



# COMMONS

Revista de Comunicación y Ciudadanía Digital

Publicación bianual

Volumen 5, Número 2 pp. 93-117

ISSN 2255-3401

Diciembre 2016

## **MOBILIZATION AS COMMUNICATION – A LATIN AMERICAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

Paola Sartoretto

Fecha de envío: 18/8/2016

Fecha de aprobación: 20/10/2016

# MOBILIZATION AS COMMUNICATION – A LATIN AMERICAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

## LA MOVILIZACIÓN COMO COMUNICACIÓN: UNA CONTRIBUCIÓN LATINOAMERICANA AL ESTUDIO DE LOS MOVIMIENTOS SOCIALES

Paola Sartoretto

[Paola.sartoretto@sh.se](mailto:Paola.sartoretto@sh.se)

Södertörn University

### Abstract

Many scholars have noted the lack of interdisciplinary dialogue and research between the areas of social movements studies and that of media and communications. While social movement studies fail to fully analyse media practices and communicative processes in relation to mobilization, in media and communication the social and political aspects of mobilization are seldom taken into account when analysing communication in social movements. This apparent lack of dialogue is presented in the paper as a consequence of north-centred theorization in the fields of social movement studies and media and communication, which is addressed by spelling out the contribution of Latin American communication scholarship and a view of mobilization as anchored in communication.

### Palabras clave

Social movements, mobilization, communication, Latin America.

### Resumen

Muchos académicos han observado la ausencia de diálogo interdisciplinario entre los estudios de los movimientos sociales y de los medios y la comunicación. Mientras que los estudios de los movimientos sociales no analizan de manera integral las prácticas mediáticas y los procesos comunicacionales en relación con la movilización, los estudios de medios y comunicación raras veces toman en cuenta los aspectos socio-políticos cuando analizan la comunicación en los movimientos sociales. Este artículo plantea esa aparente falta de diálogo como una consecuencia de una teorización eurocéntrica, explica en detalle la contribución de los estudios latinoamericanos de la comunicación, y propone una visión de la movilización centrada en la comunicación.

### Keywords

Movimientos sociales, movilización, comunicación, Latino América.

## 1. Introduction

This paper seeks to problematize and discuss ethnocentric notions in the theorization of social movements and to highlight the intersection between mobilization and communication from the perspective of Latin American scholarship. The theoretical endeavour speaks to Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2007) critique of the colonialist ethos of social sciences, which have come to consider experience outside the Euro- American ways of living and knowing the world as exceptions or anomalies. Santos argues that social sciences need to move beyond Northern epistemologies, and acknowledge other ways of knowing, understanding and being in the world. Against this backdrop, I suggest conceptual tools that could be useful for explaining social movement

formation and mobilization processes beyond the scope of advanced post-industrialist societies and the transmission paradigm in communication studies.

The main arguments advanced in this paper are threefold. The first proposition is that dominant theories in Social Movements studies offer little in terms of analytical tools to address communication in social movements. From then I argue that Latin American media and communication scholarship has since long intersected with the study of social movement and can thus make a contribution in this field. Finally, I propose that one of the main Latin American contributions to the study of social movements is the analysis and conceptualization of the communicative aspects of mobilization.

I will argue for communication to be seen and analysed as a constitutive and central aspect of mobilization, or as a social practice that entails more than the transmission of information. An emphasis on communication in the study of social movements relates to Downing's (2008) critique of the lack of dialogue between the areas of social movements and media and communication studies. According to Downing the potential for interdisciplinary work between these two fields is not fully developed because social movements studies treat communication as information transmission and media as mere material channels for the transmission of information.

## **2. Social movement studies – a brief outline**

Organized mobilization as a social phenomenon has been the object of study of sociology in a systematic way starting from the second half of the 20th century when different groups, more or less organized, advanced social demands and/or caused social disruption. This was a phenomenon that took place particularly in industrialized nations with a relatively well-developed and mature political system. The development of theory and analyses closely

follows social developments in certain parts of Europe and North America. Stemming from these regions the main theoretical traditions in the study of social movements try to explain why and how they arise and develop (Gamson, 1975, for instance). Another perspective applied Marxist theory in order to develop a critical analysis of social movements and mobilization (Sader, 1988; Hardt & Negri, 2005). A culturalist-identitarian perspective developed later broadening the scope of the critical-Marxist perspective and problematizing some of its concepts and explanations (see for instance Touraine, 1989 and Melucci, 1985). The culturalist-identitarian perspective questioned whether social unrest and insurgency could be explained only by class conflict and distribution of economic capital. Such theorizations dealt with social movements, organized action, and protests as a social and political phenomenon. They explained the causes of mobilization in terms of redistribution of material resources and rights (worker's movements and voting rights for instance), recognition of minority rights or advancement of certain issues to public debate. Social mobilization was seen as a form of structured reaction to inequality and lack of recognition.

In the structuralist tradition, scholars have studied the social movements of the first decades of 20th century through the sociological lenses of collective behaviour theories such as rational choice. In this school of thought, social movements are seen as arising from favourable political opportunities, which facilitate the mobilization of citizens with shared visions and objectives. The so-called Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) emerged within this tradition and has been informing studies of social movements since then. Scholars aligning with Resource Mobilization Theory are mostly interested in the socio-political conditions that nested the formation of social movements, and in how these collectives maintained and survived over time. The theory will then explain social mobilization in terms of structural anomalies to an otherwise well functioning society.

