

MUNIZ SODRÉ INTERVIEW

The way of life of the media

An original theory suggests that human bonding is the object of communication, and creates the concept of a bios of the media as a key to understanding present-day society

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Communication has never enjoyed such a high status among the disciplines of the human sciences. Outlined as an issue to be thought about at the end of the 19th century, in the wake of the concerns of the liberal State and the social thinkers with the great human concentrations in the cities, communication was always held to be, if that much, a lesser field of knowledge, without any defined theoretic object. It resembled someone living on his petty tricks, borrowing methods from sociology, the theory of information, anthropology, to rely, later, on taking shelter in French semiology, American semiotics, and from the welcome of English cultural studies. Even when thinkers of the stature of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer created, in the 40s, the concept of a cultural industry – crucial for the field of communication – and elevated it to the category of a fundamental question for understanding the 20th century, communication continued in its rather outcast condition, bowing to the great disciplines of social thought. In Brazil, the situation was never very different, even with the creation of the schools of communication at the end of the 60s.

Very well: an important contribution to the efforts by specialists from several parts of the world to locate the field of communication is magnificently

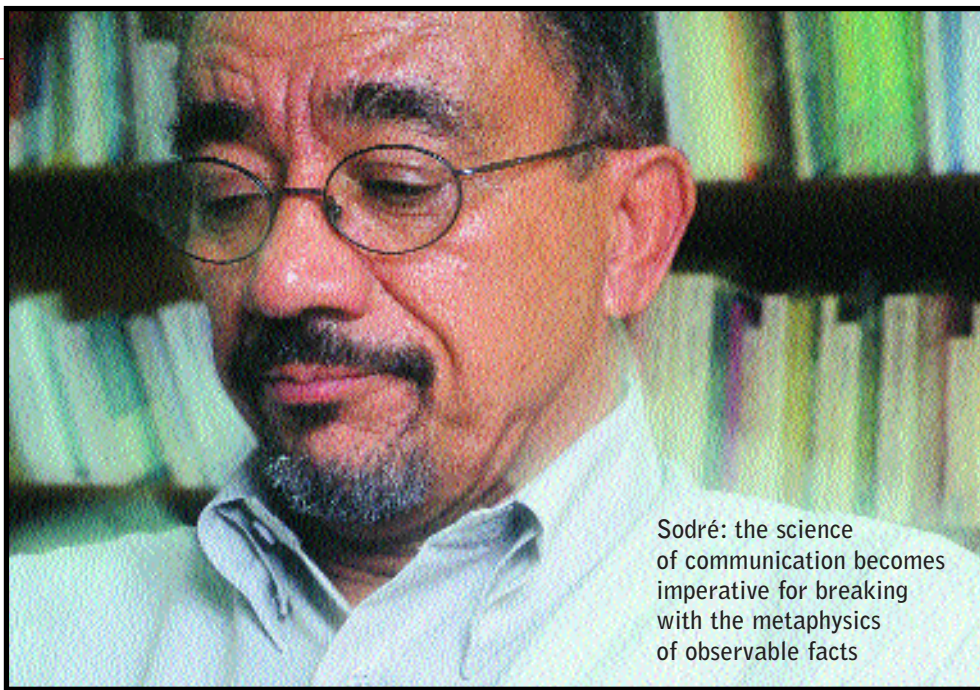
set out in a new book by a Brazilian: *Antropológica do Espelho* (*The Mirror Anthropology*), published by Vozes, launched at the end of last April. In this work, supported by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), Muniz Sodré, full professor and former coordinator of the postgraduate program on Communication and Culture, and recognized as one of the main Latin American thinkers in communication, presents a new proposal about the object of this field of knowledge: for him, this object is human, community bonding, which occurs today in the ambit of a general relationship – the one established by the media – which pretends to be a bond, a link that is always affected by the emotional side. Furthermore: Muniz suggests that we live today a new form of life – the media driven or virtual bios, rooted in business –, made of information, mirroring and new customs.

