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Catastrophes, the Imaginary and Citizenship: The Production of the Other and the Singularity of Experience

1 Introduction

This article reflects on the relationship between the media and the construction of publics, taking these to be based on identities and the processes of creating identities activated in concrete, well-defined contexts. This relationship, which is complex and defined by power dynamics, allows spaces, processes of citizenship, and the visibility and invisibility of causes, projects and trajectories to be defined. The central question which serves as the starting point for these reflections is the following: what contribution does the media, with its autonomous operational logic, make towards reflections on citizenship? Who and what does it include and exclude?

I intend to approach the specter of theoretical positions on the role played by the media in the production of citizenship from the basis of the polysemic notion of public sphere. Are we demanding too much of the media? Does it really set the agenda for what is relevant in a national and international context? As an opening statement, Laurent Thévenot's comparative analysis of the construction of the European sphere (1999, 77) demonstrates how there is no consistent and sustained civic vocabulary applicable as a discursive resource to counter the current hegemony of the language of the market. Without this vocabulary, we cannot conceive of alternative forms of civic action and interaction.

The first part of this article presents a discussion on the concept of imperfect citizenship and the notion of public sphere in Habermas. The second part approaches Oskar Negt's theorization of the concept of oppositional public sphere as an alternative vision. The third part of the paper deals with the relationship between citizenship, public sphere and risk. The last section considers the media coverage and socio-political impacts of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in the United States in August 2005 as illustrations of the diffractive complexity of media production and the persistence of colonial discourses. The two events had direct consequences for public opinion in the West and made explicit the discriminatory and socially exclusive criteria contained in a biopolitics of populations based on racism, class difference and discourses that produce fear and dangerous alterities.

2 Imperfect Citizenship and the Community of Fate

The concept of citizenship used in this text aims to range beyond legal and political definitions and, based on the work of Étienne Balibar (2001), employs the concepts of the community of fate and imperfect citizenship. The community of fate implies political conditions in which uncertainty and conflict, if not violence, prevail (2001, 209). In terms of its territorial component, the community of fate may extend from a building, street or neighborhood to the entire planet. As a consequence, citizenship is a complex notion that is always defined and constructed on various levels, within multiple frameworks linked in diverse ways. Imperfect citizenship is therefore constituted from practices and processes rather than being stable or pre-defined.

The synthesis of these concepts of the community of fate and imperfect citizenship enables us to conceive of the public sphere as being pervaded by the weight and contradictions of individual and collective subjectivities. To quote Balibar, "the *public sphere*, in reality, is nothing more than an objectified and universalized representation, a collective control, a communication field for the 'passions and interests' of society" (2001, 212).

This reflection by Balibar, and its attention to questions of identity, derives from his theoretical proposition concerning the notion of the political. For this author, the phenomenon of politics is defined by three concepts: emancipation, transformation and civility (Balibar 1997). The autonomy of politics corresponds to the ethical aspect of emancipation. The possibility of conceiving of transformation derives from the structural and conjunctural conditions of the political and refers to the heteronomy of politics. Civility corresponds to the heteronomy of the heteronomy or, in other words, the contradictions and ambiguities of identities, belonging and rupture.

On the basis of this ductile notion of citizenship anchored in contradictory and complex political processes in which the challenge of identities and identity politics becomes pressing, the traditional notion of the constructed public sphere may be interrogated on the basis of the propositions of Jürgen Habermas. In his pioneering work on the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in Western societies, this author drew attention to the return of charisma within the representational public sphere, based on image and opinion specialists who convey the interests of economic and political powers (Habermas 1989). This pessimistic vision of Habermas, which was directly associated with the period in which the book was written, would later be transformed into a relative naturalism in his work *Between Facts and Norms* (1996).