Arising from a post-structuralist critique to both Resource Mobilization Theory and critical-Marxist perspective, as well as from the search to explain the movements forming from the 1960s and 70s (particularly in Western Europe), New Social Movements (NSM) theory argued that the collective construction of identity and shared meanings constitutes the backbone of movements such as women's rights, anti-war, environmental and the LGTB movement. Social mobilization will then arise when individuals can gather and identify with shared worldviews and causes rather than being a consequence of a favourable political climate.

Both RMT and NSM acknowledge the role of media institutions as fundamental actors both in the emergence of repertoires of action (Tilly, 1978) and in the construction of shared meanings and views. Nevertheless, these theories do not offer analytical tools with which to address a) how social movements relate to media institutions, b) the limitations that social movements face as producers of meaning in certain media landscapes, c) the intersection between communication and mobilization, in which media can play different roles. These are questions that are constantly discussed within the field of media and communication studies, but many times from a technological-determinist and media-centric perspective.

Given this context, I seek to discuss how and why the particularities of Latin America as a geo-political region structure the development of social movements that are diverse from those formed in the Euro-American context. Due in part to these particularities, the role of communication in the process of social mobilization and the communicative processes within social movement have often been highlighted by Latin American Scholars. Communicative processes are seen as central for mobilization both for activists and scholars who have analysed social mobilization in the region. These analyses can inform an understanding of communication as a way to articulate struggle, moving away from media-centric explanations of mobilization, and from the transmission paradigm in communication.

### **3. The approach to communication in the dominant Social Movements theories**

Although collective social action as an object of enquiry emerged together with sociology as a field of study, it is from the second half of the 20th century that social mobilization will enter research agendas and become a field of study in its own right. Gohn (2014) notes that the term “social movement” was already present in texts in the first half of the 19th century and observes that the first studies that looked into collective social action referred to it as popular disturbance (*ibid.*). The focus of the analysis then was collective behaviour, tending to consider collective mobilization as an anomaly caused by irrational behaviour. The durkheimian idea of anomy informed many of the analyses

(ibid.). Later, in the 20th century, with an inspiration in Weber's analysis of social action, scholars such as Alain Touraine made an effort to dissociate their theoretical development from value-charged terms and naturalistic interpretations of collective behaviour. In this view, collective action and mobilization are ways to call attention and claim recognition for groups and causes.

The classical approaches to social movements that understand collective action as a disruptive anomaly to social order began to be challenged and renovated especially from the second half of the 20th century, when social mobilization gained a political dimension. In this paper, I will engage particularly with contemporary approaches to social mobilization as a politico-cultural phenomenon, adopting Touraine's differentiation of social movement as a "special type of social conflict", more than a form of collective behaviour and disruption of social order. I will engage with these theories in order to make an argument for the central role of communication in mobilization processes.

Scholars who have attempted to devise a genealogy of contemporary social movement theories usually differentiate between culturalist, behaviourist, and critical-historic perspectives (see Della Porta & Diani, 1999 and Gohn, 2014). These perspectives focus on different dimensions of collective action and are not always mutually exclusive. In general lines, the behaviourist or instrumentalist approach analyses social movements at the structural level of the relations between different social actors. According to this perspective, collective mobilization is a result of structural opportunity on one side and strategic action on the other. In this perspective, there is a tendency to explain collective action in terms of strategy, in the sense that a social movement is composed of strategically planned tactics through which rational individuals form groups in order to advance their claims. The formation of social movements is a consequence of opportunities and conditions structured at the socio-political level. Accordingly, Tarrow understands social movements as "collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities" (1998a: 4).

What many scholars in the instrumentalist approach ignore is that the construction of collective challenges and the mutual understanding that is necessary to the acceptance of common purposes and to the maintenance of social solidarities is impossible without communication, whether mediated or unmediated. Within the instrumentalist approach, Charles Tilly (2008) has paid some attention to communicative processes when he analysed and discussed the so-called repertoires of contention, which are responsive to socio-political situations and shape mobilization. Repertoires of contention can also be seen as communicative processes. Public meetings, petitions, demonstrations, and press-statements aim to communicate within and outside social movements. More than just transmitting and broadcasting information, these repertoires constitute processes enacted by mobilized subjects. Different media technologies can undoubtedly modify the dynamics of these repertoires, but they are in essence communicative processes that emerge within social movements in order to maintain a mobilized membership, and to create opportunities for dialogue with different sectors of society.

At the same time that the labour and student movements served as objects of analysis for many scholars, different kinds of social conflict that gave rise to social movements in Europe became objects of research within the European context. Much of the theoretical apparatus that informs research in social movements today owes credit to European scholarship developed during the 1960s and 1970s, from which two main approaches can be identified: a critical approach informed by Marxist theories and a culturalist approach. It is possible to say that such perspectives developed analytical aspects that were left untouched in instrumentalist theories of social movements. They analysed social movements as historical subjects whose formation rested on the contradictions of capitalism and that, in turn, gave rise to class-consciousness. These approaches also had a more complex view of the interplay between individual and collective, analysing the ways in which individual identities become objects of collective bargain.

