

A paradigmatic rupture in communication

A ruptura paradigmática da comunicação

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ABSTRACT

This paper is focused on discussing the historical emergence of communication as a practice and theory of an anthropological reconfiguration by means of disruptive technologies and episteme radically opposed to late 18th century mechanistic and positivist social thought systems. Autopoiesis and endosymbiosis. Ancient original wisdom. Common good. Measures of embracing artificial intelligence. Epistemological rupture and a proposal for communication as a science of the commons.

Keywords: Mechanicism and positivism, original wisdom, new epistemes, artificial intelligence, science of the commons

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RESUMO

A emergência histórica da comunicação como prática e teoria de uma reconfiguração antropológica do homem por meio de tecnologias disruptivas e de epistemes radicalmente opostas aos sistemas mecanicistas e positivistas que orientam o pensamento social desde fins do século XVIII. Autopoiese e endossimbiose. A milenar sabedoria originária. A noção de bem comum. A medida de acolhimento da inteligência artificial. Ruptura epistemológica e proposta de comunicação como uma ciência do comum.

Palavras-chave: Mecanicismo e positivismo, sabedoria originária, novas epistemes, inteligência artificial, ciência do comum



IN TODAY'S POPULAR CULTURE, communication is this reality in which we are immersed, both in terms of intelligent machines and their use in our daily practices. A kind of new book of life, no longer just written in the language of carbon chemistry, in which bacteria have diversified and interacted with others on a global scale, but in the language of minimal units of meaning, infrainformational, which can take on phonemic or simply digital configurations. It is thus appearing to common sense as an ecosystem, but which at the same time requires non-mechanistic knowledge from an episteme that transforms the planetary status quo. 'Communication' as a concept points to a human science of the commons, which renders irrelevant the mechanistic and positivist epistemology of late 18th century social sciences, bringing together interactionist perspectives such as autopoiesis, endosymbiosis, original wisdom and community commons.

The well-known notion of autopoiesis refers to the living beings' capacity for self-production and self-maintenance, unlike mechanical systems. Its cognitive biology implies a vision of the planet as an entity in continuous interaction with humans, but exempt or autonomous from control by absolute capitalism.

Maturana, Varela and Margulis' perspectives, presently significant, are familiar to the ancient wisdom of traditional peoples, as two short stories of Eastern doxa show. The first, attributed to Lao-Tse, narrates the efforts of a village elder to draw water from a well and then carry it in buckets to his house. A young villager shows him the available technical mechanisms capable of extracting the liquid and taking it through pipes to the house. The elder replies that he was aware of the existence of these resources, but that their use depended on a technical 'heart' that he did not yet possess.

In the second story, a Zen master had commissioned his disciple to grow rice. In the first year, the young man made sure there was never a shortage of water, and the rice grew strong. The following year, he added a little fertilizer to the soil, which accelerated growth and increased the harvest. On the third year, a larger amount of fertilizer increased the harvest even more, but the rice grew small and stale. And the master advised: "If you keep increasing the amount of fertilizer, you won't harvest anything worthwhile. You strengthen someone when you help them a little. But you weaken them if you help too much."

Both stories, although in different ways, touch on the appropriate measure of relationship with one's technical exteriority. It is not a question of rejecting or demonizing technology—a product of human ingenuity—but of integrating it humanely as a common good, and therefore of finding a measure outside the mechanicism exacerbated by capital.

On the subject of common goods, Fiske (1992) proposes four major types of goods in human relations, differentiating between *community commons*, based on pooling and communalism; *reciprocity*, which consists of giving, donating, gifting and receiving, thus creating balanced social relations; hierarchical *inequitable redistribution*, which includes that directed by the State in social classes; and finally, that which is regulated by *market prices*, based on the exchange of resources according to the formal capitalist ‘equal value.’

Since its inception in the mid-20th century, communication technology based on radio and electronics has been a supposed common good placed under the aegis of market prices or capitalist values. Under the ideological guise of a new cultural utopia, ‘communication’ has come to be proclaimed and experienced, thanks to the dizzying development of electronic technology, as an indispensable feature of the market and political governance.

