

THE PRESS THEORIES OF LATE LIBERALISM

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Brasileira de Pesquisadores em Jornalismo

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ABSTRACT - The transformations undergone by the press around 1900 gave rise to a reevaluation of its meaning and its theoretical grounds from the point of view of their liberal interpreters. The collapse of political and doctrinaire journalism resulting from this event was at first object of assimilation by those intellectuals, thought a restructuration of their theories. After 1918, however, the agenda of discussions about the press migrated from the field of the public opinion modeling to that of the manipulation of consciousness of the masses. The liberal theories suffered an eclipse, which has subordinated the old figure of the press to the new concept of propaganda. This paper reports and evaluates the historical peculiarities of this process, analyzing the ideas of Frank Taylor, Emil Löbl, Wilhelm Bauer, Karl Kraus and Henry Mencken.

Keywords: History of journalism. Theories of journalism. Late liberalism and the Press.

AS TEORIAS DA IMPRENSA DO LIBERALISMO TARDIO

RESUMO - As transformações por que passou a imprensa por volta de 1900 deram origem a uma reavaliação de seu significado e bases teóricas por parte de seus intérpretes liberais. O colapso do jornalismo político e doutrinário delas resultante foi, de início, objeto de assimilação, via a reestruturação de suas teorias. Depois de 1918, porém, sua agenda de discussões migrou do campo da formação da opinião pública para o da manipulação da consciência das massas. As teorias liberais sofreram um eclipse, que subordinou a velha figura da imprensa ao novo conceito de propaganda. Este artigo relata e avalia as peculiaridades históricas desse processo, analisando as ideias de Frank Taylor, Emil Löbl, Wilhelm Bauer, Karl Kraus e Henry Mencken.

Palavras-chave: História do jornalismo. Teorias do Jornalismo. Imprensa e liberalismo tardio.

LAS TEORIAS DE LA PRENSA DEL LIBERALISMO TARDIO

RESUMEN - Las transformaciones sufridas por la prensa en 1900 dieron lugar a una nueva valoración de su significado y bases teóricas por sus intérpretes liberales. El colapso resultante del periodismo político y doctrinal oriundo destes cambios fué, primero, objeto de una asimilación, a través de la reestructuración de las viejas teorías. Después de 1918, sin embargo, sus discusiones emigraron del campo a la formación de la opinión pública para el de la manipulación de la conciencia de las masas. Las teorías liberales han sufrido un eclipse, que subordinó la antigua figura de la prensa a el nuevo concepto de propaganda. En este artículo se describe y evalúa las peculiaridades históricas de este proceso, mediante el análisis de las ideas de Frank Taylor, Emil Löbl, Wilhelm Bauer, Karl Kraus y Henry Mencken.

Palabras clave: Historia del periodismo. Teorias del periodismo. Prensa e liberalismo tardio.

During the last decades of 19th Century, Western press from its major urban centers has passed by a series of structural transformations that led the reading public of the political press to become consumers in a market of newspapers that their own conversion in enterprises was creating. In the United States, Hearst, Scribbs and Pulitzer registered the fall down of the political party journalism and its ideological purposes to direct the public opinion, defending that, from now on, the press should express popular needs instead its own doctrines. For them, the time had come for readers find in their newspapers no more than the news they, the readers, expected, in spite of the way this process could it be thought by the upper strata of the enlightened public originated from the classic liberalism of the 18th Century.

In Western Europe, there were few exceptions in this understanding. Instead of this, we can find paradigmatic cases. The United Kingdom offers one of them. The industrial revolution and the urban expansion, but especially the Education Act from 1870 fostered there the emergence of a new kind of public that was tapped by the press. The abolition of taxes that had burdened it and the growing literacy of the masses created the institutional conditions for the popularization of reading and the spreading of literacy, promoting a democratization of books, magazines, and newspapers.

