Communication Research in Latin America: Will the "Nocturnal Map" Survive or Fade Away?

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On June 12, 2021, at the age of 83, Jesús Martín-Barbero passed away, defeated by COVID-19 and a complex variety of diseases and pains. For decades, his health had not been at its best: among other infirmities, he had endured chronic cardiac and muscular problems. But the recent death of his wife, Elvira, undoubtedly caused the worst of his suffering, for with her he lost his lifetime emotional and practical support. May they both rest in peace.

Although I do not intend this text as an obituary note, some questions concerning Martín-Barbero's legacy to the field of communication studies cannot be ignored or postponed. In this context, this article principally aims to reiterate some of the issues and enlightenments that have emerged from long-term readings and conversations with him, and to project them beyond the Latin American academic field.¹

Among Martín-Barbero's theoretical and epistemological contributions,² his claims for the recognition of communication as a strategic factor in every sociocultural dimension were explicitly aimed at political and ethical debates, formulated in terms of a historical understanding of interdeterminant processes.³ Following Paulo Freire's example (but Paul Ricœur's as well), Martín-Barbero developed some of his work's core concepts in a metaphorical mode. In this sense, the "nocturnal map to explore the new field,"⁴ drawn in the final pages of his canonic book *De los medios a las mediaciones* (*From the Media to Mediations*), condenses the sense of the work done and the effort required, of the "history re-known, and the future sought,"⁵ as a process of culture lived in common, mediated by the reading.

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¹ Raúl Fuentes-Navarro, Un campo cargado de futuro: El estudio de la comunicación en América Latina (Mexico City: FELAFACS, 1992); Raúl Fuentes-Navarro, "Institutionalization and Internationalization of the Field of Communication Studies in Mexico and Latin America," in The International History of Communication Study, ed. Peter Simonson and David W. Park (New York: Routledge, 2016).

² Carlos A. Scolari, "From (New) Media to (Hyper)Mediations: Recovering Jesús Martín-Barbero's Mediation Theory in the Age of Digital Communication and Cultural Convergence," *Information*, *Communication & Society* 18, no. 9 (2015); Maria Immacolata Vassallo

The book was written "accepting that since times are not for synthesis," there are "many areas of everyday reality that are still to be explored, zones into whose exploration we cannot advance except by groping or only with a nocturnal map." Such a map would serve to investigate "no other things but domination, production and work, but seen from the other side: that of the gaps, consumption and pleasure. A map not for escape, but for the recognition of the situation from mediations and subjects."6 The metaphor meant so much to Martín-Barbero that he later adopted the nickname "mestizo cartographer."7

Jesús Martín-Barbero was a Colombian—or better, a Latin American philosopher, born in Spain and educated in Belgium and France, who "discovered" communication practices in Colombia and decided to convert himself into a scholar in this field. He took semiology as his first approach, but soon he began to think of communication transdisciplinarily. When De los medios a las mediaciones first appeared in 1987, Martín-Barbero was already a well-known and respected educator and researcher of communication and culture throughout the Spanish-language world. The book heightened his recognition, making him the leading scholar of the field in Ibero-America (i.e., Latin America plus Spain and Portugal). The work's translation into English (1993), Portuguese (1997), and French (2002) broadened his international renown.8

In an early review of the book,⁹ I brought out two reading keys explicitly stated by the author in its first pages. One was his call to "lose the object in order to gain the process"—departing from mediations and subjects, not from mass culture or the media, and taking historical dynamics as the axis for the study of cultural processes that "articulate communicative practices with social movements." ¹⁰ The other key lay in the articulating model he proposed, and its application to the reading process itself: the book is presented as an instrumental element of mediation between subjects, practices, and projects of transformation, which simultaneously turns out to be a historical recount and, as such, a meta research-oriented device. 11 De los medios a las mediaciones thus conveys, under its complex discursive structure, original contributions to the historiography of media and communication practices and cultures, as well as to the history of the academic field. Yet even more, for Latin America, it has played the role of an influential, reflexive work, like others from the decade, one that would define the area as distinct among Western cultural and linguistic regions.12

From the Media to Mediations (or, Communication, Culture and Hegemony, the title the editors of the English translation chose, unfortunately inverting the original title and subtitle) consists of three parts.

- de Lopes, "The Barberian Theory of Communication," MATRIZes 12, no. 1
- ³ Jesús Martín-Barbero, "A Latin American Perspective on Communication/Cultural Mediation," Global Media and Communication 2, no. 3 (2006).
- ⁴ Martín-Barbero took the expression "nocturnal map" from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Piloto de guerra (Madrid: Ediciones CS, 1969).
- ⁵ Jesús Martín-Barbero, De los medios a las mediaciones: Comunicación, cultura y hegemonía (Mexico City: Gustavo Gili, 1987). All translations from the Spanish of this edition are the author's.
- ⁶ Martín-Barbero, De los medios a las mediaciones, 229.
- ⁷ Jesús Martín-Barbero, "Aventuras de un cartógrafo mestizo en el campo de la comunicación," Panorama económico 7, no. 7 (1999), 12.