Such a position is scientifically problematic at a time when digital technology, with its prospects for machine learning or artificial intelligence, is transforming human ingenuity. The age-old question of the *technical heart* becomes contemporary, as does the measure of technique in relation to the human being.

This is not a new debate. Let us recall the conversation that took place in 1995 between Paulo Freire and Seymour Papert, a disciple of Piaget, researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and proponent of computer use for child learning. Papert was the creator of *constructionism*, a well-known pedagogical theory according to which students program problem situations computationally, testing hypotheses for personal instruction.

Papert’s method even included Freire’s didactic approach to literacy by means of a few generating words borrowed from the learner’s linguistic universe. Freire, however, although convinced of the important role played by technology in the subject’s intellectual transformation, detected in Papert’s practical-theoretical attitude a disconnection between the pedagogical software and students’ social and political reality.

In other words, it lacked the original source of the essential education issues, i.e. culture, the locus of common goods such as mutualization and communalism, upon which sociability is built. Without the cultural dimension, technology narcissistically closes in on itself, fascinating us with the efficacy of technical performance that encompasses individual cognition, but repressing our bond with the community and the socio-historical environment, element responsible for the political transitivity of knowledge.

Paulo Freire’s pedagogy includes or embraces technology, but due to its visceral commitment to social emancipation, it is neither disembodied nor above the socio-historical conditions of knowledge production and transmission;

therefore, it is not above the culture that is concretely lived with others in a territory, in a city.

Indeed, when one wonders what could be ‘first’ in the emergence of cities, ‘living together’ appears as a starting point. What the ancient Greeks called *philia*, a term usually translated as ‘friendship’ but which encompasses the common bond, tracing a circle of conviviality and signifying both sharing and neighborliness.

Philia is the motive of living together, not as a mere convention or agreement, but as a predisposition to sociability, *which is communication proper*—understood not as transmission of information, but as the intention to make differences common or to unite opposites that, in their dynamics, make *philia* circulate. Communication is both talking and doing: in Latin, *communicatio* also means society (*societas*).

Communication is thus defined as the bond established by *philia*, with one’s own place. *Philia* allow us to define the common as ‘one’s own’ (*okeion*) and ‘neighbor’ (*koinon*), meanings enmeshed in the modern concept of sociability as defined by Tönnies (1979). Because it is ‘one’s own,’ the common place is a spatial and symbolic *topos* that offers images and memories (house, temple, monument, etc.) to relatives or neighbors as a field of identifications, triggered by the same language. The communicative bond of *philia* is nourished by different memories, rites and significant events. It feeds on culture.

Whatever name is given to the commons—place, locality, community—in a certain *living environment*, one should understand it as a constitutive bond. This is because community cohesion is upheld by shared beliefs and values related to determinations (good/evil, just/unjust, etc.) necessary for intersubjective bonding.

Culture can be conceptually summed up by actively mapping this environment. What is understood as *the world of life* encompasses both this environment and learning, as Paracelsus puts it: “Learning is our own lives—from youth to old age. In fact, almost until death. Nobody spends ten hours without learning something” (Meszáros, 2005, p. 15). Apparently, however, social thought, fascinated by its own methods, often forgets to learn from the world of life.

The assumption that it is not the victory of science that distinguishes our nineteenth century, but the victory of scientific method over science is a serious warning against transforming the method—an instrument of scientific research—into a constitutive element of the objectivity of objects. Instead of scientifically widening thought, methodological ossification tends to elaborate a theology of the social.

In statu nascendi, the social sciences were not prisoners of methods. But when the production of ideas or theories about the changing reality (the historical reason for the field’s vigor) disappears, the methodological and ‘applied’ unfoldings

of this knowledge remain, such as opinion and market research which, together with the media, contribute to social control. Scientificity becomes algorithmic, allegedly 'neutral' but assimilating, by oblique mathematics of an embarrassing and unresolved past. Artificial intelligence is not immune to human stupidity.

Hence, the 'universalism' of social thought in certain countries, even under the banner of the political left, suffers from myopia before the immediate surroundings or loses sight of the variable centrality of social struggles. Edgar Morin had already inquired: how is it possible that sociologists only see the (temporary) invariance of reproductions and not the variations and changes of these 'invariants'? The answer lies in the scientific paradigm, a system of power that fixes the researcher's gaze on the same supposedly invariable point.

