

# Thinking the popular from an *other* place: Jesús Martín-Barbero's proposal and contribution to the theoretical debate on popular culture

*Pensar lo popular desde un lugar otro:  
La propuesta de Jesús Martín-Barbero y su  
aporte al debate teórico sobre la cultura popular*

■ AMPARO MARROQUÍN PARDUCCI<sup>a</sup>

Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas. San Salvador, El Salvador

## ABSTRACT

Jesús Martín-Barbero is a Latin American reference for communication and culture studies. His work enabled introducing in the debate a historical perspective and a conceptual *map* of the references and disputes around the popular. The hypothesis of this text is that Martín-Barbero managed—and this was his greatest contribution—to shift the place of the popular from the ancestral/native to a place that is more plebeian, more bastard, more suspicious, and more grounded in the Latin American reality of his time: he placed the popular close to the world of the masses. This text revisits elements discussed in the doctoral thesis and, thus, recovers two main reflections on popular culture in Martín-Barbero's thought: the historical-genealogical view of the popular, which this author addresses in *De los medios a las mediaciones*, and its shift to the place of the masses and its implications, also addressed in this work, from which some conclusions are drawn.

**Keywords:** popular culture, mass culture, Jesús Martín-Barbero

## RESUMO

Jesús Martín-Barbero ha sido un referente latinoamericano en los estudios de comunicación y cultura. Su trabajo permitió colocar en el debate una mirada histórica y un *mapa* conceptual de los referentes y disputas en torno a lo popular. La hipótesis de este trabajo es que Martín-Barbero consiguió, y ese fue su mayor aporte, desplazar el lugar de lo popular desde lo ancestral/originario hasta un lugar más plebeyo, más bastardo, más sospechoso y más anclado con la realidad latinoamericana de su momento: colocó lo popular cerca del mundo masivo. El presente texto retoma elementos elaborados en la tesis doctoral y, a partir de ello, recupera dos reflexiones centrales sobre la cultura popular en el pensamiento de Martín-Barbero: la mirada histórica y genealógica sobre lo popular, que este autor trabajó en su libro *De los medios a las mediaciones*, y su desplazamiento hacia el lugar de lo masivo y las implicaciones que esto tiene, que también se desarrolla con extensión en la misma publicación, a partir de lo cual se ofrecen algunas conclusiones.

**Palabras clave:** cultura popular, cultura masiva, Jesús Martín-Barbero

<sup>a</sup> Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture of the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) since 1997. She was a guest professor at different universities in the region. She is currently the dean of the School of Social Sciences and Human Sciences. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3996-3974>. E-mail: [amarroquin@uca.edu.sv](mailto:amarroquin@uca.edu.sv)

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MATRIZES

We believed we knew the meaning of popular, communication, culture, miscegenation, but then we were reminded that these concepts are historical. That the concepts we had as premises suddenly stopped “being concepts to become problems.”

*William Fernando Torres (1998, our translation)*

THIS ARTICLE IS part of a long dialogue with the Colombian-Spanish author Jesús Martín-Barbero (1937, Spain, 2021, Colombia). In 1987, the publisher Gustavo Gili decided to publish his book *De los medios a las mediaciones* [Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations, SAGE Publications, London, 1993] in a collection directed by Miquel de Moragas, which increased the references to Martín-Barbero’s thought. Latin American academic discussion was already focused on the role of culture, mediations and hegemony, but the publication of Martín-Barbero’s book was a crucial to set aside agendas related to the nature, specificity, and technology of the media, and again raised questions about certain borders that previously seemed clearly defined, as pointed out by William Fernando Torres (1998). The first version of this text was published in 2019, in the journal *Encuentros Latinoamericanos*.

Martín-Barbero’s dialogue during the 1980s and 1990s was very fruitful to give rise to a historical view and recover a conceptual *map* of the references and disputes around the popular, but my hypothesis is that Martín-Barbero managed—and this was his greatest contribution—to shift the place of the popular from the ancestral/native to a place that is more plebeian, more bastard, more suspicious and more grounded in the Latin American reality of his time: he shifted the popular close to the world of the masses, “made of clay and cane, but with television transistors and antennas” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. xiii, our translation).

This text revisits elements from my doctoral thesis (Marroquín, 2015) and, thus, recovers two main reflections on popular culture in Martín-Barbero’s thought: first, the historical-genealogical view of the popular, which this author addresses in his book *De los medios a las mediaciones*, and, second, its shift to the place of the masses and its implications, also addressed in this work, from which some conclusions are drawn. Thus, I am going to address the first.

