

The Politics of Communication: An Essay on Theorizing Social Interaction

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Introduction

Let me start with a confession: When I submitted my abstract to the organizers of this conference I had some doubts if it really fits into the program because it deals with the topic of communication and politics in a very peculiar way. But now, after one and a half day, my own understanding of this topic has been so increased that I feel a little bit safer in my own presentation. The reason I had some doubts is that I approach the topic of communication and politics from a very abstract and theoretical point of view. So it does not deal with the topic as an empirical question but is concerned with a peculiar way of thinking in the practice of theorizing communication resp. social interaction.

So I see my contribution on the meta-theoretical level – or you may call it the level of the history of ideas or the level of ideology (Peters, Lucy, Carbaugh). In this it is related to questions of politics indeed.

I try to show that a peculiar way of theorizing social interaction is heavily but tacitly influenced by a political model of the actor and a political way of thinking, without stating that directly.

Leading Questions

Scholars, who aspire to develop a general theory of social interaction come to a point where they have to answer questions like the following:

- How do we conceive people who communicate?
- What features, aspects, or qualities of these people do we regard to be relevant?
- What is the prototype of man-in-interaction?
- What does the model of the actor we use in theories of social interaction look like?

Being such a scholar I asked myself these questions too and looked for answers in relevant theories of social interaction. The result of my inquiry is that either theories of social interaction adopt a model of the actor which is obviously insufficient or the theories rely on a model which is implicitly introduced and taken for granted without clearly stating it.

In what follows I will shortly comment on some explicit but insufficient models of man-in-interaction. Then I will concentrate on a model of man-in-interaction which is tacitly presupposed in many theories of social interaction nowadays.

Some famous explicit models:

- The sender, imposed by the mathematical theory of communication (Shannon & Weaver), adopted from there by a lot of other communication theories without considering the original theoretical context, criticized by Goffman as being insufficient in many ways.
- The ideal speaker, introduced by Chomsky in his linguistic writings, aimed at explaining linguistic competence (a kind of personified grammar) which is quite distinct from interactional performance a theory of social interaction should be oriented to.
- The craftsman, used by Bühler in his *Theory of Language*, a concept Bühler borrowed from Plato, which suggests an analogy between social interaction and the manufacturing of things.

So it seems to me that these models are not sufficient for understanding social interaction – but looking for alternative conceptions I do not see any explicit conception of what the actor in social interaction looks like or consists of.

be paraphrased as: “Social interaction is nothing but political action.” Being interested in developing a genuine theory of social interaction it is obvious that I cannot agree with this position.

The sceptical version is: “Let’s think about it. Are the concepts for understanding political phenomena suited for understanding social interaction? Is politics a productive model for interaction? Does it make sense to regard man-in-social-interaction as a political animal?” After all – the political discourse has been developed to solve political problems – not those of social interaction.

The Case of “Equality:” Is Equality a Relevant Dimension of Social Interaction?

My suspicion is that to confer the political model upon the subject of social interaction leads to conceptual confusion, and contributes to a misleading perspective on social interaction, with the effect that some features are unsuitably stressed and others which might be relevant for the understanding of social interaction are neglected.

One of the essential ideas of this political conception is the idea of equality (“liberty, equality, fraternity”). And indeed this idea shows up in thinking about social interaction too as one of the most important dimensions of the conception, description, and analysis of social interaction. This suspicion is strengthened if you regard the use of the concept of “equality” in theorizing communication. One prominent example is the conception of the “*Herrschaftsfreier Diskurs*” by Jürgen Habermas with its prominent position in his architecture of a democratic society.

Please, get me right: I do not say that scholars of social interaction assume that equality is realized in social interaction. I say that scholars assume that equality is a relevant dimension of social interaction and that they assume that inequality is something like a failure of communication. The French philosopher Tzvetan Todorov makes a similar point in his discussion of theories of social recognition. He notices that most of these theories assume that social recognition is the result of a struggle in which the participants are conceptualized as being equal (this idea originally was developed by Hegel of course). He asks: “Why are only relations of rivalry among equals taken into account?” And his answer is: “It’s our linkage to equality as a political ideal which produces that we project this model onto the social reality. Thus we reduce [. . .] social relations to those

which presuppose equality. [. . .] Unconsciously we regard society through the film of democracy.”

Open Questions and a Tentative Suggestion

Could it be that the big key words of the Western political discourse: liberty, equality, fraternity, do not fit with the logic of social interaction? Then it would be misleading to regard social interaction as a subject of political, especially democratic affairs, but the art of politics is to create - in the path of social interaction - political conditions which come close to the key concepts of our political self-understanding. These paths themselves however follow a logic which is not a political but an interactional one.

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