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 looks 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, critized 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.

Thesis: The Dominance of a Political Model of the Actor

It seems to me that scholars of social interaction implicitly rely on a model of the actor which is adopted from another discourse – a discourse which is related to another but distinct aspect of social reality – not social interaction but political action in a peculiar way.

So that's my thesis: In theories of social interaction scholars rely on a specific political model of the actor, i.e. a model which was developed in political thinking in the age of enlightenment and which holds good in the political system since then.

The reason for this adoption from the political discourse is the lack of a substantial theory of social interaction on the one hand and the attractiveness of this political discourse in our western intellectual culture on the other hand.

An Interesting Finding

To explicate my thesis I turn to the way the subject of understanding is conceptualized in communication theory. A classical conception of understanding in communication theories is based on the following model: Actor A has ideas which are somehow related to things. He puts these ideas into words and transmits them to Actor B who develops ideas on the basis of the words and relates them to things.

$$\begin{array}{ccc} A & B \\ \text{things - ideas} \rightarrow \text{words} \rightarrow & \text{words} \rightarrow \text{ideas - things} \end{array}$$

What I am interested in for my contribution is not so much the process of understanding as it is thought of in this model but the underlying conception of the actors A and B; that is, the individual who speaks or understands.

Talbot Taylor in his book Mutual Understanding has followed up this conception to its original formulation – and found it in the writings of John Locke, especially in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding. He stresses the specific relationship between the words and what they signify (ideas):

In the Essay the connection between words and what they signify (ideas in the mind of the speaker) is analyzed as having four primary characteristics: it is *arbitrary*, *voluntary*, *private*, and *individual*. By saying that the

connection between a word and its idea is arbitrary, Locke indicated that there is no a priori reason why any particular word should be the sign of a given idea. In using one word rather than another as the sign of a given idea, a speaker is not guided by any principle of nature. [...] In addition to arbitrariness, there is also the voluntariness of the connection between a word and the idea the speaker signifies by it. Signification [...] is an act of the speaker's will. [...] In calling a given idea by a name, the act performed by the Lockean agent is not only voluntary and arbitrary, it is also an individual act performed in mental privacy. Clearly, the semiotic act must be individual, for it is directed by the agent's own will. (Taylor, p. 31ff)

So these are the qualities of the Lockean actor:

He has private thoughts
He is an individual
He has a free will
He is not determined by nature.

This actor – or the stressed features of an actor – is in accord to the philosophical-political conception of man or the political vision and discourse of that time in which privacy, individuality, and voluntarism were key concepts (and of course Locke wanted it to be in accordance with that because his interest was a political one). So what we have here is a conception of man as it had been developed in the political discourse in the period of enlightenment and civil emancipation. Now what to do with this result?

How to Cope with this Finding?

I would like to distinguish different reactions to this result. You can take an affirmative position or a sceptical one. The affirmative position has a weak and a strong version:

- the weak version is: "Well, maybe it is an adoption from the political discourse but why is that a problem? The adoption of concepts from other disciplines or discourses is normal business in science."
- the strong version is: "Yes, we agree that it is a political model of the actor, and that's perfectly right, because it is necessary to conceive social interaction as political action."

In both these affirmative positions social interaction is more or less identified with political processes or see through the glasses of political concepts. This can 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 with 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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