## THE HISTORICAL SHIFT: THE POPULAR INTRODUCED IN GENEALOGY

*The expression “living fossils” could be adopted, but mainly understood, by those dedicated to studying folklore. Because, just as pits conserve an archaic fauna, very important for understanding primitive zoomorphic groups, popular memory*

*similarly preserves primitive mental forms that left no mark on history, precisely because they could not be expressed in durable forms (documents, monuments, writings, etc.). Even today, we can find, in folklore, forms that belong to different eras, forms that represent archaic mental stages. Close to a legend with a relatively recent historical substratum or a popular song with contemporary inspiration, we can find medieval, pre-Christian or even prehistoric forms. Obviously, folklorists know these facts. Nevertheless, I dare say that few understand them.*

Mircea Eliade (our translation)

As Eliade points out, the universe of the popular and folklore is a sort of living fossil. It has ancestral elements that refuse to disappear and that are alive in various gestures, in music, in religious rituals, in forms of entertainment; they are rituals of resistance to cultural impositions, but also of complicity with the hegemonic forms of culture. According to Jesús Martín-Barbero, archaic pre-modernity, modernity and its utopias, and cynical and disillusioned post-modernity survive at the same time in popular culture. These reflections were analyzed during the 1970s and became part of the academic debate when *De los medios a las mediaciones* was published.

This book was published in 1987 by the publisher Gustavo Gili, in Mexico, as part of the *Mass Media* collection that is dedicated to addressing communication themes and was directed by the Catalan professor Miquel de Moragas.

The reception of the book exceeded all expectations. Colombian researcher William Fernando Torres recalls this work as “a time bomb” that “circulated among the most experienced readers and among unprepared ones, also among the most competitive colleagues. A few days later and with the efficiency of clandestinity, a pirated edition appeared in the hands of the traveling booksellers of the universities” (Torres, 1998, p. 60, our translation).

*De los medios a las mediaciones* was divided into three parts. The first, entitled “People and masses in culture: the landmarks of the debate,” deals with the review of certain categories and how different schools of thought placed it.

In the genealogical process developed in the first part of his book, Martín-Barbero also divided his reflection into three times: first, the people, in which he reflects on *the popular* based on the theoretical categories that had already been discussed in the Latin American academe; second, something that in my opinion constitutes his contribution in relation to thinking about the popular, that this category cannot be thought from outside of the masses and of the theoretical functionalism that was often discarded too quickly. In this time, the author reviews the constitution of mass society and *mass* phenomena and, finally, the historical construction of a *massive popular* cultural matrix. In a Benjaminian exercise that

ends up constituting the popular in a constellation, he goes through history in the opposite direction to find, with Walter Benjamin, that “hope was given to us by the desperate” (1996, p. 102, our translation) or to discover “the popular forms of hope,” as he himself will say, referring to the words of the Brazilian theologian Hugo Assman (1975, p. 263-268, our translation). In this first part of the text, I seek to recover his genealogy on the terms *people* and *popular*.

In María Moliner’s *Diccionario de uso del español*, popular is an adjective with five definitions: “of the people (social class); what is within the reach of people with less economic resources; the person who has many supporters, admirers or sympathizers among the people; by extension also those who are in all social classes or in a certain circle of people; applied to things, very widespread among the people” (Moliner, 2007, p. 2553, our translation) and, finally, it refers to the Popular Party in Spain. But, then, how did we come to constitute the popular as an adjective that has all these definitions? Martín-Barbero presents the debate from the 16th century:

In its “origin,” the debate was configured by two major movements: one that contradictorily sets in motion the myth of the people in politics (Enlightenment) and culture (Romantics); and one that, merging politics and culture, affirms the modern validity of the popular (anarchists) or denies it by its “overcoming” in the proletariat (Marxists) (1998, p. 3, our translation).

The map is constructed based on the recovery of these dialogues in which enlightenment and romanticism are opposed; on the intellectual proposal of anarchists and Marxists; and, finally, on the more contemporary analysis of historians and academics of the twentieth century, who direct their gaze to the cultural processes of the Middle Ages and propose a new reading of the popular from there.

The genealogical journey begins in the search for an origin that, in fact, is not origin. Martín-Barbero suggests that the first debate that built the current notion of people is found in the discussion between the Enlightened and the Romantics. Three thinkers begin the debate on the concepts of people and popular: Machiavelli (1469-1527), Hobbes (1578-1679), and Rousseau (1712-1778). In them, the people “matter as a general will,” but what is produced is a device of “abstract inclusion and concrete exclusion” (1998, p. 7, our translation). The bourgeoisie uses the people as a category that legitimizes a power different from that of the sovereigns. If they were chosen by God, the new rulers will be elected by the *people*. However, the people will not be defined by what they are, but by what they lack, by what they do not have: wealth, political office and education. The view of the popular and the people begins its construction in a negative manner.