The industrialization of the press, with its accompanying rise in publishing costs, led to a progressive transfer of ownership and control of the popular press from the working classes to wealthy businessmen, while dependence on advertising encouraged the absorption or elimination of the early radical press and stunted its subsequent development before the First World War (CURRAN; SEATON, 2006, p. 36).

This whole situation impacted on the form through which, until then, the press used to be seen and evaluated by the intellectualized sectors of society. Before this, they believed that freedom of expression and competition of ideas, ensured by free enterprise in the publishing industry, could, intellectually, promote reason and, politically, develop a force of unstable equilibrium, the public opinion, in front of which authorities will need to be responsible.

The design of the press as a beacon or guide of the opinion was an effect of these circumstances, always remembering that, underlying it, there was a political process that, although excluding the masses, was, in fact, and in principle, open to the competition of opinions and ideas. Newspapers were published primarily to represent

the political parties and, if possible, to influence in the creation of a more or less comprehensive view about the public affairs: that is how is formed the effective fiction called public opinion, as some liberal still could thinking in the first decades of 20th Century (cf. BAUER, [1914] 2009; TÖNNIES [1922] 2013).

All of this stemmed from the understanding that, although we can try to influence them, people were free and rational beings, and thus able both to persuade as being coaxed. The general belief was that, in the end, better argument will prevail. Although some interpreters were beginning to see that reason may be put aside, and is possible to appealing to the imagination during public debates, acting aesthetically on the senses of an audience, socialists and liberals believed that irrationality was a factor in decline and would be overcome in the future, “thanks to the spread of enlightenment”, as said by Moisei Ostrogorski in 1902 (OSTROGORSKI, 1902, Vol. II, p. 334).

For him, though the political parties had control over or influenced a significant part of the American press, the fact was that these papers rarely had intention “to direct the political conscience of its readers, to lecture them: they consider[ed] themselves in the first place as purveyors of facts, true ones, if such can be obtained, or otherwise”(p. 321). However, at this same time, the growing business organization of the press has begun to determine a revision in the understanding of the subject hitherto adopted by the advocates of liberalism. The reorientation of its activity in the commercial and marketing sense led these people to think about what seems to be a new and problematic process of influence in shaping public opinion: the problem of the manipulation of information through the policy of the editing the news (ROSS, [1910] 2008).

In this context, journalism turned itself in an object of suspicion, becoming ever more deprived of legitimacy in the eyes of the conscious and responsible public, influenced by the old liberalism and the enlightened social-democratic doctrines. The conversion of the press in a pure and simple form of business was starting to jump in sight of its late scholars (cf. BÜCHER, [1893] 1901). The criticism addressed to it was moving from the prejudices of its staff towards the mechanisms of selection, distortion and suppression of news practiced by the business. Everywhere emerged a concern with the employment of more or less consented practices of publicity for political purposes through the pages of newspapers, and to the lack of impartiality in the presentation of news made in their offices (ROSS, [1910], RUSSELL [1911]; HARDT, 1979, p. 204-213).

What follows is, in short, an account intended to reveal the way of thinking that this juncture gave rise among some theorists of late liberalism. We aim to highlight how some of these intellectuals, first, reshaped the understanding that the press, despite necessarily biased in its manifestations, was, nevertheless, a guide and beacon for formation of public opinion; but, in a second moment, have begun to fear about its development in an era in which were appearing signs that the educated audiences may be eclipsed by or even dissolved into masses; and in virtue of this, public opinion may be manufactured by the tactical use the press, through a new, insidious, and all powerful institution, finally called propaganda, after First World War.

I FROM THE CLASSIC PAST TO THE SIGNS OF A NEW ERA

According to classical liberalism, originated from the age of Enlightenment, civil society constitutes a kind of stage in which occurs a free exchange of ideas, based on the employment of the individual capabilities. Each person could and should form and express an opinion about the subjects of general interest circulating in a public sphere, and try to persuade others to accept them in conditions of liberty and free use of reason by the part of all. In 1914, Wilhelm Bauer still saw without any reservation or sign of concern the fact that “all means of expression converge towards the organization of propaganda: this is peculiar to any spiritual movement of some importance” (BAUER, [1914] 2009, p. 214).

