FROM THE CHILEAN LABORATORY TO WORLD-COMMUNICATION

ARMAND MATTELART'S INTELLECTUAL JOURNEY

Mariano Zarowsky

Foreword by Peter Simonson

Translated by
William Quinn & Peter Simonson

mediastudies.press
History of Media Studies
series

From the Chilean Laboratory to World-Communication: Armand Mattelart's Intellectual Journey

by Mariano Zarowsky

Foreword by Peter Simonson

translated by William Quinn and Peter Simonson

Translation of Mariano Zarowsky, *Del Laboratorio chileno a la comunicación-mundo. Un itinerario intelectual de Armand Mattelart* (Editorial Biblos, 2013). The support of the Argentine Republic (through its Programa Sur de Apoyo a las Traducciones) is gratefully acknowledged.

Published by:
mediastudies.press
414 W. Broad St.
Bethlehem, PA 18018, USA

Cover design: Natascha Chtena

Landing page: mediastudies.press/from-the-chilean-laboratory-to-world-communication-armand-mattelarts-intellectual-journey

History of Media Studies series - issn *(online)* 2637-6091 | issn *(print)* 2637-6091

isbn 978-1-951399-50-4 *(print)* | isbn 978-1-951399-47-4 *(pdf)*

isbn 978-1-951399-49-8 *(epub)* | isbn 978-1-951399-48-1 *(html)*

doi 10.64629/3f8575cb.08e7ds72 | lccn 2025943425

Edition 1 published in October 2025

Contents

CHAPTER SIX

Class Analysis of Communication, or the Critique of its Political Economy

> But that the class struggle is also the "decisive link" in Marx's scientific theory, is perhaps more difficult to understand.
>
> —Louis Althusser

> In reality one can "scientifically" foresee only the struggle.
>
> —Antonio Gramsci

In the assessments of the field of communication studies there is consensus that what came to be known, once it achieved the status of a sort of subfield, as the *political economy of culture and communication*, emerged later than other perspectives. César Bolaño, Guillermo Mastrini, and Francisco Sierra (2005: 18) outline a regional frame of references of its development. They assert that the "two main groups" that gave it a disciplinary presence were the "North American school" of Dallas Smythe and Herbert Schiller, and—though they believe that one cannot in a strict sense speak of a school—the European group: on the one hand the British academics Nicholas Garnham,

Peter Golding, and Graham Murdock, and on the other the French theorists Patrice Flichy, Bernard Miège, and Dominique LeRoy, among others. The authors also include the Latin American contribution, despite its greater diversity and more diffuse focus, tracing it back to the Econcomic Commission for Latin Ameridca and the Caribbean (CEPAL in its Spanish acronym) economic analyses, with stops at the questioning of the developmentalist perspective by the dependency theories and the Latin American contribution to the debate about the New World Information and Communication Order. Along similar lines, the Canadian Vincent Mosco (2006) proposes in a recent assessment "making a map of the Political Economy of Communication with regional emphases." In Mosco's view, "although there are important exceptions and a mixing of currents of thought, the North American, European, and Third World approaches are different enough to warrant distinct treatment" (62).

Where, then, to place the position of Armand Mattelart, a multi-faceted cosmopolitan, in this map of regional references? In the European, Latin American, or North American tradition? The diversity of answers to this question (which has not always been posed in exactly these terms) is symptomatic: Bolaño, Mastrini, and Sierra (2005: 22) regard Mattelart's intervention as part of the Latin American tradition, which promotes "the so-called cultural dependency or cultural imperialism theories." Mosco (2006), on the other hand, places him in the European tradition that "puts *class struggle* in the foreground" (63), while Bernard Miège (2004) emphasizes Mattelart's familiarity with the North American economic-cultural processes and his role as a *passeur,* or go-between (transmitter, mediator) in France, based on his contact with US economists like Herbert Schiller (48). [1]

The uncertainty about Mattelart's place on this map can perhaps be explained by the cosmopolitan nature of his trajectory: He might have been one of the few who could, at a time when the political economy of communication was consolidating as a discipline in the late 1970s, straddle different traditions that were emerging in different parts of the world and that, as Miège (2006: 157–158) observes, sometimes had very little contact with each other. However, can Mattelart's profile really be reduced to that of a *passeur* or go-between, that is, someone who gets different intellectual

[1] In French communication and information science, observed Miège (2006), those who identified as part of the field knew little about the political economy of communication: In his opinion, the processes by which ideas spread in the country focuses on the French-speaking world, where "outside influences are admitted only through strictly controlled filters" (46). This gave relevance to Mattelart's role as a *passeur.*

traditions to engage in dialogue? Or should we also be exploring how, at the same time that he has indeed carried out this operation of translation, articulation, and the promotion of dialogue, he has also formulated original categories and perspectives for thinking about communication and culture in contemporary capitalism or, to be more precise, to think about contemporary capitalism from the critique of culture and communication?

It is in this direction that we will reconstruct the framework of dialogue between the traditions that Mattelart helped to connect, with an eye to highlighting the uniqueness of his theoretical position. This map will allow us to understand the intentional controversy of his assertions, as well as the potential that his perspective has for today in the search for categories and perspectives. The idea of *force fields*, as we have pointed out, will be useful for orienting a reading that lays out the concepts and ideas of this emergent field in dynamic relations of proximity and distance, of variable attractions and repulsions, of reciprocal cross-pollination and borrowing. What interests us is not so much to offer an abstract definition of the positions that characterize the *political economy of communication* as to reconstruct the ways some of its "regional" representatives went about constructing the concept of their object and ways to address it. If the mid-1970s saw the emergence of a disciplinary approach that revolved around the phrase *political economy of communication*, then we ought to observe the emergence of a network of dialogues and intellectual exchanges about its object (in which Mattelart played a leading role), that established a community of peers and a disciplinary framework.

Monopoly Capital and Cultural Imperialism: The North American School

While it is well known that Herbert Schiller, from the United States, and Dallas Smythe, from Canada, played key roles in the emergence of the political economy of communication, less well known is the fact that Armand Mattelart had contact with these researchers in 1971 in Santiago de Chile, and forged a very fruitful and long-lasting intellectual relationship with them. The encounter introduced Mattelart to *Mass Communications and American Empire*, a book of Schiller's (published in the US in 1969) that had a deep impact on Mattelart's first research into the internationalization of communication systems and so-called "cultural imperialism."[2] Within the

[2] It is interesting to note that *Mass Communications and American Empire* was translated

general framework of the arguments—following a line initiated by Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy—that referred to a mutation of capitalism based on the development of monopolism, Schiller's contribution was to propose an early materialist genealogy of a cultural system, the United States', that was already then having an impact on the whole planet. [3]

In *Mass Communications and American Empire*, he argued that, since the Second World War, a geopolitical reordering had taken root around the world. Schiller (1976 [1969]) contended that, while capitalism had always been an international system (a hierarchical system with one or two metropolises at the top, dependent colonies and many degrees of command and subordination in between), the distinctive feature of the stage was that new and more subtle forms of imperialism were taking shape and replacing the old British imperialist model and its "*iron and blood* tactics" (14, 18). This mutation resulted from a structural fact: The communication and electronics system was merging with the industrial economic system and with the military complex, and this union was giving rise to a new version of imperialism. While military influence over the official communication system was growing (the official sector was becoming militarized under the threat of a routine and prolonged state of emergency in response to insurgency), at the same time *civilian* participation was continually expanding within the block of military-industrial communications: The investment in satellites and electronic equipment resulted from a need for the international circulation of commodities that also expanded the system of values that accompanied and promoted them. The so-called "worldwide invasion of U.S. electronics" encompassed different dimensions, ranging from the regulation of the international satellite system to the spread of devices or, directly, of broadcasters. Thus, aside from the economic benefits, Schiller argued, this expansion served as a spearhead for disseminating an economic order and the US system of values. In his view, this trend pointed in a direction that extended to the planetary scale: "The structure, character, and direction of

into Spanish in 1976 (as *Comunicación de masas e imperialism yanqui*) and that it was never translated into French.

