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The instrumentalization of the communicative citizenship field in the context of armed conflict: the case of the Association of Organized Women of Eastern Antioquia in Colombia

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Abstract

This paper focuses on introducing the concept of communicative citizenship and how the creation of this field could overcome a gap with regards to the relationship between communication, citizenship and human rights. Furthermore, this paper present preliminary results of one case study (the experience of the Association of Organized Women of Eastern Antioquia – AMOR – in Colombia) that shows how this model applies in the context of an armed conflict.

Keywords: *communicative citizenship, human rights, public sphere, Colombian armed conflict, citizenship*

Introduction

In this paper I would like to present two important aspects of the PhD research project called “*Communicative citizenship, another dimension of rights*” that is supported by The Centre for Research in the Social Sciences – CRISS – at The University of Huddersfield. First, I would like to introduce the concept of communicative citizenship, some key issues, principal categories and dimensions, and how the creation of this field could overcome the gap with regards to the relationship between communication, citizenship and human rights. Second, I will present preliminary results of one case study that shows how this model applies to a specific social, political and economic context and how this communicative citizenship field could work in different scales. This paper aims at a preliminary analysis of the experience of the *Association of Organized Women of Eastern Antioquia – AMOR* – in Colombia, a collective of women victims in the Colombian armed conflict. It explores how this group uses socio-communicative resources in order to claim human rights in local and regional public spheres and examines the ways that these socio-communicative strategies affect categories of identity, recognition, power and visibility in this region.

The communicative citizenship field

The communicative citizenship field is a theoretical and methodological construction to integrate different dimensions of the relationship between citizenship, communication and human rights in contemporary social sciences. Before exploring this concept, it is important to note that in the last two decades scholars from disciplines such as sociology, media studies, political science, communication and political philosophy have

been developing different approaches to explore this relationship and the role of these three categories in society. Following scholars like Curran (1997), Bauman (1998; 2007), Todorov (1999), McNair (1999), Keane (2000), Stevenson (2003), Curran and Morley (2006), Castells (2006; 2009), Rey (2007) and McLoughlin & Scott (2010) it can be concluded that this relationship is inherent, structural, indivisible and essential in order to understand, describe and analyse the reconfiguration of actual society.

Now these three categories are undergoing total redefinition and reconstruction at the same time, because geopolitical and socio-cultural changes have affected the conventional meaning of these concepts, precipitated by the globalization process, the crisis of the nation – state, the network society, the emergence of a new set of human rights in society and the crisis of the modernity project. Social researchers have developed various studies in this field and it is possible to find well-developed research, reflections and debates in different academic fields, in other words, an academic tradition exists for this issue in contemporary social studies.

There is, however, a lack of integrative approaches, and for this reason the communicative citizenship field is seeking to provide the theoretical and methodological answer in order to overcome this problem of holistic understanding. Thus, following this academic discussion, and the principal arguments of this theoretical field, it is possible to establish five contemporary interconnections between the categories of citizenship, human rights and communication to provide a more comprehensive idea of the importance of this relationship to understand the dynamic of the actual social structure.

These contemporary interconnections are: first, the homogenizing function of citizenship in developing a sense of belonging and loyalty to a particular society and territory has changed, and now both communication and citizenship have new meanings in social spaces that provide people with a sense of political and cultural belonging, transforming social structures, roles and public responsibilities in the social arena. Second, the key role of citizenship, human rights and communication in the formation of democratic public spheres has been revitalized because values of equality, diversity, respect, solidarity and freedom have been expressed through different kinds of social and media narratives, affecting mentalities and representations of liberal ideas in public opinion.

Third, the tie between citizenship and the main characteristics of a democratic regime (constitutionality, participation and rational choice) are now affected by the symbolic centrality of the new technologies of communication and information, allowing citizens to take a more active role in the public sphere. Now the citizen has more communicative resources with which to receive quality information about public issues, and has different channels to express diverse points of view in the public sphere. In the same way, this new communicative context helps scholars to once again reconsider different perspectives of the “ideal concept” of the public sphere in liberal democracies (e.g. ideal concepts from Arendt (1958), Habermas (1991), Fraser (1992), Keane (2000) or Taylor (2005)) and how it is possible to build a strong civil society that demands respect of universal human rights principles.

