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REVEALING POVERTY: SPEECH AND REPRESENTATION OF THE POOR IN THE BRAZILIAN MEDIA

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This brief approaches the study of poverty and inequality in Latin America from a cultural perspective. It is based on an analysis of newspaper articles in Brazil, which shows how both poverty and inequality are “naturalised” within the hegemonic media.



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Key points

- One way to unveil the public discourse of poverty is to enter into the semantic field of poverty, as expressed in the hegemonic press.
- The understanding of the social construction of poverty is enriched by the media, which not only shows an image of the poor, but also points out explicitly and implicitly the tensions faced when addressing the challenges it poses.
- The cultural dimension of poverty makes it possible to work on the way in which poverty is subjectively constructed.

Introduction

The challenges of conceptualising poverty and understanding how societies respond to it in their midst pose certain key questions. Firstly, how do unequal societies naturalise millions of poor persons (i.e. make them part of the “natural” instead of the socially constructed world)? In parallel, what are the societal mechanisms that allow the tolerance of extravagant wealth in a context of widespread poverty?

Responses to these questions emerge from a discourse analysis of the Brazilian hegemonic press (that is, *O Globo* newspaper) over a period of thirteen years (2002-2015) (Darling and Friggeri, 2017). The hypothesis used in the research holds that the media not only creates a particular representation of the poor, which becomes accepted as “truth” by the non-poor, but also defines in an implicit manner the tensions that need to be faced in order to solve the problem. It is understood that mass media brings issues to the attention of both the public and politicians.

Every application of discourse is influenced by social struggle and domination. At the same time, discourses represent and are used as tools of those struggles (Foucault, 1996). Within this context, it could be said that the truth does not exist. What does exist is the interpretation of an alleged truth that can be repeated thousands of times until it becomes a “truth” (Feinman, 2011). The mass media thus has the potential to offer a non-objective interpretation that becomes understood as the truth (Muñoz, 2017).

The Cultural Dimension of Poverty in Brazil

The cultural dimension of poverty refers to the particular ways in which it is problematized and the

emerging responses to the diverse representations of poverty. In this regard, a cultural analysis involves not only the poor, but also the various social groups (particularly the powerful and able who use mass media to their benefit) and their relationships with one another (Bayón, 2013: 90). This perspective allows us to uncover discourses and visions of poverty and inequality that create understandings, and thus condition the social and political ways in which these issues are addressed in a particular context. In this way, unveiling the public discourse of poverty implies entering into the universe of messages expressed in the media that contribute to “naturalising” the notion of the problem and therefore condition eventual solutions.

The role of the mass media has become as important as formal schooling in terms of shaping opinions and spreading social values in contemporary society. Even though social media does not have the explicit objective of socialising, it suggests and proposes values and reachable ideals. Manuel Castells (2006) affirms that we are living in a new information era characterised by the existence of a ‘net society’. In this society there is an economy based on information and a net-based social organisation facilitated by the media.

O Globo is a key example of the mass media in Brazil. This outlet tends to build a heteronomous notion of the poor, presenting the poor as passive subjects in a social environment that cannot be deconstructed because it has been “naturalised”.

This type of notion has particular significance in Brazil, one of the tenth most unequal societies in the world. Between 2004 and 2009, the incidence of poverty fell from 40.7 to 25.7 million people, out of a total population of 207 million (IPEA, 2015). However, the Gini coefficient remained high, exceeding the 0.50 (CEPAL, 2016: 30).

There are two specificities in the Brazilian case, whereby absolute poverty is associated with inequality, and the level of GDP does not match with the reality of existing absolute poverty. In 2016, 25.4% of the Brazilian population were living below the poverty line, equivalent to 52 million Brazilians, while the *per capita* annual income was 8640 US Dollars. There is therefore little doubt a poor distribution of income is one of the main causes of poverty.¹

However, the economic dimension is not enough to define the phenomenon and understand its persistence. The critical discourse analysis that makes the cultural dimension of poverty explicit allows us to show not only how the notion of the poor is projected in the media, but also the tensions that exist regarding the social struggle surrounding power and its significance. Hence, it is useful to explore how the notion of the poor is constructed by hegemonic media and how this notion is used to understand the reproduction of social conditions that, at some point, should be addressed by public policy.

