O mundo do avesso by Letícia Cesarino is a work that requires courage – to be written and to be read

O mundo do avesso, de Letícia Cesarino, é uma obra que requer coragem – para ser escrita e para ser lida

JACQUELINE AUSIER DOMINGUES[a]

University of São Paulo, Postgraduate Program in Communication Sciences. São Paulo – SP, Brasil

ABSTRACT

This review aims to describe and reflect on the main ideas contained in the work, O mundo do avesso: Verdade e política na era digital by Letícia Cesarino, a Brazilian anthropologist, researcher, and teacher. The author explains that understanding contemporary phenomena such as populism and disinformation first requires observing the technical dimension of their infrastructures — relying on the cybernetic perspective of Gregory Bateson to explain her central argument. As a result, Cesarino develops a powerful and disruptive work that envisions new possibilities for understanding the crises that permeate the current Brazilian sociopolitical scenario and modifies the thinking of her attentive reader.

Keywords: Anti-structural publics, cybernetic explanation, digital, politics.

[a] PhD student and master's degree in the Postgraduate Program in Communication Sciences at the School of Communications and Arts of the University of São Paulo (PPGCOM – ECA/USP). Member of the Group of Semiotic Studies in Communication, Culture and Consumption (GESC3). Orcid: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0219-2140. E-mail:jacquelineausier@usp.br

RESUMO

Esta resenha tem como objetivo apresentar e refletir acerca das principais ideias presentes na obra *O mundo do avesso: Verdade e política na era digital*, de Letícia Cesarino, antropóloga, pesquisadora e docente brasileira. A autora expõe que, para compreender fenômenos contemporâneos como o populismo e a desinformação, é necessário, primeiramente, enxergar a dimensão técnica de suas infraestruturas, apoiando-se na perspectiva cibernética de Gregory Bateson para explanar seu argumento central. Como resultado, Cesarino desenvolve uma obra potente e disruptiva, que transforma o pensamento da leitora atenta, por vislumbrar novas possibilidades de entendimento sobre as crises que permeiam o atual cenário sociopolítico brasileiro.

Palavras-chave: Digital, explicação cibernética, política, públicos antiestruturais.

DOI:http://dx.doi.org/10.11606/issn.1982-8160.v18i1p295-302

O mundo do avesso by Letícia Cesarino is a work that requires courage – to be written and to be read

Cesarino, Letícia. (2022).
O mundo do avesso: Ubu. 304 p.

ONE OF THE greatest events in recent human history took place in the 1990s and the early 2000s, when the internet and the World Wide Web transitioned from an exclusive military technology to becoming increasingly present in everyday life. During this transition, theorists and scholars from multiple areas turned to reflect on the possible impacts that the internet and the digital could have on the different spheres, from anthropology to mathematics, for example. Thus, one of the first questions outlined, in an interdisciplinary way, was the relation between politics and the online environment. Initial debates were mainly focused on a possible "digital democracy," since, as pointed out by Farias, Cardoso and Oliveira (2020, p. 76), in the 1990s, "… The Internet was celebrated as an invention that would open a new era of cultural and political democracy, perhaps through new forms of e-governance and direct contributions from citizen-journalists" (free translation).

When this "prediction" failed to come true, new angles on politics in the digital age began to emerge, one of them being the investigation of radical and extremist discourse propagated in different socio-political realities and the role played by (increasingly sophisticated) technological means in this dynamic. In Brazil, interest in this specific angle has intensified significantly since 2016, when President Dilma Rousseff was impeached by a coup, and then with the campaign and election of Jair Bolsonaro's far-right government (2019-2022). In this scenario, the anthropologist, researcher, and professor Letícia Cesarino began, in 2018, the investigation which resulted in the work *O mundo do avesso: Verdade e política na era digital*, published by Ubu in November 2022.