Even though processes of meaning construction and the formation of shared identities received much attention from scholars in the New Social Movements tradition, communicative processes are still largely ignored. In Touraine's analysis (1985), the construction of social problems that generate a conflict and the connection to the process of identity formation are seen as socio-political phenomena in which communication has only a marginal role.



Despite its differences, NSM and RMT are not entirely incompatible with each other, but they seek to explain social mobilization and collective action through different epistemological lenses and focusing on different aspects. While RMT emerged from the analyses of class based movements and classical theories of collective behaviour that explain social mobilization from the perspective of political opportunities trying to understand how certain demands give rise to successful social movements; NSM pays attention to the construction of shared social demands based on identity aspects and solidarities.

Scholars aligned with New Social Movements theory, also directed a critique to class-based Marxist analysis that attributed social mobilization and collective action to the contradictions of capital and the conflict between capital and labour. Instead, Touraine (1971) and Melucci (1985) argued that social mobilization might arise through processes of collective identity formation in which claims involve rights based on shared identities and certain social solidarities. At the time when they developed their analyses, an array of conflicts that were not necessarily class based (Sexual diversity, minority rights, movements against war and use of nuclear energy) were emerging in Europe, where they based their research. In this sense, Touraine (1985) argues that all social movements arise from social conflicts and, as a consequence, comprise conflicting actors, but that in post-industrial societies this conflict extrapolates the material level.

It was not until recent years that communicative processes in social movements started to receive more attention, particularly within media and communication studies. This is due, on the one hand to the institutionalization of certain claims into NGOs and other kinds of civil society organizations, which started to use more aggressive media strategies (Greenpeace and PETA, for example); and on the other hand, to the widespread use of communication technologies and digital media platforms as tools for mobilization and action. By the turn of the century, as emerging communication technologies facilitated fast and real-time exchange among activists at the same time that transnational activities of corporations gave rise to new areas of social concern (labour rights in a transnational arena, environment, genetically modified organisms, marketization of life, etc.), transnational collective mobilization facilitated by communication technologies entered research agendas (see for instance Bennet & Segerberg, 2012).

The emergence and widespread use of digital communications (particularly in the developed world) and, in particular, their use for social mobilization, have stimulated studies of social movements from the perspective of their media practices. The arrival of communication scholars into the discussion has happened largely through two different aspects of contemporary collective action and mobilization. The first is the increasing use of personal communication devices coupled with the blurring of boundaries between private and public life, with individual political action becoming an act of public performance. Such developments have had an important role for collective action and for the construction of identities and communities of interest that may develop to networks. The second aspect is the increasing presence of media in our daily lives and the role of media institutions in shaping our understanding of reality and its conflicts and structuring a variety of social relations and daily activities. Nevertheless, many attempts to understand media practices connected to social mobilization started from media-centric and technological-determinist views that saw technologies as agents of change.

Although research on the interplay between media and protest action has been systematically carried out for at least three decades (Gitlin, 1980; Halloran *et al.*, 1970 are emblematic examples), phenomena such as transnational protest action, national mobilization and certain kinds of “lifestyle” activism have recently sparked a wave of studies and commentary. The omnipresence of media in advanced post-industrial societies and the strengthening of the connection between media and collective action have fostered interdisciplinary in the analyses of collective action. At the same time, as noted by these analyses have often ignored inequalities in access to communication, and the hybridity between old and new technologies.

Latin American scholars have drawn from these theories in order to explain social mobilization in the region (Gohn, 2012). The complexity of problems and conflicts in the Global South cannot be fully understood only through social theories developed to explain phenomena characteristic of the Global North. It is only by constructing analytical tools adequate to explain the specific realities of the Global South that we can make these realities and ways of living visible and avoid epistemicide (Santos, 2007). Furthermore, as

Santos (2007) argues, the South is not a geographical but a spatial definition. It is the space of those who are excluded from society and whose experience is absent in scholarly discussions. Colonization, decolonization, hybridity and dependency are historical processes that have had a perpetual impact in the social fabric and political structure in Latin American countries and have shaped social movements in the region. Even contemporary movements focusing on identity and lifestyle issues intersect with conflicts caused by colonization and by Latin America's peripheral geopolitical position. These historical processes are of crucial importance for understanding the emergence, development and maintenance of social mobilization and collective action on the continent. These are also determinant factors for the crucial role that communication plays in social mobilization in Latin America. The emergence of social movements in the region is a process of collective awareness and cultural (re)construction that could only take place through communication.

Faced with these social conditions as empirical object, Latin American communication scholars have paid attention to a multiplicity of aspects that lay the basis for social mobilization such as difference and inequality (García-Canclini, 2004), minority as place (Sodré, 2005; Paiva, 2005), the role of communication in the exercise of citizenship (Mata, 2002; 2007), communication as a right (Peruzzo, 2014) are key concepts for understanding social mobilization in non-Western societies. As a consequence, mobilization scholarship in Latin America has since long emphasized the communication as a central element for the process of consciousness raising and, in consequence, for mobilization (Freire, 1967; Bordenave, 1983; Garcia-Canclini, 2006; Peruzzo, 1982, 2007a; Reguillo, 2007). A particular aspect in the work of these scholars is that communication is understood as a dialogical process, and not as a flow of information from sender to receiver. Communication processes help raise awareness and maintain the cohesion among movement members.

