

Politics and the Theory of Communication.

It is difficult, at present, to have a panoramic vision of the political situation we live in. And, consequently, to form an opinion concerning the trends toward the future. There are many reasons for this incapacity of ours, and some of them are these: We know too many details, and thus have lost sight of the really essential aspects. We are being informed mainly through mass media, which stress the sensational and omit the less ephemerals, and therefore more "tedious", aspects of events. Traditional categories for the understanding of the political situation are no longer useful, (for instance: almost every form of government calls itself "democratic", and the classical distinctions like "left and right", "liberal and conservative", "progressive and reactionary" can no longer be applied without doing violence to the situation). The demographic explosion has shifted the center of humanity to the south and to the east, but our information concerning the political situation is mostly manipulated in the north and the west, therefore in a region which is rapidly becoming the periphery of the situation. We have learned at school to see the present situation as the result of a long historical process, but apparently this is not a good method to grasp it: many aspects, like the exhaustion of natural resources, pollution and the drug culture cannot be understood from, and in fact are falsified through historical perspective. We have been programmed to judge political events with a traditional set of values, (very vaguely: the "judeo-christian" one), but since, at present, the vast majority of the participants in events either never adhered to that set of values, or no longer does so, this sort of judgement tends to obscure the situation for us. There are phenomena which we reluctant to consider political, and which we therefore label with what is for us a pejorative term, (like "terrorism", "pornography" or "lunatic fringe"), but which, nonetheless, are important aspects for the understanding of the situation. And this list of reasons which prevent us from having a "well informed political opinion" can be continued at will.

It may be objected that there is nothing new to the inability of ours to understand our "historical moment". This is true, of course: it has always been the privilege of a very small élite, (of which the "politicians" rarely were a part), to really understand their "present", and what is more: only when their "present" became a past was it possible, always, to judge whether or not they did understand it. Still: the reasons for our own incapacity are new ones. It is not for a lack, but for an excess of information that we are unable to make a map of the situation. And we tend to become a-political, not because we are disinterested and alienated, ("unconscious"), but because we are over-fed with politics and therefore fed up with it, ("pigs"). It may be said, paradoxically, that we seem to possess all the conditions to become, all of us, sages, or

prophets, or futurologues, (or whatever term one prefers to denote one who has understood his political situation), and that it is precisely this constellation which prevents us from seeing where we are and where we are going.

Now this is an unsatisfactory state of affairs. (No argument is needed to prove that a society which does not know where it stands, and therefore does not know whether what it wants is possible, is doomed.) This is the reason why efforts to remedy such an unsatisfactory state of affairs abound. What seems to lack is a theory which would organize and sort out the mass of information we possess concerning the political situation, and thus form a meaningful whole which would permit to see the hidden, underlying structure. In reality, however, there is no such lack of theoretical visions. On the contrary: the efforts to remedy the unsatisfactory situation by furnishing a theoretical support only tend to aggravate it. Not so much because we dispose of conflicting political theories: this is part of our confusion due to an excess of information concerning the situation. But because we have so many theories which explain the political scene from the point of view of some "objective" science: psychological, sociological, economic, biological, even physical and so forth explanations. The confusion resulting from these efforts to permit us to understand is not due to the fact that some of these theories conflict with each other, but to their incompatibility: an economic explanation of nazism, for instance, is not compatible with a psychological explanation. The need for a meta-theory is, therefore, felt, a theory that would order and sort out the information coming from the various theoretical levels. But of course: the moment such a meta-theory is provided, (one that may be called "philosophical"), not only is there always some other one on the same meta-level which conflicts with this one, but also the need is felt for a further abstraction, a meta-metatheory, to explain that conflict. In short: the effort to remedy the unsatisfactory situation by providing us with a theoretical support only adds to the confusion.

