FROM THE CHILEAN LABORATORY TO WORLD-COMMUNICATION

ARMAND MATTELART'S INTELLECTUAL JOURNEY

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Foreword by Peter Simonson

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William Quinn & Peter Simonson

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Final Words

Overdue and Partial Recognition

Having secured a certain institutional stability, Armand Mattelart undertook an ambitious historical research project starting with *Rethinking Media Theory* (1986), giving shape to his *world-communication* trilogy (*Mapping World Communication*, 1992; *The Invention of Communication*, 1994; *Histoire de l'utopie planétaire* [*History of Global Utopia*], 1999). This voluminous work earned him a certain recognition from his academic colleagues, but it was relative and a bit overdue (in 1986 Mattelart turned 50).

One indicator of this qualified recognition was the invitation to collaborate, together with Michèle, on the *Dictionnaire critique de la communication* [*Critical Dictionary of Communication*] that Lucien Sfez coordinated and published for Presses Universitaires de France (PUF) in 1993. At once an ambitious endeavor and a clear manifestation of the disciplinary consolidation and of the persistence of an encyclopedic tradition in French universities, the *Dictionnaire critique de la communication* was a massive, two-volume work of over a thousand pages that included entries by more than three hundred specialists from several countries. In spite of their intellectual heft, Armand and Michèle Mattelart's participation in the project was marginal: They wrote only one entry on the links between "communication and crisis" in a work that published multiple contributions by other authors (in Sfez, 1993: 1011–1015). As we have seen, Armand Mattelart did not see eye-to-eye with Lucien Sfez on theoretical questions.

Another indicator of a certain recognition could be seen in the reviews —mostly favorable —of the books Mattelart published starting in the early 1990s, which appeared in the leading journals of information science and communication studies, such as *Réseaux* (founded by Patrice Flichy in

1983) and *Hermes* (founded and directed by Dominique Wolton in 1988, and published from the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique [National Center for Scientific Research, or CNRS, in its French acronym]).[1] In the same sense, it is important to note that Mattelart was quoted as one of the most relevant figures in a number of studies—many of them written by leading figures in the field—that reconstructed the history of information and communication science in France. These assessments started to proliferate in the 1990s, a typical manifestation of a process of disciplinary consolidation and institutionalization that sought to shore up the field's epistemological traditions and external visibility.[2] In this same way one can read the multiple interviews that different specialized journals devoted to Mattelart, who offered his testimony and vision of information and communication science.[3] Finally, in 2010, Mattelart published through the La Découverte publishing house a long autobiographical interview with the Canadian researcher Michel Sénécal, *Pour un regard-monde* [*For a Global View*] (Mattelart, 2010).[4]

So, while his colleagues from the French field of information and communication science did offer him some recognition, we must note that, as he worked far from the leading institutions of the university hierarchy and the high-status disciplines, Mattelart occupies a somewhat peripheral position within the French academic and intellectual field as a whole. The constancy of his critical approach and his relation to Marxism (though heterodox and less pronounced, it never stopped being close) in a context where the tradition was losing legitimacy and a series of cultural institutions and formations of the French left were crumbling, helps to explain the marginalization and the overdue, relative recognition of his stature. Furthermore, it must be remembered that in an academic and intellectual field that was being reorganized by the pressure of the mass media, which had become

[1] See, among other reviews of Mattelart's book, Palmer (1992), Pailliart (1994), Soulez (1996).

[2] See, among other assessments, Flichy (1980), Boure (1997), Miège (2000), Meyrat and Miège (2002).

[3] Of particular interest is his interview by the journal *Dossiers de l'audiovisuel* (journal of the National Audio-Visual Institute) in the issue devoted to the history of information and communication science in France. There Mattelart was questioned about his role in producing the Mattelart-Stourdzé report (Pineau and Taynoud, 1999). On the same topic he was interviewed by the journal *MEI, Médiation & Information* (Lancien and Thonon, 2001). More recently, Michael Palmer conducted a long interview with him about his intellectual itinerary in the journal *Le Temps des médias* (Palmer, 2008).

