Philosophical Profiles in the Theory of Communication

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WITH A FOREWORD BY RICHARD J. BERNSTEIN
AND AN AFTERWORD BY JOHN DURHAM PETERS
Introduction

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This is a study in intellectual history. Its aim is to bring attention to the theme of communication in twentieth-century academic philosophy. It should be noted right from the outset that there is already a large body of studies examining the place, and in some cases the centrality, of communication in the thought of specific twentieth-century philosophical figures. Taken individually, the essays presented here serve that purpose, and each has in fact been written in such a way that it could be read independently of the rest. When taken together, however, they have a distinct effect, namely, that communication emerges as a kind of overarching, even pressing, philosophical theme, one unrestricted to any particular school of thought or line of inquiry. Why bring attention to this theme?

This volume was designed for the student and scholar of communication studies. Like most disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, communication studies has a rather quirky and idiosyncratic institutional history, one that has played a decisive role in shaping its theoretical orientations and methodological traditions. One consequence of this institutional influence has been a certain myopia with respect to contributions to communication theory from outside disciplines. It is only relatively recently that students and scholars of the field have come to appreciate the limitations in theoretical scope and vision imposed by their disciplinary past and the historical opportunity now to move beyond them.

In his 1986 essay “Institutional Sources of Intellectual Poverty in Communication Research,” John Durham Peters lamented the poor state of communication studies as a discipline. Peters attributed this poverty to multiple institutional sources, the most crucial being the uncritical enthusiasm with which the field’s early scholars sought after institutional legitimacy and public recognition over theoretical rigor and sophistication. Overshadowed by
the longer histories and more formidable accomplishments of competing disciplines, the early scholars exhibited far less concern for coherently defining their intellectual purpose and mission than for demonstrating to everyone, themselves above all, that communication studies was a bona fide science. Peters invoked Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities to draw an analogy between communication studies and the nation-state. In the attempt to establish their institutional legitimacy, the early scholars managed to craft a wildly exaggerated narrative about the field, replete with anachronistic myths of origins and founding fathers, a false claim to vast intellectual territory far beyond its limited reach, and a disheartening inability to recognize just how much of what it took to be essential to itself was in fact derivative of other disciplines. Peters found a curious paradox in the field’s claim to jurisdiction over something so broad and universal as to defy any such claim. There is, after all, a long history of Western thought devoted to the various phenomena to which the term “communication” may be applied, and the idea of communication has long been a topic of intense interest in other disciplines. Peters therefore depicted communication studies as “an academic Taiwan—claiming to be all of China when, in fact, it was an isolated small island” (544). The consequence of this preoccupation with securing and strengthening the nation has been severe theoretical impoverishment, and this partly in the form of a blindness to ideas about communication, both historical and contemporary, that lie beyond the limited confines of the field.

Peters has since come to play an important role as commentator and historian of the field. He has tried to cultivate a certain critical and historical awareness, highlighting the field’s intellectual limitations and emphasizing the importance of theoretical foundations. In his landmark study, Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication (1999), Peters sought to give some coherence to the field by providing a genealogy of the idea of communication, extending back to its ancient roots and textual sources—a task that, rather tellingly, had never been carried out before. In a style and method reminiscent of G. W. F. Hegel, Peters excavated the conceptual history of communication to show how it evolved over the centuries, thereby hoping to provide some direction for the future of the field. The historical conclusion to which Peters was drawn is that we have been chasing after an illusion for the greater part of history. The conception of communication as the connection or union of minds, he argued, needs to be abandoned.

Although it is difficult to determine the extent to which Speaking into the Air has accomplished its ambitious task of reorienting the way we think about communication, there is no doubting its effect in cultivating a deep historical consciousness among students and scholars in the field. Speaking
into the Air has arguably become the most widely read text in communication studies today. In treating communication as both a historical and a philosophical question, Peters has opened up the field to new lines of intellectual inquiry. He has interpreted figures as grand and ancient as Jesus and St. Paul as rich sources of ideas about communication, and has proposed a new way of conceptualizing communication, namely, as dissemination.1

More recently, Peters has reversed his pessimism about the field, seeing in the richness and variety of ideas about communication an opportunity for doing intellectual history. Along with James Carey, Peters has drawn our attention to the importance of pragmatism as a resource for communication theory, and a number of scholars have joined Peters in developing a distinctly pragmatist tradition of communication inquiry.2 Peters has also called for greater attention to be given to four intellectual traditions whose histories have yet to be told: (1) the social psychology of media effects, a tradition in which he includes such thinkers as Hannah Arendt, Daniel Bell, Warren Breed, Kenneth Burke, Erving Goffmann, C. Wright Mills, David Reisman, and even Jürgen Habermas; (2) cybernetics, the influence of which Peters finds in thinkers as diverse as Roman Jakobson, Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Jean Hyppolite, and Michel Foucault; (3) psychiatry, in which Peters sees an intense preoccupation with madness conceived as a form of communication breakdown; and (4) literary studies, a tradition with a long history of interest in communication and media arts.3

To this list, however, a fifth intellectual tradition has to be added, namely, philosophy. Although communication studies draws to a certain extent on the work of key American and continental philosophers—John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas—there remains a large number of twentieth-century academic philosophers whose contributions to communication theory remain poorly understood, vastly underappreciated, or entirely unrecognized by both students and scholars in the field. It is not just that a great many professional philosophers have theorized in their individual capacities about communication; it is, rather, that a story about communication may be found in philosophy conceived as an intellectual tradition. The present volume takes up Peters’s call for doing further intellectual history, and has been designed as a first step in bringing attention to that story.

