicación* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1997), 14. These ideas are organized in the book starting with those related to the “social organism” as a network of information exchange and then moving on to those contributed by “New World empiricism,” reviewing “information theory,” “critical theory,” “*Cultural Studies*,” “political economy” with its variants and studies on the actor and reception, and ending with the currents that examine “postmodernity” in the world of networks.

⁴⁹ Mattelart and Mattelart, 9.

⁵⁰ Mattelart and Mattelart, 126.

⁵¹ Miquel Rodrigo Alsina, *Teorías de la comunicación: Ámbitos, métodos y perspectivas* (Barcelona: Aldea Global, 2001), 14, 44.

three "perspectives" of analysis—the "interpretative," the "functionalist," and the "critical"—which, in turn, imply "currents," i.e., the "sources" that "feed theories of communication with theoretical content."⁵²

In this case, among the authors with the most bibliographical references are the Spaniards Luis Badía, Jordi Berrío, Manuel Castells, Josep Gifreu, Daniel Jones, Miquel de Moragas, Manuel Parés i Maicas, Miquel Rodrigo himself, Enric Saperas, Felícísimo Valbuena, and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, as well as Jay Blumler, Pierre Bourdieu, Umberto Eco, Anthony Giddens, Erving Goffman, William Gudykunst, Michel Mafessoli, Edgar Morin, Herbert Schiller, Wilbur Schramm, Paul Watzlawick, and Mauro Wolf. Also on the list are the Latin Americans Néstor García Canclini, José Carlos Lozano, Jesús Martín-Barbero, Humberto Maturana, Guillermo Orozco, and Antonio Pasquali.

Éric Maigret focuses his sociological examination on the field of "communication and media" (up to the internet) and expresses that "any theory of communication proposes a set of momentarily indivisible elements: a model of the functional exchange between people, a point of view regarding their relations of power and culture, a vision of the political order that unites them"; it can be said that these three elements give rise to the three levels of the communication phenomenon as he understands them: "natural or functional," "social or cultural," and "creativity," which "correspond to the levels of people's involvement in the universe of objects, of interindividual relations and of sociopolitical orders."⁵³

"Communication is primarily a cultural and political fact and not a technical one" and any theory consists of "scientific presuppositions and ideological, ethical and political points of view," he says, assertions that undoubtedly translate into his proposal of "applying the gaze of the social sciences to the media," with which he conducts an overview that goes from nineteenth-century European studies of the press to the "new technologies" and "electronic democracy."⁵⁴

A singular element of Maigret's book is the incorporation of "European founding fathers" into the most widely known theoretical tradition: Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Alexis de Tocqueville, Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Max Weber. However, his criticism of them suggests why for the most part they did not generate research traditions in the field:

On the question of the media, most of the European Founding Fathers were not close-lipped but short-sighted. They looked closely—they kept their distance from the common people with respect to the harmful effects of the media or proposed practical study programs—but

⁵² Rodrigo Alsina, 161. This author says that a "perspective" implies "a similar approach to a similar object of study and a similar conception of communication within society" (163). The "currents" he identifies in the "interpretative perspective" are the "Palo Alto School," "symbolic interactionism," "Erving Goffman," "constructionism," and "ethnomethodology"; in the "functionalist perspective," on the other hand, he gives a brief historical review of functionalism and presents its principles, describes the functions and dysfunctions of mass communication, and summarizes the criticisms of functionalism; finally, in the "critical perspective," he returns to the "currents": "the Frankfurt school," "political economy," and "cultural studies." (163–207).

⁵³ Éric Maigret, *Sociología de la comunicación y los medios* (Bogotá: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005), 15–16.

⁵⁴ Maigret, 17, 16, 49. The critical review provided by this author involves, among other theoretical approaches, studies of effects, the Frankfurt School, the theory of mass culture, the mathematical model of information, the anthropology of communication, technological determinism, semiology, *Cultural Studies*, and theories of public opinion and public space (85–463).

they misunderstood the place of communication in modernity, they underestimated its social importance.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Maigret, 67.