Forcing the word, we can state that the hegemony of the bourgeois press, its classic era, begins when the factions vying for his political leadership have started to publish newspapers to convey your point of view to their pairs as reflective audience, a public and, thus, try to win supporters for their proposals. The partisan political journalism was an institution whose origins were linked to the dialectics of the public sphere that emerged with the historical rise of that class, in the course of eighteenth Century.

The prevailing assumption at that time, lets remember, was that the press helps to form and, especially, to express the views of the various social groups existing in civil society. Though they bring universalist ambitions with them, newspapers are always divisive, serving to develop, discuss, and propagate the ideas that a collective have in its opinion disputes with and against others ones in a public sphere open to all capable and interested (cf. HABERMAS, 1984)

Inside this context, people used to believe that public opinion was no more than the synthesis of this process, a figure whose appearance was mediated by the political action of the parties and the intellectual proselytizing through the press. The principle that structured ideologically this conception, it was assumed by its spokespersons, was the rational persuasion, in spite of being known that vehicles of opinion were subject to errors of judgment and even financial corruption sometimes.

Since the time of Balzac, at least, almost every educated person known that the press could and, in fact, used to be venal, but there was no objection for their part, too, to the fact that it is and must be an politically engaged and divided institution. It happens that there never was lack of criticism to the lies told by it, that there always was distrust over its reports. No one had doubt that, several times, their owners and their staff edited news and articles in exchange of money stemmed from the part of those interested in their publishing. On the other hand, there was relative consensus that the press was the beacon of civil liberty, and therefore that their franchises should not be suppressed, nor their liberties censored, if it will be for the sake of public life and the safeguard of community (cf. MILL, [1859] 1954, p. 59-118; SCHÄFFLE, [1874] 1881, vol. I, p. 372-373).

People objected to the doctrine conveyed by some newspaper, but not the fact that each one had its political line and professed one or another partisanship. They denounced the pecuniary corruption in which for times newspapers fell, but not the fact that they were partial and ideologically committed (see WILMER, 1859).

In the late nineteenth century, however, the panorama, as indicated, began to change. The bourgeois liberal individualism as ideology had to face a competition that was beginning to come from political and sociological doctrines of collectivist nature and deterministic conception. In the United Kingdom, the belief in the principle of individual rational persuasion was going into eclipse, while were emerging theories that accused the conditioning of opinion by tradition and by other collective forces, instead of defend its autonomy (HAMPTON, 2001, p. 223).

While newspapers were becoming commodities of mass consumption, the practical reflection on the press was, as said, abandoning its bourgeois and liberal understanding as means of expression and enlightening of the current public opinion. Marketing concerns were taking command of the press, leading the newspaper

publishers to announce that they are from then onwards just “giving the hopeless ‘quarter-educated’ members of the working classes what they wanted” (p. 220).

Around 1900, the progressive conversion of the press into big business which stimulated the expansion of the reading public, as well as the emergence of a mass market for the news, has determined the appearance of a new doctrine for this institution. There was the development of a new and more or less vague conception according to which the press, instead of doctrinal proselytism, should help to form the public opinion mirroring or reflecting the facts of life, through the gathering, elaboration, and sale of news.

2 FRANK TAYLOR AND THE POLITICAL PARTY PRESS COLLAPSE

Frank Taylor analyzed this new situation in his booklet “The newspaper press to the both power in the formation and expression of public opinion”, published in 1898. The author describes in this writing the tendency of the British political press to lose its influence on society. The same way it was happening in the United States, political newspapers were suffering a decline in the United Kingdom. “The newspapers are now a commercial enterprise and must be conducted upon kindred lines to other commercial enterprises” (TAYLOR, 1898, p. 24).