As Deborah Cook notes (2001, 139), Habermas seems to assume that the systemic-paternalistic functioning of liberal democracies must be the standard to adopt. Therefore, according to this writer, it is only in rare cases that the public sphere fulfils the conditions that enable it to become a communicative power capable of directly influencing the political system.[1] Moreover, what Habermas calls "civil privatism" is reinforced by colonization of the life-world, making it difficult for a robust and vibrant public sphere to develop. What is surprising about Habermas' new arguments is that the weakness of the public sphere derives almost exclusively from the negative dynamics of the life-world and not from economic or political systems and their hegemonic operational logic.

This new Habermas theoretical proposition ascribes the capacity to make demands on the political system to the actions of social movements, above all through spectacular and disruptive initiatives, given that the media does not fulfill its role in mediating and shaping citizens by drawing on expert opinions.

What possibilities are there for the construction of active and participative citizens? Rather than speaking of a public sphere, which acquires almost metaphysical connotations, it seems more appropriate to speak of publics in an attempt to restore the complexity of media construction and reception and its political impacts. According to Cefaï and Pasquier (2003), publics are not essential, pre-existing entities but are instead produced through performances that publicize a social problem, measure or public policy, or a project, programme, spectacle, etc. The authors distinguish between the media public and the political public. The media public is, above all, the target for a representational mechanism. The political public, in John Dewey's original sense, is "an associative, inquiring or deliberative public which aims to control the consequences of an event or an action and seeks to define the forms of public good" (1991, 18).

This pragmatic approach to publics highlights the importance of social experiences and interpersonal links in shaping personal and collective experiences of reception of the media involving social, civic and political commitment. The forms of collective mobilization reveal the role of the media as the practical operator of experiences of identity and identity narratives. If a political public can be interpolated, reinforced or challenged by the actions of the media, this can also produce public problems and create publics susceptible to conversion into political publics.

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1 For a decisive analysis of the naturalisation of the concept of civil society and the relationship between political culture and the public sphere, see Somers (1995). For an attempt to recover the concept of civil society applied to situations involving cultural and historical diversity, see Chambers and Kymlicka (2002).

3 The Creation of an Oppositional Public Sphere

As a direct reaction to Habermas's normative and integrative vision in his account and enshrinement of the bourgeois public sphere, Oskar Negt, in proposing a proletarian or oppositional public space, as he would later term it, sought to make visible the collective and alternative forms that give public expression to those human needs that evade the straitjacket of the dominant media representations (Negt 2007, 216). This overspill process allows a public sphere to be constructed that accommodates immediate, lived experience and enables an inalienable democratic order to be founded.

Oskar Negt proposes the restoration of rhetoric and the art of persuasive discourse to disseminate demonstration and protest. In addition, whereas for Habermas public space, free discourse and the affirmation of freedom of opinion in a profoundly European sense represent the factors that legitimize the new bourgeois social order, strictly demarcated in terms of economic interests and the pressures of the state apparatus, Negt configures a broad notion of public sphere necessarily including production, economics and the private sphere.

The potential politics of the production and private spheres must be worked on in order to mobilize them in the service of an enlarged public sphere. Polemical issues originating from production, work and the private sphere and traditionally excluded from the bourgeois public sphere are currently undergoing radical changes (Negt 2007, 222). As Alexander Neumann aptly notes (2007, 8), the Habermas concept of publicity is deliberately presented as the theoretical idealization of a form of politics based on recourse to violence and the exclusion of the majority of the population. The oppositional public space, which flows and consolidates itself in rebellious subjectivities and partial connections, restores, makes visible and projects the particularities and combinations of specific real-life situations. The aim is to start from fragmentary experiences, almost inaudible, unheard murmurs and speech that takes risks (12).

For Oskar Negt, the experiences that overflow from concepts and negate them are more important to a critique than the words used to positively name things. Rebellious subjectivity contains the obstinacy, authenticity and negativity of actors who resist the triumphal march of the winners. Whereas the bourgeois public space proceeds by generalized abstracts, the oppositional public space is directed towards the accumulation of unique experiences. In opposition to normative discourses, oppositional space is characterized by direct speech, which allows for the exchange of experiences and resolution by dialogue that is partial and always open to conflict (Neumann 2007, 21).