According to Martín-Barbero, a slightly less pessimistic conception of the people can be found in the Romantic movement of the eighteenth century. Somehow, the Romantics try to undo this negative view of the popular. In genealogical terms, the Romantics will consider the popular as something immoral or aesthetically despicable<sup>1</sup>. The terms *folklore* and *volkskunde* are constituted at this time to allude to a scope in which academic reflection deals with these discussions. The author shows that the Romantics recover from the popular that which comes from its originality, its purity, its non-contamination, and then “by denying cultural circulation, what is actually denied is the historical process of creation of the popular and the social meaning of cultural differences” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 11, our translation), that is, the Romantics, by idealizing the popular and transforming it into an archive, past, heritage, folklore that is only in museums, end up also denying the living, real, quotidian *popular* and in this operation that relegates the people to the ancestral past, the Romantics end up approaching the Enlightened.

While writing his reflection, this philosopher was aware that a deeply Althusserian view of Marxism was being strengthened in certain countries and academic proposals, that of reducing the processes of mass communication to *ideological apparatuses of the State*. Martín-Barbero recovers another view of the popular: that of the anarchists. Particularly the proposal of the Spanish anarchists of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century<sup>2</sup>. Of them, he will say that they are capable of standing between romantic affirmation and Marxist denial. According to Bakunin, for example, the people are not the proletariat, but, rather, this mass of the disinherited, in which alienation and utopia coexist at the same time: “The people are the healthy part of society, that which in the midst of misery knew how to keep intact the demand for justice and the capacity for struggle” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 14-15, our translation). This enabled anarchists to have a more complex view of the popular, not only as a space for manipulation, but also for conflict.

Before the anarchist proposal, Martín-Barbero reviews how “orthodox Marxism will deny both the theoretical and political validity [of the people]” (1998, p. 19, our translation). The analysis of all of them indicates that Marxism contributes an element to the analysis: it transforms the people into a concept associated with social class<sup>3</sup>, but this in itself is reductionist, to that extent, the strategy of struggle is placed on a single plane, the economic, and the anarchist proposal related to culture is forgotten.

The people appear alienated, as a non-subject that allowed itself to be ideologized throughout history. What are the consequences of this operation? For the analysis, what emerges is *the unrepresented popular*, that is, that which does not fit in the working class: women, young people, retirees, invalids and indigenous people. This denial of the cultural brings to light

<sup>1</sup> Jesús Martín-Barbero continues the historization conducted by Raymond Williams in *Culture and society, 1780-1950. From Coleridge to Orwell*, and recovers Herder's 1784 text, in which he suggests that it is necessary to “accept the existence of a plurality of cultures.”

<sup>2</sup> In Martín-Barbero's biography, the Spanish Civil War has a particular importance. Although anarchism has existed in Spain since long before, since the First Republic (1873-1874), soon after the discussions that occurred in the First International (1864). Spanish anarchism is strongly influenced by Bakunin. Faced with the vision of history governed by the laws of historical materialism and class struggle, he proclaimed the freedom of the subject, capable of changing the forces of history. I want to highlight two elements of Spanish anarchism: the first, the cultural movement that the anarchists developed in Spain, whose aim was to spread not only their political ideals, but also education and culture in the working popular classes. The cultural works of anarchism were supported by intellectuals such as Pío Baroja, Azorín, Ramón del Valle-Inclán and Blasco Ibáñez; anarchists held competitions in literature, philosophy, poetry and theater, and established Barcelona as the center of this cultural effervescence. The second element was the importance of spreading anarchist ideals through (mass) media, such as the use of schools, theaters and athenaeums to disseminate their newspapers, but they also used serialized novels, being very successful among the workers. (Litvak, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Although Martín-Barbero does not specify the Marxist schools, through this research it is possible to affirm that, in this case, his criticism of the Marxist notion of the popular refers essentially to Althusserian Marxism, in vogue during those years. On the one hand, he himself prepared his teaching degree program thesis on Althusser and Karel Kosik to be able to enter Leuven. On the other hand, Althusser's interpretation defended the recovery of a scientific Marxism, and at some point in his approaches, he distanced himself from the readings made by intellectuals such as Gramsci and Lukács and questioned concepts such as alienation, subject and history, which are much closer to cultural reflection than what Martín-Barbero poses in *Dos meios às mediações*.

