

Two childhood diseases of communication: The ontological insufficiency and submission to the policy. A discussion with José Luís Braga

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ABSTRACT

The author evaluates the positions of José Luiz Braga as laid out in an article published in the journal *Matrizes*, Year 4, n. 1, in which he treats the five theories upheld by him for his definitions of Communication, and confronts them with two central aspects of his analyses: p. the ontological weakness in the field of Communication and the belief that it can have a political end.

Keywords: Communication, communication theory, sign, transmitter, receiver

I

It is heartening to note that in the area of communication there are other thinkers who are concerned with a question that has been neglected over the last decades of communication studies: that is, to debate what communication actually is. Since the point - around eighty years ago - that the main political thrust of the West began to be controlled through channels of mass communication, everyone has been surprised by the adoption of these devices and technology designed for the purposes of domination; there has been a great deal of study on the sociology of social action on people, philosophy has elected language as the greatest structurer of the *sócius*, and even the sciences have adopted the terminology of Communication, message, code. Everyone talked about communication but nobody actually investigated what communication is. Adorno and Horkheimer demonized pop culture because it elevated *kitsch* to the stature of *great art*; McLuhan was fascinated by the technical devices to prolong our organs and limbs; Eco lowered the tone by reducing it to a clash of extremes: we either give in to the apocalyptic or we integrate ourselves. Not even the most recent critics of tech culture - Flusser, Deleuze, Baudrillard, Kamper -, nor the cautious commentators of the digital age, have actually asked the question of what communication is.

The issue is not a secondary one, as it presumes wide divisions between communicational

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fields and perspectives. How can one support a thesis that there is or isn't communication if one does not explain clearly before anything else what communication is? This because in the area there are those who believe that communication is impossible, or highly improbable, while there are others who state the exact opposite, that everything is communication, that one cannot but communicate. Both trends are persuasive in their arguments, and are principally concerned with the same object. There will never be any sensible discussion between these fields while there is no minimum consensus about what is being said about this thing called communication.

This question has led me over the last decade to reflect on what we can or should effectively understand as communication. I always remember Sören Kierkegaard's phrase; that we don't spend much time thinking about what communication is; that we rush into the object, to *the thing* that we want to communicate, as he said back in the nineteenth century. And Kierkegaard goes on, as nearly all the objects of this type show themselves even at first sight to be of vast dimensions,, p. as time passes, there will be fewer and fewer occasions or places to meditate on what communication is.

It seems to me that this is the so called *gordian knot* in the field and the principal reason why the area of Communications experiences problems of identity and affirmation regarding decisive knowledge. If it itself has not even been able to precisely define its object of study, how can it attempt to advance and become autonomous?

The issue is that we suffer from two childhood afflictions. The first is ontological insufficiency. The field of communication was born abruptly, a premature child, and had to survive in an incubator cared for by philosophical, sociological, anthropological, semiological nurses, who, armed with their jargon and their entrenched ways of behaving, tried to, p. keep it alive, but not without damaging the autonomy of this child, this strange new member of the community of established knowledge. And here we are, players in this congenitally malformed field, seeking to rid ourselves of our childhood traumas.

Communication needs to appear, needs to affirm itself to the universe of knowledge that it possesses an object, an object that, even though a little obscured in its phenomenological appearance, hazy, diffuse, ill defined, even then, has specific determinations that separate it clearly from other social happenings.

Curious about this search for the definition of the communicational object, I have dedicated myself to finding it. One of my attempts was the work, published in 2004, entitled, p.

Até que ponto, de fato, nos comunicamos that finally found a reader, my esteemed colleague José Luiz Braga, who comments on it in his essay “Nem rara, nem ausente – tentativa”, published in the journal *Matrizes*, Year 4, n. 1., p. Braga discusses my five theses on communication and develops his own way of understanding it.

II

José Luiz Braga works with one of my definitions of communication, one that is relatively old or, perhaps more accurately, one that was provisory. Over these last six years, the concept has evolved considerably, something that can be witnessed in later publications, such as the entry “comunicação” in the *Dicionário da Comunicação* (Paulus, 2008), the study, p. *Para entender a comunicação*, from 2008, and the most recent, *O princípio da razão durante* (Nova Teoria da Comunicação, Vol. III, Book 5), from 2010. In the booklet commented on by Braga, I defined communication as something extremely rare, it was the possibility of avoiding the prohibition on communication imposed by the communication society. I am not retracting this thesis to any extent, rather I have extended it, to develop the sense already outlined at that time, of communication being effectively interaction, *from which something truly new arises* (2004, p. 88). The thing I abandoned in later studies was the, still relatively confused, idea of communication that Braga translates as “something that articulates, brings together, directs and creates mutual recognition” (Braga, 2010, p. 69), which seems to be what he himself calls *communication-communion*. It is clearly however not this.