But variations constantly permeate the zones of social uncertainty. When a discipline of social thought ignores the uncertainty principle and clings to a single explanatory system as the basis of all its certainties, a problem arises. In spite of itself, this supposedly conceptual/scientific thought—i.e., the logical formalization of a canonical system—reveals the paradigmatic banner of absolute certainty by the couplet of 'rigor of thought,' a biased translation for 'rigor of method.' An academic discipline can thus close its eyes to phenomenal complexity and focus solely on a monocratic certainty, methodologically blurred against the background of a black and white reality (Sodré, 2021).

In the productive vigor of ideas, truth results not from a single methodological path but from the common space of a universal dialogue, of an encounter open to all. These encounters come from different lines of thought, ranging from academic rationalism to the dimension of feeling or *affective truths*.

It all implies that the *emotional sphere*—analogous to what Dilthey and Simmel's social-philosophy called in the 19th century the *world of the Spirit*—is decisive for understanding intersubjective relations. The same requirements established by phenomenology as conditions for 'comprehensibility,' as seen in Merleau-Ponty. It involves going further than what, when speaking of experience, Edgar Morin defines as the *constant oscillation between the logical and the empirical* to glimpse, in the diverse ways of thinking, a philosophical path capable of circumventing the dichotomy between Logic and Spirit.

Such a path is imperative at a historical moment in which absolute capitalism penetrates all spheres of existence and in which social management is guided by digital computing. An incessant planetary metamorphosis of materials, bodies and spaces takes place, in which living beings become artificial and the calculation and production machines are humanized.

With the invention and popularization of the Internet, which promotes a generalized connection between network users, the media became immediate

thanks to incessant feedback. This expanded the utopian territory of expressive transparency, launched in the last century with the advent of the image in all its technical forms. The situation is rather complex. As a revolutionary technological device, comparable to the great technical transformations of modernity, the Internet generated a new (virtual) space superimposed on the classic time-space coordinates.

In a context of growing *mediatization* (the structural articulation of the media with social organizations and institutions), electronic communication converts information technologies into artificial intelligence devices and, through the electronic network, introduces a new paradigm, with an invisible interconnection structure in which everything is both connection and passage on the reticular surface—and within people, who have become mere transmission relays—as well as cryptographic secrecy in the operative underground.

The South African theorist Mbembe (2022) calls this *brutalism*, a political category borrowed from architecture, by which “power as a geomorphic force is henceforth constituted, expressed, reconfigured, acted upon, and reproduced by *fracture* and *fissure*” (pp. 9-10). At a moment in which the concentration of capital in a few hands has reached unimaginable peaks and the Earth as a system has reached its limits, power’s ultimate project would be to transform humanity into matter and energy. Brutalism, as the apotheosis of this form of power without external limits, is thus characterized by the “close imbrication of various figures of reason: economic and instrumental reason, electronic and digital reason, neurological and biological reason” (p. 23).

In this imbrication, computational technologies assume such primacy that the reins of social power are increasingly confused with the devices of informational control. The crisis of the old technical forms of knowledge transmission (from the newspaper to the book) makes it increasingly clear that the loss of symbolic centrality of the media only enhances the power of generalized information. Such great transformation favors human beings’ technical dimension, to such an extent that contemporary consciousness is fundamentally technological. In other words, the relationship of the human subject with reality today necessarily passes through technology, especially information technologies, in all its modes of realization.

Transnational capitalism and technological mega-increment expand the world, directly or indirectly subjecting other forms of governing reality to capital. In this new space, configured primarily by the market, the power of the commodity and information reduces the national state’s charisma. It is no longer the State, but the global market, which provides the main scenarios of identity. It weakens the historical fiction of political citizenship and the ‘consumer’

emerges as a new social subject, conceived from its inception as opposed to the classical idea of citizenship.

All this growing technological structuring of the local and global environment has an obvious immediate impact on regional cultures. What is actually underway is an anthropological reconfiguration of human life, and therefore of the real subject, who is not an essence but the result of varied subjectivation processes—the historical element—constant in relations, rarely dialectical, between the living being and the thing. Separation between one and the other has always ensured the dominance of consciousness over the inert, becoming an instrument or passive object of knowledge. Now, however, things—through artificial intelligence and its connective presence in networks of power mechanisms—adhere to the human body, virtually converted into a screen. The Internet is a radical form of connection, at once political and aesthetic, between subject, thing and system.