<sup>4</sup> For his work, Martín-Barbero uses the French version of the text: J. Le Goff. *Les Marginaux et les exclus dans l'histoire* (Paris: UGE, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Even though Martín-Barbero only revisits to some elements of this historian's research, in my opinion he highlights a common element in this scholar's itinerary and proposal. The main books in which Le Goff addresses these themes are, in my opinion: *Mercadores e banqueiros da Idade Média*, (Madri: Alianza, 2010); *Os intelectuais na Idade Média* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2001); *A bolsa e a vida. Economia e religião na Idade Média* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1986); *Homens e mulheres da Idade Média* (México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2013); *As Raízes Medievais da Europa* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2003) and the work written in partnership with Nicolás Truong, *Uma história do corpo na Idade Média* (Barcelona: Paidós Ibérica, 2005).

an inability to assume the symbolic thickness of culture and think about difference, otherness.

In the 1980s, slowly but forcefully, a discussion that sought to overcome the dichotomies between structures and agents was at the center of the debate in social sciences. Disciplines such as history “had begun to distance themselves from the analytical principles on which they had consolidated their supremacy, at least intellectually, that is, the preference for mass sources, their quantitative treatment and the constitution of series, to benefit other approaches, which favored collective representations over objective classifications, singular appropriations over statistical distributions, and conscious strategies over determinations unknown by the individual” (Chartier, 2011, p. 7-17, our translation).

There is also a central approach: in order to understand how the social sciences and, especially, history established the category of the popular, Martín-Barbero approaches the time “when, for the West, the popular constitutes culture: the Middle Ages.” And, to this end, he is based on the French historian Jacques Le Goff, whose text *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*<sup>4</sup> had been published in Spanish by Taurus in 1983 (Le Goff, 1983).

Le Goff approaches the Middle Ages from a new perspective. It is no longer that time questioned by its delay, of silences, of inquisition, but a time that, beyond the history of the winners, narrates the profound richness of a quotidian life full of exchanges and inventions. An era very close to that “lost modernity” of which Latin America is part, and in this operation that implies, according to Le Goff, making *cultural history* lies “the opposition between erudite culture and popular culture” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 85, our translation).

The French historian uses two movements for his analysis: confrontation and exchange. In the Middle Ages studied by Le Goff, *the popular* is constituted through conflict and dialogue<sup>5</sup>.

Two more scholars are mentioned. One of them is the Russian Mikhail Bakhtin, with *Popular culture in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. The context of François Rabelais* (1987) addresses what is strange about popular culture, “what is parallel to the official, what is other” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 87, our translation). From Bakhtin, Martín-Barbero recovers his way of placing the popular as a cultural plane opposed to the official one. Bakhtin places a particular *space*, that of the public square, which is the place where the people have the main voice. The square is the open space where everyone fits: speeches, trading, theater, everyday life. He adds to his analysis the category of *a time*, that of carnival as a reaffirmation of the people's body and its moods. Carnival is the most important time in the square, it is a time of exception; after working time and harvesting, carnival



is that brief moment when dancing and pleasure are allowed. Two devices appear in the text: laughter and the mask.

While in Bakhtin's oeuvre popular culture is placed as different, other, strange, in the work of the Italian Carlo Ginzburg we find the resistances of the popular culture and the capacities that were constituted through that to assume the conflict in an active and intuitive way.

The genealogy that Martín-Barbero proposes considers the contributions of other social scientists: Michel de Certeau, who pointed to the danger of making think that the only intelligibility in practices is given by the processes of reproduction, and two representatives of British cultural studies, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, and a French, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. These authors will lead him to affirm that popular life is familial, in group, community, vicinal, with a mixed morality: contestant cynicism, elementary religiosity, living one day at a time, improvisation and meaning of pleasure.

Based on these authors, illuminating the itinerary that Martín-Barbero builds, is the Italian Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937)<sup>6</sup>. According to his reading, in proposing the concept of hegemony, Gramsci places the superstructure at the center of the discussion, that is, the sphere of the cultural dimension and, in some way, of the class dimension of popular culture.

The concept of *hegemony* [makes it] possible to think the process of social domination not as an imposition from an *outside* and without *subjects*, but as a process in which the class becomes hegemonic to the extent that it represents interests that also recognize the subaltern classes in some way as their own. And "to the extent" means here that hegemony does not *exist*; in fact, it is permanently made and unmade and remade in a "lived process," made not only of strength but also of meaning, of appropriation of the meaning of power, of seduction and complicity. This implies a defunctionalization of ideology (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 99-100, our translation).