The authors repeatedly cited in this work are Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, John Dewey, Émile Durkheim, Umberto Eco, Anthony Giddens, Erving Goffman, Jürgen Habermas, Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart, Max Horkheimer, Elihu Katz, Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, Walter Lippmann, Sonia Livingstone, Karl Marx, Armand Mattelart, Marshall McLuhan, David Morley, Érik Neveu, Dominique Pasquier, Jean-Claude Passeron, Ferdinand de Saussure, Philip Schlesinger, Roger Silverstone, Georg Simmel, Gabriel Tarde, Alexis de Tocqueville, Alain Touraine, Gaye Tuchman, Jeremy Tunstall, Max Weber, Norbert Wiener, and Dominique Wolton. The only Latin Americans included in the references are Jesús Martín-Barbero and Eliseo Verón.

Finally, Manuel Martín Serrano proposes his own original explanation of the development and nature of communication, as well as the construction of theory about it and the place of this theorization among current knowledge.

This author questions the “communicative anthropocentrism” that, in his opinion, confines communication theories to a “pre-scientific” state, and defends the need to develop theory from an evolutionary conception and not just a cultural one.⁵⁶ He views communication as “a type of interaction that is initially at the service of biological needs and that follows zoological patterns,” and which, therefore, “becomes a support for culture, but does not start with it.”⁵⁷ This means that before “human communication” there were “pre-communicative uses of information” in other living beings—which is why, he emphasizes, it is necessary to understand the general processes of evolution in order to know and theorize communication.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Manuel Martín Serrano, *Teoría de la comunicación: La comunicación, la vida y la sociedad* (Madrid: McGraw Hill, 2007), xiv, xxi, xx.

⁵⁷ Serrano, xviii.

⁵⁸ Serrano, 23.

Consequently, he considers that there is a notable gap between current theorizing about communication and scientific knowledge in other areas and states that “the study of communication has to start when there was neither culture nor society, nor values.”⁵⁹ And it only concludes when it becomes clear how communication has participated in the characteristics of humans, of their societies: in the existence of an abstract and axiological universe.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ This has to do with what Martín Serrano calls the “paleontology of communication” (51–66).

⁶⁰ Serrano, xviii, xix.

Since this is not an account of existing theories, the only authors traditionally linked to the field of communication mentioned in the bibliography are Theodor Adorno, Roland Barthes, Émile Durkheim, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Max Horkheimer, Karl Marx, Abraham Moles, Claude Shannon, Paul Watzlawick, and Norbert Wiener, to which are added others coming from philosophy or language studies, epistemology, zoology, biological evolution, or culture in general, such as Ernst Cassirer, Charles Darwin, Friedrich Engels, Georg

Hegel, Edmund Husserl, André Leroi-Gourhan, Konrad Lorenz, Jean Piaget, Jean J. Rousseau, Ian Tattersall, Nikolaas Tinbergen, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Elements of "Western" Ideas of Communication

From the brief review made in the previous section, it is possible to tease out some noteworthy common elements among the books examined:

The primary focus of the theories in use is on "mass communication."

- Communication is conceived first and foremost as a *mass-mediated* process and, therefore, as a process of transmitting content to specific audiences.
- This communication is related to the power of the media or power over the media, thus emphasizing its instrumental aspect or use.
- It is recognized that the study of communication has a plural origin in a number of disciplinary fields.
- Theories identify repeatedly two basic blocs: pragmatic and critical.
- The few references made to the necessary scientificity refer to positivist guidelines: provision of evidence, quantification, and even assimilation to the natural sciences.
- The main source authors used, all of them American and European, are recurrent, while Latin American authors, cited at best exceptionally, are not given the same prominence.
- The epistemological concern for the definition of theory, object, and method is circumstantial, low-priority, and lacking in consistency.
- Except in the case of Martín Serrano, there is no evident ontological concern about communication as a phenomenon.
- There are also no explicit, rigorous criteria for classifying the theories presented and their corresponding components.
- And it is generally assumed that existing theories, apart from being weak and even unsystematic, are distinguished by their multiplicity, disconnection, and fragmentation.

As for the differences between the visions of the eleven authors whose books have been presented so far, the following can be pointed out:

- The mention of several theories prevails over the eventual allusion to the possibility of developing a unified theory.
- Some distinguish "human communication" from "animal communication." Most converge on "mass communication."
- Some speak of a "science of communication," some of "communication sciences" and others claim that communication cannot be a science.
- The foundations for the study of communication are found in different sources: in communication itself, in the social sciences, in the humanities, in the cognitive sciences, and even in the natural sciences.
- The greatest disagreement seems to be in the naming and classification of the theoretical frameworks that—without any visible conceptual analysis—are called theories, currents, perspectives, paradigms, lines, or schools, even within the proposal of a single author.