4 Citizenship, Public Sphere and Risk

The advent of modernity led to the concept of *chance* being replaced by the concept of risk, expanding the context of trust in addition to the role of the state in regulating this area (Giddens 1991; Luhmann 1993). However, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos has argued (1995), we are also witnessing a widening gap between the capacity to act and the capacity to predict, thus dramatically increasing risks, both in terms of scale and frequency. This presents new challenges for risk regulation by national states, due above all to transnational dynamics and the increasing needs of citizens in terms of security and the existence of well-defined prevention and mitigation plans with clear objectives. As a result, the need arises to study risk regulation systems (Hood, Rothstein and Baldwin 2001) and how they adapt to the need for transnational cooperation, given the globalization of risks. According to Ulrick Beck (2001), "States must *de*-nationalize and *trans*-nationalize themselves for the sake of their own national interest, that is, relinquish sovereignty, in order, in a globalized world, to deal with their national problems." This, for Beck, is an inevitable trend within what he terms the world risk society (1999; 1992).

This separation of nation and state proposed by Ulrich Beck diverts attention away from the founding material and symbolic mechanisms of internal political arenas and political struggles occurring as a result of external events (Klinenberg 2002). This is why the creation of a political arena demands explicit inclusion, the justification and articulation of individual choices and facts and debates made perceptible to specific audiences (Barry 2001; Callon and Rabeharisoa 2004).

Permanent dangerous events and situations tend to increase the legitimacy of state intervention, often involving the suspension of social and economic norms, creating a state of exception indicating the inevitable presence of the state. These extreme events present concrete challenges to the production of knowledge within the social and natural sciences that, in the majority of cases, restrict the supposed autonomy of the sciences.

However, many scholars working in this area reinforce the role of experts and the established powers (states and international agencies) in the management of uncertainty, marginalizing the knowledge and participation of citizens. This clearly reflects in the "enlightened catastrophism" of Jean-Pierre Dupuy (2005; 2002) or the worst case scenarios of Lee Clarke (2005).

This theorization of "extremes" is based on an ecology of fear (Davis 1998) and a politics and culture of fear (Furedi 2005; 2002) which do not allow for any progressive and gradual composition of a shared world (Latour 2005). There-

fore, it does not prove possible to create this shared, heterogeneous, complex and conflictual world through a sociology of virulence (van Loon 2002), but instead through a modest, interlinked approach alert to the components emerging out of the social sphere and able to activate and democratically weave a version of this sphere.

Extreme events such as disasters and catastrophes show the political work involved in positioning disposable groups and individuals outside social networks and communities within the national imaginary. The social sciences, as technologies of humility (Jasanoff 2003), must create visibility for individuals and groups located on the interstices of socio-technical alignments and must be involved in the collective work required to describe and personify these individuals and groups within a political process of full citizenship.

The eruption of fear in the arena for public debate, created whether by natural or social events with major material, symbolic and political visibility such as 11 September 2001, the Asian tsunami or Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and its explicit deployment within a logic of political control consubstantiated in the politics of fear, demands reflection and the advancement of alternatives for the construction of a shared, conflictual, diverse, heterogeneous world that is, nevertheless, always defined by shared experiences and identities.

These alternative visions, leading to a democracy based on dialogue in which all the interested agents associated with a particular matter have the right to speak and to investigate, are based on constant attention to emerging identities and the creation of alternative scenarios that can respond to local non-equivalent issues in a precarious balance between general and particular interests.

As Niklas Luhmann aptly points out, the hiatus has been growing on a communicational level and in the wake of the logic for the analysis of systems within modern society (namely politics, law, economics and science) between those involved in decision-making and those excluded from this process but nevertheless suffering the consequences of the decisions that are taken. This increasing communicational hiatus may lead to a lower level of trust in relations between members of a given society.

