

# Culture, identities, and class: Alejandro Grimson's restless conceptual search<sup>a</sup>

## *Cultura, identidades, classes: A busca conceitual inquieta de Alejandro Grimson*

<sup>a</sup> Interview conducted in Buenos Aires with funds from the Institutional Program for Internationalization CAPES/PrInt, Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM).

Interview with

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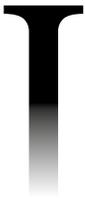
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**T**HIS INTERVIEW WITH ALEJANDRO GRIMSON in a café, in the San Telmo district of Buenos Aires, integrates the activities conducted as part of an academic mission funded by the Capes PrInt Program at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM). There are many reasons why the interviewee's work is of interest to us communication scientists. We will briefly discuss them below, specifically his perspective on culture in dialog with macro-social issues, which can shed light on communication issues, given the author's interest in the cultural analysis of hegemony.

PhD in Anthropology from the University of Brasilia (UnB) and a degree in Communication from the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), Grimson is a researcher on migratory processes, social movements, political cultures, identities and interculturality. He was a presidential advisor and coordinator of the Argentina Futura program. He is a researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council of Argentina (CONICET) and a professor at the Interdisciplinary School of Social Studies (IDAES), National University of San Martín (UNSAM). *Los límites de la cultura* was recognized by the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) as the best book published in Spanish in 2011. His other works include: *Mitomanías argentinas: Cómo hablamos de nosotros mismos*; *La nación en sus límites: Contrabandistas y exiliados en la frontera Argentina-Brasil*; *Pasiones nacionales: Política y cultura en Brasil y Argentina*; and *Mitomanías de los sexos*, co-authored with Eleonor Faur.



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Grimson's theoretical density on cultural processes stems from core (categorical or practical) questions, excavated from the historical moment in which they are inscribed. On the one hand, his effort to relate the object of study to broader sociocultural processes is one of the great lessons for reception and consumption studies, which are always attentive to the contexts where they occur; culture, for the author, can only be understood from political and social processes. On the other hand, our cultural analysis of hegemony can be oxygenated by his realistic view of subaltern sectors, which teaches us to protect data from "our political desires," as to avoid previously framing practices as forms of resistance and empowerment. Unsurprisingly, his latest book brings together reflections from various authors on the subject of the middle classes. It connects with his theme of identities since identity differentiation processes are interpreted in his work as a way of articulating structural inequalities.

Grimson leaves us with the lesson that culturalist objectivism and postmodern constructivism need to be revised; that culture is different from identities; and that the fragmentation of identities can only be studied without neglecting power. For reception and consumption studies, differentiating one concept from the other implies focusing both on the relations between the media and "audiences" as part of inequality producing processes, and not just differentiation, and on the dissociations between practices and crystallized meanings, coupled with feelings of belonging.

**MATRIZes:** What motivated you to edit a book and write about the middle classes?

**Alejandro Grimson:** In the middle of the last decade, I had begun to realize that, in Latin American countries, part of the population defined itself as middle class. When asked, people described themselves as upper middle class, middle class or lower middle class. And the same occurs even in extremely poor Latin American countries. In theory, people are thought to lie to themselves: they are poor, they are hardworking, but they have a false conscience. But this objectivist sociology disregards language. We thus began researching these self-perceptions, introducing the relevance of the subjective dimension. I have previously shown that individuals positioned in class strata with varying incomes perceive their actual income quite differently. Our research revealed uprising processes that had to do with the middle class: in Spain, in the Arab countries, in Asia, in Africa, in Brazil, in Chile. We thus made this collection about the middle classes, inequality, politics.

**MATRIZES:** In following the long discussions on the concept of class, it seems a little dismal to attest the little consensus between what is considered relevant to map positions in the social structure, when existing occupational sociology methodologies work quite well to classify them based on criteria such as occupation, income, cultural capital, goods and services consumption, for example. What is your experience with this issue in empirical research?

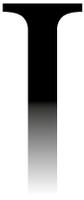
**AG:** I do not question occupational sociology, which is a subdiscipline of Sociology. What I do question is an objectivist sociology for whom subjectivity has nothing to do with truth. We need not argue further about whether or not ranking is important; discussing the classification criteria is useful. What we want to understand is the relations between income, wealth, schooling level, etc., and self-perception. Social life cannot be defined based on these criteria alone.

**MATRIZES:** Why do you think people refuse to identify as working class?

**AG:** In *Que es el peronismo*, book published in 2019, I show that one issue with class theory is that class identity has always been thought of as exclusive, but in practical terms this is not the case. If a unionized worker goes on strike, he perceives himself as a worker; if he goes sightseeing on the beach, he becomes middle class. And that is not a contradiction. The middle class is currently in crisis due to impoverishment. When you have a child in college or a car, your class perception changes.

**MATRIZES:** In Brazil's recent history, the state and certain research institutes have tried to paint us as a middle-class country, classifying individuals as the "new middle class" when, in fact, authors such as Marcio Pochmann and Ricardo Antunes have proven that it is a working class. How do you judge these narratives that measure a country's degree of development by the rise (real or fictional) of groups to the middle class?