Fourth, the urgent need for a new set of rights, especially communicative rights, emerged as a consequence of the tension between communication and citizenship,

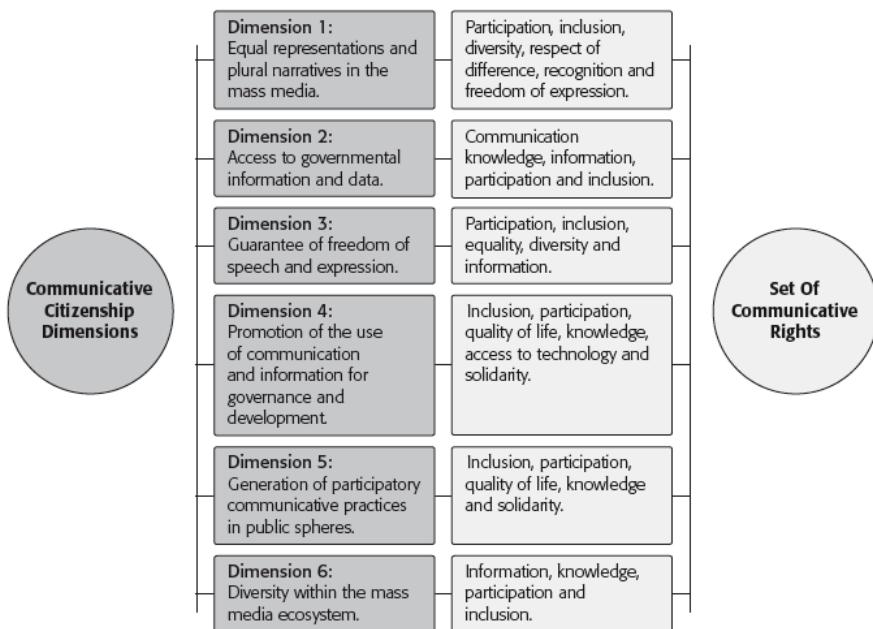
because the new socio-communicative regime provides other ways of understanding the role of communication in the public sphere and how this new role transforms the traditional meanings of concepts such as democracy, representation, rights, recognition, duties, responsibilities and participation in contemporary social structures. Finally, the relationship between citizenship and communication can be used to try and develop a more democratic media system with this new socio-communicative regime highlighting the central role of communication in contemporary society.

These interconnections incorporate the ideas of scholars such as Curran (1997), Todorov (1999), McNair (1999), Keane (2000), Stevenson (2003), Bonilla (2003), Castells (2006; 2009), Curran & Morley (2006), Rey (2007), Martin-Barbero (2009), Rincon (2010) and McLoughlin & Scott (2010), and are the principal theoretical resources of the communicative citizenship field within the communicative dimension of civil, political, social and cultural rights. In this context, the first important concept is the concept of communicative citizenship, which is an interdisciplinary concept that is concerned with the values of equality, solidarity, access to technology, respect of difference, participation, recognition, justice, information, knowledge and quality of life within a global arena.

This concept represents the instrumentalization of a new dimension of citizenship where communicative action is at the centre of the social dynamic, and one of its primary purposes is to understand the different socio-communicative manifestations, actions, strategies, practices and tactics associated with the contemporary struggle for recognition, meaning and significance for different actors in public spheres.

Furthermore, communicative citizenship can become a concept which is used to claim equal representations and plural narratives in the mass media, access to government information and data, guarantee of freedom of speech and expression, to promote the use of communication and information for governance and development, to generate participatory communicative practices in public spheres and to encourage diversity within the mass media ecosystem. The citizen, the civil society and the civil sphere are at the centre of the dynamic that emerges from the instrumentalization of the concept of communicative citizenship in the public sphere, and provides communicative agency to citizens in order to transform specific social structures and claim different types of social, political and cultural rights from a communicative perspective.

One of the more important discussions about the principal categories of the communicative citizenship field is to know what new form of individual and collective citizenship experience could emerge in connection to other dimensions of citizenship, and what set of rights, duties and responsibilities it is possible to now establish. The next figure describes the relationship between communicative citizenship dimensions and the set of rights that emerge in this context, providing a basic overview of the principal categories of this field.

Figure 1: Relationship between communicative citizenship and rights

As Figure 1 shows, there are six communicative citizenship dimensions which link to a different set of communicative rights that come from communicative dimensions of civil, political, cultural and social rights. These six dimensions have a direct relation with rights and demands, because in this aspect the communicative citizenship concept tries to encourage the development of communicative agency in citizens. If by agency we understand “the ability to be able to act within a social and cultural context while making a difference to the flow of events. Agency should not be thought of as the opposite of structure, but dependent upon rules and resources generated by social structures. To have agency is defined by the ability to be able to intervene actively” (Stevenson 2003, p. 155), these linkages provide the different aims to achieve in the social structure, through citizen action.