In principle, all aesthetics alter perceptions. Expanded as a form of *socius*, it is capable of altering (or otherwise *organize*) realities. As an apparatus, the network is a technological matrix capable of aesthetically *increasing* physical space-time, compressing time and expanding space. The apparatus hides the fact that the ‘social’ of the network is an effect of computer programs, that is, a parallel reality created by engineers or designers capable of constraining users’ discourses.

In practice, it is a new immaterial *urbs*, with its own dwelling and discourse circulation norms. As technologically advanced as it may seem, the network is a ‘city’ without citizenship; all the inhabitants electronically together but humanly separated, like a grouping of automata.

SEPARATION

Separation is the key word in a new civilizational equation, backed by an ‘uncivil’ dynamic. But it is also the antithesis of autopoiesis and endosymbiosis, which require the integration between living beings and things, just as in original cultures in which the time of objects is not alien to that of humans, nor are things static entities, thus giving interfaces the power to expand reality. It is precisely the interfaces that, within digital technologies, build an augmented reality, only now as a function of capital.

However, separation continues to operate at the level of human relations by means of a mechanistic logic. For example, digital programming reduces phonation (as well as its written reproduction) to the mechanical level, which can lead to discursive regression. With artificial intelligence, the subject emulates the robot which, as is well known, is capable of embodying a semantic system.



Language, however, is not semantics, nor syntax, nor grammar—therefore, not even simply discourse—but the symbolic order of embracing differences and rapprochements capable of appropriating and expressing what we are. It is the binding legal system upon which common responsibility is established.

But computational language is a predictable, self-correcting numerical monopoly (capable of exchanging subjectivation for digits) with closed values. Increased technical freedom of user response, and therefore individual responsiveness, does not in any way affect their civil irresponsibility. Rather, it casts the technically *augmented* individual into the precariousness of social relations devoid of the community bond that would ultimately make each person responsible for the other. Only *in community* can the cohesive identities and bonds essential for social responsibility be constituted, an ethical principle linked to the dignity of language and self-care as sources of meaning in human existence.

RESPONSIBILITY

Responsibility must therefore be taken as an *ethical principle* relating to the dignity of language and care of the self as sources of meaning in human existence. It is the foundation of the values and normativity naturally intrinsic to the human condition of life self-affirmation.

This principle, essential to human communication, is not epistemologically integrated into the rationality model of the social sciences, forged between the 18th and early 20th centuries according to mechanistic and positivist parameters. The field of communication studies that took off shortly before the Second World War, despite the radical novelty of its empirical materials, remained under the hegemony of this paradigm, without any major misgivings about the immediate—capitalist and industrial—evidence of its empirics.

Putting the person, as author and subject of the world, at the center of knowledge does not suffice. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) rightly observes, a humanistic conception of the social sciences

places what we today call nature at the center of the human person. There is no human nature because all nature is human. It is therefore necessary to discover global categories of intelligibility, hot concepts that melt the boundaries into which modern science has divided and enclosed reality. (pp. 44-45)

For him, “the world is communication and therefore the existential logic of postmodern science is to promote the ‘communicative situation’ as Habermas conceives it” (Sousa Santos, 2007, p. 45).

For us, this situation furthers comprehension, so as not to disqualify nature or man as a result of quantitative and nomothetic knowledge. Within an emerging paradigm, it is imperative to overcome the classic dichotomy between natural sciences and social sciences, to abolish or relativize disciplinary boundaries and to establish a communicative or interactive situation between knowledge, aiming at a knowledge that is both global and local.

Communication as a science of the common means producing knowledge with wisdom, discourse with dialogue, action with pause and reflection: a field of transitive meaning, recognizable by the Other. Far from being an epistemological appendage of the 19th-century social sciences, communication implies a paradigmatic break, a new expansive field in which the object of knowledge moves from the epistemic subject's abstraction to the empirical subject who, in turn, is not the sovereign of the Anthropocene, but the concrete partner of Earth and machines. ■

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