That does not mean, of course, that these theoretical efforts were made in vain. Marx' economic theory, Freud's psychological theory or Weber's sociological theory of the political scene, for instance, not only have provided us with deep insights into that scene, but have become, themselves, powerful tendencies within it. And the popularisation and vulgarisation of such theories is, in fact, one of the methods by which the political situation devours the theories which try to explain it and thus makes them self-defeating. In short: the various theoretical levels of explanation add to our confusion, not only because they complicate the picture, but also because they enter themselves into the picture through practical, namely political, application.

If this analysis is correct, if it is difficult nowadays to have an overall vision of the political situation because of an excess of information, (and because that information is manipulated), and if this difficulty is aggravated rather than relieved by theoretical consideration of the situation from a number of points of view, it is legitimate to ask the following question: Is this incapacity of ours to form an informed opinion concerning our situation one of the data, possibly the most important datum, of that situation? Can it not be said that what characterizes best our situation is the fact that we know too much about it, and that we have consequently lost/orientation? And can one not jump to the conclusion that the purpose of the perpetual bombardment by information to which we are exposed, and of the steady stream of publications of explanatory theories which irrigates our confused minds, is precisely the provocation and maintenance of that political impotency of ours? Such an hypothesis does not involve, necessarily, a diabolical interpretation: as if there were dark forces at play whose purpose it is to politically castrate us. (Although we do meet such interpretation not only on the level of political fiction, but also in some theoretical writings.) A "purpose" is not necessarily a human project. It may be an inherent tendency in a given process. (E.g.: One of the purposes of hammers is to crack skulls, although this may not have been part of the project from which hammers originated.) The purpose of the steady flow of information may perfectly be our de-politisation, without there existing any person or group of persons who projected it to be so. (Which again does not exclude the possibility of someone taking advantage, a posteriori, of that unprojected purpose).

Let me resume the argument: it looks as if our political situation were characterized by the fact that we are being bombarded by information and theoretical interpretation of that information, with a view to making it impossible for us to form political opinions. Now such a statement is questionable from at least two angles: from a strictly political one, and from the angle of theory of knowledge. From the political angle it may be objected that the bombardment by information aims at imposing a specific political opinion and excluding all other opinions, rather than at depolitisation. (E.g.: compare Russian, American and Brazilian TV programs.) From the epistemological angle it may be objected that the loss of orientation due to an excess of information is not a specifically political problem, but characterizes all attempts at knowledge at present. (E.g.: we have a far less consistent view of the physical world than we had a generation ago, because we dispose of too many information.) Still: be such objections valid or not, the statement is justified as an hypothesis, and it shifts the consideration of the political scene to the field of the theory of communication.

At this point it seems necessary to immediately eliminate one source of possible error: the purpose of this essay, (which may or may not develop into a full-fledged book), is not to supply a theoretical approach to the political situation from the level of the theory of communication, and thus to add to the existing confusion. Fortunately, this cannot be its purpose, and for two reasons: (a) there is not yet, and possibly never will be, a theory of communication comparable, as far as consistency is concerned, to psychological, economic or sociological theories, let alone the theories of the natural sciences, and (b) the level of communications is not an "infra-structure" of the political level, as the level of economics, sociology or psychology sometimes claim to be. In fact: the relationship between politics and communication seems to depend on how one decided to define the term "communication". If one defines it very narrowly, communication becomes one aspect of the political dimension of man. If one defines it very broadly, communications becomes that field of human endeavor in which phenomena like political commitments occur. One may define it in such a way, that "communication" becomes synonymous of "politics". And finally one can define it so that some political phenomena become part of it, and others not. Which is a way of saying that there is not, as yet, a general consensus as to the field for which any future theory of communication will be competent.

It is precisely this immaturity and fluidity of present communicological research which motivates this paper. In a field where almost nothing has been firmly established as yet, where every effort is pioneer, almost everything is permitted, even the attempt to take a fresh look at the admittedly impenetrable political situation. There is no danger that such an attempt will ever result in a communicological "explanation" of the political situation: communication needs at least as much political "explaining" as politics needs communicological "explaining". But this is the beauty of it: the attempt to take a fresh look at the political situation from the point of view of communication is an adventure: one does not know what may come out of it. Whether the political scene will reveal new aspects, whether communicological methods, (and prospects), will have to adapt to such an effort, whether a new attitude toward political commitment will develop during the research. At this point I suspect that any or all of these things, (and other things), may happen. And to make them happen is the purpose of this paper.