The alternative is to define social technologies for participation leading to the construction of civic epistemologies that allow for the informed and critical presence of citizens within the public sphere (Jasanoff 2005). These civic epistemologies define how democratic societies acquire shared knowledge for the purposes of collective action shaped by different political cultures and national contexts.

The consolidation of the importance of civic epistemologies must be based on experience accumulated through analysis of disaster situations or catastro-

phes in which, contrary to the affirmations of many specialists and political leaders, the responses of the populations, groups and individuals affected are not based on irrationality or panic (Clarke 2002) but on mutual help, solidarity and the construction of disaster communities shaping the capacity to resist, recover and slowly re-establish bonds, lived experiences and inhabited spaces.

The myth of panic allows political and administrative leaders to retain information that reinforces the logic and dynamics of power in the management of extreme events. Panic, or the presumption that this will determine the actions of individuals, is always ascribed to ordinary citizens and never to leaders, scientists or technicians. This political definition of panic removes the possibility of incorporating citizens as a genuine resource in planning and in the response to disasters or extreme events. Moreover, the failure to divulge information leads to a mistrust of political agents, preventing any appropriate usage of shared knowledge and consolidating the potential for resilience and resistance on the part of populations, groups and individuals.

Rather than an ecology of fear and a politics of fear, the possibility of constructing a public sphere with full citizen participation in relation to hazards, risk and vulnerability implies an alternative vision based on the security of populations (Lakoff 2006). This new paradigm raises a central question: what type of techniques, instruments and government institutions are most relevant in terms of focusing on the welfare of citizens and which areas of knowledge and types of intervention need to be defined to preserve the security of populations?

The framework for analysis must be long-term taking into account provisions for public health and the reduction of poverty rather than responses and actions defined by urgency, the short-term and the mitigation and limitation of damage. Special attention should be paid to structural factors and their spatial dimensions, which require planning and a clear and well-defined context for the actions of public bodies. The definition of sustainable lifestyles necessarily implies sustained and integrated intervention in terms of the welfare of populations.

A logic of civic participation associated with the construction of a public sphere based on dialogue in relation to risk issues must consider the living conditions of human beings as members of a social collective and their right to integration and full citizenship.

5 Extreme Events, Catastrophes and the Racialization of the Exploited

Taking as a reference point local theories on the media, publics and the construction of citizenship discussed above, mainly within a European and North American context, the aim of this second section is to analyze the media coverage of the tsunami that ravaged the Indian Ocean in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina, which destroyed New Orleans in 2005. I follow Walter Mignolo closely (2005a, 405) in his appeal to suspend the theory of proletarianization and concepts of people, popular and the multitude until there is a clear understanding, both in epistemological and political terms, of what racialization means and how it operates in a capitalist and imperial/colonial world. For Mignolo, "a topology of social actors hand in hand with a topology of being is an imperative to understand the current imperial articulation both at the level of the imperial differences and the colonial differences" (2005a: 405).

This proposition may be integrated with the critical Boaventura Sousa Santos view of post-colonialism (2002, 16). For this author, although the colonial relationship is one of the fundamental unequal power relationships within capitalism, it is not unique and should be interlinked to other power relationships such as exploitation based on class, sexism and racism. Analysis of economic factors and the historical and heterogeneous configurations of the colonial relationship should also be considered as an essential component in the analysis of culture or discourse.

The historical geography of disasters reveals evidence of the hegemonic and performative production strategies of an insecure world. As Greg Bankoff clearly demonstrates (2004), at the end of the twentieth century the *topos* of natural disasters replaced the *topoi* of tropicality (disease is resolved by Western medicine) and development (poverty is resolved by investment and Western aid) to produce another dangerous and distant exoticism. However, some catastrophes in the Western world, more specifically Hurricane Katrina in 2005, revealed how this exoticization, based on racial and class criteria and the biopolitics and geo-economic management of populations, is also fully functioning in certain geo-historical locations (Mignolo) in the hegemonic center.