Amidst this situation, some people do not fail to make the customary “vague declamation about the present power and predestined omnipotence of the press”, which ended to become “a nauseous commonplace of modern literature” (p. 3). For the author, that is not more the case however. Taylor argues that “the mysterious ‘majesty of the print’ is evaporating with every accession to the numbers of those who are capable of forming a judgment of their own made possible by that process” (p 19).

There is a “tendency, encouraged perhaps by the natural vanity of journalists, to exaggerate the strength of the external forces [represented by the press] to the public mind”(p 18). However, the ideological power that once it possessed is, in fact, declining, although it thrives as an institution and is becoming increasingly more present in everyday life, due the combination of several factors.

Writing under historical circumstances in which the abolition of official fees, the use of the telegraph and the railroads, the growth of education, the advent of universal male suffrage, and the

progresses in graphic arts were putting the developments of the press in a mass consumption scale, the author notes two movements. The first one relates to the fact that people were, for all that, going to read more and, for this, becoming to be increasingly more independent individually. They are no longer conditioned to follow instructions and directives of others, as would be in the past, maintains the author. "Experience and knowledge must tend to make the electorate [and newspapers readers] independent of [their old] advisers" (p. 21). On the other one, people were becoming influenced by new institutions and processes, which occasionally make them a base for social movements that were going beyond the strictly doctrinal record stipulated by the old liberalism, if not the own socialism, as jingoism was doing (cf. RÜDIGER, 2013).

[The newspapers], the platform, and the pamphlet are now the most conspicuous among the intermittent or potential factors [influencing the public] (TAYLOR, 1898, p. 19). The fact is that the old doctrinal press, "as a formative power, will slowly and imperceptibly decline" (p. 21), presaged Taylor. There is no option to it but to acquire a role of a merely supportive force in the making of public opinion. Political newspapers have to understand that its function limits itself to give reputation to a set of ideas or a group of leaderships.

The preparation of the opinion public by the politically engaged newspapers tend to retreat as soon as the political parties become more socially fluid and porous to the demands coming from an electorate more socially diverse and increasingly less committed towards their doctrines. Excepting the cases of crisis in the public affairs, during international disputes, or some polling periods, the political press has turned itself inept to mobilize the attention of the public to the partisan disputes, the administration affairs, and parliamentary debates.

In combination with this process, which tends to conduct to disappearance the claims of journalism to be the "leadership the public opinion," the author also stresses the emergence of a "mutation of organic character in the [European] press" (p.21). That is, the advancement of a new journalism that, exploring scandals, personalities and events, tends to cause shock on the public, through bombastic calls and popular language, without any interest in "printing intelligence of public interest nor supplying material for [the education of] public opinion"(p. 21).

Despite these inclinations to sensationalism, preventing part

of the public to engage with an enlightened and responsible attitude towards its own affairs (p. 24), not everything is bad in this movement, according to the author. The replacement of the doctrinal background article by news reports does not necessarily betray the public and enlightening mission of the press. It means only that this goal is now realized through a new way. News reports are expression of another form to concretize a founding principle of the legitimization of the press in the midst of democratic liberalism.

To publishing news is not only the most obvious function of newspapers, but in a free state, is also the most essential task of the press, much more than the editorial article. Whenever a nation is requested to reach a judgment, it is absolutely necessary to take full and reliable information to all homes quickly and inexpensively, instead to receive and follow an opinion. And that is something that only the news press can do, despite the fact that sometimes, abusing its power, it may do this deceiving the people and, thus, leading the public to take calamitous decisions (p. 26).

The transformation of the press into pure and simple trading companies, though suppose this risk, does not free it from legal sanctions, and therefore its exploitation for purposes of profit is not necessary incompatible with the exercise of the civic duties it inevitably contains. The danger represented by the occupation of their editorial space with materials without true public interest is not ultimately fatal, something that just can be met with irreparable damage in all situations (p 25).