[4] In one review of the book, Loïc Ballarini, of the University of Paris 8, described Mattelart as one of the indispensable figures of communication studies in France (Ballarini, 2010).

key actors in the process by which the intellectual word circulated and was legitimized (Bourdieu, 1997; Champagne, 2007), Mattelart was mostly reluctant to appear in the leading print and audio-visual media, except for his sporadic contributions to *Le Monde diplomatique,*[5] a non-specialized journal that fell far short of having mass appeal. This aspect of Mattelart's intellectual trajectory (as it relates to the changes in the conditions in which his words and image circulate) should be read in the light of the profound mutations that the intellectual world and left-wing culture underwent in France in the last quarter of the twentieth century and that are reflected in the twists and turns of Mattelart's own itinerary.

Openings

The perspective that guided this research brought us up against a conundrum: the apparent paradox that comes from stating the need to study the collective nature of knowledge production processes and the positioning and social function of its leading producers and disseminators, while at the same time underscoring the uniqueness of Mattelart's intellectual profile and his contribution to thinking about society and communication. This is evidently one of the constitutive tensions of intellectual history and the sociology of culture. Thus, we have tried to avoid the risks of a biographical emphasis—which reduces historical density to a matter of "great men"—but also the risks that come with an approach that plays down the subjective dimension, thereby ruling out the possibility of understanding the active role of subjects in social processes. Feeling pulled in these two opposite directions, we have followed a route that has allowed us to address certain matters that we consider relevant.

First of all, it would be possible and desirable for this book to be read as a contribution to an emerging and still underdeveloped intellectual history of communication studies in Latin America. In fact, in order to follow the thread of Mattelart's itinerary, we have explored aspects and perspectives that have received little attention so far in the field. Here we hope to have dug deeper than the general superficialities that historians tend to mention when referring to contexts; our intention has been to identify the specific dynamics where, at the confluence of academic, cultural and political practices, knowledge about communication burst onto the scene in the 1960s and '70s.

[5] This positioning contrasts, for example, with that of Dominique Wolton, who had a larger public presence, or that of the "mediologist" Régis Debray, whose intellectual visibility was bolstered by the considerable symbolic capital he accumulated in his political career.

In this sense, the history of communication studies on the continent is shown to be a fruitful field for undertaking research at the place where intellectual history and the sociology of culture cross paths: The moment in which the field emerged is rich ground for studying the way knowledge about the social is produced in *spaces of multiple cross-linkings*, or in other words, the way a space of knowledge emerges out of a heterogeneity of discourses and social practices from which it is then delimited and becomes autonomous as a discipline, very often papering over the processes that gave rise to it. In parallel with this epistemological question, or, to be more precise, intersecting with it, the figure of Mattelart has allowed us to demonstrate how the history of communication studies in Latin America is an extraordinary place to study the ways the emergence of the "communication question" in the 1960s and '70s expressed, just as Gramsci (2009) wrote about the emergence of the "language question" in Italy, more general socio-political processes—in the words of the Italian communist, "the formation and growth of a ruling class, the reorganization of a cultural hegemony" (265).

Along these lines, we have explored—by contrasting certain aspects of Mattelart's intellectual itinerary we have highlighted with the way he was read retrospectively—the forms that the construction of a *selective tradition* took in Latin American communication studies, and more generally, the consolidation of a legitimized version of the past that made a partial interpretation of the tensions between intellectuals, culture, and politics on the continent in the 1960s and '70s. A convergent effect of the close of one political era and the reorganization of the academic-intellectual field that accompanied it, this selective tradition left a mark on the assessments of the social sciences of the previous period, contributing to the consolidation of an academic and intellectual generation and to the formation of a new cultural hegemony starting in the 1980s.

As a counterweight to this tradition, the figure of Mattelart is productive for arguing that, far from being a kind of obstacle to the production of knowledge or implying the subsumption of a purported autonomy (to be sure, defined in very different ways), the link between political practices, the production of specific knowledge, and intellectual intervention allowed an intense cultural matrix to be formed. This matrix served to generate novel questions, leading to the configuration of a problematic and a field that revolved around the phenomena of communication and culture, which broadened the horizons of Marxist debate and of the social sciences. This not only made possible the emergence of Latin American communication studies; it also gave the field its distinctive mark. Mattelart's political-cultural

practice promoted, at the same time, contacts among emerging social subjects, which greatly impacted the development and shifts of the continent's cultural field.