Ideology is not something that is outside and that is imposed by coercion, but something that is within the popular, perhaps that is why Gramsci says that "the unorganizable part of public opinion (especially women, where the female vote exists) is so large that it always makes possible the booms and electoral coups where the sensationalist press and the radio are widely disseminated" (Gramsci, 1981, p. 38, our translation). Martín-Barbero points out that if Gramsci left any heritage, it was the need to pay attention to the weave, that is, to create the popular "as a use and not as an origin, as a fact and not as an essence, as a relational position and not as a substance" (Cirese apud Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 100, our translation). However, this is not possible;

<sup>6</sup> A Marxist theorist, politician and journalist, Gramsci was arrested in November 1926 and imprisoned until 1934, when he was freed with a probation order because of his illnesses. He died in 1937, and his texts were published ten years later, starting in 1948, in editions that began to circulate until in the 1970s they became a fundamental point of the discussions of the academic left (Rosengarten, n.d.).

therefore, I try to review the other concept based on which the category I deal with is built: *the massive*.

### THE STRUCTURAL SHIFT: FROM THE CULTURAL ADJECTIVE POPULAR TO THE SUBSTANTIVE OF MASSIVE POPULAR

Perhaps the main boldness of the Spanish-Colombian thinker was to insist that the popular, through the constitution of the cultural industry, shifted its fossil *life*—to use Eliade’s term—to this ambiguous and bastard place of the market, to the mass media.

At the end of the nineteenth century, dazzling new technologies of reproduction are within the reach of Western societies. The first of these is photography. Even though Louis Daguerre (1787-1851) considers that it was invented in 1839, the mass diffusion of this medium will only take place from 1888, amid the industrial era, when George Eastman invents the Kodak camera and begins the manufacture of film rolls that put photography within the reach of many. A few years later, in 1895, brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière surprised the world with a new proposal: cinema. The faceless publics, the large crowds and the masses began to emerge, seduced by the proposal of new consumptions that would end up supporting fascist political movements or exuberant multitudinous movements that were difficult to control. It is not by chance—as pointed out by intellectuals such as Eduardo Gruner—that the rise of cinema coincides with the rise of Marxism and psychoanalysis (Pinto, 2007).

It was precisely at this time that the terms “of the masses” and “mass culture” see their greatest dissemination. In order to understand this concept, the traditional dictionary is of little use, because it refers more to the physical magnitude associated with the matter or to the mixture of flour with water and yeast than to the crowd, which it mentions briefly. However, I want to return to the *mainstream* concept that is available on *Wikipedia*:

**Masses:** In Political Sciences, Sociology and Constitutional Law, masses or the masses refer to a collective subject in certain manifestations of social behavior, mainly to describe forms of gregarious behavior, as opposed to individual behavior. It is often used in the plural form (the masses), and in opposition to the concept of elites. Usually, it is not used neutrally, but with a different semantic value according to the ideological intention with which the term is used: both derogatory and laudatory. It is closely related with other concepts, such as people, crowd, plebs, rabble or scum; and with the Greek expression *hoi polloi* (οἱ πολλοί — “the many” or “the majority” —, the basis of democracy or power of the people — with *demos* translated as people) as opposed



to *hoi olligoi* (οἱ ὀλίγοι — “the few” or “the minority” —, the basis of oligarchy), both coming from Pericles’ funeral speech and, the first, widely used as an elitist topic in Anglo-Saxon culture since the early nineteenth century (“Massas”, 2013).

In an entry linked to the previous one, *Wikipedia* states that the concept of “mass society” was born with the advent of industrial society (“Sociedade de massa”, 2013), and refers to groups of individuals equal to one another, one of the ideals of the new societies that opposed the Ancien Régime. However, this expression came to mean the concern of the elites with these crowds lacking in culture and very difficult to control; and as pointed out in *Wikipedia*, it is not usual to use this term neutrally.

Another dictionary that presents a very widespread definition is the *Online Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, which presents the following about “mass culture”:

**Mass culture:** A set of cultural values and ideas that arise from common exposure of a population to the same cultural activities, communications media, music and art, etc. Mass culture becomes possible only with modern communications and electronic media. A mass culture is transmitted to individuals, rather than arising from people’s daily interactions, and therefore lacks the distinctive content of cultures rooted in community and region. Mass culture tends to reproduce the liberal value of individualism and to foster a view of the citizen as consumer (Drislane & Parkinson, 2002).<sup>7</sup>

Mass culture, in this definition, is produced exclusively through the “modern” means of communication, electronic communications, and the fact that it is pointed out as an opposite or substitute for people’s daily lives. Martín-Barbero’s genealogy enable us to establish the concept of masses and the massive in a dimension that encompasses the contradictions and complexities of the term.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of mass society is much older than manuals for communication scholars usually inform. In order to make technology the necessary and sufficient cause of the new society, most of these manuals situate the advent of the theory of mass society between the 1930s and 1940s, ignoring the historical, social and political matrices of a concept that, in 1930, was already almost a century old. Perhaps an image is adequate: the development of the theory of mass society during the nineteenth century is that of a movement that goes from fear to disappointment and from there to pessimism, but preserving disgust (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 27, our translation).