#### 4. The communicative approach to social mobilization

In the previous sections I have presented the dominant approaches to the study of social movements and argued that they pay little attention to communication as a social process and its significance to social mobilization. Within Latin American communication studies, in contrast, the analysis of social mobilization has received much attention. This reflects the central role that communicative processes have for many social movements in the region. In the perspective of scholars in this tradition, communication is seen as a site of power struggle (see for instance Sodr , 2005 and Mata, 2007). Collective action in contemporary Latin America comprises varied established and new social actors, organized around a multitude of claims and social conflicts. A prominent question in the whole region is that of the indigenous populations, afro-descendants, rural communities, women, and youth. These groups remain the most active in trying to advance post-development and post-capitalist agendas through organized collective action in various Latin American countries.

Lately, problems arising from unplanned and rapid urbanization and lack of public policies and social investments fostered the formation of homeless, youth, and unemployed (particularly in Brazil) into movements aiming for collective action. In face of this relatively rapid spatial reorganization, Garc a-Canclini (2006) asks “What does it mean for Latin American cultures that countries which had about ten per cent of their population in the cities at the beginning of the century now concentrate sixty to seventy per cent in urban agglomerations?” (2006: 422). For instance, rural exodus and migration to larger urban conglomerates such as S o Paulo reshapes the claims for redistribution and recognition in the region, adding a territorial aspect to these claims. Escobar (2001) notes that place is an important structuring element in social mobilization in Latin America as demonstrated by the emergence of movements for urban mobility and territorial rights for indigenous populations.

This is not to say that the so-called lifestyle politics, which demand recognition and respect of non-normative lifestyles, are not important. In fact, environmental, gender and sexual diversity questions will often be embedded in more overarching claims to culture, practice, political representation and territory. Social movements in Latin America are thus hybrid organizations whose struggles are located both within the economic, and the symbolic realms.

From this perspective hybridity is an important analytical concept for the study of social movements in Latin America because it allows us to bridge the gap between functionalist and culturalist views and to resolve the conflict between political-economic and cultural analysis of social movements while at the same time remaining attentive to differences and particularities of material experience (as suggested by Santos 2007). Escobar sees hybridity in a broader sense as connected to economic, material and symbolic practices. Even though García-Canclini provides a very accurate analysis of symbolic elements and cultural life in Latin America at the end of the 20th century, it is Escobar's view that will be more useful to the analysis of social mobilization in non-Western regions.

It is necessary, however, to clarify the different uses of the term in the cultural and the post-colonial studies. In cultural studies hybridity refers to the ways in which different cultures and societies shape the appropriation and reproduction of symbolic products (see Martín-Barbero [1984] 2003). In the analysis of social movements, hybridity has to do with the array of socio-cultural practices that characterize collective action in Latin America. It can help explicate the contention between material and symbolic conflicts, and demonstrate how these two realms of experience interplay in the organization of collective action. In this context, hybridity helps us understand that indigenous groups in Latin America might be defined as a local ethnic community, but their struggle to survival and autonomy connects them on a transnational scale. It follows that collective action enacted by indigenous peoples and peasants cannot be explained through a functionalist logic, because they include both elements of self-preservation, and of radical change depending on the angle from which we choose to look at them.

Hybridity as a formative characteristic of social movements in Latin America will also be manifested in the variety of communicative processes that will be enacted by social movements. Such communicative processes consist largely of social practices such as production and distribution of food, performative acts, and the embodiment of traditional cultures through clothing, music, literature, theatre, and rituals. Although different media technologies might be used as part of these practices it is the communicative element above the technological one which is their essence.

In this context, the culturalist framework has gained popularity among social movement scholars in Latin America in recent years. However, it provides an incomplete explanation to collective action and mobilization in the region when it overlooks the materiality of identities and the fact that conflicts of advanced capitalism still produce class struggles. In other words, the struggle of many groups to be recognised in their difference and particularity, intersects with their struggle for redistribution of material resources.

These struggles are the root of collective mobilization in Latin America, which was articulated through the conscientization<sup>1</sup> (Freire [1967] 1982) of groups of individuals about the oppression to which they were subjected. Peruzzo (2006) and Paiva (2007) also emphasize the role of communication for the formation of social movements in Brazil. Both authors argue that the acts of producing and sharing information, and creating spaces for discussion and exchange of discussion and exchange of ideas have been crucial for the maintenance of social movements in Latin America. Here, communication is seen as an educative process – while producing and sharing the movement militants engage in a learning process that is crucial for conscientization. Through communicative process such as theatre performance, protest, and media production, social movement militants raise awareness about their condition and make their struggles common (shared) struggles, which is the meaning of the Latin verb *communicare* that originated the word communication. In the same vein, Peruzzo (1982) has argued that communication strategies (in the form of public relations) are important even for insurgent organizations that challenge the status-quo, because they also need to create cohesion among members, and forge relations with different sectors of society. In the view of these authors, communication is a process of meaning construction that can facilitate relations, form bonds, and create a collective identity, all of which are constitutive aspects of mobilization. It is therefore impossible to dissociate communication from mobilization. In this context, communication is not only an element in social mobilization, but it is the very essence of mobilization because without the processes of creating, producing, sharing, dialoguing and performing acts – which are communicative processes – it is impossible to mobilize individuals towards a collective objective.