[3] Revisiting Lenin's arguments about capitalism's transition from free competition to monopolism and looking at it from an economic perspective, Baran and Sweezy (1968 [1966]) stated that the need to absorb an ever-larger surplus (resulting from the elimination of certain tendencies toward the fall of the profit rate) led capital to look for new outlets for its reproduction. One of them was through spending on advertising, which would also create an adequate infrastructure for absorbing the growing supply of commodities. Another was the increase in military spending, which redefined the relations between the state and business, based on tightening the bond between the military and industrial complexes.

the internal communication complex are no longer, if they ever were, purely national issues," he noted (25). Schiller in 1969 was already referring to the first industrial and political pressure to market a European television that had been developed through state sponsorship.

Reading Schiller's works (in the context of the intervention of US state agencies and companies in the process of destabilizing Chile's Popular Unity) had a profound impact on Mattelart and oriented his research to some extent. A certain familiarity can be observed, even in the writing style and the emphasis on compiling empirical documentation from public government, business or military sources.[4] The idea that the US model relied on the growing integration of communication systems into the military-industrial complex, and that this system tended toward internationalization, constituted one of the basic cores of Mattelart's first works (1972, 1974) on the subject, in which Schiller was repeatedly quoted. At the same time, we must note that Schiller's and Mattelart's works were motivated by different interests, influences, and conditions of emergence. Mattelart, as we have seen, devoted some of his research between 1971 and 1973 to analyzing and documenting the ramifications of this model in Chile and Latin America, and the specific ways it made itself felt. On this point a different emphasis can be read with respect to Schiller's position: Instead of a concern for giving an account of the genesis of the US model and its tendency toward expansion, Mattelart focused on recounting the international reactions, alliances, and strategies that were put into play on the local scene and in the media run by the dominant classes in peripheral countries, particularly Chile. From this emphasis, Mattelart worked back to the genesis of the processes of internationalization in the United States, and from there he problematized the notion of cultural imperialism.

This implicit dialogue can be followed, a few years later, in *Multinationales et systèmes de communication* [*Multinationals and Communication Systems*], where Mattelart took up some of Schiller's arguments while also questioning the very concept of *imperialism.* In response to the question of how the state's ideological apparatuses were being modified in the new stage of in-

[4] Schiller's work was built on a prodigious body of testimonies and sources, mostly from public archives in the United States (minutes of Congressional hearings, reports by commissions, etc.), which the US political economist seemed to prioritize over the theoretical analysis of the logic of the strictly economic processes and trends. Schiller seemed more concerned with revealing and documenting the economic corporations' and military's political control over the development of communication systems than with contributing to a definition or theorization of the concept of imperialism, which is practically absent in his work.

ternational capital accumulation, Mattelart (1977 [1976]: 10–11) observed, in tune with Schiller, that in the new scenario the boundaries between the economic, political, cultural, and military spheres were being blurred—in other words, that the novel result of this convergence was that economic profitability was merging with ideological profitability.[5] Mattelart diverged from Schiller, however, with respect to the ways of understanding the process of the internationalization of cultural production and its alleged North Americanization. At the very least he established a matrix. Following Nicos Poulantzas's lead, Mattelart stated that while "state monopoly capitalism" modified the ways hegemony was produced (which made evident the need to problematize the appearance of "new forms of state practices," 11), the process of the internationalization of cultural production did not necessarily imply the disappearance of national cultures. Cultural imperialism, he argued, could only work and be analyzed if it was situated in its relation with other cultures, i.e., if its formation was understood in the context of class alliances within a national space and their reproduction, as well as in the context of the relations between "interior bourgeoisies" (he used Poulantzas's phrase) and international bourgeoisies. In short, it needed to be situated within a framework of relations of force and the concrete conditions of its manifestation. Cultural imperialism—wrote Mattelart—"changes shape and content depending on the phases of the empire's political, economic, and military expansion," but it also "adapts to the different dominant realities and contexts." A perspective like the one he was proposing—he concluded—"would have the merit of sparking discussions about imperialism in the cultural sphere. It would underscore its historical character, its class-based character, and relate it to modifications in the respective roles of these bourgeoisies" (265–266).

This point highlights Mattelart's very different emphasis with respect to Schiller's positions. The North American betrays an economistic and somewhat "fatalist" concept of cultural imperialism, where the homogenization and internationalization processes of the production of symbolic commodities follow inexorably from the logic of capital valorization and the United

[5] Mattelart provided some examples of this interpenetration: The development of the Communication Satellite Corporation (COMSAT), in charge of formulating satellite policy—and a whole telecommunications policy along with it—was effectively delegated by the state to large corporations. It also happened the other way around, as he demonstrated with the case of the educational television series *Sesame Street*: Foundations linked to large corporations took it upon themselves to conceive, plan, produce, and distribute educational services. As the analysis of the television series showed, certain logics of advertising language and commercial rationality developed in mass culture would come to permeate a product conceived for educational purposes.

States' military and technological predominance.[6] Mattelart commented on precisely this issue in his presentation at the Algiers Conference on cultural imperialism (1977):

> Many studies are devoted to, and actually re-validate, the myth of imperialism's omnipotence and omniscience. How many critical studies of imperialism are victims of a *counter-fascination with power?* […] If such a vision, bordering on the apocalyptic, is evident in certain denunciations, and even certain analyses, the reason is that imperialism is often treated as a *deus ex machina.* (Mattelart, 2010 [1979]: 99)[7]

In contrast, Mattelart insisted on the need to look at class issues and their relation to the national culture. Such a perspective, he stated, would keep analysts from conflating national realities as different as those of France and Brazil, for example. The class perspective that he was proposing had the merit of reconciling the study of multinational macro-systems with diverse national realities: It combined a given level of development of productive forces and a particular historical-cultural legacy with determinant class relations, i.e., with zones of struggle and conflict that conditioned the configuration of the whole process. By framing the problem this way, Mattelart was introducing a reference that was unusual at the time in the field of communication studies in Europe and the United States: He was taking from Gramsci the notions of *international political party* and of *intellectuals* (as international mediators), because they allowed him to analyze the dynamic of national and international *relations of force* and the diversity and complexity of ideological transmission circuits. Within this framework (and here the reference was to another heterodox Marxist, Rosa Luxemburg), consideration had to be given to the responses that popular or national liberation cultures put into play in each situation. In conclusion, Mattelart (2010 [1979]) wrote: "The existence of specific forms of mediation within each society, within each social formation, as well as the character of these different types of mediation, create a broad variety of encounters with imperialism" (102). It was no coincidence that he incorporated this matrix of Gramscian thought—we

[6] The influence of Baran and Sweezy's economic arguments and their notion of *monopoly capital* on Schiller's reasoning (1983) are more explicit in an article that, though published a few years later, summarizes some of the economistic premises that undergird his position, starting with the eloquent title: "Communication Follows Capital."

[7] Here I am quoting the version of the intervention that is incorporated into the introduction to Volume One of *Communication and Class Struggle* (1979). [Translator's Note: Here I am using the language from the original version in English.]

will come back to this later—into his introduction to *Communication and Class Struggle*: "For a Class Analysis of Communication." This work—in his words—could well have been called "For a Critique of the Political Economy of Communication."