Following this statement, it is observed that the concept of *mass society* is born with modernity, with serial reproduction, with industrialization, in addition

<sup>7</sup>“Mass culture: a set of cultural ideas and values that arise from the common exposure of a population to the same type of cultural activities, media, music, art, etc. Mass culture is only possible through electronic media and modern communications. Mass culture is transmitted to people to replace everyday interactions and, therefore, lacks the content of cultures rooted in a community or region. Mass culture tends to reproduce the liberal value of individualism and to stimulate a view of the citizen as a consumer.” [our translation].

<sup>8</sup>Later works analyze other genealogies. Some fundamental ones are: the British reading developed by Francis Mulhern in English cultural studies. In the text *Culture/Metaculture*, Mulhern establishes the concept of the creation of the *kulturkritik*, which comes mainly from German academia, and also includes important thinkers from other countries such as Ortega and Gasset, Julien Benda and Virginia Woolf. The most philosophical approach is found in Peter Sloterdijk’s *Die Verachtung der Massen* [Contempt for the masses]. *Essay on cultural struggles in modern society* (2001). Two quite political approaches are those of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in the work *Empire* (2005), initially published in English in 2000, with the proposal and analysis of the category of *crowd*, a concept to think about a global order permeated by networks of communication, control and migrations of different types; and the work *A razão populista* (2005), by the great Argentine theorist, Ernesto Laclau, who makes his own review of the defamation of the concept of *masses* and of the construction of the category of *people* to think about populism as a political practice. All texts are subsequent to Martín-Barbero’s initial genealogy and deserve a comprehensive review of the novelties they propose.

to arising from fear, disappointment, pessimism and disgust, from the urgency to think how the new bourgeoisie will understand the hegemonic processes to control any revolution that occurs after the one it started. If, as Deleuze points out, “genealogy not only interprets, but also values” (Deleuze, 2016, p. 14, our translation), this dismantling of origins enables Martín-Barbero to show the fears of an academy formed from the scale of values of the elites and the reasons that prevent discovering in the masses gestures of goodness, intelligence and taste.

Martín-Barbero divides his review on “the masses” into five times. First, the more sociological approach that enables, with Alexis de Tocqueville, the discovery of the crowd as a central place for a policy that establishes a certain type of democratic regime, such as that of the United States; second, the time linked to crowd psychology, greatly influenced by the predecessors and theorists of psychoanalysis, in which authors such as Tarde or Freud review a certain type of feeling associated with the masses, their hysteria, their feelings, the possible manipulation and distrust of the elites; third, the most philosophical time in which some thinkers such as Ortega and Gasset articulate a metaphysics of the man of the masses and name the malaise that with their visibility was installed in modern society; fourth, a review based on the new functionalist theories of communication enables Martín-Barbero to carry out a risky but original operation, which consists in tracing a route of union between some massive gestures and the survival of the popular; fifth, he dedicates an entire chapter to thinking about one of the most important theories linked to the mass, that of the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno and Benjamin, but also based on four later thinkers: Edgar Morin, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and Jürgen Habermas.

Therefore, the originality of this author’s thought lies in this intersection, in this Benjaminian constellation that enables him to reflect on the popular by adding to this concept, indissolubly, a category that had previously been considered opposite: the massive. The constellation is the model that Benjamin proposes for the study of human phenomena, especially history. What he intends is for scholars to approach the phenomena, the facts, and through them, without forgetting them, without diluting them in a system, show a configuration, a mosaic. The important point here is that the phenomenon maintains its independence, that it is very clear that it is not in continuity with others, that it does not end up distorted by the whole. What Benjamin called the “salvation” or “redemption” of the consistent phenomenon is to show it in a whole that does not go over it and that can even do without it. Benjamin insists that the phenomenon be saved, that it remain recognizable, that it not end up lost in the tide of what is, because if it happens, we will have betrayed the process of knowledge. This is the path that runs through history in the opposite direction, reflects on

the erasure, on this erasure that has been the intellectuals' condemnation in relation to mass communication as the destroyer of popular culture and, based on that, reviews what we have become.