In my view, communication has nothing to do with communion. The mistake is perhaps due to my argument, at the end of the work, about Niklas Luhmann’s insufficiencies, that we are part of the *flesh of the world* (Merleau-Ponty), that the world enters in us, and we in it. This allusion to the French philosopher is only relevant in its opposition to Husserl, for whom the process of meaning construction, of expression, in Husserlian language, was an exclusive product of one’s consciousness. Merleau-Ponty corrects Husserl by transferring this operation to our relation with the world. Our consciousness, if such a thing exists; is part of a whole in which we dissolve; the flesh of the world.

And communication is a extremely rare process because it involves a qualitative relationship with the world, that presupposes my disposition to receive the new, a meeting with

the alterity of “the other”, an experience that is clearly different from my own. They are qualitative phenomena, ones that cannot be reduced to the logic of proportionality or fragmentality, as Braga suggests, and on which I will comment later.

Braga does not accept that we don't communicate or that we rarely communicate. For him, this thesis is too broad and excluding, as there are, according to him, *lesser forms* that should not be ignored. Thus, there exist large, medium and small communications, the criteria for their measurement however are not clearly expounded. If one applies statistical functions, this would mean that the indexes of communicability would vary from 0 to 1, when they reach maximum communication.

The problem with this in my opinion is precisely in the fragmentation. What is exactly a *lesser* communication? Let us take a conversation between three people: *A* shares his ideas, *B* listens carefully and understands them well and *C* listens equally carefully but does not understand them completely. Is it this? Or, let's say, the television transmits an announcement and some people take in only the images and colours, others the meaning of the some of the news, and still others take in the underlying intentions of the TV channel. Are these forms of small, medium and large communication? And what about social networking sites? How do they work? An event is transmitted via Twitter. Would a lesser communication be that of Twitter itself, one which only works with a 140 character limit? Would a larger communication be the same fact but as written on a blog?

These are my suppositions because the categorization of communication in mathematical values brings to the field a strange situation of being able to measure communicability. In the case of the three participants in the conversation, the situation of participant *C* is clearly one of inability to understand due to cultural, linguistic or even cognitive factors. Communication simply seized up, the noise made it inviable. It wasn't lesser, it simply didn't happen. Even in *B*'s case, his comprehension, apparently clear, is not to do with communication. *B* merely took in knowledge of what was said by *A*, it was merely a record. I will explain later why a record is not actually communication. In the second case, that of the television announcement, there are several forms in which the receiver can relate to the sounds, the images and the text of a journalistic transmission. If the receiver took in only the sounds and the image, what is the justification to say that these planes are lesser than that of the text? They are merely different. Even the fact of taking in the text does not imply automatic understanding and still less the

person who made inferences about the underlying intention of the channel. He only makes other judgements, which transcend what was actually transmitted and fall into the category of so-called *ideological analysis*.

Twitter is a form of data transmission marked by its economy of signs. It is a short, quick, *small* transmission. But this does not seem to be Braga's concept of lesser communication as a twittered phrase can contain dense communicative matter that has the virtual power to have instant repercussions and provoke incalculable effects.

Braga in a way tries to define these gradations of communicability.

Communication is not just something with a high value, with precious and rare information, - it is all exchange, articulation, passage between groups, between individuals, between social sectors -, p. frequently unfamiliar, in conflict, drawing together interests from all orders; marked by casual exchanges that go far, p. and beyond, p. *intentions* (that can be valid or irrelevant) (p. 69).

Here one can see his concept of communication is still marked by the *childhood affliction* of communication theories that, as exemplified by Shannon's canonical scheme, interpret it as a *thing*, p. Communication as something that I pass from myself to another, like a liquid; the materials, the objects that I place at one end of a pipe or a tube and that come out the other end; communication as an element that I extract from my head and transfer to someone else's head, inserting it within. This is the metaphysical concept of communication, which transforms something itself, that circulates, that flows and that is passed on. But this idea of exchange is a tremendous mistake. I don't exchange anything. What comes out of me is not what is incorporated by someone else; in their mind, something else is *produced*. Neither is it articulation, as one cannot say that my phrase articulates with yours or vice-versa, in the same way that limbs are articulated, joined together by flexible joints, as there is also here the idea of an *articulated thing*.