To better understand the scope and significance of Mattelart's theoretical position, it is useful to contrast it with that of another decisive player in the emergence of the political economy of communication. While Herbert Schiller emphasized the relations between communication and power (while starting from its economic role), his colleague and friend, the Canadian economist Dallas Smythe, focused primarily on posing novel questions about the economic logics that he believed governed mass communication.[8] Through the reverberations and replies it generated, Smythe's position contributed significantly to the configuration of a problematic revolving around the political economy of communication, not just because he was one of the first to propose the problem of communication and culture industries as a differentiated object for economics, but also because the provocative tone with which he launched his theoretical-epistemological proposal sparked a series of replies, intellectual exchanges, and cross-pollinated readings on both sides of the Atlantic, which would contribute to erecting a framework of indispensable intellectual sociability for the consolidation of the discipline.[9] His essay from 1977, suggestively and provocatively entitled "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism" (1983 [1977]), explicitly laid out his position in dialogue and continuity with Baran and Sweezy's monopoly capitalism arguments. The article was presented as an attempt to spark a debate about the economic and political importance of communication systems, an issue that Smythe believed had not been considered by the tradition of "Western Marxism," which gave importance to mass communication systems only insofar as they could produce and reproduce *ideology*, an ideology that was considered only for its function of reproducing social relations. Smythe (1983 [1977]) countered that "The first question that historical materialists should ask about mass communication systems is *what economic function of capital do they serve*, aiming to understand their role in reproducing capitalist relations of production" (71–72; italics mine). This was precisely—and here Smythe anticipated his conclusion—"the 'blindspot' of Western Marxism." Of

[8] Though Canadian by birth, Dallas Smythe had an extensive professional career in the United States and in close contact with Schiller. See Schiller (1976 [1969]: 10).

[9] Among the many references to Smythe's inaugural work are Murdock (2006 [1978]), Flichy (1982 [1980]), Schmucler and Mattelart (1983), Zallo (1988), Garnham (1994 [1990]), and Bolaño (2006).

course, the Canadian already had an answer for the question he had adroitly formulated; that function was "the management of demand (concretely, through economic processes of advertising and mass communication)" (99).

If at first Smythe seemed to be referring to an indirect economic function of the "consciousness industry," in the sense of managing demand in order to reduce the gap between production and consumption (the famous "mortal leap" of commodities that Marx spoke of), Smythe quickly went on to state that this function was at the same time subsumed in the production of a particular surplus value. And here is where the novelty comes in: Smythe wondered about the economic and productive nature (in terms of direct creation of surplus value) of the processes of the management of demand that Baran and Sweezy had left at the point of (non-productive) circulation. Thus, the point of departure for a Marxist view, Smythe argued (1983 [1977]: 74–76), was to objectively define the nature of the commodities constituted by mass communication and from there to account for their specific form of valorization and their function in the overall accumulation process. These commodities were the *audience and readership* that broadcasters sold to advertisers. Smythe thought it was the audience that produced these commodities by doing work, although he immediately added, throwing a certain ambiguity into his proposition, that the audience was also a commodity "produced by the mass media" and by "the family" (74–96). Thus, the key question for Smythe was the following: "How does demand-management by monopoly capitalism, by means of advertising, relate to the labour theory of value, to 'leisure' and to 'free time'?" (79).

If we have devoted space to developing Smythe's hypotheses, it is because in his questions and dilemmas one can discern the emergence of the issues and tensions that, to a great extent, define the political economy of communication. And because situating them will help us to recognize, by way of contrast, the uniqueness of Mattelart's critical-theoretical position. On the one hand, Smythe opened up a problematic when he identified the need to interrogate an absence in Marxism (specifically, the question about the nature and the specificity of the processes for valorizing capital in what he called the "consciousness industry" and their relation to the overall processes for valorizing and reproducing capital), and at the same time he noted—though he limited himself to simply formulating the question—that his proposition involved broader redefinitions of Marxist theory. If "the mass media of communications are *simultaneously* in the superstructure *and* engaged indispensably in the last stage of infrastructural production" (75), then fur-

ther analysis was needed of the inferences implied by "this 'principal and decisive' integration of superstructure and base which reality presents" (97).

As we will see below, the British current of the political economy of communication and culture would take up a polemical stance in this field opened up by Smythe and in the problems he posed for Marxist theory regarding its conceptualization of the relations between base and superstructure.[10] More controversy came, evidently, from the problematic that Raymond Williams had opened up with his attempt to formulate the bases of a materialist cultural critique.

The British Political Economy of Communication: Legacy and Reworking of Cultural Studies

Despite the dichotomies and disagreements that have been noted between *cultural studies* and the *political economy of communication* (Garnham, 1997; Grossberg, 1997), it is not a stretch to say that both theoretical positions drew in part and with different emphases on the theoretical and epistemological program that Raymond Williams formulated in the early 1970s. In an article published in the *New Left Review* in 1973, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," Williams laid out some of the central axes of what would be his revision of Marxism and his attempt to think about the relations between economy, culture and society in a new way. In *Marxism and Literature* (2009 [1977]), where he expressed a central concern for the possibility of a materialist understanding of literary and cultural forms, Williams spotlighted the social impulse that motivated his intellectual undertaking. After referring to recent transformations in "neo-capitalist" society, he called on Marxism to revise some of its theoretical postulates and on critics to broaden their objects of research. He wrote:

> The major modern communications systems are now so evidently key institutions in advanced capitalist societies that they require the same kind of attention, at least initially, that is given to the institutions of industrial production and distribution. Studies of the ownership and control of the capitalist press, the capitalist cinema, and capitalist and state-capitalist radio and television interlock, historically and theoretically, with wider analyses of capitalist society, capitalist economy, and

[10] An example of this is the polemical response to Smythe's article (2006 [1978]) that Graham Murdock (2006 [1978]) published on the other side of the Atlantic shortly after the article came out, which would in turn generate a "reply" from the Canadian to the "response."

> the neo-capitalist state. Further, many of the same institutions require analysis in the context of modern imperialism and neo-colonialism, to which they are crucially relevant (see Schiller (1969)). (Williams, 2009 [1977]: 184-185) [11]

Williams continued his reasoning with a conclusion that is central to our overview:

> Over and above their empirical results, these analyses force theoretical revision of the formula of base and superstructure and of the definition of productive forces, in a social area in which large-scale capitalist economic activity and cultural production are now inseparable. (184-185)

The Brazilian critic Maria Cevasco (2003 [1991]) situates Williams's intellectual program within his attempt to understand these structural transformations that emerged in the Europe of the 1960s and '70s, and she emphasizes that one of the strongest impulses driving his theoretical work was "imagining a field of studies that does not yet exist, but that is an imperative of the new modality of social organization, where the scale of the communication media broadens the interpenetration of the economic […] and the cultural" (61). What then was the content of this theoretical-intellectual program? To put it briefly, Williams developed a conception of cultural materialism that—in an abridged and thus rather schematic form—was based on two complementary principles: first of all, on the understanding of culture as a constitutive dimension of the social; or, in Marxist terms, on understanding culture as a material force, as a productive force. Secondly, on the need to account for the cultural sphere's own materiality and specificity. The articulation of these two principles led him to question the oft-trumpeted notions of base and superstructure (expressions that Williams attempted to demonstrate were used as simple metaphors in Marx's thinking).