Findings

The discourse analysis of *O Globo* shows a tendency to present the poor in a way that denies some of the socially valued characteristics of every human being; individual and social responsibility, self-awareness, a critical political stance, self-determination, and the use of responsible freedom. The prevailing media discourse in the analysed articles² resorts to a victimisation of the poor. The most frequent qualifiers used indicate a paternalistic view of the phenomenon that seems difficult to resolve. This is shown in the analysed articles, where there is almost no reference to the causes of the poverty in which people are living.

The ‘elephant in the room’ is not obvious. In fact, the dialectical relationships between poverty and wealth concentration are somehow concealed. In a significant number of journalistic articles, material deprivations are linked to biological and behavioural deficiencies that are difficult to overcome. The article entitled “*Pobreza ou riqueza na infância podem determinar DNA*” (“Poverty or wealth in childhood can determine DNA”), dated 14 November 2014, discusses how the difference between wealth and poverty starts in childhood. It is said that wealth and poverty can alter the genetic burden of individuals for the rest of their lives (*O Globo*, G1, 14-11-2011).

Governments’ methods of addressing poverty and inequality are also frequently criticised by the hegemonic media. The cash transfer programmes that proved effective in reducing poverty in Brazil and elsewhere are strongly criticised by *O Globo*. In the article “*Pesquisa aponta que Bolsa Família reduz interesse por emprego formal*” (“Research indicates that *Bolsa Família* reduces the level of interest in undertaking formal work”), dated 15 June 2012, it is said that a non-desired consequence of the *Bolsa Família* Programme is the absence of stimulus to encourage formal employment searches.

In Brazil, the media has overtly criticised the *Bolsa Família* Programme, which reached a target population of 52 million Brazilian citizens and lifted them out of poverty (CEPAL, 2011: 107). The press reduces the analysis of the programme to a critique of those who receive it. It is said “[...] Federal government assistance continues to stimulate informal work without a formal contract [...]”. The beneficiary thinks that if he gets a formal job, he will be forced to leave the *Bolsa Família* (*O Globo*, 15-06-2012). In general terms, *O Globo* considers cash transfers as a subsidy that promotes vagrancy, vices and also discourages the search of work.

When these types of assessments are repeated insistently over the years, the notion of the poor as mere recipients of social income, not oriented to work and unwilling to make the effort required to get out of poverty, is conveyed and reproduced. As a result, the widespread idea that cash transfers or social policies negatively affect the ‘work culture’ is strengthened at the same time as there is open criticism of the

clientelistic practices of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores*, the political party of the recent governments.

Finally, the social notion of poverty conveyed by *O Globo* reduces poverty to the sum of the poor. Thus, it considers the poor as a unit with similar problems or apparently comparable needs to others living in the same social situation. Community membership is not even considered as an important factor when analysing the possibilities of moving out of poverty. This is particularly significant, because it is well known (Lomnitz, 1975; Atria and Siles et al., 2003; Bonavitta, 2009) that the improvement of living conditions and the implementation of survival strategies are linked to social and political organisation.

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Final remarks

In sum, poverty and inequality are closely related. However, this is not discussed or problematised by the Brazilian hegemonic media we studied (*O Globo*). An urgent ethical and political discussion in the quest for redistributive justice is thus left aside.

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Notes

- 1 Poverty in Brazil is officially measured using the Poverty Line indicator. This line separates the poor from the non-poor and is based on the cost of a standard basic needs basket.
- 2 The journalistic articles were selected using a database or corpus specially constructed by linguists and engineers of the PoLaMe project (Poverty, Language and Media: The cases of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia y Mexico, 2012-2017, NFR-227187). Through the digital public access corpus, a sample of about 35 million indexed words associated with poverty were collected. The database contains journalistic articles over a 5-year period (2010-2014) from highly relevant newspapers in Mexico, Colombia, Argentina and Brazil. The foundation for study in the Brazilian case comprised journalistic articles of the *O Globo* newspaper from the 2010-2014 period. The sample took into account the social impact of the articles. In fact, a 2013 survey of the Perseu Abramo Foundation (FPA) showed that 91 million people, almost half of the Brazilian population, listen and watch *O Globos* TV programmes all day long (FPA, 2013). After the units of analysis selection, categorial linking processes were carried out for each article in order to analyse non-expressed intentions, ambiguous connotation terms, and simulations, as well as complex uses of language that express ironic and hyperbolic expressions related to poverty.

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