All of these figures (exchange, articulation, passage, but also transmission) bring to mind metaphysical definitions, as they are based on positivist figures of presence, of real existence, of the thing having to show itself in order to have validity. In the first texts on communication, particularly in the empirical school, communication had to be reduced to measurable values. Thus, the mathematician Claude Shannon attempted to measure communicational content by the level of rarity of statistical occurrences of terms in telegraphic communication. He reduced a human social phenomenon to mathematical units of measurement. It is incredible that he managed to say how new a text was without needing to carry out any investigation of its explicit

content...

Braga believes that communication is something *attemptive*. The attempt of the participant is, for him, relevant to his thesis (Braga, 2010, p. 72). It is the fact that the receiver seeks to interpret the message in a coherent form from the start, in the emission (ibid). Or rather, it is, again, the ability to decipher a code. What I mean is; I make my attempts; if I decipher conveniently, this means that I have understood, that the communication took place. But this is a very poor concept of communication. It is pre-Luhmannian, a continuation of Shannon's model from the 1950s. This not a very ambitious model of studies of the communicability of our acts and words, of the major means of communication of digital forms; its problem is that, being technical, it is always at the margins of what is actually happening.

For him, communication is actually the possibility of someone understanding what the transmitter is saying. They are one's attempts to adequately decipher. It is *C* understanding *little* and *B* understanding *a little* of what *A* wanted to say. We have not graduated beyond the basic conditions of human communicability; we are still in kindergarten arguing about what terms we should use, how to be clearer, and what resources to use so that our interlocutor is on the same wavelength as ourselves. The phenomenon of communication is still very far away.

And the end of the process will come about, according to Braga's theory, with the realization of *meaning*: "Let us assume that interpretation and adjustment reverberate mutually - we adjust the perceived meaning, we perceive the meaning according to the possible adjustments to our repertoire" (p.76). There is clearly here the notion that meaning pre-exists, that it is there, that it is only a matter of perceiving it, adjusting it, considering it. For Braga, meaning is never production, is never something that occurs and arises from the actual communicational event. If we consider meaning as something *always given*, that we only need to be able to recognize, we will be condemning communication as something dead, defined, absolute., *p*. We would be yet again in the realm of metaphysical thought.

III

José Luiz Braga is interested in the predictability of communication:

(...) two angles characterize the perspective that communication is an attempt. From the first angle, communicational episodes are probabilistic - meaning that *something relatively predictable can happen* (p. 70).

However, prediction is a calculation; it is the supposition that something can happen by obeying certain regularities and controlling certain interfering factors. Here let's take communication as a project that can be administered. If I increase the efficiency of my procedures (my language, my expressive form, resources of understanding, etc), there is the probability that I will achieve better future results. We are in the field of predictions, of projections, of programming. All this engineering of the communicational event can only be understood as a technocratic procedure, of the same kind as used in financial, economical speculative and political calculations. This, though, is a subject for executives.

However, two of Braga's own quotations come to mind, ones which seem to contradict what was outlined previously: "What in one regime would be considered a success may in another, be frustrating" (p.71). "(...) Which means that it must be difficult, if not impossible, to establish *apriori* criteria for success in the interactional attempt that is communication" (p.71). In fact, the criterion of success marked by the fact that the receiver seeks to interpret the message in a coherent form from the start, in the emission, is a questionable criterion as it says nothing about communication, and only about the prior condition for its realization. In other terms, success (there were results, I interpreted it coherently) can imply, as he says, *frustrations*. There cannot be *apriori* criteria, but quantitatively *apriori* criteria, as these tend fatally to direct the study in the direction of a calculative, technocratic, and possibly even manipulative, way of thinking.

When he says that "the result of communicational interaction is more probable the less modificational the social and human relations; and less probable the more modificational" (p.73), we find a common ground to escape the technocratic paradigm and get closer to the effectively communicational model. What does it mean to say communicational interaction is more and is less modificational? Why should one be more probable than the other? For this, Braga fatally has to resort to *my* definition of communication.