Built like a strict, dense essay, *Antropológica do Espelho*, the 25th book by this far from orthodox thinker, dedicated for 30 years to reflections on communication, examines the ethos of this media driven world; it analyzes the transformation of the symbolic points of reference with which, educationally and politically, the contemporary conscience is formed; it speculates on the current processes of building reality, memory and identification of the subjects;

it sets out the transformation of the norms and values of sociability, that is to say, of Ethics – the great theoretical backing to the essay – and, finally, it discusses the field of communication in epistemological terms. It does all this making clear the linkage between the media and the market within the so-called globalization, and keeps in the background the idea that communication and the media constitute, theoretically, pretexts for new social discoveries in the social sphere. A few extracts from the interview he granted to Pesquisa FAPESP about his new work follow:

■ *Why qualify some respected theoreticians, important for communication, as “thinkers of death”?*

— I was referring to a generation of French thinkers who grouped themselves around something they called “la théorie”, and who theorized the world half way between philosophy, sociology and anthropology. They included Levy Strauss, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, the Tel Quel group, Roland Barthes, later Jean Baudrillard. The theory has somewhat disappeared. It was very much in vogue in France from the mid-60s to the 80 and a bit, and in the 90s it was already starting to wane, losing much of the aura it used to have. Its theory was a line of thought of what was disappearing from the contemporary social forms. Some gave this the name of post-modernism, which I



Sodré: the science of communication becomes imperative for breaking with the metaphysics of observable facts

see as a label to stick to certain mutations. What characterized it was the decline of certain social forms that Gianni Vattimo preferred to call, in Italy, *pensiero debole*, non-violent thought, outside metaphysics, no longer that transcendent god, but a partial and relative one, subject to many interpretations, and respecting fiction about the world, in the tracks of Nietzsche. But they were also thinkers of death because they represented the death of their own continuity.

■ *In what sense?*

— In the sense that, academically and methodologically, they could not be taken very literally. Traditional thinkers had behind them a cause and the possibility of a methodological continuity, take Marx, and even Sartre. The ones we are talking about had neither one thing nor the other, they were more related to the text than to life concretely stirring, and they were people with a brilliance that illuminated a lot and then went out. Anyone who later tried to write like Barthes came out badly.

■ *What is your relationship with them?*

— I studied with some of them in France, like Barthes, and I have a personal relationship with one of them, which is Baudrillard. But the question that is important here is that, like them, I do not in fact believe in universalism and in the scientific precision of the social sciences. Hence, the great epistemo-

logical interest of communication is to bring to the panorama of social thinking a relativization of disciplinary knowledge. I do not believe that communication is strictly speaking a discipline. To repeat a play on words that has already been done, it is rather an indiscipline with regard to strict, narrow, disciplinary limits.

■ *Without these limits, can the object of a field of knowledge become clear?*

— Yes, and, with this, first, you see that the object of communication is not the media, it is human bonding. That is to say, how it is that we, socially, and why socially, are together. What tie makes it possible for us, being in a community, to hate ourselves and kill ourselves, but to remain together. Beyond work, beyond the economy, there is some thing called a bond.

■ *But what specific nature does this bond have, this object of communication?*

— It is the bond in the light of another general kind of bond that has been established: the bond of the media. This means: it is the bond in the light of relationship, that is, the media are relational, communication is bonding. And what is the difference between bonding and relationship? It is that bonding goes through the body, affection, passes through feelings, and hate, while the relationship between people can be completely impersonal, that is, they are atomized,

separated individuals, who relate legally and politely, by law and by etiquette. The bond may even be transfixed by law, but it is emotional, libidinal, and affective.

■ *Does a bond in the atmosphere of the media have these same properties?*

— It may have, the problem is to what extent this happens, in coexistence with the force of a relational bond which is entirely societal – which I distinguish from social. The first I understand as the force of the institutions of society, of the State, that keeps us together. Well, the media keep with their public

a societal bond pretending to be a social one, because they work with the emotions. The media create a relationship, and to do so they have to set up another kind of sociability, another bonding rule.

■ *In what manner?*

— Look at the trick of television, for example. That familiarity with which it goes into your home, that likeable look of the presenter, which is not that of the speaker in public, it is a bonding pretext. In the relationship, the identities seem to be ready, finished and tied together by threads, legal, socio-psychological, etc., while the bonds, even though it is traversed by this, is emotional. Communication is the science that works on this – and I say that it is a science strictly speaking, not in the positive sense, but in the sense we used to have in the 18th century, and which is in Kant, in the sensualist philosophers, in a fine language, and capable of being recognized as such by the community.

■ *But isn't it an exaggeration to classify communication as a science?*

— No, science doesn't have to be necessarily exact and universal knowledge. There is this sense of science as a well structured language, and, seen like that, communication gives us the pretext for talking about an emergent kind of sociability, which is not anchored on a territory, which are processes, staged relationships where their reality is virtual,

and which today are together with other historical forms of sociability.