In spite of the accusations of economism that some cultural studies partisans lobbed at the British political economy of communication, when it emerged it accommodated itself to a certain extent in precisely the problematical zones proposed by the author of *Marxism and Literature*. Of course, for this tradition the metaphor in question—even in its more complex version—continued to be productive. In general terms, the concern of the British theorists of the political economy of communication was centered on the possibility of establishing theoretical criteria for analyzing the relation between material production and symbolic production within the

[11] Williams's reference was to *Communications and American Empire*, by Schiller (1969).

coordinates of a monopoly capitalism that extended commercial logic to ever more powerful media. In 1973 Graham Murdock and Peter Golding published, in the journal *The Socialist Register*, an inaugural programmatic article called "For a Political Economy of Mass Communications" where, to the best of our knowledge, they used the phrase for the first time. While it was an exploratory article that the authors themselves defined as a case analysis of the British media system, they were already announcing what they proposed as the two core dimensions of their analysis: on the one hand, that "the obvious starting point for a political economy of communication media is the recognition that the mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and distribute commodities" (Murdock and Golding, 1973: 205). On the other hand, that aside from producing and distributing commodities, "the media also disseminate ideas about economic and political structures. It is this second and ideological dimension of mass media production which gives it its importance and centrality, and which requires an approach in terms not only of economics but also of politics" (207). A short time later, in 1977, the same pair, Murdock and Golding, (1981 [1977]) published a theoretical work in London that would become one of the founding references of the emerging discipline, where they further developed their propositions. They argued that media studies should not be conceived as a self-contained specialization, but rather as part of the overall study of social and cultural reproduction and that, in this sense, it should share the concerns of traditional sociological analysis about the issue of class stratifications and the ways the social order is legitimized. Taking as their starting point the assumptions of *The German Ideology* and of the Preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, the authors proposed that consideration should be given, in the first place, to the overall economic context in which media control was wielded, but at the same time to the analysis of cultural production in its specific form. While the authors understood that "Marxism's distinctiveness and promise as a framework for the sociological investigation of culture and communication lies precisely in the fact that it focuses on the complex connections *between* economics and intellectual production, between base and superstructure" (30), most Marxist-inspired analyses of cultural issues either only looked at mass media products assuming simple relations between economic structures and relations and cultural production (they gave as an example a whole line of research linked to the concept of ideological state apparatus); or else they took the product as the starting point and then "worked backwards" to uncover its economic base, without going "nearly far enough towards

explaining how the […] 'culture industry' actually works" (27). The authors situated Theodor Adorno's arguments about the culture industry in this last position, but they also attributed a similar imbalance to Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall: Their "detailed and often dazzling dissection of cultural forms sits uneasily on an undeveloped analysis of the economic bases of their production" (29). For Murdock and Golding, in contrast, the task thus required inverting the primacy of the focus and concentrating on the issues of ownership, control, and production, in order to make "a concrete analysis of the economic formations and process that underpin the contemporary communications industry" (30). In short, by embedding the tasks of the political economy of communication within those of a Marxist sociology concerned with determining the relations between material production and symbolic production, Murdock and Golding redefined its problematics and urged researchers to work on the specific modalities by which the law of value subsumed cultural production.

Nicholas Garnham's article "Contribution to a Political Economy of Mass Communication," published in the first edition of *Media, Culture and Society* in 1979 (republished in Garnham, 1994 [1990]), can also be read as a programmatic, foundational article that proposes synthesizing and formulating a position and a perspective for this current of thought. Fully identified with the sign "political economy," Garnham—like Murdock and Golding—puts the study of the relations between "base-superstructure" at the problematic center of the discipline, or, to be more precise about his position, the study of the relation between the law of value and ideological forms. If the base-superstructure metaphor was the essential point of departure for a political economy of culture (on this point Garnham was making a strong challenge to Williams), it was so as long as one avoided falling into two traps: economistic reductivism (which Garnham attributed to Smythe, for example, p. 29) and the idealistic autonomization of the ideological level (which he attributed to Stuart Hall, among others, p. 23).

What then was the political economy of communication trying to analyze? First, Garnham observed, it needed to shift its attention to the media as ideological apparatuses of the state in order to analyze their role as economic entities. In this sense, Garnham seemed to be taking up the question posed by Smythe (what economic function of capital do the media serve?), but he had a better answer than the Canadian did: The media fulfill an economic function by creating surplus value directly through certain cultural commodities—cultural products—and insofar as they valorize a particular type of capital; and indirectly in other sectors of production, through advertis-

ing, to the extent that they organize consumption and reduce commodities' circulation time. For Garnham, then, if it was necessary to maintain the distinction between base and superstructure, at the same time it became necessary to analyze the contemporary and specific ways that *monopoly capitalism industrialized the superstructure* and the effects that this produced.

The development of the political economy of communication in Great Britain clearly stoked an open controversy with the cultural studies camp and looked for modes of demarcation from it. The appearance of the journal *Media, Culture and Society*, founded in 1979 by Nicholas Garnham himself, was one of the spaces where this position was promoted and disseminated; by its own assessment, its emergence can be read as an attempt to lay bare the shortcomings of French-style semiology and above all of what Garnham (1994 [1990]: 20) called "Lacanian Althusserianism"—which by then had notably influenced a second generation of British cultural studies—and its emphasis on the relative autonomy of the ideological and on processes of the constitution of subjectivity (Hall, 1994 [1973]), (1994 [1980]). In the best tradition of the *New Left Review*, *Media, Culture and Society* would publish and debate work from the continent: Mattelart published some articles in the journal, and the English translations of his book were reviewed in its first issues.[12] These things point to the existence of a space of reciprocal knowledge, exchange and influence where Mattelart played a somewhat leading role. Nicholas Garnham wrote the prologue to the English-language version of the book by Armand and Michèle Mattelart and Xavier Delcourt (Garnham, 1984) where, as we have seen, he highlighted the uniqueness of Armand Mattelart's position within the field of the political economy of communication, drawing attention to the key role that his Chilean experience played in the configuration of his intellectual profile and his theoretical position.

The aim, as the reader is no doubt perceiving, is to consider Armand Mattelart's theoretical position within this overall space of dialogue that was beginning to take shape across Europe. For this, we still need to describe one last zone of interaction, related to his most immediate intellectual milieu at the time.

[12] See in *Culture, Media and Society* the review of the English-language version if *Multinationales et systèmes de communications* (Paldan, 1980) and the review of the English-language version of *L'usage de médias en temps de crise* (*Media Usage in Times of Crisis)* (Cruise O'Brien, 1981).

On the Other Side of the English Channel

Armand and Michèle Mattelart recall that on the occasion of the 1961 publication of the first edition of the journal *Communications*, edited by Roland Barthes, one of the era's few economists of the cinema, Henri Mercillon, expressed his astonishment to the editorial board over the "omission of economics" from the declaration of principles accompanying the launch of such a publication, devoted to studying mass culture and its meanings (Mattelart and Mattelart, 1987 [1986]: 35). The authors interpret this omission of an economics of culture industries in the leading journal about communication in France as symptomatic of a deeply rooted mindset that held firm until the late 1970s, linked to the French academic and intellectual field's resistance to analyze the phenomena of the economy and the culture as interconnected and occurring on the same plane. At that time the first analyses emerged that raised economic questions about cultural production.

While French researchers of the culture industries seem more reluctant than their British colleagues to embrace the phrase "political economy of communication," the truth is that when people speak of the emergence of a "French (non-)school," they are referring primarily to the space articulated around the Groupe de Recherche sur les Enjeux de la Communication (GRESEC) of Stendhal University in Grenoble, founded in 1978 by Yves de la Haye and Bernard Miège (Bolaño, Mastrini, and Sierra, 2005). In general terms, this group's early publications combined theoretical reflection about the status of communication and culture in the development of contemporary capitalism with a marked emphasis on case analyses, i.e., with the study of the specific, differentiated modality that the valorization of capital took on in each branch of cultural production. In 1978, the team led by Bernard Miège published a collective work, *Capitalisme et industries culturelles* (*Capitalism and Cultural Industries)*, through the University Press of Grenoble. The authors concurred with a diagnosis being reached on the other side of the English Channel: The existence of a phenomenon that, while not new (Marx had already given an account of its early manifestations), had now expanded at an unprecedented scale: the conversion of the sphere of culture and art into a space of valorization of capital. The transition corresponded to the monopoly stage of capitalism (Miège *et al.*, 1978: 169-170). However, unlike the question that concerned their British colleagues (about the relation between processes of the valorization of capital in the culture and mechanisms of ideological reproduction), Miège's team placed more emphasis on