For Taylor, let's summarize, the public was starting to be understand as an anonymous mass, a clientele of consumers potentially able to be mobilized and manipulated by the press, but this would only occur if there was a lasting cooperation between the various news vehicles existing in a given situation, and if all of them abdicate of their public service function (TAYLOR, 1898, p 34;. cf. IRWIN [1911] 1969).

3 EMIL LÖBL AND WILHELM BAUER: PRESS NEW THEORY

Emil Löbl (†1942) proposed to lay the theoretical foundations for the scientific understanding of the journalism that was thus emerging in his treatise "Kultur und Presse", published in 1903. Beginning with the guiding concepts which would make school among the experts on the so-called Periodistik in German-speaking countries, the Austrian journalist and writer establishes a separation

between the political and the news press. The aim was to explain the structure of the second one, starting from the identification of its praxis, media, textual forms and professional structures. The key point here is his reflection on the political and sociological foundations of the institution, his analysis of the role of the new journalism in relation to the processes of shaping public opinion in civil society (LÖBL, 1903, p. 214-263).

Löbl “mixed the historical knowledge about the modern press and the systematic reflection about it with a critique of its mode of development”, aiming to encourage a discussion about the culture emerged around it, says Wolfgang Duchkowitsch (apud KNIEFACZ, 2008, p. 60). According to the former author, the press ended to become a formidable spiritual power in the midst of life of people, the main connection between the individual and the collective intellect, the “most notorious support of constitutional representative system emerged with modern times mass in his step” (LÖBL, 1903, p. 219).

In this sense, it fulfills a certain number of tasks, spreading over two axes, called by him the objective and subjective ones. From an objective point of view, newspapers and magazines represent a factor of political integration, economic development and national and international projection of people from various countries of the planet, because they promote interaction between them, through a technical means of material inscription of consciousness (p. 223-230).

The subjective point of view, in turn, must take into account two aspects. Concerning the first, the author notes that the new journalism contributes to accelerate the pace at which we experience reality, through the creation of a news stream, amid which ideas, lacking respite for reflection, necessarily provokes an intellectual impact. This process, the author believes, incites our consciousness to be shallow. Concerning the second, he stresses that news press helps to leveling down the vision about reality we developed, due to increasingly standardized and elemental character of the ways through which the news are presented by it to the general public (p. 216-223).

For Löbl, newspapers are, in essence, a “multiplier” of public opinion. Except in some rare circumstances, they do not control it. There are many other means of influencing it, as it is proved by “the many cases in which public opinion was created with no aid of or even against the opinion of the press”(p. 254-255). Journalistic vehicles can eventually articulate it, and promote its exponential diffusion, but have no way to create it alone, because this impulse,

contained in the mind of their professionals, collides with the increasingly entrepreneurial nature of the press. The conversion of journalism into a new form of business entails growing concerns among its staff not only to hold captive the conquered reader, but indefinitely expand their circle, what tends to impose a populist trend in the editorial policy of newspapers. This circumstance blocks out the temptation to arbitrarily influence the public awareness, to indoctrinate the readers, nevertheless it exists among their editorial team and proprietors (p. 256-263).

The pragmatic rules that informally govern the professional practices of the press and ended up imposing limits to the calculations of their editorial crew originate from the fact that the public platform that represents the periodicals acquired a virtually pure entrepreneurial structure, much more than from the ideological convictions of that group or of the interests of the people hidden behind the desks.

Gabriel Tarde (†1904), in spite of his contemporaneity and similar interest to understand the new status acquired by the press around 1900, jumped over the type of analysis proposed by Löbl. The author examined the subject while rethinking the fortune of public opinion in an era of social growth and differentiation. According to him, the time had come to the press reach its climax and impose its rule: now “newspapers make and lead the world” (TARDE [1898/1901] 1992, p 44.).

He explains that this results from the fact that they became able to capture and develop the ideas and feelings of large masses of individuals, their opinions, converting synthetically them in public opinion. From the interplay that exists between newspapers and their readers, is that the press “will make a unique and immense crowd, abstract and sovereign, which we will baptize with the name of [public] opinion” (p. 153).