From all these elements it is possible to infer that in the "Western" conception, communication is a technologically mediated process that generates effects and in which the unilateral action of the transmitters has preeminence over the receivers, even as receivers are recognized as having competences of re-signification; at the same time, communication is seen as an area of knowledge that lacks a defined scientific status, deals with multiple objects and shows a theoretical weakness that might nonetheless be manageable when specific research aims at influencing certain practices.

As was bound to happen, this "Western-centric"⁶¹ view of the communicational phenomenon and its study is inscribed in the epistemological space of modernity, and both its scope (what it allows us to think) and its conditioning factors (the way it suggests what is thinkable) are those installed in the general social theories or theoretical matrices that serve as its frame of reference.⁶² And this is precisely where its link with coloniality comes from,⁶³ since this view, both in its conservative wing and in the one that claims to be progressive, effectively imposes and legitimizes the Eurocentric civilizing model whose age-old universal pretension prevents it from realizing that, in reality, it is nothing more than a provincialism projected from the colonial core of the fifteenth century which persists in denying and disqualifying worldviews and histories that it sees as "other."

Consequently, due to the frequency with which Latin American academia—as well as Asian and African academia—has been imitating or uncritically repeating certain imported conceptions for

⁶¹ "Westcentric" in the original version of Shelton Gunaratne, "De-Westernizing Communication/Social Science Research: Opportunities and Limitations," *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 3 (2010): 475.

⁶² On the characteristics of these matrices, see Erick Torrico, *Comunicación: De las matrices a los enfoques* (Quito: CIESPAL, 2010), 25–59.

⁶³ This concept, initially developed by Aníbal Quijano, refers to the hierarchies of power inherited from the colonial era, which after independence have been traditionally reproduced by the institutional devices and control structures of non-imperial nations and internalized by their subalternized populations. Cf. Eduardo Restrepo and Axel Rojas, *Inflexión decolonial: Fuentes, conceptos y cuestionamientos* (Popayán, Colombia: Universidad del Cauca, 2010), 15ff.

decades, as well as adopting certain intellectual fashions, "Western" communication was successfully implanted in quasi-canonical terms in the region and beyond without any significant resistance, with the main effect of marginalizing or simply inhibiting the regions' own reflections.

De-Westernizing Communication?

Notwithstanding this long "Western" predominance and the custom of epistemic, theoretical, and methodological "borrowing," Latin America generated from the 1960s onwards a critical-utopian vision in communication that, while not homogeneous, has been marking an alternative analytical route and today faces the challenge of de-Westernization and, consequently, of its own emancipation.

This option is new given that for the first time, within the framework of the "decolonial turn" initiated at the end of the 1990s, discussion has occurred about the possibility of reinterpreting world history and thereby dismantling the Eurocentric logic with which this notion had been constructed.⁶⁴ This implies, at the same time, the opportunity to overcome, via "epistemic disobedience," the constraints of the paradigms established by the West to guarantee for itself the oligopolistic advantage of knowledge.⁶⁵

It is worth remembering that the previous Latin American critique was almost always derived from intellectual and political positions—from historical materialism to postmodernism—born in the heart of modernity and that at no time proposed going beyond the borders of that project forged in unison with the reign of capital, resulting from the incorporation of America into the planetary map.

This is why the challenge of the present is different and bigger, and meeting it still calls for a great deal of preparation. In any case, it is not a matter of throwing overboard all the knowledge already accumulated or of chasing dreamy autochthonisms, but rather of critically reevaluating what is already known and channeling another understanding of communication—more human, social, communitarian, inclusive, humanizing, and democratizing than that of the "dominant paradigm"—as well as instituting a space of quali-quantitative knowledge around a theoretical core that gives priority to consensus as its purpose and to interrelation over technical mediations.

De-Westernizing, therefore, means ceasing to see communication and its field through the eyes of technocracy, the market, blind faith, and political control, and in so doing, to recover the liberating content of its meaning and praxis.

⁶⁴ Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel, *El giro decolonial*. This academic dependence was critically portrayed in the excellent article cited above by Luis Ramiro Beltrán on the foreign character of the premises, objects, and methods present in Latin American communicational research, a text which for this very reason, since its publication in 1976, has never ceased to be relevant. See Restrepo and Rojas, 94–119.

⁶⁵ Souza Silva, "Desobediencia epistémica."

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