

Comments on Richeri

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COMMENTS ON RICHERI

Communication Studies occupy a place today which could have been held by war treatises in the past. They describe a field of operations, and define possible tactics and strategies; they analyze conflicts and help us to understand how to emerge the victor. This parallelism has been suggested to me by Giuseppe Richeri's essay, which is included in this issue. His contribution is indeed important: not only does it offer a precise agenda of themes and methods central to media studies, but it also reminds us of the connections these share with the most widespread public concerns. Richeri begins with two strong points. Firstly, he puts forward the idea that the relationship between media and social life is like a spiral: a change in the media world triggers one in the world of social institutions; this second change then triggers yet another in the media world, and so on. Therefore, it is impossible to conceive of one world without the other: here we are faced with a reciprocal determination. Secondly, within this spiral it is possible to recognize three moments of particular relevance: the interactions between media and industry, the ways in which the media grant access to their products and services, and the role of Public Administration. Richeri presents us with a "play" of four protagonists: media, consumers, industry and the State. He proposes to analyze not their single action, but the dynamic relations—in spiral form—that are established between them. Richeri's approach is deliberately *holistic*; however, only in recuperating the *complexity* of this landscape can we truly make ourselves aware of it.

By framing the question in these terms, which I share completely, there seem to emerge a few particularly interesting ideas. I will try to list them here.

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Firstly, Richieri highlights the growing importance of researches by “theme,” as opposed to “by discipline.” Media studies have long worked at isolating one aspect from the other: in analyzing the forms of consumption, they neglected the forms of production; in analyzing legal aspects they did not take into account the development of economic conditions, etc. However, since the framework is complex, no one aspect can be isolated from the rest. From this we may derive that research must tackle specific *exigencies*, rather than single disciplinary aspects. Richieri has already provided important proof of the effectiveness of this approach, as, for example, when he examined public broadcasting services in Europe by focusing on their crises instead of studying them in and of themselves. In this way, he emphasizes several different factors, which are integrally connected.

Secondly, Richieri provides evidence of the necessity of linking general accounts and case studies. This is a question of working, on the one hand with a global viewpoint (the general media landscape), and on the other hand with a local viewpoint (the case study). The first is not a generalization of the second, and the second is not an exemplification of the first. The global and the local confront one another, as well as clash.

More than any other, the media are the field that requires this global/local dialectic. In this field we continually see the erasure of geographical differences (for example, the worldwide diffusion of television formats), though we also witness the reinforcement of local specificity (trust in the media, for example, seems to still depend heavily on national situations). Industrial strategies and markets, which are of particular interest to Richieri, seem to me to be particularly subject to the tension between global and local. If it is true that we now live within a global market system, national markets remain an important reality nonetheless. Richieri does not fall into the trap of adopting the concept of “glocal”. Although useful, this concept undermines the contradictions still at work between the two dimensions; Richieri leaves open the aforementioned dialectic.

Finally, Richieri’s proposition makes reference to a variety of disciplines, from sociology to economics to history. But more than an interdisciplinary approach, his seems to me to be in search of a terrain which could be called “political economics of the symbolic.” Richieri is not so bold as to employ this name for the field that he designs, due to its “resonances.” And yet, this is the substance of his proposition. Moreover, it

responds to a widespread need: with the end of the specificity of the various media and of different fields of expression, the industry and the market of the symbolic become a visible reality. To work within the confines of cinema, television, journalism, or the internet—in a situation in which their convergence has created a single, *de facto* field—is in many ways outmoded. On the other hand, there is a point of encounter which unites cinema, television, journalism and the internet: and this point lies in the fact that these are all territories in which knowledge, information, narrations etc. are elaborated. Indeed, these are all territories of elaboration and of the circulation of the *symbolic*. To understand the conditions under which they succeed in producing and in circulating this symbolic, beyond their residual specificity, becomes an essential project of research. Even more essential is understanding to what extent our society needs a symbolic.

Naturally, the complexity and the dynamism of the terrain that Richeri looks upon also demand new analytical tools. In his research, Richeri brings into play what I would like to call “manifold analysis,” which consists in exposing the ways in which the tendencies that arise are almost always linked to charged contradictions, leading to often opposing solutions. For my part, I would like to acknowledge my debt to Richeri for quite a few observations which have been useful to me in elaborating the concepts of “communicative negotiation” and “cultural negotiation,” which have kept me occupied for a few years now. And it is with this nod to a friendship I hold dear that I would like to conclude these brief notes.