For me, communication is a phenomenon that rarely occurs because our social lives are much more marked by processes of signalization and information. How does this happen? When I make my opinion public, it is likely that others will ignore it; it is also possible that they will hear it but only register it; or that they will consider it and think about it. There are three possibilities. In the first case, nothing happens; I speak, promulgate, disseminate, and nobody hears me. My voice, my text, my manifestation is solemnly ignored by the world. It is nothing

more than one more sign in the world fair of signs; signs from people, from machines, from animals, from nature itself. Who pays attention to signs? Only those who have some specific interest in that sign. At this point they look, listen and read. The sign becomes information. Or play, or fleeting aesthetic and inconsequential pleasure. In order for information to become communication it must occur within me, as a participant of a communicational process, a radical qualitative transformation: I need to free my system, to welcome, to open myself to that which is telling me something. Neither information nor communication actually exist. There are ways for me to relate to the signs, and these do exist. I cannot say that a particular thing is not a sign, nor that a sign does not exist. Signals do not admit the negative: I cannot but signal, as by existing I will always signal.

With this theory, the occurrence or non-occurrence of communication is to do with intentionality. While I remain isolated or isolate myself from the surrounding universe, nothing can affect me; I can be that individual from the Luhmannian model who only sees the world through a window and never interacts with it. These kinds of individuals are closed to communication. They read the news, buy books, converse with friends, use internet chat-rooms, but nothing affects them; their self-imprisonment is radical, their control system does not allow for divergence. Everything for them is information, which is used to reinforce their position, the arguments they use against adverse opinion. Communication however is authorization, it is permission, it is contact with what is different, strange, unusual. Something that I am not can instigate transformation, alter my viewpoint, allow me to change and therefore show me that I am still alive, quite the opposite of the previous case, in which individuals are buried alive in their own convictions and negate life.

Through the fact of being, in our everyday lives, more defensive, more conservative in our positions, because they comfort us, for this very reason, the most probable communicational interactions will be those that least modify our social relations, and those that are less probable, will be those that make the most change., p. It is the latter that are most important, that define our situation of being alive and not living-dead.

It is for this reason that communication is not a gradient. It is not something that can be small, medium, medium large and large. It either is, or it isn't, and this is a radical criterion. It is either a complete success or a complete failure; it either happens or it doesn't and this is a way of thinking that is completely contrary to the statistical model or the calculation of prediction and

probabilities. It is not made up from trial and error (Braga, 2010, p. 77), as it does not depend on us, it depends on itself, but this, the second childhood affliction will be dealt with in the next section.

IV

Braga, just as in my proposal, advocates that the same concept of communication should be possible both for interpersonal forms and for large mass-media broadcasts and internet signals. This is excellent. “We can thus distinguish between the attempts of participants and the social attempts that become real at each interactional episode - the attempts of the process.” (p.72). He goes on:

This means that, p. communication can not only take place, but that it effectively is made, at some point between total success and total failure, as a result of an action, of a human and social effort to produce something that is not completely given in the previous isolated, p. points of an interaction (p.80).

In my proposal, the great social communication, transmitted *en masse*, occupies an immaterial territory that I call *atmospheric mediatic continuum*. It is an abstract field in which news, facts, and events, reverberate and gain the *status of spirit of time*. The events become the *great social theme* of the moment, as these multiple insertions (newspapers, television reports, internet blogs, and individuals, for example), grow ever more until they become the great Event. But this is not the result of *an action*, it is a blind product, a derivation of multiple interventions, of reverberations of interest that the agents have in their repercussions. It is in the collective, in the multiple and indeterminate product that they become a total social event. No-one is responsible for this; no-one provokes it at will. The thing simply happens through a casual, aleatoric conjunction of multiple interventions.

When Braga says that this is the result of an action, of a human and social effort to produce something, he gives the impression that humans in some way are in control of the process. And this idea is the same that is at the root of the concept of predictability of communication, to which he refers: “In the study of concrete interactive devices, one of the particularly relevant angles of investigation refers to the perception of its processes *for the production of predictability*” (p.79).

It is clear that Braga is talking about communication thinking of its utilisation, of its operation as social intervention. Communication as a mere tool, an old childhood affliction, that filled the imaginations of activist groups involved, who saw in it the chance of achieving power or of bringing it down. From the indications, he seems to believe that agents' efforts, when well operated and administrated, can actually generate these positive effects in receivers. It is only a matter of teaching the communicators to operate the systems to enable them to intervene in the social sphere. It is a political proposal, or, as he call it, a *praxiological action*, not a proposal to study the communicational phenomenon within a exemption imagined to be necessary., *p*. His realm of study is political science (or rather, political practice), not the field of communication. His concept of communication escapes the *stricto sensu* investigation of what communication is and ends up in the field of how to better operate the equipment for communication with the aim of instrumental action. We are not far from the threat of political *educationism*. In contrast, I believe that only the study of communication per se allows one a chance at autonomy.

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