

## BOOK REVIEW

# *Mass democracy: journalism and citizenship*

VICTOR GENTILLI

Porto Alegre, Editora PUC/RS. 2005, 180 pgs.

REVIEWED BY **Antonio Hohlfeldt**

What I like most in this book by Victor Gentilli is the passion with which it was written - passion, yes, but not divorced from rationality. It can appear antithetic, but it isn't. Note that there is passion because the book has a basic assumption: the belief in journalism, in its vitality, in its real existence. But it has rationality because it wants to prove, by reason and by practice, this existence, as Luiz Martins points out well in his preface to the work, appear not to believe any more in journalism and/or, above all, in its social role.

I have been a journalist for more than twenty years. I continue to be a journalist, although I no longer frequent a newsroom. I know that the journalist is the one who feels the intimate requirement, the extreme need to transmit, to report to someone else, an event he witnesses, even though by chance. The journalist is the one who feels ethically responsible for disseminating the piece of news, not simply because it is news, but because it can signify a colossal change in immediate reality, inaugurating a new moment in our lives.

Raw material of historiography, for many people journalism is, in reality, passion and rationality - passion, because it requires devotion 24 hours a day. We are not acting as journalists - we are journalists, permanently. We do not know what it is to have a day off. We do not know what leave or vacation is. Because wherever we are, even resting, if something happens which is relevant, socially speaking, we will be there, acting as journalists. Rationality, because beyond consecrated formulas, inverted pyramid or not, we have to choose, every moment, not just the report but the form of the report, the elements to be highlighted, emphasized, distinguished, those elements in short that will effectively make the event a news item.

There are responsibilities in all this. Journalism, it can be said, was born with humanity's particular drama: the expulsion from the earthly paradise and the condemnation of human beings to pain and suffering inaugurated journalism. But the journalistic account has advanced: it was a portrait of the assassination of Abel by Cain, of the confusion created in Babel, of the tsunami from which Noah was saved, and so on.

The navigators and the discoverers practiced journalism in their logbooks. Defoe invented tales that he swore were true journalistic accounts. Euclides da Cunha inaugurated in Brazil the position of special envoy. João do Rio and Lima Barreto – mutually opposite and complementary – inaugurated modernism in Brazilian journalism, that kind of journalist who goes to the street, who converses with people, who does interviews and reporting, who transmits life, in short, in his paragraphs.

We went through “new journalism”, we confronted the dictatorship with the courage of professionals such as that of João Antonio of “Hello, professor, it's been a long time”, and of the whole Realidade group. We arrived at entertainment journalism, after the revolution of the fifties, when we abandoned empty phrases and discovered objectivity.

Many people today do not believe in journalism, but not Victor Gentili, because he links in an umbilical way journalism with citizenship and with democracy. After four vast, dense and profound chapters on mass society – chapters in which the most extensive bibliography is revisited and reanalyzed critically – the author leads us to the center of that which is the supreme value of democracy and citizenship: the right to information on the part of the citizen. And then he says the obvious, but an obvious that needs to be reedited and remembered: only journalism provides that information, in its most essential sense. That is the reason for its importance and its role. Chapter 7 in this book is essential, in this sense, because, as Gentili states, the right to information articulates all other rights, from individual to human rights.

Victor Gentili is not afraid to mix authors, at times even contradictory ones. Thus, from a quotation from Hanna Arendt, he jumps to an epigraph by David Reisman: as long as the reference helps his arguments for the reaffirmation of journalism, Gentili feeds that quotation to his artillery (heavy, let it be said in passing, but always mobile): his objective is, by means of the most diverse arguments, to convince the reader of the importance and social role of journalism.

For all these reasons, we read this book with enthusiasm: specialists and non-specialists, journalists and non-journalists. It is like a great novel, whose end is known in advance: in any event, the book should be read to the end, who knows, did the author all of a sudden change his mind and modify the happy end without telling us? Fortunately, here the author does not let us down. On the contrary, up to the last paragraph he harps on the same subject: journalism is the activity that basically involves the dissemination of information in the modern world, that is, it remains constantly in tune with the current scene, providing that basic guidance indispensable for everyday decisions, from the most elementary to the most complex. Wow! How wonderful, Victor Gentili continues to believe in journalism.

**Antonio Hohlfeldt** is Professor of the Postgraduate Program in Social Communication at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), where he teaches “Communication Theories” and “Communication and Public Opinion”.