**AG:** Nations constructs narratives for legitimacy. For many countries, such as Argentina and Uruguay, the discussion was which country was whiter, and therefore superior. Progressivism, I believe, sees the middle class as a hurdle because the left tends to represent the most exploited side of society. To continue representing society one requires a more dynamic discourse, so that the left can have a political project. We cannot address only one part of society. Neoliberal discourse is aimed at the middle class, whereas the left morally rejects the middle class, making policies for all that also benefits the middle class.



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**MATRIZES:** Elísio Estanque points to the recent radicalism of the Brazilian and Portuguese middle class (2011-2013) as an aspect that changes the Marxist idea of a merely individualistic class. Were we slow to realize something that was once present in middle-class counterculture? Could other phenomena, such as segments of the environmental movement linked to the middle class, also attest to this “critical” capacity?

**AG:** Moral questioning is unacceptable in this case because middle-class participation has also been fundamental to important historical facts for humanity. You can only judge a person by their actions.

**MATRIZES:** Jess Auerbach's text on the middle class in Angola and Brazil talks about the importance of digital networks for class identities. I got the impression that the media does not confirm itself as relevant because I had trouble pointing out significant aspects about its role. Could you comment on your impressions of these relations?

**AG:** I do not think you can universalize this relation between digital networks and identities. It is contextual. At first, the use of computers, smartphones and the web was elitist. New technologies need to be investigated. I have no research on this myself.

**MATRIZES:** Do you believe the presence of the media in sociological analysis to still be very incipient? If so, do you attribute this to an approach that still sees it as an ideological state apparatus or as an instrument of the dominant ideology, in line with the Frankfurt School?

**AG:** I do not know. Manuel Castells brings great debates; on the other hand, I do not think one ever overcomes that Frankfurt debate. For example, Héctor Schmucler, one of the founders of the field of communication in Argentina, says that the history of communication theory worldwide is the history of relativizing the effects of the media. He starts with the hypodermic theory and ends up talking about culture, in a process spanning several decades. I believe he would have liked to ask differently; not about the power of the media, but about the social impact of technology and the relations between technology and society. His disciples teach a subject at university called “Technology and Society.” Flavia Costa<sup>1</sup>, who is close to him, has just published *Tecnoceno*, this era in which human beings left a technological mark on the planet.

<sup>1</sup> Flavia Costa holds a PhD in Social Sciences from the University of Buenos Aires and is a researcher at the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET). In 2021, she published the book *Tecnoceno. Algoritmos, biohackers y nuevas formas de vida*. In the book, she highlights the technical development and infrastructures that have triggered a leap in scale in our relationship with the environment, where the scale is planet Earth. Using the term “technocene” coined by the Portuguese sociologist Hermínio Martins (1934-2015), Costa states that digital information technologies led to a profound technomorphy produced at the confluence of capitalism, technoscience, financialization, militarization and extractivism.

**MATRIZes:** Do you think the media's determination in these works is stronger?

**AG:** The problem is defining what determination is. In classical theory, it is causality; for Raymond Williams, it is delimitation. But no one can say that the media is irrelevant, with the issue of fake news, agenda setting, etc.

**MATRIZes:** What aspects could you comment on about the relations between the media and national identity?

**AG:** One of the most important aspects of the political struggle in which the media is involved today has to do with what Goffman calls the construction of frames, or interpretive marks. When you build a landmark, interpretation is another dimension of the struggle. When you talk about Rede Globo, Folha de São Paulo, you are talking about a Brazilian configuration that has no influence here [in Argentina]. Even with globalization, you have CNN. You can look at all the TV channels, but CNN has no relevance here. But the local media does.

**MATRIZes:** I believe you contradict much of the literature on globalization and the role of the nation-state.

**AG:** Yes, I believe you can say that, because it is a linear analysis of globalization as if it lacked contradictions, levels. Globalization is full of unfulfilled promises, both about the fluidity of borders and the thesis of the global village. Where is this global village? I make a distinction, both in theoretical and political terms, between national configuration and national state. Configuration is the interpretative framework, the historical sedimentation of a given moment; the nation-state is a political possibility. If Brazil elects Lula, he commands the nation-state resources. It always had limits; it is not only today, with globalization, that the nation-state faces limitations. You have macroeconomics, microeconomics, diplomacy, typical nation-state problems: why are there countries where the economy is growing, and others in recession? Countries where wages go up and others where they do not? Some with investments in science and technology, and others not; with good public education, and others not? Because of the nation-state. Now, national configuration is where common meaning is contested; where culture, the media, social movements, political parties come to play, because configuration is the field of interlocution. And the nation-state is the field of action at this level. Other levels exist, such as neighborhood, city.



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**MATRIZES:** Where do you place the level of institutions?

**AG:** There are institutions at all levels. If you use a space criterion, you have micro and macro: neighborhood, city, nation, the UN, etc. You can have other criteria. That is just for space. You can study many contexts from this concept of configuration: school, hospital, etc. You have heterogeneity, conflict, inequality, implicit code. What you can reconstruct from this conflict, you can study.