Moreover, the principal argument at this point is that with these six dimensions it is possible to encourage communicative citizenship agency, claim political, social, economic and cultural rights from a communicative perspective; to build a strong capacity for individuals to act independently and to make their own free communicative choices in specific contexts. One of the final goals of this citizenship experience and exercise is to start a long-term process of socio-communicative emancipation, where citizens can develop a more active role in the configuration of their socio-communicative and symbolic regimes, claim traditional forms of human rights from non-conventional perspectives and compete with other social actors for power and communicative resources in public spheres.

The communicative citizenship field and the case of the Association of Organized Women of Eastern Antioquia in Colombia

In this second part of this paper, I would like to present how *the Association of Organized Women of Eastern Antioquia – AMOR* – has been using different socio-communicative resources in the last fifteen years (1997 – 2012) in order to claim different kind of rights in the local, regional and national public sphere, and how this experience could be an example of the instrumentalization of the communicative citizenship field in the context of an armed conflict.

Some context: the Colombian armed conflict

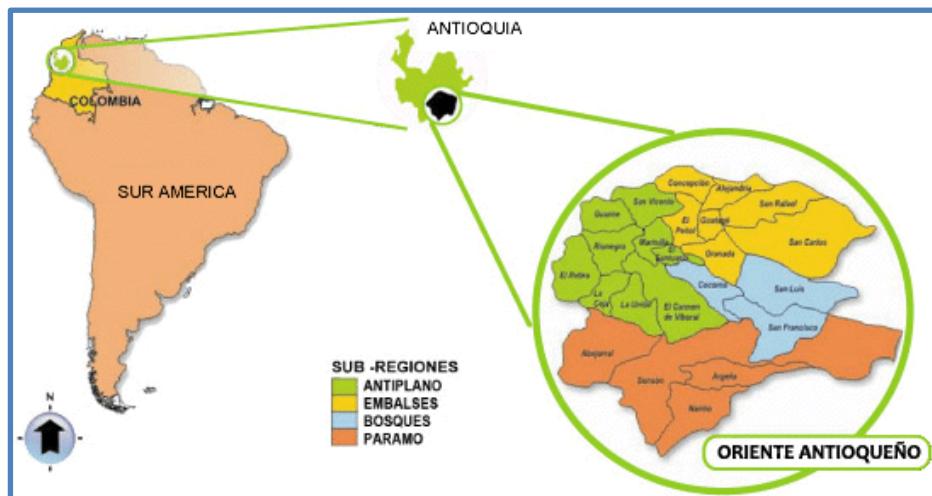
Colombia has a population of 48 million, a landmass of 1.139.000 Km², four million internally displaced people, 420,000 refugees, two guerrilla groups (extreme left armies), more than six new paramilitary groups called BACRIMS (extreme right armies), 50% poverty (one in two Colombians are poor), the longest armed conflict in the world, which has lasted almost 50 years, and is the country in Latin America with the most unequal distribution of wealth (Fisas 2009; UNDP 2010). From the point of view of the United Nations Development Programme this conflict combines five structural factors: the drugs traffic problem, the minimum role of the local states in the Colombian regions, historical inequality and exclusion, the incapacity of the state to create democratic institutions and the apparent indifference of political and economic elites (UNDP 2003, pp. 1 – 25). On the other hand, for the Colombian Government this is not an armed conflict; it is a “Terrorist threat” (Republic of Colombia - Ministry of National Defence, 2009) and this definition is the base for developing all the actual political policies in the country.

According to scholars such as Sanchez & Meertens (2001), Gonzalez, Vasquez & Bolivar (2003), Pecaut (2004) and Wills (2006) the principal cause of the Colombian conflict is the asymmetric war between the Colombian army and the other irregular groups (guerrillas, paramilitaries, drug dealers) for control over territory and the incapacity of the state to create the roots of democracy in the country. As a result, civil society is the principal victim of the conflict and this is especially true for women. Following the results of the project “*The costs of the war*” (2008) the Colombian NGO *Program for Peace* argues that 86.18% of the victims of the Colombian war in the last 15 years were civilians and 61.23% were women, more than half, and 40.76% were from the Eastern Antioquia (*Program for Peace* 2008, p. 24).

In other words, four in ten Colombian civilian victims in the period 1993 - 2008 were women and from Eastern Antioquia. What is the reason for this? The Regional Program for Development and Peace of Eastern Antioquia – PRODEPAZ – established three causes: firstly, 45% of Colombian energy resources are concentrated in this region; it is a geographically strategic area within the armed conflict and the women have an active role in the local companies; secondly, in the logic of armed conflict, women are “war booty” and a specific target for the warriors; finally, a strong patriarchal society exist in

this region and killing women sends a powerful message and aims to debilitate the regional social structure (PRODEPAZ 2009, pp. 76 – 77).