In the first pages, Cesarino explains she was motivated by curiosity regarding the supposed singularities in Brazilian political-electoral behavior during the 2018 presidential elections. To understand that moment, however, the author resorts to Gregory Bateson's cybernetic theory (1972), inviting the reader—or rather, the female reader, to whom Cesarino reports—to perceive the technical dimension that constitutes the contemporaneity phenomena. The author chooses to divide the book into two parts, in addition to its introduction and conclusion. The first part is denser and consists of two chapters, entitled "Dynamical Systems and the Cybernetic Perspective" and "The 'Malaise' in Platformization," which present the main theoretical

concepts to guide and support the author's central argument. The second part consists of the chapters "Politics: algorithmization and populism" and "Truth: conspiracy and alt-sciences," in which Cesarino explains, based on the theories introduced in the first half of the book, the Brazilian political conjuncture and the crisis of confidence faced by science and democracy, also presenting new insights and perspectives as the chapters develop.

Cesarino is aware that the journey proposed by her research is difficult to go on. In the introduction, the author is concerned with establishing a dialogue with the readers, to prepare them for what will be discussed in the following pages. As she points out: "the spirit of this book, which is based on the sciences of complexities, is to be comprehensible to any reader endowed with interest and intuition, and who is open to a different view of social processes" (Cesarino, 2022, p. 11; free translation). Thus, instead of causing intimidation, Cesarino's text instigates the reader to continue reading, even if it is necessary to read (or reread) each passage very carefully. In an impactful introduction, the researcher outlines some theoretical notions (such as cybernetic explanation and linear and nonlinear systems), while she relates them to Brazilian sociopolitical context in the recent years. Additionally, she briefly summarizes each of the chapters and how they are interconnected, situating the reader before they begin their reading.

The first chapter establishes a new look at systems. Cesarino explains that she references the same systems known by common sense: political, economic, legal, etc. What changes, however, is the way of perceiving them since they are socially understood as historical and linear processes. The author, however, seeks precisely the trans-historical within these systems, that is, "a common dynamic or functioning mode" that extrapolates the different spheres of social organization, transcending each one's particularities. To make this common infrastructure visible, Cesarino resorts to the contributions of Bateson (1972), an anthropologist who, in the 1940s, was part of the original cybernetics movement—first defined by Norbert Wiener (1948) as a super science that aims to ascertain "the common elements in the functioning of automatic machines and of the human nervous system, and to develop a theory which will cover the entire field of control and communication in machines and in living organisms" (Wiener, 1948, p. 14.)

From there, Bateson (1972) developed what he called a cybernetic or negative explanation, centered on dynamical systems, in opposition to the positive perspective, which converges around linear systems. While the positive explanation interprets systems based on linear causal relations, the cybernetic

explanation focuses on "co-emergence patterns of agencies in the same dynamic field of complexity, conducted by recursive causalities… or feedback effects" (Cesarino, 2022, p. 30; free translation). Thus, when destabilizing factors—such as the new media—act on a system, it cannot follow a linear logic since unpredictability becomes the protagonist of its functioning. In everyday life, as much as most individuals comply with a certain routine, everyone is subject to possible entropy of events. Precisely for this reason, Cesarino argues that, in real-world relations, nonlinear systems are predominant, which is why cybernetic explanation is more efficient for the context analysis proposed in her work.

After elucidating this fundamental aspect, the author deepens the discussion over the alignment between machine-animal-human, in an effort to highlight cybernetics as a science that encompasses the processes of "control and communication in machines and living organisms" (Wiener, 1948). Cesarino uses a historical perspective to address the dynamics and trajectory of the normal sciences, which will help to understand some of the key concepts of *O mundo do avesso*: the structures and antistructures. In short, normal science needs a minimally stable consensus by the members of a community regarding a shared paradigm. Thus relying on peer review, ethical standards, specific scientific procedures, etc.