studying modalities of valorization of capital valorization in culture and questions surrounding the specificity of its economic status. Until then, most Marxist analyses had focused on analyzing superstructures, describing the relations between modes of production and dominant ideology, or analyzing the restructuring of capital and the formation of its corresponding ideological apparatuses. In general, the authors stated, these studies saw fit to apply an overly general theoretical principle: the ultimately economic determination of the ideological superstructure. In contrast, the economists on Miège's team—like their English colleagues—found it necessary to orient their research toward the concrete modalities of this determination, but also the economic status of cultural production itself. Consequently, while it was inevitable to approach the production of value in culture as part of the broader reproduction of capital, the research questions needed to aim at shedding light on the concrete modality of this determination: How and why is capital led to valorize capital in the sphere of culture? And then, what justifies a separate analysis for this type of commodity Or, to put it another way, what specific problems does contemporary capitalism face when producing value through art and culture? (8). All the work done by Miège's team aimed at answering these questions in theoretical terms, but also on the basis of case analyses; it sought to differentiate itself explicitly from the tradition that Adorno and Horkheimer had inaugurated around the question of the effect that the "industrialization of culture" had on mechanisms of ideological reproduction and the constitution of subjectivity; and also from the tradition that formed around the Althusserian theory of ideological state apparatuses, which sought to determine the particular characteristics of cultural commodities relative to the specificity of their process of production, circulation, and realization (21). Of course, one of its particularities resulted from the fact that culture could not be reduced to a means of valorizing capital because it was part of the ideological reproduction of social relations. To sum up, after devoting several chapters to theoretical discussion of the economic dimensions in question and case analyses of specific media (photography, the record industry, audiovisuals, etc.), at the end of the book Miège and his team focused their conclusions on problematizing the relations between commercial cultural production and social reproduction.[13] Nonetheless, the formulation of the issue they were

[13] They argued that if culture participated in the overall world of commodities, it was not just because it became a field of surplus value, but because it participated in the broader reproduction of capital and intervened more and more in the process of realizing value in general. The logic of capitalism thus ensured, on the one hand, the promotion of culture

working on highlighted the need to account for the economic specificity (through the specific modality of its processes of production, circulation, and consumption) of culture industries.

Let us then recapitulate schematically the questions that account for the emergence of the political economy of communication: Within the framework of the development of monopoly capitalism, what economic function did mass media and culture industries fulfill—and how was this function to be analyzed if it turned out to have some specificity as the production of value? What was their nature and what was their economic particularity? Finally, what redefinitions in Marxist theory were implied—in Smythe's words (1983 [1977])—by "this 'principal and decisive' integration of superstructure and base which reality presents"? And, if the distinction was still valid, how to account for the relations between these two entities?

It is in this problematic where we will situate the unique character of Mattelart's position (he read, as few French intellectuals did, the North American school and the British debates, and his colleagues on the other side of the English Channel read him), which laid bare a sort of theoretical vacuum in the political economy of communication:[14] specifically, what place does conflict, class struggle, occupy in the dynamic of economic-cultural processes? Is it a secondary dimension, derived from the logic of capital accumulation? Does it work autonomously, according to its own legality? Or is class struggle located inside these processes, immanent in them?

---

by way of its commercialization, and on the other, the promotion of commercial commodities by way of culture. It followed that if one analyzed the economic role of cultural production, it was impossible to ignore the fact that culture also interfered in the overall process of capital reproduction due to its ideological role, and that these two aspects were becoming more and more deeply intertwined (Miège *et al.*, 1978: 173). If culture as a commodity was independent of its content (the aim of capital in the field of culture, as in any other field, was valorization, and this went beyond the use value of the commodity in question), on the other hand the aim was to account for how the processes of commercialization and capitalist integration of culture industries filtered or conditioned this cultural production. Cultural production of the capitalist variety thus favored a profound interpenetration between the dominant ideology and culture industries.

[14] In his "response" to Murdock's "reply" to his article about "communication as the blindspot of Western Marxism," Dallas Smythe (2006 [1978]) conceded that Murdock was right when he pointed out that Smythe gave no indication of how *class struggle* was to be situated within his working framework. He wrote: "It's true, I didn't. The reason is that I didn't know how to, not that I considered it irrelevant. So I left class struggle at the point of the reproduction of the force of labor (a very unsatisfactory situation to leave it in)" (26).

At the Crossroads of Regional Traditions, or the Critique of Political Economy

Let us begin by situating the appearance of *De l'usage des médias en temps de crise*, published in 1979, in the series of debates we have laid out and in the problematic that the emerging political economy of communication opened up.

In this book, Armand and Michèle Mattelart revisited some of the arguments they developed in *Multinationales et systèmes de communication* (*Multinationals and Communication Systems*). Briefly: Since the mid-1980s, the structural crisis of capitalism had brought to a head the need to reorganize the mode of production of material goods. This same crisis also involved the need to restructure the mode of production of symbolic goods or of cultural commodities. This fact, in the authors' view, was somewhat less evident and thus less studied (Mattelart and Mattelart, 2003 [1979]: 13): if the contemporary phase of capitalism was characterized by the acceleration of monopolism, its novelty was not to be found exclusively in the economic dimension and the scale at which this process unfolded, but in the fact that it became "increasingly difficult to delimit the true sphere of the cultural dimension" (53). In this assertion we can situate one topic pointed out by the "pioneers" of the political economy of communication: In the new phase of monopolism, spaces of the valorization of capital came to include spheres of social activities that had up to then been linked to ideological reproduction or to the simple reproduction of capital, but not directly to accumulation. Nevertheless, the Mattelarts' analysis pointed in a particular direction. They wrote:

> There is too much of a tendency to isolate analysis in the sphere of economic relations when the structures created by this acceleration are examined. […] Monopolism can certainly be characterized as a process of business concentration (as in the communication and information industry, at the national and international levels); but beyond the economic sphere, doesn't the monopolist process mobilize the spheres of human activity in their entirety, the mode of production of the life of a society in its entirety? (53)

While they were witnessing a broadening of the spheres of social activity in which capital was valorized, rather than asking about the economic specificity implied in this process, the Mattelarts pointed to the political basis of the restructuring that was taking place. The fact that the *crisis* was at the

heart of the reconfigurations—considering that the authors did not see the crisis as just an accumulation crisis, but also a crisis of hegemony—suggests a particular modulation in their perspective. The tendencies they referred to were produced "in a moment when the capitalist state's ideological apparatuses have reached a different level of maturity: They correspond to a different political and economic need." This need was what they set out to analyze in their work:

> For this we could apply a term that Gramsci incidentally uses in his analyses of Fordism and the rationalization of the U.S. state apparatus, and speak of the "Taylorization" of the sphere of hegemony. (58)

The assertion that the economic and political dimensions formed a unit of analysis that called for a joint explanation deserves our full attention and further clarification. The notion of *Taylorization of hegemony* as a single fused concept that the Mattelarts constructed on the basis of Gramsci's reflections on *Americanism* gives us an interpretative clue: If, on the one hand, the notion of *Taylorization* invokes the economic rationalization of the production of symbolic goods (rationalization that could come from the logics that govern the movement of capital), at the same time the reference to Gramscian thinking and his notion of hegemony situate the game of political determinations on the same plane as the logics of valorization.[15] The concept of *hegemony* as "moral and intellectual direction," consisting of both coercion and consensus, implies conflict, the unstable, changing relations of force between classes and, within that, the intellectual mediations that organize economic production and regulate the relations of classes with each other, with the state and with power. The phrase *Taylorization of hegemony*, since it locates on the same plane the logics that orient the production of value and the dynamics of the relations of force between classes (i.e., forces that refine economic legality itself), allows us to read the content of the notion

[15] In another text from the same period, Armand Mattelart (2010 [1979]) used a similar syntagm. He stated that "the present moment of the mode of production of communication is characterized by the global process of 'Taylorization' of social control." This also went back to Gramsci, who in his study on Fordism "used the term 'Taylorism' to refer to the rationalization of the State apparatus." Mattelart made use of Gramsci's reflections on *Americanism* to analyze the restructuring that had taken place in the United States in response to the crisis of the 1930s. This process was "commanded by the new cultural, economic, and political requirements necessary to continue the accumulation of capital" (65). The social restructuring was not driven only by an economic legality and needed to be analyzed as a transformation of the modes of production of hegemony.

of *critical* added to the phrase *political economy of communication* that the Mattelarts were proposing at the time.