1. Conscientization (Freire 1967) is the process through which the oppressed become conscious of their oppression and of their place in the social structure. According to Freire, those who are conscious of their oppression can act to change their position.

2. Exception to the "Arab Spring" which despite taking place in North Africa and the Middle East had diasporic middle-classes as catalysers.

3. Bennet and Segerberg (2012) conclude that more studies are needed in order to explain the role of media in long term political action that goes beyond protests and demonstrations.

4. Melucci (1985:68) acknowledged that there was a new sphere of conflicts belonging specifically to post-industrial complex capitalist societies that are not caused by the conflict between labour and capital.

Despite this ritualistic, performative, and dialogic character of communication, contemporary studies and research on social movements have placed a strong focus on the roles of media – with emphasis on digital media – for social mobilization. The attention to media practices and communicative processes in connection to protest and social mobilization comes not only from media and communication studies, but also from more established disciplines such as sociology, political science and geography. Geographer Milton Santos already in 2000 points out that the fast development of communication technologies contributes to a new consciousness of being in the world, which in its turn can foster new forms of solidarity. Santos never explains in what ways communication technologies contribute to the new consciousness of being in the world that he refers to. What are the daily individual and collectives' practices that are altered with the development of new communication technologies? And how does the use of social media and mobile device intersect with other social practices to constitute the fabric of collective action? It is impossible to answer these questions without approaching mobilization as a communicative process, and in order to do that we need to turn to the Latin American communication scholarship.

Sociologists and political scientists have recently analysed the roles of social media and mobile devices in the organisation of collective action (for instance Bennet & Segerberg, 2012). There is a clear tendency in studying protest movements - which according to Tarrow's (1998:5) definition might not necessarily be a movement but a protest organization or a protest event - in the West<sup>2</sup> that is performed predominantly by middle-classes and the educated precariat. Albeit relevant in their timely analyses, studies of protest and unrest cannot identify the mechanisms through which a social movement becomes institutionalized and evolves into a social actor<sup>3</sup>. This is particularly the case with many social movements in Latin America that first arose from certain social demands to evolve into institutions through a long-term process. In this sense, it is necessary to highlight the differences between social demands that emerge (particularly in developed countries) with the fragmentation and specialization of societies<sup>4</sup>, advance of global capitalism and neoliberal dogmas, and those historical social demands that are connected with Latin America's colonial past and its relation to US imperialism. This differentiation alone makes necessary specific analytical tools in order to avoid pragmatist and superficial analyses of social movements and collective action in non-Western regions.



## 5. The intersection between mobilization and communication – a Latin American contribution

As discussed in the previous section, social mobilization is an integral part of a social fabric, and will be conditioned and structured by socio-political factors as well as by the historical trajectory of the societies where it emerges. In Latin America, European colonization, industrialization and urbanization processes, dictatorship, North American imperialism, imposed development agendas, and the on-going conflicts between native and settler's cultures have all had a role in shaping social mobilization. Frank and Fuentes (1989:19) stress that it is important to look at the class composition of social movements. According to the authors, in the West, social movements are composed of middle-classes, while in the South they are composed by popular classes. Although this is a rather reductionist view it is useful in helping us understand the importance of creating discursive spaces for the enactment of communicative processes –while middle-classes usually want to regain lost rights or broaden the reach of their rights, popular classes must discover and construct themselves as subjects of rights. At the same time, it is important to be aware of the hybrid character of social movements in Latin America, particularly in recent years, with emergence of gender- and ethnic- related movements. The contact and interaction between different socio-cultural aspects is thus present in García-Canclini's analyses of collective action in Latin America. García-Canclini wanted to move away from dichotomies between popular/erudite, rural/urban, native/foreign and developed the concept of hybridization as an analytical tool to understand cultural manifestations in Latin America. Even though García-Canclini did not study social movements per se, his contribution to the understanding of collective action in Latin America is of crucial importance because of its new approaches to the formation of subjects (Gohn, 2012) that supersede Eurocentric understandings of exclusion and difference.

Gohn (2012) highlights the role of urban popular movements in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s in setting research agendas in the region. In his study of social movements in São Paulo's periphery, Sader (1988) has called attention to the non-institutionalized and fragmented character of these collectives that included mothers' associations, women, indigenous and afro-Brazilian groups all of which acted trying to construct new social identities. Common among these movements is the dialogic character of their practices and the drive to create discursive spaces in the form of discussion groups, programmes in community radio, community newspapers, etc. These discursive spaces were not only channels for transmission of information but also spaces in which to organise mobilization.



In the experiences of many Latin American social movements and mobilized groups the appropriation of media and structuration of communicative processes receives much attention. For example, miners in Bolivia have used radio stations as a way to become protagonists in the flow of information (Gumucio-Dagron, 2005), the Zapatista movement has made a strategic use of media and of their leader's image, and the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) has included the communication rights in their causes (Sartoretto, 2015).