However, no paradigm is capable of being developed infinitely; it reaches its limits of reality apprehension, eliminating the remnants that it was unable to assimilate. These remnants result in what Kuhn (1962/2018) called "anomalies," whose proliferation establishes a crisis in the current paradigm, demanding its self-reorganization. With crisis of confidence established in a community, the anomalies—which never ceased to exist but were marginalized—can be strengthened and moved to the center of that reality, emerging as "the vanguard of a new paradigm" (Cesarino, 2022, p. 49). In this way, the previously established paradigm—that is, the structure—is weakened and pressured by the paradigm in progress, functioning as its anti-structure. Cesarino explains that the term was used by Victor Turner to "designate the reflexive moment by which a society folds in on itself, eliciting contesting elements to the political and legal models that control the center of society" (Cesarino, 2022, p. 49; free translation). Based on this, the author designated the term "anti-structural publics" to refer to defenders of Bolsonarism, the far-right and the conspiracy theories and alternative sciences, pointing out their main similarity: for them, models of universal recognition were encompassed by models of bifurcated recognition. Substantially, the former

> represents the normative Democratic Rule of Law, the liberal public sphere, and the "normal science" prevalent in the pre-neoliberal context. The latter represents individuals within segmented communities of destination, whose relations are mediated by logics related to the free market. In one case, recognition is potentially and normatively both universal and public. In the other, recognition has a particular basis, granted only to members of the same integrated community of destination, and ultimately, it opposes an environment experienced as threatening and uncertain (typically, an enemy). (Cesarino, 2022, p. 21; free translation)

Cesarino concludes the first chapter by defining that the anti-structural public wish to encompass the opposite, to which the bifurcated model of recognition is the opposite of universal recognition. The second chapter is based on this principle, and its main objective is to address the dimension of technical materiality integrated to the essence of systems such as new media, favoring the emergence of an anti-structural public. In the author's perspective, the common infrastructure of these technologies is built with inverted assumptions, based on opacity and asymmetries. Although they were not necessarily developed with the purpose of favoring the anti-structural public mentioned by Cesarino, the new media practically "spontaneously" benefit the emergence and proliferation of anti-structures, provoking changes in the public sphere disposition, which happen much faster given the fast-paced nature of social media. These transformations lead to "disintermediation processes," which, according to the author, refer to the disengagement of components of the previous normative structure, that were seen as reliable, such as democracy and the scientific community. As a consequence, the system is not completely broken, but it is rather permeated by emerging forms of reintermediation, such as "expert" health influencers, with no actual qualification in the area. Thus, the environment becomes highly unstable, with structure and anti-structure, disintermediation and reintermediation coexisting together.

Throughout the chapter, the author also discusses several characteristics of algorithms and emphasizes their disproportional relation with users. Nevertheless, human beings are resistant to perceive themselves as influenced by technological agencies. In addition, algorithms tend to privilege joining equals with equals, in a sort of individual "clustering," and constantly collecting and circulating users' personal data, which results in one of the most worrying findings of the entire work: it is not the human beings who use digital technologies and the algorithm to expand their abilities, but rather the other way around.

In the subsequent section of *O mundo do avesso*, the third chapter focuses on detailing the association of algorithmization and populism, centering the panorama in the electoral rise of the new right, especially Bolsonarism, considering events since 2013, which peaked in the 2018 presidential elections. The researcher adopts the cybernetic perspective to approach these facts, classifying populism as technopolitics, since politics may be implanted in the technical artifacts of the infrastructure of digital environments—fundamental in Bolsonaro's election. To investigate her argument, Cesarino conducted a survey within WhatsApp groups from Bolsonaro's supporters, identifying technical dimensions of populism in the digital environment, such as

> the presence of an imminent existential threat, the delegitimization of pre-existing structures of truth production (press, academy) to isolate those supporters in closed publics, and the inverted mimesis relation in which the enemy is the inverted image opposing the identity of a leader and of the population. (Cesarino, 2022, p. 149; free translation)

The author also emphasizes that the proliferation of mimetic and segmented patterns, which help to destabilize universal knowledge, does not happen naturally in new media, but it is rather algorithmically oriented. Throughout the chapter, Cesarino interprets multiple characteristics of anti-structural publics based on the cybernetic concepts presented in the first section, helping the reader to visualize them concretely.