This volume examines the place of communication in the thought of key figures from twentieth-century academic philosophy. Each chapter presents an intellectual profile of a particular philosophical figure. The approach is based roughly on the work of Randall Collins, whose pioneering study The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change (1998)
situates the great philosophers of world history within complex social and intellectual networks. This approach to intellectual history, being quite separate and distinct from a mere history of ideas, enables us to see the historical settings and rich social relationships that gave rise to great thinkers and their contributions to knowledge.

The design and structure of the present volume was inspired by a number of studies offering intellectual profiles of key thinkers. These include Richard J. Bernstein’s *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (1986), Jürgen Habermas’s *Philosophical-Political Profiles* (1983), Anthony Giddens’s *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory* (1983), and Anthony Elliot and Bryan S. Turner’s *Profiles in Contemporary Social Theory* (2001). A collection of intellectual profiles allows for simple and clear organization without compromising the nuance and complexity of its subject matter. The aim has been to combine ease of accessibility with detailed historical analysis and interpretation. In keeping with the latter task, each profile in this volume has been designed to answer the following questions about its chosen figure: (1) Who was/is this figure and what was/is his or her intellectual context? This part presents the historical setting in which to make sense of this figure’s work. (2) What does he or she have to say about communication? This part examines the place of communication, implicit or explicit, in his or her thought. (3) What has been the impact of this figure’s work on communication? Who has he or she influenced? Why does his or her work matter? The aim here is to make explicit the difference this work makes to our understanding and practice of communication. All of the chapters in this volume have therefore been organized according to three key components: intellectual context, contribution to knowledge, and difference to thought and practice. The contributors to this volume have otherwise been given the liberty to tell the story of their chosen thinkers as they have seen fit. Each chapter, therefore, retains its own style and integrity.

I have tried to ensure something of intellectual variety, selecting thinkers from different philosophical schools of thought: analytic, pragmatist, phenomenological, hermeneutic, feminist, systems theoretic, critical theoretic, psychoanalytic. By far, the most neglected of these has been the analytic school; the inclusion of chapters on Robert Brandom, Donald Davidson, and Daniel Dennett has been intended to redress this neglect. Although the pragmatist school is more familiar to the field through the writings of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, many of pragmatism’s most important figures, both classical and contemporary, remain mere names out of reach. In addition to the chapter on Brandom, a self-described “analytic-pragmatist,” the chapters on Charles Peirce, William James, and Richard J. Bernstein are
intended to give greater attention to the pragmatist tradition. The chapter on Sandra Harding, with its emphasis upon the partiality of all perspectives, not only makes a powerful case for the relevance of feminist thought to both philosophy and communication, but also reveals remarkable similarities to pragmatism. The chapter on Hannah Arendt challenges popular misconceptions about Arendt’s views of the social, misconceptions that have led to misguided dismissals of her thought. The chapter on Seyla Benhabib demonstrates the fascinating development and enormous practical value of a critical communication theory after Habermas.

The chapter on Ernst Cassirer, the idealist philosopher who challenged Martin Heidegger’s view of radical finitude, amply demonstrates why communication studies ought to play a part in the ongoing revival of interest in Cassirer’s thought. Phenomenology and hermeneutics are two sister traditions that hold lasting promise for communication theory; the chapters on Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur affirm the far-reaching relevance of both traditions to the field. The chapter on Emmanuel Levinas reveals how the dual influence of phenomenology and the Talmud led Levinas to a radical and counterintuitive style of theorizing that stands conventional communication theory on its head.

The thought of Martin Buber has thus far been known to the field largely through caricature. Buber is all too often reduced to so many catchphrases and misleading clichés about dialogue, which lead to summary dismissals of his importance. The chapter on Buber demonstrates why popular ideas about him are so misleading, and carries out the task of providing a much-needed corrective account. Another thinker who has so far been known to the field largely through caricature is Ludwig Wittgenstein. Although it is common today to encounter all manner of references to “language games,” what Wittgenstein meant by this deceptively simple concept is something quite different than what it is popularly taken to be. The chapter on Wittgenstein is a formidable work of exegesis, making this renegade and mysterious thinker both accessible and deeply relevant to the field.

The chapter on Jacques Lacan, the most philosophical of psychoanalysts, reveals a surprising contribution to communication theory. Although psychoanalysis has long served as a powerful tool for the analysis of media texts, it has not been understood as a resource for communication theory. One thinker who is impossible to classify and belongs in a school of his own is Gilles Deleuze. The originality of his thought is matched only by its notorious inaccessibility. A chapter on Deleuze’s contribution to communication theory is therefore necessary, given that he is a poorly understood, if readily familiar, name in the discipline. The chapter on Alasdair MacIntyre, with its