As many social movement researchers in the 1970s and early 80s were doing research-action and involved in the movements which they were studying, inspired by Paulo Freire's work on praxis, scholars (particularly in Brazil) tended to distance themselves from Touraine's conceptualizations (Gohn, 2012) for whom a researcher of social movements should not be part of the movement she is investigating. In a meta-analysis of research in communication, Berkin (2016) describes how horizontal research emerged from the attempt to understand the subaltern condition from a counter-hegemonic epistemological position. Methodological horizontality and the endeavour to understand the subaltern conditions meant that many communication scholars sought an approximation to social movements, which represent subaltern and counter-hegemonic positions.

The rise of neoliberal politics and the results of imperialist development agendas and economic dependency on loans from international institutions such as the IMF, coupled with the democratic opening in the last years of the 1970s spurred a wave of social mobilizations (such as the movement for direct elections in Brazil) and can partially explain the popularity of Marxist and critical theories among scholars at the time. However, recent social phenomena that take place particularly in urban contexts highlighting issues of gender, inequality and social exclusion have been responsible for the return to Touraine's culturalist theories in order to seek appropriate analytical tools.

In the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the young democracies in Latin America staged both the withering of certain collectives and a socio-cultural effervescence that has resulted in the radicalization of the democratic processes and the emergence of indigenous movements, especially in Bolivia and Ecuador, coupled with nationalist movements as the Bolivarian in Venezuela (Gohn, 2012)<sup>5</sup>.

5. The nationalist movements in Latin America are completely different in character, structure and practice than those in Europe. The main difference being the inclusive and emancipatory ethos of nationalist movement in Latin America in contrast with the reactionary character of nationalist movements in Europe.

These later developments in the socio-political scenario have been matched by analysis that point out towards expanded analytical horizons. Gohn (2012: 60-61) notes that many scholars moved away from class-based analyses to focus on identity construction.

Another important contribution from the study of social movements in Latin America is a robust theoretical development of the concept of community. In this sense community is seen as a social space and practice that is formed in and through a social movement constituting particular forms of sociability. Beyond collective action and protest, scholars (for instance Santos 2007) will see social movements as communities of practice whose activities extrapolate direct action. The concept of community as used in Latin America differs from notions of community common in Northern countries in the sense that is connected to a position that is at the same time subaltern and insurgent. A community might not constitute a social movement, but the type relations and collective subjectivity that are forged in a community are crucial for the establishment of a social movement. We can therefore say that enduring social movements in Latin America constitute communities of practice towards social mobilization.

Many social movements in Latin-America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will act not only in order to organize mobilization but also towards the formation of a community with particular forms of sociability. Rural worker's organizations such as the Landless Workers Movement (MST), The Movement of Women in Agriculture (MCC), community associations that are commons in the Favelas (Custódio, 2016), and indigenous groups (the Mapuche ethnicity in Argentina, for example) engage in communicative processes in order to reproduce social relations among militants and members. These can be theatre groups, group performances such as *mística*<sup>6</sup> (Sartoretto, 2015), video production, and discussion groups, which are enacted in order to construct shared identities and build cohesion around common goals and demands. Such practices illustrate the strong connection between communication and mobilization in social movement practice in Latin America. Empirically, this is probably not a particularity of Latin American social movements and could possibly be encountered in other areas. Epistemologically, the understanding of mobilization as a communicative process is a Latin American contribution to interdisciplinary studies of media and communication and social movements.

6. *Mística* is a ceremony performed during MST's meetings, demonstrations, workshops, classes, etc., involving theatre, music, and other artistic forms. It is a ludic way to represent the history and struggle of the movement and to construct a shared collective imaginary about the collective, see more in Sartoretto, 2015.

## 6. What do social movements do with media? – Mobilization as communication

Downing (2008: 40-41) has identified the need for more interdisciplinary discussions between the areas of social movement studies and media and communication studies. He observes that it was not until recently (early 2000s) that the “social movement phenomena have registered in the main discursive arenas of media analysis”, at the same time that scholarship on social movements “rarely focus on media dimensions of social movements”. Looking at this analysis from the perspective of the epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2007), we can say that it has a Western-Northern bias and ignores decades of Latin American scholarship which addresses social movements in an interdisciplinary perspective. As discussed in the previous sections, Latin American media and communication scholars have since long been attentive to social movements in the region. It is nevertheless worth noticing that in Latin American scholarship the approach to social movements is not media-centric, but looks into communication in social movements in its varied forms. In reducing communication in social movements to mediated communication, we risk committing epistemicide (Santos, 2007) because media are material resources unequally distributed in many societies. There are many communicative processes that unfold beyond, and without, media, and, therefore, reducing communication in social movements to mediated communication makes such processes invisible.

The analysis of the intersection between communication and mobilization in Latin American scholarship has generated useful analytical tools for understanding the communicative aspects of social mobilization. The discussions and theories developed by Latin American scholars can help the analysis of contemporary social movements even in other areas, because, as I have argued here that is in its essence a communicative process that is augmented and modified by continuing technological development. Concepts such as conscientization (Freire, 1967), right to communication (Peruzzo, 2007a), and the analyses of popular communication (Bordenave, 1982, Garcia-Canclini 2003) as central aspects of social mobilization are an important contribution for interdisciplinary discussions between the areas of social movement studies and media and communication that should be taken into account in the West-North context.

