COMMUNICATION

This brief section on communication is concerned with a narrow range of issues. In an age which places such a premium on communications technology and the possibility of communication across borders, time zones and paradigms, it is an irony that we neither think what is meant by communication nor do we communicate well. In <u>dematerialisation</u> I consider how social bonds are weakened by separating people off from one another: the advance of communications technology has had the paradoxical effect for many people of permitting communications with more people while also ensuring that the nature of those communications prevents those human beings from inter-acting other than through their communications technology. Of course communications technology does permit communication between people who might otherwise never have communicated whether because they live in different countries, or because samizdat*-style they are prevented politically from communicating freely. Communication requires hearing and understanding and not simply talking.

Communication

Communication in philosophical terms

Communication requires not only that something is said but, more significantly, that the things said are heard and understood: without the hearing and understanding there is no communication, properly so called. So, when talking about <u>dematerialised</u> social relations our "communication" with those call centres which seek to deal with us as quickly as possible, or those recorded messages which give us a numbered list of options, we must bear in mind that the quality of our communication is little more than unilateral discharges of information.

Political communication

At the political level, if there is insufficient communication about political issues – whether in the form of limited debate of all viewpoints or a limited coverage of political issues in sufficient depth in our newspapers – then the quality of our polity is necessarily limited. Noam Chomsky's theory of *Manufacturing Consent*, in which the media is presented as offering us only a narrow range of discourse and so ensuring that there is a mass consent to that narrow range of political choices, gives us a means of conceiving of how the possibilities for broad, social communication are necessary limited by those same media which are intended to communicate information to us.

Antonio Gramsci was the first to identified the significance of ideology as communicated through the mass media – a twentieth century phenomenon – in generating mass consent to a given political programme without the need for force. Gramsci was a Marxist who identified the power of the bourgeois political classes in their ability to

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subjugate the working classes by feeding them an ideology of adherence to the bourgeois, capitalist agenda, of the opportunities which such an organisation might offer them, and so ensured the quiescence of the proletariat. Hegemonic power results from this mass communication – such "communication" being about the transmission of messages and also about their acceptance by the populace which hears them. The Marxist project, as Gramsci described it, was to displace the bourgeois hegemony with another hegemonic power bloc based on socialism.

A primer on New Labour's Gramscian project
In short, communication, politically speaking, is concerned with winning support and ensuring quiescence. The new Labour project before the 1997 election campaign conformed to this pattern. Ironically, while speaking of avoiding ideology, the project talked of a new nation which would progress beyond corruption and an ignorance of individual suffering into a prosperous and caring society built on social justice. Politics in this new age is concerned not with developing an ideological programme which is then sold to the populace, but rather with using marketing techniques such as interviewing focus groups to identify the policies which people wanted and then tailoring the manifesto to appeal to those preferences.

At first this was a sensible way to proceed: in the UK the Tory administrations were ideologically and morally bankrupt and they also held an almost universally right-wing print media in their thrall, and galvanising the people behind a popular programme of displacing those old ideas, could not have failed in such a climate once it focused attention on sleaze and once it won over the print media. Subsequently, however, the lack of a clear ideology (either in the mind of the new Labour policymakers or in the perceptions of the mass audience) made it difficult to know how to proceed without simply asking more people what they wanted before seeking to cobble together policies to match those desires. The people began to expect that their political leaders would lead – and became cynical about politicians who seemed concerned only to grasp for new ideas in a desperate plea for popularity: akin to a teenager seeking entry to a new social group by asking "what music do you like?" and then saying immediately "oh, they are my favourite too". No-one is fooled. Seeking simply to transmit back to people what you think or hear that they want will not fool them into thinking that you are leading them into the future. Politics is about movement, ideology and vision: not about selling soap powder.

Communication requiring understanding
Communication is not a process simply of speaking – it not even a process of listening to what is being said and then saying the same thing – rather it is a question of speaking and of being heard and of being understood. As Terence McKenna put this: "If the truth can be told so as to be understood, it will be believed".

The key here is *understanding*. Understanding in the sense of connecting with the sense of what is said and not merely comprehending the separate words independently of one another.

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Communicative action

The work of <u>Jurgen Habermas</u> is concerned with his theory of communicative action. Briefly put, his concern is to effect a form of social organisation in which people can communicate entirely freely – without the hazing effect of ideologies or political obstacles interfering with such free communication – with the hope that sufficient communication about our social structures will mean that we will reach a final omega point (the "ideal speech situation") of social consensus. His two volume work *The Theory of Communicative Action* is the centrepiece of this part of his project.

*Samizdat

The samizdat movement was very important in the collapse of the Soviet bloc in central and eastern Europe. In considering Paul Virilio's theory of <u>speed and politics</u> elsewhere on this site, I refer to technological advances making certain kinds of action and reaction possible which had not been possible before. So, the development of fax machines (coupled with photocopiers) enabled people in the Soviet bloc to share news about public demonstrations and developments elsewhere which would not otherwise have been reported to them in the official newspapers. Therefore, people were able to fax one another their news and to make numerous copies of those communications. Thus the boundary of space-time was broken by not having to deliver newspapers surreptitiously by hand over large distances: rather, the fax machine permitted instant communication for the first time and so enabled uprisings to take effect simultaneously across territories (as with the velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia) and so to build up a sufficient head of steam. The spread of knowledge that revolt was going on elsewhere encouraged numerous resistance movements in different countries to become more active and so dissent spread.

Communication and law
Considered in detail in the <u>Autopoiesis and Social Systems</u> page.