In the last chapter, which focus on the rise of conspiracy theories and alternative sciences, the researcher argues that, from a structural point of view, the crisis of politics and the crisis of science are, in fact, a single crisis, since "the current media infrastructure helps to provide a resonating machine, bringing populism and post-truth together, without completely merging them" (Cesarino, 2022, p. 205; free translation). Although she has some reservations with the term "post-truth," the author initially uses it to refer to disinformation processes, conspiracism, denialism, and pseudoscience. Despite interpreting that the Brazilian sociopolitical conjuncture comes from the same root, Cesarino explains that the anti-structural public have convergences, but also divergences. According to her, during the early COVID-19 treatment, conspiratorial and anti-vaccine segments, were a public that "only partially overlap with political Bolsonarism in the strict sense. But they share many of the structural dynamics elaborated in the previous chapter and, therefore, also operate as anti-structural publics" (Cesarino, 2022, p. 206; free translation).

Thus, the researcher emphasizes that all these publics use a "strange-familiar" logic, constantly triggering extremes and promoting dehumanization of the supposed enemy, operating within the gray limits of legality. In this dynamic, they not only bring events in real time, but also make use of a denunciatory movement, revealing truths that are, according to such public, purposely hidden from the the average public, promoting the idea of emancipation. The topic of truth permeates significantly all the debates raised by this chapter, and Cesarino explains how the production of truth is intimately connected to social trust, highlighting that the new media are indispensable instruments in the process of transferring trust to new mediators.

Finally, in the conclusion of *O mundo do avesso*, entitled "On Endings and New Beginnings," the author does not offer a simple solution to the described scenario, since it would be a utopian resolution. By introducing the cybernetic perspective as a possible interpretation of contemporary phenomena, it becomes evident that any solving attempt must encompass the technical dimension of the crisis. On the other hand, the author does not deny her skepticism regarding the individual's ability to counter current systemic trends. However, her final words are not discouraging. For Cesarino, "if there is any hope of avoiding the democratization of the end of the world by capitalism, it lies, contradictorily, in the ability of the system to adapt itself" (Cesarino, 2022, p. 279; free translation). If it finds a way to rearrange itself, prioritizing its continuity, it might not even be the end of the world—just the end of this world. Regardless of the paths that will be taken, Cesarino's work takes the first necessary step for any type of transformation, by allowing her readers to deepen their understanding of the conjuncture they are inserted, whose problems helped to develop such a chaotic scenario. That is precisely the reason why *O mundo do avesso* is a disruptive and necessary work, which requires breath and courage, both to conveive it and to read it. M

REFERENCES

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. University of Chicago Press.

Cesarino, L. (2022). *O mundo do avesso: Verdade e política na era digital*. Ubu.

Farias, L. A., Cardoso, I., & Oliveira, P. R. N. (2020). Comunicação, opinião pública e os impactos da revolução digital na era da pós-verdade e *fake news*. *Organicom*, *17*(34), 71-81. https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2238-2593.organicom.2021.176133.

Kuhn, T. S. (2018). *A estrutura das revoluções científicas*. (B. V. Boeira & N. Boeira, Trads.). 18a ed. Perspectiva. (Obra original publicada em 1962)

Turner, V. W. (2013). *O processo ritual: Estrutura e antiestrutura*. (N. C. Castro, Trad). 2a ed. Vozes. (Obra original publicada em 1969)

Wiener, N. (1948). Cybernetics. *Scientific American*, *179*(5), 14-18. https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican1148-14

Article received on March 12, 2024 and accepted on March 25, 2024.