Downing (2008) further argues that media should be seen as cultural agents and not only as technologies<sup>7</sup>, particularly alternative media, which is usually the kind of media produced by social movements. This is another area in which Latin American scholarship has advanced due to its socially situated approach to media and communication. When we understand communication as a social process and practice beyond transmission of information, media will assume the role of cultural agents because they are crucial elements for the social practice of communication. Martín-Barbero (1984) and Clemencia Rodríguez (2011) have argued that media production in the form of cultural manifestations is crucial to the strengthening of marginal groups, and Peruzzo (2008) points out that communication rights, the right to the power to communicate, and to act as a producer and sender of information, are essential for social inclusion of marginal groups. Furthermore, the conflicts and struggles for media representation and for the construction of a democratic media system have also meant that social movements had to embrace issues of media ownership in parallel to other issues (see Sartoretto, 2015, Rodríguez, 2011, and de Moraes, Ramonet & Serrano, 2013). In these dynamics, media assume a meta-role – being not only the arenas for struggles but also the object of struggle, which makes their role as agents of change more prominent. Both the cultural dimension of social movements and their eventual struggles to communicate and be represented by and in the media, can be entry points to analyse the interplay between communication and mobilization even outside the Latin American context.

Latin American media and communication scholars' attention to social movements is also a statement of the important role of these social formations to the history and social fabric of the region. Frank and Fuentes (1989) argue that despite having a transitory nature, social movements were then important agents of social change, and will perhaps be the most important agents of social change in the future. Almost thirty years later – the future the authors refer to – those have an important role in reshaping the relation between the state and civil society in Latin America and in the world.

7. As it is the case in more instrumentalist works, Tilly for instance see media as channels of communication.

8. Interview to the author.

9. In Latin American scholarship popular culture in opposition to elite forms of culture and usually refers to cultural manifestation of native, afro-descendent and other subaltern groups, differently from the Euro-american usage of the term popular culture to refer to mass culture as opposed to erudite culture.

The connection between communication and mobilization is easily identified at the empirical level in the daily practices of militants and social movement members. When asked about planning communication strategies, a young militant in a Brazilian social movement answered, “Our struggle is our communication strategy”<sup>8</sup>. The answer illustrates how mobilization and communication are deeply embedded – to mobilize is to communicate. In order to keep militants mobilized and maintain the cohesion in the organization, communication in its diverse forms is essential. The nature of social movements in Latin America, discussed in the previous section, means that raising awareness about social oppression and rescuing the value of native and popular culture<sup>9</sup> are important aspects of mobilization (see for instance Gumucio-Dragon 2005; Rodríguez, 2011; and Bordenave, 1983). Because it is impossible to dissociate culture and identity from the economic struggles that affect many marginal groups in Latin America, the communicative processes that lead to the strengthening of the cultural forms connected to these groups can be considered a form of mobilization.

As cultural agents’ media are directly linked to processes of globalization, identity construction, and cultural hybridization. Also, social inequality is reflected on media through the representation of different groups and issues and ownership structures. Hence the conceptual dialogue between the two fields –social movement and media studies– can contribute to de-Westernizing social movement theories insofar as it will lead to an analysis of phenomena (suggested by Downing 2008) that stretch beyond the Western-Northern regions.

## 7. Concluding remarks

In this article, I have addressed the alleged lack of dialogue between social movement studies and media and communication (Downing, 2008). I argued that this is a feature detected in Western social sciences, whereas in Latin America, media and communication scholars have since long been paying attention to social movements. This happens in due to two main reasons: a) dominant social movement theories developed in the West do not offer adequate analytical tools to deal with the types of social mobilization that emerged in Latin America, and b) communication as a social process that involves diverse practices has been crucial to social mobilization in Latin America.

The material and symbolical factors that characterizes social mobilization in Latin America, has meant that communicative processes played a crucial role in mobilizing and forming collectives in the region. The analysis of this process by Latin American scholars can also contribute to the interdisciplinary discussion between Social Movement studies and media and communication. Contrary to what Downing (2008) affirms, media and communication scholars in Latin America have been paying attention to social mobilization for at least thirty years and have developed a robust body of analysis and theoretical conceptualizations.

A constant epistemological feature among many communication studies in Latin America is the view of communication as a social process and as a site where power is exerted. This makes social movements and mobilization processes ideal objects for analysis the mechanisms through which hegemony is questioned, difference and inequality are materialized, and minorities can fight the impossibility to speak (cf. Sodr , 2005). By providing analytical concepts with which to address the communicative aspects of mobilization and to understand mobilization as a form of communication, Latin American scholars have made a contribution to the study of social movements.

