On Communication*

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My remarks will address the uses of the term 'communication' as it has come to permeate everyday talk in the mainstream speech culture of what we can loosely refer to as Western and Westernizing societies in late modernity. I will try to synthesize insights found in a number of studies conducted within the fields of Communication, Sociolinguistics and Sociology that highlight the cultural and historical specificity of 'communication' as a vernacular term. I will then consider a range of hybrid iterations in which the term is implicated in contemporary cultural contexts. Let me begin with my own work. When I first came to the United States some thirty years ago, I was struck by the pervasiveness of references to 'communication' as a social good and to its absence as a social problem. Statements such as "we talked but we didn't communicate", which sounded puzzling to my non-American ears, suggested that 'communicating' did not simply refer to a discursive activity but to a particular, desirable emergent quality of experience that resulted from it.

Given the prevalence of this usage in everyday talk, in popular culture and in academic parlance, it seemed like a good point of entry into an exploration of American culture. In a paper co-authored with Gerry Philipsen in 1981, which was entitled "What We Need is Communication,"[1] we proposed to view the term 'communication' as a cultural category, which performs a meta-discursive function, enabling cultural members and analysts alike to speak about speech. Using the heuristic framework proposed by Dell Hymes for the study of language in use, we claimed that 'communication' refers to a culturally coded 'way of speaking,'[2] a nexus of a particular set of communicative means and a particular set of cultural meanings. It was this codification process that rendered statements about the need for communication, laments about its absence or failure, and institutional projects designed to enhance and improve it, meaningful to members of mainstream American culture. Our informants interpreted 'communication' in relation to shared premises about persons, relationships and interpersonal conduct. To them it signaled intimacy, positive affect, and flexibility in engaging with others as equals. Premised on a model of selfhood grounded in personal uniqueness and the interiority of individuals, 'communication' is fraught with difficulties. In the logo-centric ethos of 'communication' these are resolved through talk as a

preferred relational tool - what Foucault might have called a 'technology of self' and of social relations.[3]

As such, 'communicating' is understood as a search for authentic selves and relationships, marked by seriousness of purpose expressed through the use of deliberate and ritualized speech forms. These are captured by such expressions as "Let's sit down and talk" and by the pervasive use of the metaphor of 'work.' Talk about working on one's 'self', one's 'relationships,' one's 'communication' strongly echoes the language of the therapeutic ethos, which has been popularized through the self-help literature over the past century. In his 1988 book Talking American,[4] Donal Carbaugh incisively showed how the mass media participated in the codification and cultural dissemination of the communication ethos through the development of the TV talk show format, such as the Phil Donahue talk show. As Phil Donahue sat down and talked to his studio guests they did not only preach the virtue of communicating with others over personal and interpersonal difficulties but also provided models for 'communication' that inscribed its forms and meanings in the public sphere.

The social potency of the 'communication ethos' was more recently underscored within the field of Sociology as well. In the year 2000, sociolinguist Deborah Cameron published a book whose title intriguingly questions Good to Talk? Cameron traces what she calls a "Communication Culture"[5] in institutional arenas such as the workplace and therapy. Where we discussed speech codification and ritualization as part of a cultural project of social integration grounded in self-making and emotion-work, Cameron discusses regimes of 'verbal hygiene' in which individual expression and everyday spoken interaction are colonized by impersonal 'expert systems.' In her view, therapy (and self-help as therapy without therapists) is an institution with its own procedures for constructing morally driven self-narratives. These narratives disseminate "ideas about what it means to be a 'good person', and more concretely, of providing models for the behavior of such a person towards other people.' Communication' is significant to both functions."[6] She refers to this process of verbal regimentation as 'styling,' and further notes that in the context of the work-world 'communication' is re-interpreted as a valuable 'skill' that promotes people's capacity to adopt behaviors and

language associated with flexibility, adaptability and effectiveness. Cameron conceives of training in communication skills, or 'skilling', as involving a process of self-construction whether that talk gives verbal shape to emotional life, as in therapy, or is instrumentally oriented towards the effective execution of work tasks. She regards this process critically, writing: "As spoken interaction comes increasingly to be treated as a set of 'skills', and colonized by expert systems with their de-contextualized, transferable procedures, there is a risk that its capacity to signify 'authentically' who an individual is and what s/he thinks or feels will be compromised."[7]

A similar focus on communication as a pivotal vernacular term that owes its resonance to the culture of therapy or self help appears at the center of a recent book by Eva Illouz, Cold Intimacies: The Rise of Emotional Capitalism, published in 2007.[8] Offering a socio-historical account of the emergence of what she calls the 'communication ethic' in the United States, Illouz links it directly to the growing impact of psychology as an academic and applied field. She marks the year 1909 – a hundred years ago - when Sigmund Freud arrived in America to lecture at Clark University about psychoanalysis, as a watershed year that brought about a change in American emotional culture. She claims that the therapeutic language that became crystallized between the first and second World Wars was decisive in shaping a modern emotional style, a vernacular version of therapy's 'talking cure,' which generated a new personal and interpersonal imaginary.

Illouz points to an intriguing paradox involving rationality and emotions in contemporary life domains. While 'classical' contexts of instrumental rationality, such as the corporate world and the public-political sphere, have become infused with emotion talk through the cultivation of communication skills, the emotional life associated with the private sphere has become increasingly rationalized through the reification of emotions and the codification of verbal expression. Illouz is clearly attuned to the possibility of a critical perspective on the communication ethic, pointing to its reification and commodification within the context of what she calls 'emotional capitalism.' While acknowledging the role the 'communication' code plays as an instrument of domination and regimentation in contemporary life, she

nevertheless underscores its role as a shared cultural code that underlies projects of self-making and community-building.