The tsunami that hit the Indian Ocean on 26 December 2004 marked the emergence of a global disaster community, due to the number of people affected, the range of countries directly hit, the colossal material damage and, more importantly, the media coverage, amplified by the victim status of thousands of European and North American citizens present in tourist resorts across the region.

After the 2004 tsunami, technical staff representing dozens of NGOs from 55 countries, rushed to Sri Lanka. The lack of coordination and the reactive nature of these organizations served to reveal the absence of any predictive capacity or planning, the non-incorporation of theories and structures for the analysis and reduction of risk and the low importance attributed to accumulated learning associated with mitigation and recovery from disaster situations. The accumulated knowledge associated with disaster management had not been generalized or incorporated into the organizational and logistical structures of the NGOs operating in catastrophe situations (Twigg and Steiner, 2002). Their operational logic was appropriate for the socio-historical, socio-political and socio-geographical contexts of post-colonial Latin America, but not adapted to post-colonial situations in Asia.[2]

For example, one member of a local authority in Sri Lanka complained to a journalist from the French *Nouvel Observateur* magazine that they needed cement and electricity and not brioches or croissants. The presence of the United States fleet off the coast of Sri Lanka also created feelings of hostility, above all in the zone controlled by the Tamil rebels.

In addition, in the Banda Aceh area of Indonesia, aid from the UN and the NGOs was co-opted by the central government which used it as a political weapon against rebels (40% of the population in this region were living below the poverty line before the tsunami).

The logic which supports the work of major international aid systems (NGOs and the World Health Organization) may also restrict or annul the work of local organizations. A major catastrophe, like a battlefield, is a real-world testing ground for health and hygiene matters for the World Health Organization. The danger is that a future humanitarian power and health authority is being created which, supported by collective emotions, strips small countries or territories of their capacity to act (biopolitics in an international context). Within this context, India's refusal to accept international aid during the tsunami crisis demands consideration beyond a simplistic analysis of the receptiveness/unreceptiveness of political regimes and their dictatorial logic or willingness in the face of international aid and world charitable organizations.

In taking a concrete approach to the media coverage of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, we are confronted by the first world disaster both in terms of its dimensions and the unusual involvement in this type of event of tourists who

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2 The cases of the cyclone which hit Myanmar (Burma) on 2 May and the earthquake on 12 May 2008 in China clearly demonstrate this.

were citizens of the core countries in the world system (with media reports additionally forgetting the presence of thousands of Asian tourists at the scene).

In the initial moments, the information was based almost exclusively on amateur video footage, democratizing the flow of information and reinforcing the stamp of reality. On the other hand, Western governments, contrary to what might have been expected given the dimensions of the disaster, displayed an inertia and an inability to act and coordinate that was almost pitiable and truly striking. Beyond an inability to mourn citizens who had perished in a faraway tourist paradise, what we witnessed, in the case of Sweden for example, was a lack of recognition and an inability to represent an event of this kind, the absence of an enlightened catastrophism in the face of the omnipotence and self-sufficiency of governments that had great economic resources but were incapable of conceiving of a catastrophe beyond their territorial limits.

In the diffractive interplay of images and discourses that followed the tsunami, the inhabitants of Europe and the tourists in the Indian Ocean region realized the weakness of the state as the global therapist in the imaginary of its citizens (Sloterdijk 2006, 266). Cracks opened up in the crystal palace with its warm, self-complacent endosphere and each of the tourists and the disaster community that consisted of their families, friends and loved ones felt completely unprepared, vulnerable and at the mercy of the elements. The shattering of the crystal palace, the radical change in their comfortable homeostasis as world travelers and the consequent experience of vulnerability made them citizens of the world and simple human beings.