- 8 Jesús Martín-Barbero, Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations, trans. Elizabeth Fox and Robert A. White (London: Sage, 1993); Dos meios às mediações: Comunicação, cultura e hegemonia (Rio de Janeiro: UFRJ, 1997); Des médias aux médiations: Communication, culture et hégémonie (Paris: CNRS, 2002).
- 9 Raúl Fuentes-Navarro, "Pensar la comunicación desde la cultura," Signo y pensamiento 8, no. 14 (1989).
- 10 Martín-Barbero, Communication, Culture and Hegemony, 187.
- 11 Raúl Fuentes-Navarro, "Investigación y meta-investigación sobre comunicación en América Latina," MATRIZes 13, no. 1 (2019).
- 12 Among the other works were, Armand Mattelart, L'invention de la communication (Paris: La Découverte, 1994); and John Durham Peters, Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

The first, "The People and the Masses in Culture: The Highlights of the Debate," unfolds an erudite recovery of Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel de Certeau, among other authors, to give an account of the current state of the debate on culture, while also laying the foundations to advance Martín-Barbero's own proposals for hegemony as the key concept for thinking the sociocultural mediations of communication.

The second part of the book, titled "The Historical Matrices of Mass Mediation," incorporates work Martín-Barbero had previously disseminated in widely cited articles, papers, and lectures—though his proposals make more sense as a whole in the book, where they clarify and complement each other. Finally, the third part focuses on the problems and research proposals that, without the previous one hundred and fifty pages, would solidly sustain their relevance, but that acquire much greater weight with them. Titled "Modernization and Mass Mediation in Latin America," this section aims to integrate reflection on "Latin America as a space of debate and combat." 13 It divides into two chapters, first, "The Processes: From Nationalisms to Transnationals," and second, "The Methods: From Media to Mediations." Here unfolds the core of Martín-Barbero's legacy to the field: the methodological shift "from media to mediations" and the continuing process of "mapping out" those mediations as heuristic tools and empirical references in a dynamic transdisciplinary model of "communication within culture and culture within politics." ¹⁴

The significance of the theoretical and methodological shift indicated in this chapter's title is already broadly illustrated in the description of the historical transformations outlined above. . . . Over the last few years, a Latin American movement, dissolving pseudo-theoretical issues and cutting through ideological inertias, has opened up a new way of thinking about the constitution of mass society, namely, from the perspective of transformations in subaltern cultures. Communication in Latin America has been profoundly affected by external transnationalization but also by the emergence of new social actors and new cultural identities. Thus, communication has become a strategic arena for the analysis of the obstacles and contradictions that move these societies, now at the crossroads between accelerated underdevelopment and compulsive modernization. Because communication is the meeting point of so many new conflicting and integrating forces, the centre of the debate has shifted from media to mediations.¹⁵

Ten, and then twenty and thirty years after the book's publication, several scholarly communities celebrated the continuing interest in and influence of De los medios a las mediaciones with special issues of their books and journals.¹⁶ From diverse angles and countries, a good number of scholars, including myself,¹⁷ provided empirical information and critical interpretations about the multiple and con-

¹³ Martín-Barbero, De los medios a las mediaciones, 163.

¹⁴ Martín-Barbero, De los medios a las mediaciones, 228.

¹⁵ Martín-Barbero, Communication, Culture and Hegemony, 187.

¹⁶ María Cristina Laverde and Rossana Reguillo, eds., Mapas nocturnos: Diálogos con la obra de Jesús Martín-Barbero (Santafé de Bogotá: Universidad Cen-

tradictory processes of reading and assimilating Martín-Barbero's proposals. Without ever going through revisions beyond new prologues across its six Spanish editions, 18 the book remains an indispensable reference in many articles, essays, course bibliographies, and graduate theses—as it has been, almost without variation, for more than three decades.

In the many interventions of his career, Martín-Barbero expressed his vision that two opposing foundational conceptions characterized Latin American communication studies, and the necessity to surpass them: "On the one hand, there was the Functional paradigm," which related the study of communication to the diffusion of innovations; and "on the other hand, there was the Theory of Dependence," which asserted that mass communication formed "part of the process that included the domination that Latin American countries had to put up with." The arguments behind Martín-Barbero's defense of his position about the field's strategies to cope with the changing configurations of the communication-culture-politics dimensions of Latin American societies became progressively explicit and coherent as he debated, sometimes fiercely, with leaders and followers of other schools of thought, especially some critical political economists and idealistic postmodernists. The history of the field he traced, as well as the theoretical and methodological approach he sustained, became one of the most influential sources of the "Latin American school of thought." It shaped both research practices and the academic training of professionals trying "to understand the role played by communication processes and the mass media in the changes that were taking place in Latin America" (and elsewhere) before and after the turn of the century.19