Nevertheless, the sense that the Mattelarts gave to this notion, rather than in a theoretical formulation or systematization, should be read in the analysis that addressed the transformations of the systems and modes of communication then taking place in Europe. It was tied to a process whereby information was converted into material for economic production and simultaneously into a vector of political control: With the new communication networks, new modes of interaction and work were being promoted that—as the Mattelarts (2003 1979]: 87) illustrated by pointing to an advertisement that offered communication systems for businesses—could appeal to a rhetoric of participation. In the same tenor, the development of new technologies or media of communication, such as videocable systems or community radio stations, brought to the surface the question of the user's decentralization and activity, which was promoted, paradoxically, within a framework of increasing concentration of traditional media. The logics of the old models of mass communication were modified, or else they incorporated modalities that promoted a certain cooperation among consumers, in a process of "decentralization (within concentration) and [of] diversification (within standardization)" (78). This gave rise to questions: Did this process imply a democratization of the word and of political participation? How was this situation to be analyzed? As an extension of the logic of capital and part of its search for new markets or spaces of valorization in the local or the deep dimensions of everyday life? As a search on the part of the powerful for new modes of production of consensus and legitimization? Or, just the opposite, as a product of the resistance of alternative practices in the face of state power and private communication monopolies?

One can read in the Mattelarts' position an effort to find a key for interpreting these processes in the articulation of economic and political factors, with an eye to situating them, always, on the plane of conflict, in the effects that produce variations in the relations of force between classes. In this sense they wrote:

> To evaluate the scope of this tendency toward the linking of the media of mass communication, which takes different forms in each social formation, it is necessary to return to the notion of mass media and mass culture as a system, as a network of networks that are both autonomous and connected. There is too much compartmentalizing in the analysis of the vectors of this mass culture […] The current conditions of monopoly capitalism call for considering all these

> vectors as a system, within which each vector, each mass medium, yields, in different degrees, to the rationality that established them as a whole. Because each specific medium, placed along a continuum, reflects a different state of the productive forces, a different state of the movement of capital and, therefore, of the evolution of monopolism, a different correlation of social forces, manifold contradictions, a different way of materializing freedom of the press, different degrees of consciousness, in both senders and receivers. (68-69)

As this paragraph implies, for them the nature and the function of the media of communication and mass culture in the period of monopolism could not be deduced exclusively from an economic rationality that has as its engine the law of value; nor could it be deduced from the interests and logics of the powerful. These dimensions are overdetermined, they wrote, in each specific social formation, with the "different correlation of social forces," with "varied contradictions," with "different degrees of consciousness." There can be no doubt that these are possible ways of naming the vicissitudes of class struggle. And this vision required that "all these vectors be considered as a system." They then concluded, in relation to the configuration of the object of the *critique* of the political economy of communication:

> The desired analysis, at once differentiated and unified, should, for example, make it possible to determine when each mass medium becomes an economic and/or political objective for the powerful, that is, when it really begins to function as an integral part of the state apparatus. (68-69)

If one looks carefully, beyond the absence of specific references (though there is an evident reference to Althusser's notion of ideological state apparatus), this position can be read through the lens of the idea of *structural or complex causality* that Althusser had formulated in *Lire le capital* (*Reading Capital*), in the battle he waged against the economistic reading of Marxism (which happened to be a position that Armand Mattelart was quite familiar with from his first readings in Chile before the notion became widespread). In *Capital*, Althusser reads one way of understanding the idea of *determination* in Marx that, in opposition to an idea of *linear causality* implicit in the logic of *expressive totality* (which assumes a relation of expression within a whole between an inner *essence* and an outer *phenomenon*, i.e., between the economic dimension and superstructural forms, respectively), suggests *totality in its immanence*, that is, "the determination of the elements of the whole by the

structure of the whole" (Althusser, 2006 [1967]: 202).[16] This reading key helps us to situate in the Mattelarts' theoretical position a unique production of the concept of the object of the critique of the political economy of communication. In their words:

> One cannot overestimate the need to know the conditions and contradictions in which the market of mass cultural production is deployed and an alternative is sought, on the basis of the apparatuses and outside of them. Might this situation not be contradictory? Isn't the democratization project that underlies this multiplication of cultural commodities and services the result of a mediation of class oppositions? (82)

This formulation thus suggests a revision of the concept of the object of the political economy of communication that assumes a break with the *economistic* assumption that oriented a good number of its approaches: Economic rationality could not be a self-sufficient variable for explaining the shifts and transformations in communication systems, because these shifts, even in their economic dimension, must be situated within the framework of class oppositions. Analysis needed to be oriented in that sense. In his introductions to *Communication and Class Struggle*, published in 1979 and 1983 respectively, Armand Mattelart would further develop his theoretical position and make it more explicit.

In the first of the two introductions, "For a Class Analysis of Communication," he mentioned in a footnote at the beginning of the text that he had considered an alternate title that he believed was equally appropriate: "Paraphrasing Marx, we also might have entitled this work 'A Critique of the Political Economy of Communication'" (2010 [1979]: 124). It was not just a question of preference for the phrase "class analysis of communication" over "political economy" (we note that this was the name used most

[16] The idea of a structural causality assumes, Althusser argued (2006 [1967]), "that the effects are not outside of the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element, or space upon which it would come to *leave its mark*; on the contrary, this implies that the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozan sense of the term, that *the entire existence of the structure consists of its effects*, in other words, that the structure is nothing but a specific combination of its own elements, is nothing but its effects" (204). We would reiterate that we are not trying to say that Mattelart was working here explicitly from these Althusserian categories, but that they can serve as an interpretative key for reading his theoretical position. In a passage from his introduction to *Communication and Class Struggle*, a contemporary text, Armand Mattelart (2010 [1979]: 34) tried out some critiques of Althusser, distinguishing the different appropriations and conditions of reception of his thought in Latin America and Europe.

often in the British tradition), but also of the addition of the term *critique*.[17] What meaning can be given to this term, with all its interpretative baggage in the history of philosophy and above all in the history of the Marxist tradition? Why did Mattelart opt for the other title: "For a Class Analysis of Communication"? And what was at play in the apparent equivalence of the expressions?

Broadly speaking, Mattelart's proposal can be read as an attempt to "take the subtitle of *Capital* literally: *A Critique of Political Economy*," as Althusser (2006 [1967]: 171) had described his own intention. Or to put it another way, an attempt to problematize the *concept of its object*. At play in the distance separating "critique of political economy" from "class analysis of communication" is the critique of its empiricist assumptions, i.e., of the existence of a separate economic object governed by its own laws.[18] We will address the issue in parts.

The essential concept that helped him construct the totality of his perspective, wrote Mattelart, was *mode of production*, exactly as laid out in Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Mattelart, 2010 [1979]: 47). He understood that while Marx had never defined it perfectly, his analyses suggested seeing this theoretical concept as a tool that could be applied to the social totality, not just for the economic structure of society, but also for the legal and political superstructures (48). From there, Mattelart drew an analogy and proposed the concept of *mode of production of communication*. The formula first of all indicates a correlation between the way communication apparatuses work, which determines the mode through which messages are generated and exchanged, and the general mechanisms of production and exchange that condition all human activities in capitalist society. However, far from being a "superstructural" expression of an economic base, the concept of mode of production of communication allows for an analysis of its specific configuration as a material activity. On the one hand, Mattelart indicated (2010 [1979]), the mode of production of communication includes

[17] Should any doubts persist, they can be dissipated with a reference to the introduction to the second volume, published four years later, where Mattelart (2010 [1983]) titled one of the internal sections "For a critique of the political economy of the mass media" (85).