**MATRIZES:** In the introduction to *Los límites de la cultura*, you quote Raymond Williams and his defense of the centrality of cultural production to social functioning. Could you comment on the implications of the statement “communication workers have the ability to tear apart the entire fabric of social life”?

**AG:** He is establishing a dialog with Perry Anderson, the Marxist historian, in the book *Politics and Letters*. Anderson tells Williams that the weight of the economy is different from that of culture, that a miners' strike is much more relevant than a journalists' strike. Williams replies that it depends on the situation, on the culture's priorities. If culture prioritizes energy, it is a cultural prioritization, not a natural one. Williams, in the late 1970s, still could not have known what would happen to the media, but he responded impressively to a more classical perspective. When there was only journalism, without social networks, a journalists' strike could destroy the social fabric.

Another important thing about Williams is that nothing exists outside history. Determination, causality, lies within history. Going back to that phrase, this is no longer the case, for today we have social networks. I do not know what a journalists' strike would be like, what the impact would be.

**MATRIZES:** But on the other hand, today the capacity to divide is perhaps greater due to fragmentation, a loss of the power of professional journalism.

**AG:** Exactly. We have to investigate this historical context.

**MATRIZES:** Does the concept of configuration as an articulation have anything to do with that of Norbert Elias?

**AG:** It has. When I was writing *Los límites de la cultura*, a problem arose as to whether culture was an adjective or a noun. For example, when we talk about culture as an adjective, we would have to use a noun—cultural constellation, for example. But astronomical metaphors do not work very well, because a constellation is a set of discrete units; they are identifiable things, units where things can be discovered, they form shapes. That is why I

chose the term “configuration,” which is more linked to the idea of the map, of cartographic representation.

**MATRIZES:** Can you give an example to make this idea of culture as an adjective and a noun more concrete?

**AG:** Lila Abu-Loghod says, in another text of hers, that the term culture has been used to classify, to separate, which I think may be a biased view. After that, the 1990s saw great debates. If it were a monarchy, we could say that between abolitionists and reformists: the former said to kill the term culture; the reformists said to change it. The problem with the noun is that you can define it any way you like, but when it comes to Argentine culture, it is quite difficult not to nominalize. When you talk about the Argentine configuration, you are not talking about something that exists; it is a way of looking at reality. There are no configurations in the world, but it helps to see the heterogeneity, the conflict, the inequality, the field of interlocution that we cannot see any other way.

**MATRIZES:** From your experience with Canclini and Barbero, what would you highlight about their contribution to the field of communication?

**AG:** Barbero’s book, *De los medios a las mediaciones*, goes from the media to culture. In my career, this was particularly important. Jesús Martín-Barbero wrote the prologue to my first book, and Canclini and I are incredibly good friends. Jesús was the founding father of a theoretical movement. And Néstor came from a communications background, but he is multifaceted, he makes a very comprehensive analysis. What they both have in common is a philosophical background, which has meant that the questions and answers have been different from those in the field of communication.

**MATRIZES:** In the book *Los límites de la cultura*, you mention Abu-Lughod’s study of female *telenovela* viewers. One of the author’s analyses is that the *telenovela*’s narrative allows women to critically reflect on dominant gender morality. In my research with women from different classes, I conclude something similar about the change in the sexual morals of the working classes. How important do you think these analyses are for understanding cultural configurations and identifications?

**AG:** In this research, I would emphasize that the *telenovela* was written by a feminist author and interpreted by rural women in a more conservative manner, which inverts this classic idea that the *telenovela* is always more conservative than its audience. There were women in different situations



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of marriage, family, schooling level and who interpreted the *telenovela* in different ways. But the point of configuration is that these interpretations are comprehensible; they are arguing with each other, they make sense. An example of an incomprehensible interpretation: a bicycle company sets up in Africa and, as is done in car advertisements with felines, puts a guy running away from a feline. And bike sales fall. They are configurations that do not dialogue because the meaning of the feline is so different that it does not suggest different interpretations; it is the opposite of what the company supposes. Here we have a configuration boundary, which is a boundary of the network of signification. I tried to show in one of my works that the limit of configuration is the limit at which the signifier becomes a false cognate. Now, when the situation is one of shared configuration, going back to Abu-Lughod, you have heterogeneity in dialog, in conflict. If there is conflict, there is dialogue.

**MATRIZes:** Isn't there often, in these reception studies, a lack of explanation for these differences in interpretation in terms of social and cultural structure?

**AG:** Yes. I do not know about structure, but questions about subjective and objective dimensions, forms of ethnic and gender self-affiliation, etc. For me, this is not outside of history. For me, we need to study these variables, and we do not know what we might find in the field. It could be class, gender, age. And today we have intense generational or gender boundaries of meaning. Would it simply mean that these things are more relevant now? Or would it be more than that? The issue is: there are no variables outside the situation; we have to enter the situation. But it is not contextualization without theory, but with a theory of the multiple determinations that can emerge.

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