Thus, studies that address the ways the media model and preach the 'communication ethos', or the ways in which the workplace sets out to train individuals to become better communicators, or the ways communication skills become commodified within consumer culture, recognize the role of cultural modeling and social power in shaping people's lives. Taken together, the three aforementioned lines of research raise the question of whether it is possible – or desirable – to reconcile approaches that privilege a phenomenological perspective on the study of communication and its integrative function with those that offer a critical perspective on the diffusion of communication ideologies through regimentation and domination.

These studies, each with its own perspective on questions of cultural modeling and cultural domination, converge a great deal in the accounts they provide on the emergence of 'communication' as a culturally and historically situated keyword in late modernity. However, since this model is far from globally shared, and because it is so relentlessly disseminated around the world through mass mediated popular cultural forms produced in the West, one might ask if the term 'communication' carries any resonance beyond 'mainstream' American or 'Anglo' culture. And to the extent that it does, what can it teach us about cultural change in the social imaginary of groups whose encounter with modernity has brought them into contact with the 'styling' and 'skilling' associated with the 'communication' ethos?

Let me conclude, then, by briefly mentioning a couple of studies that demonstrate what such an exploration might look like. For instance, Ayala Fader has recently studied inspirational audiotapes produced by 'The center for Moral Education and Strengthening the Home' for the benefit of ultra-orthodox Hasidic women in the neighborhood of Boro Park in New York.[9] Adopting an analogy from studies of Muslim women, she calls these tapes "non-liberal Jewish self-help." She argues that these tapes constitute a new and hybrid genre of religious non-liberal self help that "challenges the boundaries between Western secular psychology, religious theology, and education."[10]

Seamlessly weaving together the therapeutic language of self-help and the language of Jewish moral philosophy, these tapes reinforce traditional Jewish ways, employing the language of self-empowerment and promises of personal growth. In regarding the cultivation of the self as a worthwhile project, they do not speak of liberating an essentialized, interiorized self but rather appeal to the highly coded gendered hierarchy that defines Hasidic women's existence. Women-listeners are encouraged to be satisfied with their lives, not to question them. Realizing one's potential is considered an important goal for these women, and they are told they should do so by embracing their role in relation to their husbands and upholding the gender hierarchy. The problem-centered, self-disclosure associated with the 'communication' code is not embraced by the women who sermonize or give lessons on these tapes. In an attempt to shield Hasidic society from women's expressivity, listeners are warned against sharing their problems or expressing negative feelings, and are exhorted to realize their potential by controlling their emotions in silence or prayer rather than through talk.

Another example of processes of hybridization and syncretism of this kind can be found in studies of the New Age movement that emerged in the American cultural scene in the 1970s and swept over the West - not as a nonliberal but rather as a hyper-liberal cultural formation. Adopting a non-institutionalized form of religiosity, the New Age movement promotes a 'self-spirituality,' a term that Paul Heelas views as "the essential lingua franca" of this movement.[11] New Age spirituality is profoundly modernist in its focus on the cultivation of the individual self yet this self is re-interpreted in cosmic, transpersonal terms. It also poses a challenge to the modernist ethos in its rejection of rationalism and in its romanticized appeal to neo-pagan and Far Eastern practices and symbolisms. Thus, New Age practices, which for many of its Western practitioners come at the heels of the logo-centric "communication" ethos, seem to establish what I would call a 'post-communication' expressive order, one that privileges embodied experience and the cultivation of silence.

And finally, to return to my initial encounter with the ethos of 'communication' some thirty years ago. Currently, the self-help idiom has been incorporated into mainstream Israeli culture as is indicated, inter alia, by

the morphological productiveness of the Hebrew term for 'communication' [*tikshoret*] and its derivatives in everyday talk, in popular culture and in work settings. It has also given rise to hybrid formations, some of which I have identified in a more recent study of communication styles on therapeutic programs on Israeli call-in radio.[12] Some might view these changes positively, regarding cultural appropriation as an enriching process. Others might view the same changes as indications of the relentless marketing of Western cultural forms and interpersonal ideologies in an increasingly globalizing world. I think the aforementioned studies have shown that an understanding of 'communication' as a cultural category is crucial to the way we map the contemporary global cultural landscape. This landscape is not only subject to globalizing and homogenizing processes. It is also one in which alternative interpretations of selfhood and social life brush against each other, giving rise to what may be an uneasy but also an undeniable, ongoing conversation.

Notes

[1] Tamar Katriel and Gerry Philipsen (1981) "'What We Need Is Communication': 'Communication' as a Cultural Category in Some American Speech." Communication Monographs 48:301-317.
[2] Dell Hymes (1989[1974]) "Ways of Speaking." In Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, eds. Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 433-51.
[3] Michel Foucault (1978) The History of Sexuality, V. 1. New York: Random House.
[4] Donal Carbaugh (1988) Talking American: Cultural Discourses on Donahue. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
[5] Deborah Cameron (2000) Good to Talk? Living and Working in a Communication Culture. London: Sage.
[6] Cameron, ibid., p.4-5.
[7] Cameron, ibid., p. 7.
[8] Eva Illouz (2007) Cold Intimacies. Cambridge: Polity.
[9] Ayala Fader (2009) "Non-liberal Jewish Women's Self-Help Audiocasettes and the Category of Religion," paper presented at the International Workshop "Cultured Jews: The Art and Science of Jewish Ethnography," Brown University, April 2009.
[10] Fader, ibid., p. 1.
[11] Paul Heelas (1996) The New Age Movement: Religion, Culture and Society in the Age of Postmodernity. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 18.
[12] Tamar Katriel (2004) Dialogic Moments: From Soul Talks to Talk Radio in Israeli Culture. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 231-323.