Journalism acts on the masses, (public, in their terminology), as these masses react on journalism. Readers adapt to the newspapers, as they adapt to the readers. Newspapermen listen to the people. People read the newspapers that flatter their beliefs, ideas and feelings. Newspapers readers submit themselves to the intellectual direction they seek from their preferred vehicles, because it is through them that the public ended to believe that it exerts its will and intervenes in the society.

After a few trial runs, the reader has chosen his paper, the paper has selected its readers, there has been mutual selection, hence a mutual adaptation. The one has a paper which pleases him and hatters his prejudices and passions. The other has a reader fitted to his preferences, docile and credulous (p. 42).

So, for the author too, “the libeler, the orator, the journalist, and the politician have to give a form to the will of the masses” and, therefore, did not impose unrestrictedly their “set view”, if they wish to be accepted by them. In the final analysis, the whole process governs their actions may be seen as the result of a “direction they give to the will or opinion given to them by those masses”(BAUER [1914] 2009, p. 101). Tarde just does not seem to have understood that if “the publicist activity is a stirring, a means of channeling in a certain way the feel toward the masses”, this process “is not what we have come to call public opinion”, as cautioned the contemporary and above cited German theorist Wilhelm Bauer ([1914] 2009, p. 107) and, after the War, the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies ([1922] 2013).

Retaking Löbl thesis (1903), Bauer notes that newspapers are organs of public opinion, but not this one in itself, because their editorial line is not determined by its readership only. It includes private interests of the company itself, but also the ones came from their commercial partners and from the political forces with which the business is committed. Freedom of expression newspapers have achieved is more or less limited by the need to show respect for the beliefs and values of their customers and other influencing forces, if they do not wish to lose contact with them. Through this expedient, the newspapers however “mix views and judgments that mistakenly they consider as the opinion of all or the most “(BAUER, [1914] 2009, p. 370).

“The press [can be] free, but newspapers are not” (p. 383), because, as a rule, each one expresses only a part of the opinion, and not the public opinion as a whole, being well worth remember they “can not arbitrarily influence it, because in the birth of a public opinion, beyond the political and intellectual forces, also participate those ones operating at the level of instincts, feelings [and traditions]” (p. 400).

4 MENCKEN, KRAUS, AND THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL THOUGHT

At the dawn of the past century, journalism has become a mass phenomenon towards which the feeling of the enlightened

public, at first, as we have seen, has tended to accommodation. With the outbreak of World War I, however, this began to change, redirecting the public consciousness to another line of judgment. The use of the press and other media as a weapon of war, and the emergence of new and surprising ways of expression, such as film and radio, based on the exploitation of image and sensations, gave rise to a new type of questioning among the liberal intellectuals and even in some sections of the progressive public.

Appeared among them and the social groups they were connected the suspicion that, if on the one hand the popularization of print journalism and new media represented a civilizatory advance, on the other we could find in them a bit of guilt respecting almost is bad in new times. The massive and systematic use of the press and many other techniques of moral and ideological coercion during the war incited the suspicion and fears incubated during the immediately preceding period, concurring to convert the press in a factor responsible for the explosion and maintenance of the military conflict in the eyes of many interpreters of that time on both sides of the Atlantic.

The World War had threw upon the liberal mind the fact that the beliefs of popular strata, hitherto unrecognized as a significant force in the conduct of public affairs, were becoming part of the concerns and strategic maneuvers of the political centers of decision-making. That those classes were now a subject of dispute by the best organized political forces, increasingly fewer legitimated from the point of view of the old doctrines of liberalism, as we can gauge, for instance, through a reading of the first critique directed to the new situation, written by John Hobson in 1901 (cf. RÜDIGER, 2013).

Adopting a historical perspective, what we see in this conjuncture are the conditions to the birth of the phenomenon of propaganda, that is, the open or camouflaged employment of the press and the media with the strategic objective of gaining support ideological of vast sectors of the population for a cause or organization, that ended to reveal in full during the First World War.