Map 1: Colombia – Eastern Antioquia (Oriente Antioqueño)



Source: EAFIT University (2010). *ADEPROA Project*. Retrieved May 18, 2010, from <http://ideas09.eafit.edu.co/adepoa/>

In this context, in the principal town of Eastern Antioquia (Rionegro) *AMOR* was created in 1994. This region has 23 municipalities and *AMOR* represents women for all of them, especially victims of the armed conflict. In 2009 this group expressed the voice of 123,000 women and categorized their work in four dimensions: Political, economic, socio-cultural and symbolic with a gender approach. According to Villa (2007) *AMOR* reconfigures the traditional conception of women's identity, victims groups and citizenship in this context, because the intention of this group is to find a balance between *strong citizenship* (political and economic participation) and *active identity* (socio - cultural and symbolic changes) in a patriarchal and traditional masculine public sphere (Villa 2007, pp. 162 – 174). Therefore, *AMOR* established small projects, workshops and local gender programs in order to improve these conceptions of citizenship, identity and human rights in 23 municipalities. These meanings revalorize political activity and affect direct social action in the region.

AMOR and their communicative citizenship actions

It is important to note that *AMOR* has been developing three main socio-communicative strategies in order to obtain recognition, visibility and inclusion in the local and regional public sphere in the last fifteen years. The first strategy called “*from the house to the square*” (De la casa a la plaza) is an effort to involve women in public discussions about the war, victim reparation, truth, justice and the future of local peace programmes in a cultural approach. The second action in a political rights perspective is the formation of

“*constituent assemblies*” (Asambleas Constituyentes) to create economic, health and educational programmes for women in extreme poverty. Finally, the *psychosocial strategy* is a symbolic mechanism related to women whose lives have been affected by the armed conflict. It aims to encourage women to externalise the personal effects that the war has had upon them and to transform the “victim condition” into the “citizenship condition”. For this group, the women’s identity is a precondition to “democratize the pain”, create new narratives and other memories of the conflict and reconfigure the social imaginaries of women in Colombia.

Moreover, across these three main established socio-communicative strategies, this group of Colombian victims has been using, at the same time, different communicative citizenship resources to claim human rights in local and regional public spheres that are examples of the instrumentalization of communicative citizenship agency in the context of an armed conflict. Initiatives such as “*The walls of memory*”, big walls made with photographs to remember the victims of the armed conflict in Eastern Antioquia; “*The march of the light*”, where every week this group of women and people from different towns march across public roads with a candle in their hands claiming for truth, justice and recovering the good name of some victims that had been wrongly accused of being part of some army group; “*The never again expositions*”, photography expositions about people that have disappeared during the armed conflict whose families and communities wish to commemorate them; “*Trails for life*”, where groups of victims try to recover the meaning, significance and uses of public spaces (where massacres against civilians happened) organizing annual walks to places where relatives were killed or are presumed to be buried the bodies of missing persons; and “*Memorial parks*”, in order to construct another memory about this armed conflict from the victims’ point of view; are some of this set of communicative citizenship actions.

Picture 1: “The march of light” in Granada town (Eastern Antioquia)



Every week this group of women and people from different towns march across public roads with a candle in their hands claiming for truth, justice and recovering the good name of some victims that had been wrongly accused of being part of some army group.

Picture: Erika Diettes (2011)

Picture 2: “Wall of memory” in Cocorná town (Eastern Antioquia)



Big walls made with photographs to remember the victims of the armed conflict in Eastern Antioquia.

Picture: Erika Diettes (2011)

To sum up this second part, it is possible to categorize these communicative citizenship actions of *AMOR* as two types of action: first, *the communicative citizenship action are direct actions seeking recognition in the public sphere*. These actions to empower, transform and reconfigure the position of particular civil society groups in specific socio-historical fields (In this case victims' groups) and encourage a more active participation of citizens in the construction of their socio-communicative and symbolic regimes. Initiatives such as "*The walls of memory*" or "*The march of light*" are examples of this first type of communicative citizenship action, because these actions reconfigure the "victim condition" (Villa 2007) into the "citizenship condition" (Program for Peace 2010) using non-conventional socio-communicative resources to express dignity, resistance and provide another narrative about the armed conflict in itself.