[18] In *Reading Capital* Althusser took "literally" the subtitle of *Capital* ("A Critique of Political Economy") and argued that this phrase could not mean criticizing or correcting certain imprecisions or details of an existing discipline, filling in its gaps or its omissions. "To criticize political economy," he wrote, "means to confront it with a new problematic and a new object: i.e., to question the very *object* of political economy […] Marx's whole attack is directed at this object, at its pretensions to the modality of a 'given' object: political economy's pretensions being no more than the mirror reflection of its object's pretensions to have been *given* it" (171–172).

all the instruments of production (the machines used to transmit information, ranging from the simplest to the most complex), the work methods (from the division into different genres to the ways of gathering and selecting information, etc.) and finally, he wrote, "all the relations of production established among individuals in the communication process (relations of ownership, relations between sender and receiver, the technical division of labor, and all the forms of organization and association)" (48). This definition of the relations of production is key to reading Mattelart's perspective: It assumes that from the start, "in the base," the concept of mode of production of communication involves relations marked by inequality with respect to ownership and the capacity to send messages, but also the "forms of organization and association," i.e., the equilibria of forces that emerged as a product of the will and activity of the groups in conflict. In addition, the concept of mode of production of communication assumes that in the very "infrastructure" of communicative activity there is a specific "superstructure": a political-legal superstructure (the regulations and laws that govern communication and information activity) and an ideological superstructure, i.e., the system of ideas, images, and sensitivities that organize and naturalize a way of understanding and engaging in communication. Mattelart then referred to a specific ideological form that that he called "bourgeois communication ideology" (to which he actually devoted a specific selection of texts in the anthology he was editing), in which he included ideas related to freedom of the press and expression, or to the professional ethics of communicators and their ways of practicing and understanding their activity, the principle of the social division of labor in communication (that is, the naturalization of the predominance of specialists); but also to the very concept of a "science of communication" and the notions it generated, such as public opinion, objectivity, mass culture, communication revolution, etc. The ideological, therefore, must not be regarded only as a system of ideas or representations but, Mattelart wrote, as a "collection of social practices" (2010 [1979]: 49).

At this point in his argumentation, he insisted,

> An essential part of the analysis is trying to explain how the different systems of television, radio, film and press were organized, and how *through* these systems *certain models of social relations were established.* It is also crucial to study how these systems changed, and how they continue to change, as a result of the development of the productive forces, *within the framework of class conflict.* (49; italics mine)

In this programmatic invitation, it is possible to read another of the elements that define the meaning of the *critique* of the political economy of communication that Mattelart was proposing. So far we have seen that the nature of a specific mode of production of communication must be understood in relation to a general mode of production of social life; and, at the same time, that this correlation cannot be conceived in abstract, generalized terms, because the mode of production of communication has its own specificities that must be accounted for, including the existence of a specific "infrastructure" and "superstructure." The paragraph quoted above also suggests that Mattelart understood that communication and the media formed a constitutive part of the productive forces themselves: Rather than being a mere reflection or result of an outside economic entity, communication and the media were the means through which "certain models of social relations" "were established." It is in this sense that we should read Mattelart's reference to the chapter from *Capital* "Machinery and Large Industry" and the meaning Marx gave to the expression *means of communication* as *means of transportation* (Marx was thinking primarily of the railroad), and to Lenin's observations about the development and extension of railway lines around the world in his analysis of imperialism (71-77). This led to Mattelart's conclusion that Marx's and Lenin's texts should serve as an invitation to do research into, "first of all, *the origins of these other productive forces that are the mass media*, such as the press, radio, and television, and then as an invitation to shed light on the nature of the *social force that explains their emergence*" (75; italics mine).

The differentiation between the concept of *productive forces* and that of *social force* brings us back to another of the highlighted elements from the quoted paragraph. What was the *social force* that explained the emergence of the media? Could it be reduced to the development and deployment of the logics immanent in the process of accumulation? Could it be explained only as an effect of technological development? Evidently not. Thus the quoted phrase ("it is crucial to study how these systems changed, and how they continue to change, as a result of the development of the productive forces, within the framework of class conflict") can be read as an attempt to establish an intrinsic connection between the development of the productive forces (of communication) and "class struggle," which are thus no longer seen as outside entities. The two notions, in short, are projected onto the same plane, which implies that the relation between the entities is not hierarchical or one of determination, but of constitutive immanence. This is the deep meaning that should be given to Mattelart's use of the notion of *historical bloc*.

Gramsci—quoted by Mattelart (2010 [1979])—asserted that "infrastructure and superstructure form a historical bloc" (57). Gramsci thought that this notion implied the unity not only of "base and superstructure" but, in his terms, of objectivity and subjectivity; it did not make sense to think about this constitutive immanence without remembering that the superstructure is also the place where, as Marx himself taught, people become aware of the conditions of their existence and fight to transform them.

It is clear that we are far removed from the dualism implied in the architectural metaphor (base-superstructure), which by definition assumes relations of determination and derivation, of cause-effect. Mattelart's position can be read more in tune with a monistic, immanentist conception of causality when conflict and struggle are seen as constitutive elements of the development of the "historical bloc" and as indispensable variables for analyzing its objectivization.[19] The genealogy that Mattelart (2010 [1979]: 71-72) set out to trace in his introduction (and in the assumptions that accompanied his selection for the anthology) of the development of mass culture, understood as a "mode of exchange between the market and the classes," points to the uniqueness of his theoretical stance. The emergence of this mass culture had broadened access to the "spiritual commodities" and ensured the participation of the subaltern classes in the modes of construction of consensus when the reality of class struggle had become visible, first at the local level and then at the international level. We can follow here Mattelart's distance from the positions that accounted for the emergence of mass culture by referring exclusively to the logic of capitalism and its need to manage the demand for commodities.

After defining the concept of the mode of production of communication, which operated in an abstract and general register, Mattelart linked it closely to the concept of *social formation*. This—he wrote following Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*—"can be defined as the type of mode of production existing in a particular historical situation" (59). The way the different relations of production are organized under the hegemony of certain social relations—which impose their characteristics on society as a whole—will define the nature of a specific social formation. Strictly speaking, it was Lenin who elaborated on the concept of economic-

[19] We cannot look deeper here at the analysis of the points of contact between Althusser's and Gramsci's theoretical positions that we are suggesting on the basis of the reading of Mattelart's position. It is well-known that Althusser himself has acknowledged profound concordances with the Italian communist, although he has also pointed out notable differences between them, especially regarding their conception of the status of philosophy (Althusser, 2006 [1967]).

social formation as it was put forth by Marx. Defined "as a living organism," the concept made it possible to account for the particular existence that a social formation adopted in a concrete historical situation, where different modes of production co-existed, and where the status of the relations of force between the classes gave rise to particular legal-political structures and therefore different modes of production of communication.[20] To sum up, Mattelart wrote:

> Just as we have applied the concept of mode of production to the process of communication, it is possible to use the concept of social formation to designate the specific characteristics that the capitalist mode of production of communication assumes in each specific society. The characteristics adopted by the process of communication in each social formation may be observed through a particular combination of relations of production, work methods, relations of power and class, struggles, forms of state domination, etc., which produce a media system that is both the same and different in each historic space. (59)

This paragraph highlights the *overdetermination* of elements that configure a mode of production of communication in a given society, where the relations of force and the state of class struggle play a constitutive, non-derived role. Moreover, the concept of social formation serves to avoid reductivism when one looks at the processes of internationalization of cultural production and the local development of each media system, "which is both the same and different in each historic space." The concepts of mode of production of