As a method, genealogy shows the knowledge/power based on which the categories we use to name the world are constructed. In the case of the *massive popular*, its historical construction obeyed political interests and made possible many of the cultural confusions and interventions. The popular and the massive were conceived through dichotomies that were hard to see; we lacked the view of a genealogist who would make us reflect on the internal struggles that constituted these immutable meanings with which we have worked for years.

We think within certain traditions that think us: we cannot escape them. Therefore, Martín-Barbero's contribution consists in not distancing from the philosophical tradition, nor staying only in this tradition, but, rather, circulating in some other places and assuming the various schools of thought, situating them in dialogue, thinking negatively, committing the heresy of uniting the *non-unifiable* and introducing the operation of miscegenation to explode the traditional categories. Thus, it is possible to contribute with a new and delimited point of view of the current reality.

## INITIAL CONCLUSIONS: THE DIALOGICAL SHIFT

Currently, the massive popular is a category that has already separated from its author to contribute to a social thought that reflects on contemporary cultural movements and the influence of mass phenomena as a sphere that constitutes the popular. In addition, the massive popular begins to have several parents who credit themselves with having created the term, but, as I have shown, they are all subsequent to the initial approach made by Martín-Barbero. The influence of this category of research is remarkable in the fields of cultural studies, communication and begins to contribute to philosophy, mainly linked to aesthetic thinking.

Latin American academe had an intense discussion about the popular in the 1990s. Two years after the publication of *De los medios a las mediaciones*, in 1989, anthropologist Néstor García Canclini published a new book, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. The approaches of this analysis of the forms of modernity in Mexico, Argentina and Brazil contributed to the debate on the massive popular.

This work tried not only to describe the cultural diversity increasingly evident in Latin America, but also to advance in the explanatory field and in the hermeneutic capacity, that is, to become useful to understand the meaning

of this cultural diversity that was found. According to Martín-Barbero, García Canclini's book "undoubtedly marks a point of arrival in this journey and a milestone in Latin American cultural studies. And it is mainly because it helps us to think the difference not on the sidelines, but through debate with modernity, transforming this debate into an occasion and a way to access the most radical issues and our crises" (Martín-Barbero, 1991, our translation).

In the mid-1990s, the American journalist and sociologist James Lull used Martín-Barbero's proposal to analyze what he called "popular cultural capital: black gold," in which he addressed the transnational construction of racial stereotypes associated with black culture (1997, p. 115). There is one more element in these reflections: melodrama as a semiotic device of the popular, as a device that configures and evokes.

The first decade of the twenty-first century (from the beginning of the century, when he was in Guadalajara, until 2010, when he was already in Colombia) can be called a period of balance in Martín-Barbero's thought. On the one hand, we already have a tradition in the field of communication and, on the other, an author who begins to be revisited by other researchers and analyzed through a joint review. Javeriana University's journal *Signo y pensamiento* issue 41, 2002, had the title "De los medios a las mediaciones? Viejos itinerarios, nuevas discusiones" [From the media to mediations? Old itineraries, new discussions]. In the introduction to the monograph, the editors pointed out that there were issues that had a particular persistence and that "today they keep all their burden and keep the itineraries of reflection in place, in an era of media modernity [...] in this context of changes, frustrations and validities we wanted the issue to ask if, given the current media and technological hegemony, what remains for us to do is the opposite of what Martín-Barbero has been proposing" ("Para nossos leitores", 2002, p. 5, our translation). The answers, in addition to being contradictory to the original proposals, are the continuation of a dialogue that remains in place.

This conception was also worked on in the Argentine academy by the team of researchers led by sociologist Pablo Alabarces, who pointed out in a 2008 work the following:

The reception of Barbero's book [sic] was painful: quickly relieved of the critical impetus of the sixties and seventies, our Latin American academy seemed to favor a more obvious reading, which was on the sidelines of Barbero and with ill will: the popular was in the masses... and there it was well guarded. When Canclinian hybridity reconciled all the fragments of our neoconservative postmodernity, the nineties became definitively neo-populist, in a paradoxical celebration:

the nineties were – could be – neo-populist because the people no longer existed (Alabarces, 2008, p. 18, our translation).

The concern of this Argentine thinker to recover the complexity of the thought about the people and the popular insists on the necessity to shun any simplification. To this end, he proposes two concepts to guide his work: mediations and resistances. The first will work on the contribution of Martín-Barbero<sup>9</sup>. Although Alabarces insisted on the need to think the popular, he also recovered the demand that, since Gramsci, has become clear: to suspect automatic attributions of meaning and easy reductionisms related to the popular.