Immersed in the illusion and myth of national containment, the European national structures were not prepared to respond to a world disaster community and public opinion in the European countries involved in the events of December 2004 was critical of the actions of their governments during the crisis. This was confirmed in many sociological studies of disaster situations in which before, during and after disasters, the "general public" believed it was important to trust in the authorities and their respect for citizens (Luhmann 1993).[3]

There were many critical analyses of the media coverage of the tsunami by the core countries. Harsha Walia (2005) contrasted what she termed the discourse of compassion and the ideology of humanitarianism associated with

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3 Examples in Europe include the case of the oil spill off Galicia, the Madrid bombings and the contrast between the official, civil and media indifference in Portugal to the approximately one thousand deaths from the effects of the 2003 heat wave in comparison with the situation in France, where the same event led to collective awareness and a questioning of the concept of citizenship, following the abandonment of thousands of elderly people to their fate and thousands of unclaimed corpses buried in mass graves.

natural disasters with the neglect of the humanitarian crises in Darfur and Rwanda. According to the author, we were facing a re-writing of colonial consciousness and the logic of Western superiority. In her opinion, international aid and the politics of global compassion, including the strong presence of NGOs, would ultimately defuse the anger of populations affected by the tsunami. The capacity for resistance and recovery would be diluted within a logic of victimization.

Peter Philips (2004), a North American sociologist and the director of *Project Censored*, called the stance of the leading North American media hypocritical, contrasting the excessive attention dedicated to the tsunami with the prolonged silence over the death of 100,000 civilians since the start of the invasion of Iraq.

However, we cannot simply restrict ourselves to accusations. In transforming it into a global disaster, the visibility of the tsunami triggered local, national and international solidarity work, mobilizing resources and people on an unprecedented scale. The role of the media in activating humanitarian measures can neither be ignored nor its role in providing effective support for the populations affected.

In the wake of Luc Boltanski (2000; 1999), we instead have to enquire about the principles of an approach to pity which, abandoning the negative version of compassion, enables a politics of pity to be defined, reconstituting its specifically political, controversial and even conflictual dimensions within a democratic logic of citizenship. How can distant suffering be represented and acquire political connotations that will allow for action, revolt and solidarity?[4]

The central issue involves the selection of the victims in question (who, for example, remembers that in 1970 cyclones and floods hit Bangladesh and killed 300,000 to 500,000 people?) as the politics of pity emerge – and the language here is crude and cruel – from an excess of victims, both on a material level and in terms of their representation in the media.

The re-legitimization of humanitarian work and its re-politicization includes the capacity of ordinary citizens to assimilate political events, to feel them in their everyday lives as part of their lived experience and to experience them as challenging personal and collective dilemmas, transforming anger and emotion in the face of the suffering of others into collective action by social movements independent of party politics and the state.

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4 Luc Boltanski (2000) defines three topics for suffering: denunciation (associated with anger), sentiment (associated with emotions) and aesthetics.

Hurricane Katrina once again confronted developed countries, or rather the hegemonic economic and political power, with the racial and class scars present in land planning, access to assets, and citizenship status. The rhetoric and concepts in question are crucial to the performance and reproduction of the dynamics of power: at the Nairobi Climate Conference in 2006, various analysts referred to the people uprooted from New Orleans as the first refugees of climate change. This is a dubious attribute, since the concept of refugee implies noncitizen status. The uprooted of New Orleans were North American citizens and staked their claims as such.

After the initial inertia of the North American local, state and federal authorities in dealing with the effects of the hurricane, those affected were systematically relocated to nearby and distant states, experiencing an explicit policy of selectiveness and separation of families and communities. The central issue after the event concerned the reconstruction of public housing and the right to return to the former place of residence.[5] Around 200,000 inhabitants have still not returned to New Orleans, raising the question of whether the conditions will ever be in place for them to return one day.

The people affected by Hurricane Katrina directly felt the effects of a structural and insidious racism that lingers in the United States and defines an entire tradition of selective biopolitics. After the catastrophe, the same people found themselves with threshold citizenship status, uprooted by force and removed from the arena and the public spheres.