Although the reformed liberal doctrine continued to be professed even after the end of the War (cf. TÖNNIES [1922] 2013, p. 270; MACIVER [1926] 1945, p. 273-274 – see ahead), the tendency among intellectuals progressed was beginning to change. It was moving toward an increasing distrust about the political principles originated from classical liberalism and its expectations regarding the ability of the hidden hand of market in relativize the influence

of propaganda amid a new situation, marked by an oligopolised economy or, worst yet, a growing totalitarian system of power.

Increasingly inclined to social democracy, late liberal intellectuals, we saw, have taken notice of this during World War I. A proof of this we are the writings on the press presented by two antipode thinkers, the Austrian writer Karl Kraus and the American journalist Henry Mencken. Kraus has begun denouncing the venality of the press of his country as other commentators had done before. During the War, he notwithstanding has started to defend what would later be called the thesis of the hypodermic needle.

For him, the outbreak of the war was pure and simply an upcoming of the intervention of the press on the historical situation. Without it there will be no war. The nationalism of the various peoples in struggle would not led to the mass killing during the conflict, if it had not been explored by newspapers, with the goal of increasing the runs and make more money. At first, he noted, the newspapers were no more than the daily record of life. The theory of mirror reigned, despite all the distortions to which news were subject. Over time, however, newspapers have ended to be the creators of the events.

Kraus comments that, even though newspapermen try to make us believe that the press is an activity that lives of preexisting situations, in fact it no longer is. Newspapers and magazines are no longer a way to record life among others. The fact is that, with the pass of modern times, "life has become as itself is printed by the press", wrote Kraus.

"Newspapers have become much more than mere messengers of events. They have become the events in themselves". The press has acquired the power to get us to believe that news is the real facts, due the dependence we have in relation to it. We have entered in a time in which, without the news, we have no mean to know about what is happening around the world. The power the press has is, therefore, the power to concretize this identity between news and reality, he concludes (cf. KRAUS, [1914] 2008, p. 35-57; cf. BOUVERESE, 2001).

Mencken, his conservative antipode, but no less aristocratic and Nietzschean, also acknowledged the collapse of the liberal belief in the role intellectually emancipatory of the press in his writings on the progress of the new journalism in the United States. Adopting a completely cynical point of view, which marked the decline of the liberal era, he demolished this belief from the bottom up, but following a route opposite to Kraus.

For him, amid the era of the masses, newspapers and magazines reflect the way of thinking and lifestyle of their readers, losing their status of public educational force. The vices that eventually victimize the media are now a mirror of the spirit that dominates their audience. The seeking for profit and the mercantile spirit ended to force newspapers to adapt to the demands of the masses - "This, in essence, is the whole theory and practice of the art of journalism in the United States"(MENCKEN, p. 42).

Keeping up with the war propaganda campaign against the Central Powers promoted by the Creel Committee during World War I (see CREEL, 1920), this journalist, writer and cultural critic, however, introduced a nuance in this understanding. The ideological agreement between the press and the public includes a tacit license given by the latter to the first. It includes a license to the press "training the way people should think and act [in a situation]" (MENCKEN, 1920, p. 100).

[The Boobus americanus] seems to be pathetically eager to accept ready-made opinions, to be told what to think, and [because this] he is apparently willing to accept any instructor who takes the trouble to tackle him. This was brilliantly revealed during the late war. The powers which controlled the press during that fevered time swayed the populace as they pleased (MENCKEN, 1920, p. 95).

At this juncture, when the author even ran political danger because of their pro-German attitudes, it was proved to him the fact that the organized powers could use the press to their advantage, to "control the populace as they please," though not indefinitely. Accepting uncritically the intellectual passivity of the general public in mass society, he ended reiterating his argument that the press draws its strength less from the means it uses than from the readiness of the average individual to accept prefabricated opinion (p. 95).