The theories that connect communication to social mobilization (Freire, 1967; Peruzzo, 1982, 2006 and 2007a; Bordenave, 1983; Gumucio-Dagron, 2005; Mart n-Barbero, 1984; Garc a-Canclini, 2006) can be a starting point for an interdisciplinary dialogue between social movement studies and media and communication, while avoiding media-centred and instrumentalist approaches to mobilization. Concepts developed by these authors such as conscientization (Freire, 1967), right to communication (Peruzzo, 2006) are also useful in the analysis the interplay between communication and mobilization beyond the North-Western context, within highly unequal society, in which access to technologies is not widespread, and inequality has both economical and symbolical aspects. These concepts allow the analysis of intentionality, which is a connecting point between mobilization and communication and is not addressed in media-centric analysis of communication in social movements. Finally, by conceptualizing mobilization as a form of communication it will be possible to avoid functionalistic views of communication as transmission of information and technological deterministic approaches that consider media technologies as agents of change.



## Bibliografía

---

- BENNETT, W. L., & SEGERBERG, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society* 15.5: 739-768.
- BERKIN, S. C. (2016). De los medios a los sujetos y de los sujetos al diálogo horizontal – un trayecto para abordar la comunicación. *Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias de la Comunicación*, 12(23).
- CUSTÓDIO L. (2016). *Favela Media Activism – Political trajectories of low-income Brazilian youth*. Doctoral dissertation. Tampere University Publishing.
- DELLA PORTA, D., & DIANI, M. (2009). *Social movements: An introduction*. John Wiley & Sons.
- DOWNING, J. (2008). Social movement theories and alternative media: An evaluation and critique. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 1(1), 40-50.
- FRANK, A. G. & FUENTES, M. (1989). *Dez teses acerca dos movimentos sociais*. *Lua Nova: Revista de Cultura e Política*, n. 17, p. 19-48.
- FREIRE, P. (1982). *A Pedagogia do Oprimido*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.
- GAMSON, W. A. (1975) *The strategy of social protest*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.
- GARCÍA-CANCLINI, N. (2004). “Diferentes, desiguales o desconectados.” *Revista CIDOB D’Afers Internacionals* 66-67: 113-133.
- GITLIN, T. (1980). *The whole world is watching: Mass media in the making & unmaking of the new left*. University of California Press, 1980.
- GOHN, M. G. (2012). *Novas Teorias dos Movimentos Sociais*. São Paulo: Edições Loyola.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (Ed). (2013). *Movimentos Sociais no Início do Século XXI*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- GUMUCIO-DRAGON, A. (2005). Miners’ radio station. *A Unique Communication Experience from Bolivia. Media and Glocal Change. Rethinking Communication for Development*. O. Hemer and T. Tufte. Goteborg, Sweden, Goteborg University, 317-324.
- HARDT, M., & NEGRI, A. (2005) *Multidão: guerra e democracia na era do império*. Editora Record.
- MARTÍN-BARBERO, J. (2003). *De los medios a las mediaciones – comunicación, cultura y hegemonía*. Colombia: Editorial Gustavo Gili S.A.

- MELUCCI, A. (1985) The symbolic challenge of contemporary movements. *Social research*: 789-816.
- DE MORAES, D., RAMONET, I., & SERRANO, P. (2013). *Mídia, Poder e Contrapoder- da Concentração Monopólica À Democratização da Informação*. Boitempo Editorial.
- PAIVA, R. (2005). Mídia e Política de Minorias. In: Paiva, R and Barbalho, A. *Comunicação e Cultura das minorias*. Rio de Janeiro: Mauad.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2007). Para reinterpretar a comunicação comunitária. In R. Paiva (Ed.) *O retorno da comunidade: os novos caminhos do social*, (pp. 133-148) Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X.
- REGUILLO, R. (2007). Formas del saber. Narrativas y poderes diferenciales en el paisaje neoliberal. *Cultura y neoliberalismo*, 91-110.
- RODRÍGUEZ, C. (2011). *Citizens' media against armed conflict: Disrupting violence in Colombia*. U of Minnesota Press.
- SADER, E. (1988). Quando novos personagens entraram em cena. *Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra*.
- SANTOS, B. S. (2007). Renovar a teoria crítica e reinventar a emancipação social. *São Paulo: Boitempo*.
- SANTOS, M. (2000). *Por uma outra globalização – Do pensamento único à consciência universal*. Rio de Janeiro: Record (2000).
- SARTORETTO, P. (2015). *Voices from the margins – people, media, and the struggle for land in Brazil*. Doctoral dissertation. Karlstad: Karlstad University Press.
- SODRÉ, M. (2005). Por um conceito de minoria. In: Paiva, R and Barbalho, A. *Comunicação e Cultura das minorias*. Rio de Janeiro: Mauad.
- TARROW, S. (1998). *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- TILLY, C. (1978). *From mobilization to revolution*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- TILLY, C., & Tarrow, S. (2006). *Contentious politics*. Oxford University Press.
- TILLY, C. (2008). *Contentious performances*. Cambridge University Press.
- TOURAINE, A. (1989). Palavra e sangue: política e sociedade na América Latina. *Palavra e sangue: política e sociedade na América Latina*. Trajetória Cultural, 19.



## Biografía

---

Paola Sartoretto, PhD. Senior Lecturer at Södertörn university and Associated Researcher at the Institute of Latin American Studies – Stockholm University, Sweden.

Paola Sartoretto  
[Paola.sartoretto@sh.se](mailto:Paola.sartoretto@sh.se)  
Södertörn University