■ *Research into communication would thus make it possible to spot in an acute form this process of the new forms living together with the traditional forms of sociability.*

— Precisely. That has already been announced by several people in different manners. I tried to announce it more clearly, because I based myself on Aristotle, when he, in a simple way, in the Nicomachean Ethics, distinguishes, just as Plato had already done in Philebus, three genera of existence in the Polis, three modes of sociability: the mode of knowledge, which is bios theoretikos, the mode of pleasures, which is bios apolaustikos, and political sociability, which is bios politikos. Well, thinking about each of these spheres, where the individual lodges himself in the social, I realized that all that there is with regard to the media – perceiving that they are not just an apparatus for transmitting information and data, but have an influence of the bond and relate to the bond –, is that they are another bios, which appears from something that Aristotle excluded from his system, which is the bios of business – what I call then the bios of the media or virtual bios. Without any territory, just made of information.

■ *And this is the fulcrum of your theoretical proposition.*

— It is, because starting from this, from the bios of the media as another kind of social form, the whole methodology and perspective for communication changes, because I can no longer avail myself, strictly speaking, of sociology, anthropology and philosophy, which are disciplines and learning that arose from the connections with the historical forms of bios, around the State, religion and the economy. So here, then, I have a disjuncting from the traditional objects, which makes me to think up a new object, placed on another plane, on which I can no longer talk of substances to which I am going to predicate qualities. This is what happens with the Aristotelian knowledge to speak of the social sphere, the predication of qualities, while here I am going to talk about a logic that some authors call process logic, and I am going to call properly communica-

“The idea of a fourth bios has now been inscribed in contemporary imagination. See the Truman Show film”

tional logic, a logic of the connections, of the interfaces.

■ *And what is your methodological proposition for addressing this field?*

— Methodology is one thing, and methods, another. Edgar Morin made this distinction. Methodology is the methods already tested, which many academic institutions apply mechanically. I would say that communication has method and not much methodology. Method is the route in the direction of an objective, it is a way. This means that each and every scientific work admits creation, discovery, whatever it is. Communication has that invention that C. S. Peirce called abduction, the instant of discovery, of an insight into the social sciences. When you take the great explainers of Brazil, like Gilberto Freyre and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, you can see there is enormous personal research behind the texts, but in no instant do you find in them the fetishism of research. And yet, with their ideas, abductions, insights, they have been veritable seeds. On this same track, for me, communication is, academically and theoretically, a pretext for discoveries in the social sphere.

■ *When asking about method, I was also thinking, in defense of it, of the need for a certain practical experience to think out the question of communication.*

— Unlike other social disciplines, I think that communication is a kind of study that does not dispense with the researcher's own experience. To write about journalism, some experience of journalism is fundamental, at least as someone who is submerged in a editorial office, in the environment of a television station, etc. And from this theoretical reflection to come from the inside, the media have to be accepted.

The attitude cannot be simply a refusal born of cultural and intellectual moralism, in the fashion of the Frankfurt School – which, let it be said, I think is a great school, but, at that moment, emerging technology frightened the great philosophers like Adorno and Horkeimer a lot. It has to be accepted, because it is a form of life that you share, like it or not. The whole time we are immersed in this object that is the bios of the media, and, as I wrote in the book, we go in and out of it all the time, because this bios is a parasite on the historical kinds of bios. I want to say with this that the bios of the media is going to extract the substance from the simulations it makes, their content and the appearance it wants to show the world, from the previous world. That is why it is very conservative as far as its forms are concerned. At bottom, television, for example, wants each viewer to recognize himself in it, to facilitate the relationship, it doesn't want to tear himself into strips, nor to break up his image, it wants the viewer to see himself just as he sees himself in the mirror.

■ *Given your condition as a teacher, how do you manage to transmit clear clues on the method for thinking out communication?*

— First, I take care of a methodological stimulation for this analogue logic. Given a phenomenon, my proposition is: let us examine it on the economic, political and ideological level. I do this in the manner of an essay, reflectively, reading articles, paper, talking, which does not prevent the students from being able to do each one of these levels sociologically, and with field research. My personal method is the interconnection of the three instances, and so it is isomorphic, because I try to see how different forms have one isos, one point in common.