In order to define their situation in a democratic state of law, Henri Giroux proposes the notion of disposable groups (2006, 10). The biopolitics of Katrina reinforced the idea that the poor Afro-American populations affected were a burden on the federal state and would have to find solutions by themselves. The individuals who made up these groups were seen as having no stable social ties, citizen's rights, contributive or productive capacities. Their initial classification as refugees was an indication and designation "which suggests that an alien force inhabited the Gulf Coast" proposes Henri Giroux.[6]

What, therefore, is the reference point enabling us to positively assess and classify an approach to the media regarding disasters? The following topics are proposed:
– avoidance of sentimentality and sensational images and news;

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5 The organization *Common Ground*, founded in New Orleans after the hurricane in August 2005, played an important role in defending reconstruction and the right to return.
6 The evacuation plans for African-Americans followed a meticulous process of relocating members of the same family to states as far away as Utah, Oklahoma, Texas and even Alaska.

- presentation of local strategies for recovery and the reformulation of social networks and complex power relationships based on racism, sexism, economic domination and biopolitics;
- transmission of the complexity of the situation and the real or potential conflicts existing in the area;
- provision for ordinary voices and their definitions of the situation to be heard;[7]
- attention to practices, performances and discourses that indicate the production of an oppositional public space.

In assuming difference, this type of approach allows for a concept of common humanity to be constructed and taking both the strong and weak points of local civil society into account.

Disasters are occasions which clearly reveal the social dynamics of the societies they affect (social structures, social networks, inequalities and the capacity for resistance) and the quality of the state services, their organization and operational logic. They also test the strength of the ties that bind us all together as human beings and citizens of different countries, raising political and practical moral dilemmas that are complex and perhaps impossible to resolve. However, they may also lead to the conception and materialization of alternatives for building a fairer and more equal world.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be said that the media are central components of democratic societies since they denounce the contradictions and complexities of subjects and problems that pervade these societies and suggest alternatives to be conceived and experienced as ways of resisting hegemonic biopolitical thinking and practices. Resorting to a notion of imperfect citizenship, rejecting simplistic and catastrophic visions of the media's potential to manipulate, the public sphere may be perceived as composed of multiple media and political publics who are active in certain contexts and mere spectators in other situations. As the examples presented here clearly show, the ideological function of the media – defining ideology from a Marxist perspective – also implies that publics, associations and movements within civil society and the deconstruc-

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7 A masterful and powerful analysis of Hurricane Katrina can be found in Spike Lee's documentary (2006).

tion and critique of grammars of hegemony will only be possible through the active interpolation of journalistic discourse and the public presentation of alternative denominations and definitions, whether or not associated with alternative means of production and dissemination.

Without demonizing the work of journalists, citizens and groups directly targeted by the discourse of these professionals must demand the right of reply and the right to produce other grammars that explode the colonialism (Mignolo 2005b) of knowledge. The contradictions within the field of journalism will become the catalyst for other voices and the possibility for forging new ties or new definitions of citizenship on the basis of the alterity of political and ideological practices and positionings, producing counter-discourses and counter-publics.[8]

Whilst Habermas appealed to social movements as the only agents capable of questioning the political system, we know that the media format and the framework for their actions define the tone and the impression that all events convey to media publics. The competitive logic within the media and the anxiety of its professionals regarding their public's unfamiliarity with its ductile nature, in addition to its often ephemeral logic, create the opportunity for other vocabularies to be projected and, within a dynamic of conflict, other alternatives to be conceived for the construction of a shared but non-consensual world.

The production of an oppositional public space materializes, as Oskar Negt states, through the accumulation of singular experiences conveyed in the conventional or alternative media and through the production of devices to establish rebellious and diffractive subjectivities released within the confines of colonialism and circulating as possible and alternative spaces in addition to, or despite, local theories manufactured in a myriad of academic worlds.

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8 The concept of the counter-public was proposed by Nancy Fraser (1991) in her reformulation of Habermas's notion of the public sphere.

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