But the growing distance between research on the rapidly evolving communication and sociocultural mediations, on the one hand,²⁰ and the implications of this approach for professional training within universities ever more dependent on the market economy, on the other, have steadily heightened the constitutive "tensions" subtending the field. Martín-Barbero often expressed his commitment to the study of mass communication and the shift that "prevents it from being conceived as a simple matter of markets and consumption, thus demanding the analysis of communication as a decisive space in which the public sphere is being redefined and democracy is being reconstituted."21

Taking such an emphasis on *praxis*, along with "nocturnal maps" and similar heuristic approaches as constitutive axes for Latin American academic production on communication, we could describe the recent history of the field in the region as marked by a "disintegrated internationalization,"22 one related to "the stark contrast between

tral/Siglo del Hombre editores, 1998); Miquel de Moragas, José Luis Terrón, and Omar Rincón, eds., "De los medios a las mediaciones" de Jesús Martín-Barbero: Treinta años después (Bellaterra: Institut de la Comunicació, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2017); "Jesús Martín-Barbero: Treinta años de De los medios a las mediaciones," special issue, MATRIZes 12, no. 1 (2018); "Más allá de las mediaciones y la hibridación," special issue, Versión: Estudios de comunicación y política, no. 3 (2019).

17 Raúl Fuentes-Navarro, "Un texto cargado de futuro: Apropiaciones y proyecciones de De los medios a las mediaciones en América Latina," in Laverde and Reguillo, Mapas nocturnos; Raúl Fuentes-Navarro, "Apropiaciones y proyecciones de De los medios a las mediaciones en el campo académico de la comunicación: Una revisión de su impacto, veinte años después," Anuario CONEICC de Investigación de la Comunicación 14 (2007); Raúl Fuentes-Navarro, "De los medios a las mediaciones: Reflexiones en sus treinta años, desde una perspectiva sociocultural," in Moragas, Terrón, and Rincón, "De los medios a las mediaciones" de Jesús Martín-Barbero.

18 Jesús Martín-Barbero, "From the Media to Mediations-Three Introductions," MATRIZes 12, no. 1 (2018).

19 Jesús Martín-Barbero, "Communication as an Academic Field: Latin America," in The International Encyclopedia of Communication, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach (New York: Wiley, 2008). For the "elsewhere," see Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, "Conceptualizing Mediatization: Contexts, Traditions, Arguments," Communication Theory 23, no. 3 (2013).

20 "When a certain communicational product (television news, telenovela, advertising) is the object of study, from its industrial format, the researcher can trigger elements of its narrative in articulation with the logics of production exploring the technicity. He can also articulate the communicational phenomenon with the competences of reception through the mediations of rituality or sensoriality. It is therefore a matter to draw up a specific strategic use of the maps of mediations for specific empirical research" (Vassallo de Lopes, "The Barberian Theory of Communication," 60–61).

the progressive institutionalization of the field," on the one hand, and "its scant influence beyond the Ibero-American and Hispanic academic spaces" and "waning" dialogue with other academic communities, on the other.²³ These are lines of ongoing and emerging debates, in which history provides a key dimension.

Martín-Barbero's foundational work and the critical assimilation and development of his legacy by peers and successors seem crucial for the most needed (re)interpretations and (re)orientations of the historical processes of consolidation of the field of communication studies in Latin America. Hopefully, it can also guide the consolidation of an enriched historiography of those questions, advancing toward some "daytime mediations" and more productive dialogues with other international and regional communities and academic cultures. In a brief but deep and luminous essay, signed in 2019, Martín-Barbero reflected on the transformations of his work, "traversed by history and culture," and arrived at the following certitude: "What it leads us to and what configuration we give to the world today depends entirely on how creatively and critically we confront those spaces that, otherwise, remain entirely conquered by the same history of progress and the same capitalist temporality of which we are heirs."24

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²¹ Martín-Barbero, "A Latin American Perspective on Communication/Cultural Mediation," 284. ²² Raúl Fuentes-Navarro, "La investigación de la comunicación en América Latina: Una internacionalización desintegrada," Oficios terrestres, no. 31 (2014). 23 Florencia Enghel and Martín Becerra, "(Re)Situating Latin America in International Communication Theory," Communication Theory 28, no. 2 (2018); Florencia Enghel and Martín Becerra, "How to Incorporate Latin American Communication Studies into Northern/Western Circles? Reflections on Academic Pluralism as Co-production," in Media and Governance in Latin America: Toward a Plurality of Voices, ed. Ximena Orchard, Sara Garcia Santamaria, Julieta Brambila, and Jairo Lugo-Ocando (New York: Peter Lang, 2020).

24 Jesús Martín-Barbero, "Mapas nocturnos y mediaciones diurnas," Philosophical Readings 11, no. 3 (2019).

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