But let us not be coy about it: the state of affairs in which we become less committed politically the more we know about the situation is intolerable. It implies that we abandon political activity to those who are less informed than we are, like dogmatics on the one hand, and professional politicians on the other. We cannot admit such a surrender,

even if we tend to despise dogmatics and professional politicians for their lesser and less profound information. Because if we do surrender, if we let professionals decide for us, and if we admit that only dogmatics resist those decisions, the resulting technocratic de-politisation will result in a situation where history will degenerate into a dialectics between the administrative apparatus and terrorist action. (By the way: it is important to keep in mind that professional politicians, like any other specialist, know less about the situation than the average well informed observer, precisely because they hold more information concerning specific aspects.)

Now although, as has been said, more of theoretical considerations tends to aggravate this intolerable situation, still: it is the purpose of this paper to approach the present political situation from the theory of communication with the hope to render it less confusing. The contradiction involved in such a hope is only apparent. Because it is not a theoretical explanation of the situation which is here aimed at. This would, indeed, add to the confusion, because it would be one more among already existing incompatible explanations. What is aimed^{at} is, so to speak, an explosion of existing explanations through a return to the political phenomenon itself, namely to the phenomenon of people trying to live together by inventing the rules of some games: which means by communicating. In other words: the purpose of this paper is not to explain politics from communication, but to look at politics without wanting to explain it and with the firm intention to put all explanations within brackets. The hope of this endeavor is that if politics is thus dis-explained, (de-ideologized), it will show itself to be an ideologically deformed form of communication. In short: the hope of this paper is that the communicological approach to politics is the phenomenological approach, and its purpose is to render our confusion concerning the political situation less intolerable through its phenomenological reduction. (Permit that the political phenomenon be itself, instead of to force it into some pre-conceived categories of understanding.)

This is, then, the purpose of this paper, (which may, or may not, become a book): undertake the adventure of looking at the political scene, as if there were no political or other theories to explain it, and to do this from the point of view of theory of communications, with the hope to render the formation of an informed opinion a little less difficult than it is at present. But there is this problem: if this paper is not going to become a book, it will be used as the basis for some course of lectures, (and of research based on it). But if it is going to become a book, it will want to touch a far wider audience, namely some of those who feel that the present state of affairs, in which

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information concerning politics and political commitment are inversely proportionate, is intolerable. This implies that this paper must be written one way, if it is to have academic use, and another way, if it is to have a wider distribution. And it is impossible, at this stage, to know whether or not it will become a book, without taking away some of the adventurous climate it breathes: it is not only an adventure to look at the situation the way it was said, but it is also an adventure to write about it.

This stylistic problem, (if it may be called thus), may, however, be put aside under the following consideration: due to the fact that the writer, not knowing whether he is writing a book or a text for a course of lectures, does not know whom he is addressing, this paper must be written in such a way that it will satisfy both types of readers. And this may be a good "style" of writing: it avoids academic preciosity on the one side, and irresponsible vulgarity, (born of intellectual condescendence), on the other. But, of course, it requires understanding of both types of readers: an effort on the part of students to reduce mentally the redundancies unavoidable for a wider understanding of any message, and an effort on the part of the wider, (and usually widely underestimated), public to read on, even if some passage is difficult to understand, either because terms are used which are not quite familiar, or because a reasoning is used to which the reader is not accustomed. This is the reason why the stylistic problem, (which is a "private" problem of the writer), is here being confessed: the conscious collaboration of writer and reader, of emitter and receiver, is here required, which means that this book, (if it is indeed to become one), is to be somehow dialogical, in spite of its obviously discursive structure. In other words: let us undertake this adventure of looking at the political scene as if we knew nothing about it, but as if we knew something about communications, together.