■ *Can we talk about the notion of the bios of the media as something that has the shallow surface of a mirror? Can it be summed up here?*

— The mirror reflects and at the same time encloses the image on its shallow surface. It lacks the depth of life, and this being enclosed in a shallow surface is the condition of man who lives in the bios of the media. It is like Alice in the land of the looking glasses. That is, if I am in the mirror and under blue light-

ting, I am the blue citizen in the mirror. And this blue, red or purple that the media illuminates is actually the bios of the media. The bios is a qualification, a particular illumination. A side of pure appearance that allows infinite contagion and refraction: one image leads to another, which leads to another, infinitely, and until I receive them, I am then so accustomed to them that I myself am an image. Anyway, the media reduce the discourse of the historical real to what is possible inside the surface of a mirror. And it is in this reduction of substance to its image that the world is transformed. That is why Heidegger says about technique: modernity is the world that has been transformed into an image. Merchandise is an image, not any image, but one like the most perfect and finished form of the merchandise, because what is seductive about it is not its value in use, but the value for social exchange it has acquired and which is a signal; that is to say, merchandise today is just as more seductive as it has received enhancement in the eyes of others, starting with the market.

■ *The image is the result. But what is the origin of this process?*

— The origin is the market, and consumption, then, is change in the universe of production. The traditional mode of production implied the ideology of the worker directly producing something, and the model for this work comes from the factory, even if we are dealing with an intellectual worker: I give so many hours and my work can be measured in hours or in production. With the depreciation of factory work and its replacement by specialists in machines or in administration or management of knowledge, we operate more and more with signs, with images of things, and, often, work in a large company is image, it is that guy who doesn't know how to do anything, but he circulates, he manages, administers relationships. Relationship in itself has turned itself into a value. The image has gone on to manage, to invade and to colonize the social sphere. You may say: hasn't it always been like this? Yes, it has, but psychically, inwardly, on an individual scale. The problem is that this has left the individual and goes on in the media. So the images become substance, without one being able to touch

“I see communication as a philosophical public activity, with the obligation of explaining the media to the public at large”

them, they ask only for the potency of the look.

■ *In all the modernity of the west, the look has become an instrument of power. What has changed in contemporary terms?*

— The power of seeing has been transferred, is going democratic, it is no longer a question of seeing oneself magnified in the looking glasses of the great bourgeois houses, in the portraits, in the avenues with which cities are rationalized. These classic ocular strategies have been transferred to viewing machines, the look of dominant or dominated subjectivities has been transferred to technical objects, like those in medicine or in entertainment. So we have another landscape, where the interobjective is stronger than the intersubjective. The individual is a human element in a chain of technical objects in the system. The gatekeeper who controls the garage is an element in a technical chain. And that transforms relations in society profoundly. With regard to the media, the viewing machines broaden the public space. The hustings that used to be for a few thousand, go to millions. But the expansion of technology reduces, on the other hand, the promise of acting free socially. Representation is becoming autonomous. Power lies not where we think it does, it has been transferred to the technical sphere. The media bring death to classic politics and representative democracy, we have moved on to a plebiscitary democracy.

■ *This leads to the following question: with the death of the classic forms of representation, with the weakening of civil society, what is happening on the social and political plane?*

— I think that what authors call the civil post-society is just a label, I think

that civil society continues, and what I see is the emergence of what the Hegelian idea of civil society left aside: the plebs, the rest, which did not link up institutionally to be an integral part of the world of work. It's the mass. They are the people who have been excluded and increased out of all proportion with the financial globalization of the world.

■ *But does not this increase point to barbarity, violence and crime?*

— Without a doubt, and that is what we are seeing. I am not saying that the plebs is harmonious, when it doesn't even have a civil language, just counter-language – violence is a counter-language. At any rate, let us not forget that no social group is founded without violence. Urban criminality is unbearable because the classic civil society is not prepared to deal with violence, except in terms of warfare. With criminality, as in the wars that are ethnic in appearance only, what is implied is a rearrangement of territory through instants of sovereignty, which are chaotic moments. The masses are going through their moment of sovereignty in its most unbearable form, which is this violence that is not only for getting things, but for cruelty.

■ *I find the somber nature of your diagnosis odd, in the light of the subtle sensation that your book gives that there are some ways out.*

— I agree with the point of view of Milton Santos, which was the same as Michel Serres's, that the ongoing production of scarcity, of precariousness in the real conditions of the world, generates a kind of knowledge. This knowledge is what I call experience – the component and source of all action. And the State, either it learns with the pleb or it disappears.

■ *There is a concern of yours with practical action, coming from a theoretician in communication, isn't there?*

— I understand communication as a public philosophy, that is, one focused not only on the academic world, but with the obligation of an undertaking to focus as well on the public at large, to explain the media to them. Reflection on communication is accordingly an activity committed to the historical reality, and not an entirely timeless abstraction. •