The concept of mediations as a basis for discussions through anthropology and communication was also recovered in the work of Lluís Duch and Albert Chillón, who reviewed the discussion on mediation through cinema and art, to philosophy. In the text, the authors showed Martín-Barbero's contribution to the discussion of mediations through the media (Duch & Chillón, 2012).

In June 2008, *Revista Latinoamericana de Comunicación, Chasqui*, from Ecuador, dedicated a monograph to Martín-Barbero; in its editorial, he was pointed out as “one of the most active and prolific Latin American thinkers, from time to time he gives us new studies and advances in his thought in the form of articles, books and lectures. We have seen that even after more than three decades of communicative research, their first proposals have not been exhausted; in fact, they have adjusted and adapted to social transformations” (“Carta para nossos leitores”, 2008, p. 1, our translation). In 2008, the journal *Anthropos*, from Barcelona, also dedicated a monograph, in which they pointed out that Martín-Barbero “moves from philosophy—from its themes and authors—to the social and communication sciences according to the peculiar conception of Latin America [...] and in this coming and going from darkness to light, intellectual and communicative clarity happens. There is the discovery of an original contribution from Latin America: a new theory of communication and the process of liberation as awareness raising” (“Editora”, 2008, p. 5, our translation).

Much of his thought was systematized in fourteen books, eight coordinations, about two hundred articles in academic journals, more than one hundred and fifty lectures around the world. In 2022, due to his death, discussions, congresses and seminars multiplied, which shows how his discussions are still current.

Although Martín-Barbero did not mention the word “reification” in his reflections on popular culture, it is possible to argue that this concept is at the bottom of his reflection, mainly because of his insistence on showing these *forgetfulnesses* that made us understand the cultural sphere as something that separates what should be united: that is, a methodological means to *historicize*

<sup>9</sup>“The notion of *mediations* refers us to the field defined by Jesús Martín-Barbero twenty years ago, in 1987, it seems impossible to address Latin American studies on popular culture and mass culture without this reference. However, the notion has lost nothing of its original inaccuracy, on the contrary, it has only increased it: we count eighteen definitions of mediation in Martín-Barbero's original text, and any post-Barberian literature review only adds inaccuracies and metaphors. In this last instance, the Barberian concept of mediation is another fold in the series that tries to define the relations between structure and superstructure avoiding the *determination in the last instance* and, with it, *reflex temptation*” (Alabarces, 2008, p. 23-24, our translation).

<sup>10</sup>Here again appears an insistence that is not named, but which is associated with the concerns of other philosophers, Nietzsche with genealogy, Foucault with archaeology, Zea with the history of ideas or Ellacuría with historization as a method.

the constitution of the popular<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, his work, at various times, argued against the dualistic reason that “inevitably transforms the massive into processes of cultural degradation” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. xxix, our translation) and that makes homogeneous that which, in fact, has many different aspects, such as the conceptions about culture, people and mass. This is the shift: from adjective to noun. From communication to philosophy, to understand the reifications that live in the popular by naming it, but also by facing the voracious capitalism into which we were cast, as Heidegger would say.

In March 2014, a group of academics from El Salvador and Colombia proposed to nominate Jesús Martín-Barbero as a candidate for the Prince of Asturias award in the area of communication and human sciences. Today the award is called *Princess of Asturias*, and has been awarded, since 1981, to the person, group of people or institution whose creative or research work represents a relevant contribution to universal culture in these fields. The first winner was the Spanish philosopher María Zambrano.

After deliberation, the jury awarded the prize to Joaquín Lavado, known as Quino, an Argentine cartoonist known worldwide for his character Mafalda, the rebellious girl who has combined political analysis and existential discourse since the 1970s. Beyond the anecdote, I would like to point out that, as part of the support for the candidate, the commission managed to obtain, in less than a month, 57 letters of support that came from more than fifty institutions including universities, intellectuals, and communication and journalism organizations in Ibero-America. Among the countries that supported the candidate are Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Spain, the United States, El Salvador, Guatemala, Ecuador, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Peru, Puerto Rico and Venezuela. The institutions and researchers expressed in these letters the centrality of the work *De los medios a las mediaciones* in the epistemic debate in the field of communication and its contribution to cultural studies through the thought about *mass popular* culture. At the same time, I believe that giving the award to Quino and therefore to Mafalda—this character from massive, popular culture, but also a critical character—is a good tribute to Martín-Barbero’s reflection.

The academia cannot be understood without the conflicts and power struggles that each epistemic field produces and struggles. Martín-Barbero went through three of these fields and used interdisciplinarity to question old certainties and review their permanence over time. ■



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