The second type of communicative citizenship action is called *the communicative citizenship action in order to construct identities from a counterpublic perspective*. There are actions to build cohesive collective identities in order to exercise symbolic power in the public arenas using strategies of visibility or exclusion according to some predefined interest. Initiatives such as "*The never again expositions*", "*The memorial*

parks" and "*Trails for life*" are example of this second categorization, because these actions provides powerful identity narratives of this group of victims around the idea of "democratize the private pain in the public sphere" and, through this approach, can claim human rights in local public spheres and struggle for visibility in different regional/local policy-making scenarios (e.g. local councils and regional councils). Finally, it is important to state that these two *AMOR* communicative citizenship action categories are very dynamic and it is common to find intersections between them; and, furthermore, it is clear that this instrumentalization of this communicative citizenship agency involves instruments, actions and processes that help to reconfigure socio-communicative resources of *AMOR* in the demand for political, social, cultural, economical and communicative rights in the local and regional public spheres of Eastern Antioquia.

Picture 3: "Never Again exposition" in Guatape town (Eastern Antioquia)



Photography expositions about people that have disappeared during the armed conflict whose families and communities wish to commemorate them.

Picture: Erika Diettes (2011)

Picture 4: "Trails for Life" in El Carmen de Viboral town (Eastern Antioquia)



Groups of victims try to recover the meaning, significance and uses of public spaces (where massacres against civilians happened) organizing annual walks to places where relatives were killed or are presumed to be buried the bodies of missing persons.

Picture: Contravia TV. Retrieved November 20, 2011, from: <http://www.contravia.tv>

Conclusion

In this paper I described the relationship between communication, citizenship and rights and the five contemporary interconnections between citizenship and communication as well. Furthermore, I would like to conclude that the traditional concept of citizenship is in crisis and now it is possible to find other types of citizenship experiences, identifications and citizenship dimensions, creating linkages with other social experiences, transnational practices, information flows, political identities and subjective recognitions. It is clear that there is an urgent need to create a new concept or category to develop another approach to the rights, responsibilities and duties in connection with this new set of citizenship experiences, especially from the communication field, which affect other social categories like identity, recognition, power and visibility. If in recent decades the category of citizenship has focused on creating, or revalidating, a bond with civil, political, social and cultural rights, it is now relevant to consider other sets of rights and duties to understand the development of the current social structure and new communicative regimes. If the new social dynamic has a strong tie with communicative transformations, what kind of new citizenship experiences are emerging where the focus and centrality is the communicative process itself? What kind of new rights, responsibilities and duties is it possible to reconfigure? Could the triad "communicative regime - democracy - public sphere" be the clue to understanding the contemporary socio-communicative world in a citizenship approach? Is it possible to argue that the twenty first century is the era of communicative rights?

For these reasons, in this paper I explored this relationship between citizenship and the communicative dimensions of rights, presenting the category of communicative

citizenship and their dimensions in order to provide a more comprehensive approach to this field. In summary, the communicative dimensions of citizenship need to break the boundaries of the static categories of political, cultural and social rights to introduce more complex social relations, and start to think of the centrality of communicative rights as an independent and central category. This effort tried to overcome the limitations brought about by considering communicative rights in specific fields only and the limitations in the comprehension, analysis and research of the socio-communicative field in society and its links with contemporary social science studies.

Having developed a preliminary case study in a specific armed conflict context (The experience of *AMOR* in Eastern Antioquia - Colombia), combining different quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to understand how this category and some of their dimensions can operate in a particular context; it is possible to conclude that these preliminary results are the first step to deeply understand this relationship “from above”. The socio-communicative rights of inclusion, participation, quality of life, knowledge and solidarity have a crucial relevance in this case study, and are indicators of whether civil society has, or has not, a key role in the new configuration of symbolic regimes in armed conflict context. If one of the final goals of this communicative citizenship experience is to start a long-term process of socio-communicative emancipation, where citizens can develop a more active role in the configuration of their socio-communicative and symbolic regimes, claim traditional kind of human rights from unconventional perspectives and compete with other social actors for power and communicative resources in public spheres; it is clear that the communicative citizenship actions developed by *AMOR* in the last fifteen years could be the clue that enables us to understand, in holistic terms and “from below”, how an active communicative citizenship could be the base from which to claim other sets of rights in an armed conflict context, and to exercise other types of citizenship experience at the same time.

If the communicative citizenship field tries to give more relevance, power and resources to civil society in the interaction of this actor with other institutions in the public sphere, the final conclusion is that it is necessary to develop more specific and situated case studies with other specific population sectors in order to understand the instrumentalization of the communicative citizenship field in other contexts and “from above” as well. For this reason, it is necessary to develop the same exercise in other contexts to establish if it is possible to create grades of comparability between quantitative and qualitative results and interpretative approaches from different countries and particular situations.

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