For us, all of this suggests, in sum, that, for both authors, the press apparently has no redemption in the midst of an era in which, instead of being an illustrated guide to reality, it, by force of circumstances, converts itself in a political power of its own, or in a mirror of a morally decrepit society. Under the current circumstances, the press possesses its own strength and dynamic as an autonomous world (Kraus), or operates more or less mechanically in accordance with the commands originated from an irresponsible and heteronym mass market (Mencken).

CONCLUSION

Even after the War, in the mid-1920s, there was a reformed liberalism able to excite the old precepts of bourgeois public sphere without fear of the impact the new propaganda techniques were causing in it. Some intellectuals still assumed as non problematic the thesis that, “more than a news vehicle”, the press is a “propaganda organ”, which seeks “to influence opinion”. There were theorists that saw no problem in the fact that newspapers were “not only a means of information but also a great bulwark of [political] prejudice and an instrument for their [doctrinal] exploration”, as said by sociologist and political thinker Robert Maclver ([1926] 1945, p. 273).

In fact, the author continues, newspapers always select, repress and suggest ideas and news, according to the political party, in a broad sense, they follow; but this viewpoint was not a handicap for a liberal mind, since it seems clear to it that “there are limits to their power: the press largely broadens the field and increases the activity of a party, but usually it does not control their readers”(p. 273-274).

The reason for this would be in the commercial context in which newspapers have passed to appear and the meaning of public utility that happened to have the press. “The newspapers are now largely dependent upon the services that, quite apart from the particular political opinions they advocate, are provide by them to the population”. That is, they became private companies providing public services, whose “financial success is in direct proportion to its popularity.” In the final analysis, therefore, the tendency they follow is to support the common sense of their readers, because if they did not, they will lose circulation. They have to refuse “to adopt an attitude that a portion of any of your readers opposes”, because if they insist on it, they are “putting in risk its existence” (p. 274).

The audience influences the newspapers as much as they influence their audiences - because the press needs to take account of the profile of their readers to develop their publishing activity. Eventually a sectarian publication can keep the support of the followers of a unique ideological party. Metropolitan newspapers do not: they must respect the pluralism of opinions existing among its readers; otherwise, in not doing so, they will cease to be great. The fact, therefore, would be that “the opinion public is expression of the character of the people”: the advance of socialism discloses the fact

that this movement is stronger than the growing efforts to refrain it with the help of the press. “Public opinion grows spontaneously” ultimately, concludes Mclver (p. 212, cf. TÖNNIES [1922] 2013).

Meanwhile, however, there were happening advances in another understanding, according to which those ideas were no longer plainly credible. There were new voices emerging amidst the Western enlightened mind. For them, the interdependence between the press and the public was no longer able to follow the basics of public reason, as yet advocated by some liberal and even social democrat scholars. We may find an example this in the conclusion of an analysis about the press and the public opinion proposed at that time by Norman Angell.

For this English labor party grandee, newspapers have, in fact, become commercial companies and, therefore, have to meet the expectations of the market, but this way they become influenced by the readers themselves. “The opinion is largely created by press, but it is also a fact that it is created by the way the press plays and explores some of their tendencies” (ANGELL, 1922, p. 21).

Despite this, he added, we must go beyond this judgment, consecrated around 1900. The whole problem is that, with the democratization of society, the influence of the public on the press was becoming less conscious, rational and enlightened. Installed in a mass era, the press is going to be dominated by irrational attitudes and motives, derived from the economic and social disorders produced by a capitalist social system that have no regulation and prevents the cultural formation of the population (cf. ANGELL, 1922).

Proof of the historical and intellectual propriety of this reasoning we may detected in the way by which, from this time onward, the discussion about propaganda and manipulation ended to take for itself the space before occupied by the concerns to clarify the concepts of press and public opinion originated from late eighteenth century.

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RECEIVED ON: 05/10/2014 | ACEITO EM: 06/04/2015