[20] Mattelart cited a famous paragraph of Lenin's that addresses the question: "Marx… did not confine himself to economic theory in the ordinary sense of the term […] he nevertheless everywhere and incessantly scrutinized the superstructure corresponding to these production relations and clothed the skeleton in flesh and blood […] [Marx] showed the whole capitalist social formation to the reader as a living thing—with its everyday aspects, with the actual social manifestation of the class antagonism inherent in production relations, with the bourgeois political superstructure" (Lenin, "What the Friends of the People Are," quoted by Mattelart, 2010 [1979]: 52). Almost at the same time, José Aricó (2011) interpreted the concepts of *economic-social formation* and *mode of production* in a similar vein. In his reading, Lenin had thoroughly demonstrated his understanding of the significance of the *critique* of political economy in Marx. Aricó wrote: "The concept [of economic-social formation] has a fundamental importance from the theoretical viewpoint since its essential characteristic consists of regarding all phenomena related to material production as mediations of human social relations. In this case […] Lenin uses the term *skeleton:* the *economic-social formation* is the skeleton around with the whole society is articulated. From this viewpoint, Marxism is no longer a theory used to analyze *economic life* but *the totality of social life.* Furthermore, by proposing this category of economic-social formation as an axis for interpreting society, Lenin was placing himself outside the conception of historical materialism that had characterized earlier positions and that posed the question in terms of the infrastructure/superstructure relation" (146, italics in the original).

communication and social formation must then be read as they relate to the revision of the concept of *cultural imperialism* that Mattelart was undertaking at the time. As we have seen, he was trying to distance himself from the economism present in many of the critical approaches, which could do no more than describe and predict a fatal process of cultural homogenization.

To summarize, all these elements allow us to lay out the boundaries of *class analysis of communication*, or of the *critique of its political economy* that, as we have noted, Mattelart continued to delineate in the introduction to the second volume of *Communication and Class Struggle*: "For a Class and Group Analysis of Popular Communication Practices" (Mattelart, 2011 [1983]). In this text (where he devoted one section to the "critique of the political economy of mass media," 85-106) Mattelart explained the conceptual unity that the anthology was trying to reflect in spite of being organized in two volumes (one devoted to theories and concepts of communication and culture, the other to the history and experiences of popular and alternative communication). He set this unity in opposition to the split he observed between the two traditions that, in his opinion, made up critical thinking about communication: political economy and the theories or research that focused their concerns on so-called "popular culture" and/or alternative communication.

With regard to political economy, after giving an account of his knowledge of the main debates and luminaries (he cited Smythe, Murdock, Garnham and Miège, among others), Mattelart asserted that this current had contributed to the construction of a materialist theory of communication inasmuch as it assumed a break with the reception of Althusserian ideas in studies of communication and culture,[21] with "approaches of the culturalist type" and with "the formalist and closed discourse of structuralist semiology." Nevertheless, while he acknowledged that these ideas were helping to shape theories that served to explain the functioning of what some called "culture industries" and others, "apparatuses" or "devices," he concluded that few researchers of the so-called political economy of communication succeeded in integrating "into their heuristic formulation the concern for exposing the economic and political system of the media of mass communication, and to detect the ways in which the logic of the development of these new productive forces can be obstructed" (87). The quote suggests that the analytical difficulty lay in

[21] On the influence of Althusserian ideas, he wrote the following: "After having stimulated critical reflection and revitalizing the study of ideologies, [they] finally contributed to a distancing from the analysis of concrete group situations and class confrontations conflicts (Mattelart, 2011 [1983]: 87).

the split between the economic and political dimensions, on the one hand, and at the same time in the autonomization of the logic of the valorization of capital and of power with respect to conflict and struggles. This split was expressed in the mutual distrust that affected the two critical traditions: political economy and the study of popular communication.

Faithful to his style, Mattelart's reflection in this work connected the debate over theoretical positions to the attempt to understand the processes of societal restructuring that were unfolding at the time with culture and communication as vectors. There one can see his theoretical position deployed in analysis. Once again, he insisted on analyzing these transformations as a product and a way out of the crises of the 1970s. It was precisely in the force fields that were marked out by class oppositions, as manifested in the demands and practices of the popular sectors but also in the strategies of the powerful to neutralize or co-opt them, where one could find the keys to reading the transformation of the structures of the media systems that was taking place in the United States or Great Britain. Toward the end of the section devoted to the "critique of the political economy of communication," he made one last observation that, as he remarked, could also serve as a conclusion to what he was advocating. It is worth reproducing the quote in its entirety, despite its length:

> To develop a *political economy of the media*, it is not enough to treat the culture industries (which are generally transnational) by analyzing the production process in its various phases (creation, conception, publishing, promotion, distribution, consumer sales), by analyzing the structures of its industrial sectors (forms of concentration, degrees of concentration, etc.) or by analyzing the strategies of these firms. One can only attempt to understand the functioning of these culture industries as a system both unified and diversified by raising an essential question which ought to underlie all critical research on the way in which capital is attempting to reconfigure the cultural field: what effect does it have on the political system? […] In this time of crisis, where the restructuring of the mode of production of material goods has to be accompanied by a restructuring of the mode of production of symbolic goods and cultural commodities, no *political economy worthy of the name* can marginalize these questions from its concerns. What role do the culture industries and the new information system play in the restructuring of the state? How is the function of the state apparatus as producer of the collective will short-circuited by the ideological function of these industries? (105, italics mine)

The theoretical-methodological program contained in this paragraph, which to a great extent summarizes Mattelart's theoretical position, must then be set in opposition to that of the other traditions of the political economy of communication that he was explicitly contesting. These other traditions defined their object as an economic object: the study of the specificity of the culture industries' processes of valorization. In the best-case scenario, the aim was to account for the marks that this logic left on the configuration of the "superstructure." For this reason, the uniqueness of Mattelart's theoretical position within the political economy of communication can be read in his redefinition of the problem that had constituted it, i.e., in the critique of the very concept of its object. It was not about trying to conceive conflict and class struggle as an external element, in the sense of a moment of autonomy, resistance or deviation from the legalities of power or from the commodity (a position that was dear to the culturalist currents of communication theories starting in the 1980s). On the contrary, conflict and struggle were to be considered constitutive elements of the dynamics of economic accumulation and hegemony, i.e., of the logics that govern the production and reproduction of power and value, and consequently, as an indispensable element for thinking about communication processes and the configuration and transformations of media systems. On this point, what was at stake was a critique of the political economy of communication that aimed to redefine its object and its theoretical field and, ultimately, an original epistemological reading of Marxism as a critique of knowledge instituted on the basis of an empiricist definition of compartmentalized objects. [22]

[22] In this sense, it is worth mentioning the critical observations that the Basque Marxist economist Ramón Zallo would make to Mattelart a few years later in an extensive publication where he set out to lay the theoretical groundwork for a political economy of communication. Zallo (1988) took the work that Mattelart wrote together with Schmucler, *América Latina en la encrucijada telemática (Latin America at the telematic crossroads)* (1983) and offered it as an example of what he defined as "a fundamentally sociological perspective" that "globalizes communication" (22). In Zallo's view, the authors' sociological perspective would not allow for the isolation of different classes of information because it would be located in the interpenetration of economic, political, and military elements (this was also the case of Schiller, Zallo argued). In contrast, Zallo observed that "from the economic—not sociological—viewpoint, "the globalization of communication as a whole that Mattelart and Schmucler postulate does not seem right." He proposed adopting a definition of the political economy of communication that would differentiate its object by its *nature* and its *economic function* (23). It should be noted that specialists regard Ramón Zallo as one of Spain's foremost proponents of the tradition of the political economy of communication inaugurated by Miège in France (Bolaño, Mastrini and Sierra, 2005: 20).