On another level, we have maintained that Mattelart's experience in the *Chilean laboratory* helped to forge a multi-faceted and cosmopolitan intellectual profile, and a theoretical position that left its marks, after Mattelart's exile, on the cultural field, on the world of politics, and on communication studies in France. In this sense, another of this study's lines of argument has allowed us—from the perspective of inquiring into the social conditions of the international circulation of ideas—to foreground his role as a cultural mediator or go-between, shedding light on a flow of influence from the periphery to the center. This was an exceptional type of flow, little explored in the history of the international circulation of ideas in Latin America. Nevertheless, we have been able to read in Mattelart's theoretical positions an ongoing concern with generating an *interface* between Latin American and European thinking, all the while keeping a healthy distance from both *Eurocentrism* and Latin American *localism* or *exceptionalism* (to be sure, both tendencies can be detected on either side of the Atlantic). In this sense, the metaphor of *translation* that we have used in some sections of the book to characterize the figure and intellectual activity of Mattelart is useful as long as it is understood not in a mechanical sense, i.e., as an activity of transposing texts or theories into different temporal or national realities, but as an exercise in thinking that tries (and this is how Mattelart explicitly proposed it as an intellectual program in the early 1980s) to produce something new by combining the analysis of the *general* (the tendency toward homogenization inherent in the process of internationalization and subsumption of communication and culture under the sphere of value) with the *specific* (the particular form that this process takes in each national social formation based on the conflicts that its very development generates). For this, Mattelart called for an indispensable trek through theoretical work that, in his view, would lead to the production of new syntheses and inquiries, and help to establish differences and similarities among historical processes. Indeed, the translation metaphor refers not only to theoretical activity but also to political-cultural praxis. In the different editorial endeavors that Mattelart took part in, from *Comunicación y Cultura* to *Communication and Class Struggle* (even if they were not at the center of his activity and were not part of a continuous project sustained over time), oriented to different publics and languages, one can read and synthesize a program of intervention that extends across all his life and intellectual practice. It was characterized by

an indefatigable effort to promote emergent networks and cultural formations, to link subjects, heterogeneous social spaces, and different national realities. It is in this key that the metaphor of the *intellectual* as *translator,* which we have used in several sections of this book, is meant to be read.[6]

As for his theoretical and epistemological positions, we have argued that in Mattelart's thinking, one can read a productive and unique way of understanding contemporary social organization through the critique of communication and culture. At a time when, in the context of new communicative and socio-political configurations in the social sciences and especially in Latin American communication studies, there is renewed interest (after many years of "culturalist" hegemony) in the so-called political economy of communication and culture, reviewing Mattelart's theoretical position on the *critique of the political economy of communication* could contribute to a reconsideration and a more complex framing of the ways of constructing an object that is often defined on the basis of empiricist and economistic assumptions. In addition, by pointing out Mattelart's own continuities and shifts with respect to this critical position, we have spotlighted the uniqueness of his perspective built around the notion of *world-communication,* insofar as it promotes a history of the representations, notions, and doctrines about communication that, using a long-duration approach that takes the world-system as the unit of analysis, is situated at the intersection of epistemological critique and the study of the ways hegemony is produced. Therein lies its potential and novelty as an epistemological and theoretical-political contribution for analyzing both contemporary social formations and the production of specific knowledge about communication.

In conclusion, what defines the uniqueness of Armand Mattelart's life praxis must be sought in his irreducibility to one national reality or to one disciplinary field. His intellectual intervention and his thinking have developed at the intersection of multiple national spaces and diverse spheres of social activity; the theoretical issues that he has addressed and the intellectual networks and connections that he has helped forge are thus embedded in a world-space. By situating his theoretical-political stances in conditions of production of intellectual life that are very different from our own, we have tried to head off a possible effect of romantic *enchantment* associated with the person; at the same time, by highlighting his exceptionality, we are also

[6] Martín Cortés has analyzed the figure of José Aricó as an *intellectual-translator* and drawn attention to Antonio Gramsci's notes about the translatability of scientific and philosophical languages (Cortés, 2010; Gramsci, 2008 [1984]: 72-80). These texts provided some of my inspiration for interpreting this dimension of Mattelart's trajectory.

striving—along the lines of the *defamiliarization* of the Russian formalists—to question our own intellectual praxis and distinguish what this itinerary can tell us about our present.