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## **Communication as . . .** Perspectives on Theory

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Edited by  
Gregory J. Shepherd, Jeffrey St. John, and Ted Striphas 

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## Communication as Political Participation

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Todd Kelshaw

As you read the words *political participation*, maybe you envision protesters or ralliers carrying signs and chanting, community-meeting members deliberating over coffee, poll workers signing in voters, or other decidedly “civic” behaviors. Perhaps, as well, you assign the phrase some kind of value, distinguishing it from terms like *political apathy* and *disenfranchisement*. Likely you think of political participation as some kind of potentially empowering democratic activity set within a particular sphere, which overlaps with “public” but diverges from “private.” In other words, you may view political participation as one kind of contextualized communication that sometimes you do and sometimes—that is, most of the time—you don’t do. Certainly, this conception is useful because it allows us to embody civil society in special kinds of talk that observably affect public policymaking: deliberation, debate, dialogue, rhetoric, heresthetic, and so on. However, my goal here is to inflate this bounded conception of political participation and, centrally, to assert that, in essence, *all* communication is consequential involvement in political relationships, processes, and structures.

Really? Surely there must be private or insulated communicative moments that are somehow apolitical, like when I read my daughter a bedtime story, share a joke with a coworker, or honk my car horn “hello” (or “Get out of my way!” for that matter) at a neighbor, right? In this essay’s reconception of politics, my answer is no. There are some big stop-offs along the way to this “no”: First, communication is relational and participatory. Second,

relationships are negotiations of values based in stake and power. Third, such negotiations occur in both private (interpersonal) and public (societal) contexts, which are inextricably braided. My final point is that it is within this inextricability that politics—as I define it—occurs. In other words, my major idea is that the mundane interaction of day-to-day life is just as political (if not as obviously and conscientiously) as any extraordinary public act, at least in the sense that both have consequences beyond their seemingly discrete spheres.

## Communication Is Relational and Participatory

The assertion that communication is relational is, in contemporary thought anyhow, somewhat of the “duh” variety. It seems that concern for communication’s relational nature is increasingly what defines today’s communication discipline over and against fields like psychology, linguistics, and political science. As Roberts and Bavelas (1996) trace them, dominant assumptions about where meaning resides have shifted in recent decades from *in words*, to *in words and their context*, to *in the speaker’s intention*, and, finally, to *in between interlocutors*. The “in between” is entirely a relational notion that characterizes communication as an interactive process rather than as a merely active thing.

Stanley Deetz’s (1994) commentary on the future of the discipline—written when a relational conception was still more of a “huh?” than a “duh” for many—asserts the new approach’s importance by fleshing out implications of the shift from an expressive to a constitutive take. The former sees communication as a means of information dissemination and control. In so doing, it ignores complex psychological, sociological, and economic undercurrents of heterogeneous societies while supporting the “reality” of dominant ideological traditions and the social groups that benefit from them. The new paradigm, though, aims to understand codeterminative dimensions of meaning-making, in which subtle ideological struggles and contradictory realities constantly play out. Whereas I momentarily defer discussion of these dynamics (which are at the heart of my definition of politics), I point out the general idea that relational conceptions of communication highlight the playing-out of complex and subtle dialectical tensions.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, I draw on Deetz’s idea that paying attention to such dynamics may help us better reflect and respond as we engage with others, thereby contributing to a world made more by collaborative management of contradictions than by domination and consent.

There is an important and rudimentary condition of our relational bonds with others: our participation. The by-now trite way of putting this is that we cannot *not* communicate. We participate in the words that we speak and write, and in our intended and unintended nonverbal behaviors. In doing so, we weave ourselves into social fabrics. Everything we do is inherently

communicative, which means that our behaviors arise from and contribute to our experiential worlds. This applies to the student at the back of the room who lowers her eyes, the citizen who refuses (or does not bother) to vote, and the boyfriend who hangs up the phone to avoid a quarrel. All are active—rather, interactive—instances of participation, which have consequences despite any desire one might have for invisibility and insulation. We not only participate regardless of our intentions, but regardless of our levels of awareness. It is impossible to reflect consciously on our nonstop interaction and its role in our world-making, but we cannot deny that our meanings do *mean* things to us, at all times. That we *do* coinhabit worlds that make sense to us means that we are, in fact, always participating somehow.

This infinitude and continuity of our participation concerns our various social realities’ unfolding natures. “In understanding, we are drawn into an event of truth and arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we are supposed to believe,” Gadamer beautifully observed (1995, p. 490). Communicated meaning is at once a noun and a verb—both product and process—that is real only in its ever pending consequences. In addition to being ever unfolding, relational participation is always *with*. So relating is somewhat of a democratic enterprise (in a particular sense) in that all participants have at least some control and some lack of control over what happens among them. Regardless of social disparities among participants, no one ever has total communicative control—not the dictator, the professor, the parent, the op-ed editor, nor the boss. There are too many converging dynamics within the spaces between us.

## Relationships Are Negotiations of Values, Marked by Stake and Power

That no one ever has total control over a relationship does not suggest that a relationship is ever devoid of questions about control. Relationships manifest dynamically imbalanced forces and are thus ever changing. This idea applies to relationships ranging from those with formal status differences (e.g., manager/laborer, teacher/student, sergeant/private, parent/child, and landlord/tenant) to those that we might swear up and down are equal partnerships (e.g., some friendships and romances) and simple power-free neutralities (e.g., anonymous and zero-history relationships among, say, fellow bus passengers). Along the continuum, though, our ideals and expectations of control—its causes, presence, functions, and outcomes—tend to differ.

With relatively formal, hierarchical relationships, we are more likely to perceive a kind of stable imbalance, insofar as we presume inequities to be hardwired as obvious power currencies (like the promotion that your boss dangles before you). The status quo in such relationships, we think, only

breaks down in dramatic, revolutionary fashion, as when you tell your boss to “take this job and shove it, I ain’t workin’ here no more” (Coe, 1978). On the other end of the continuum—in informal, nonhierarchical relationships—we are likely *not* to notice systemic inequities. This is because their currencies are less recognizable and the dynamics are more subtle and fluid. In these informal, nonhierarchical relationships, we are likely to think of power “problems”—slights, fights, and the like—as anomalous, discrete, maybe even sweep-it-under-the-rug events. Regardless of our assumptions and ideals about various kinds of relationships and their stabilities and visible currencies, though, *all* relationships experience the playing-out of shifting and multilayered power disparities—the ebbs, flows, flip-flops, and perpetual inequities of which are the drivers of meaning-making. Relational dynamics just vary in their levels of tumultuousness, subtlety, and calculation.

How is this so? Why is force an inescapable factor in relationships, even those we believe are founded on pacifistic, egalitarian ideals? If we view meaning as made within our interactions, then it follows that interactions are dynamic, creative processes. The creativity of relating cannot happen by means of stasis, which would result, impossibly, in the death of meaning. If you and I were perfect replicas and if there were no one else on Earth to interfere with us, we would neither disagree nor change (nor need to communicate, for that matter), and we would live together in perfect peace (not to be confused with harmony, which requires aligned difference; ours would be unison). Given the preposterousness of this scenario and the Earth’s abundance of diverse people and peoples, such stasis is not feasible. We are a varied lot, and our heterogeneity is both reflected and made in our distinct languages and voices. This polyphony is sometimes harmonic but more often dissonant—and the composition itself is ever detuned within our relationships’ pushes and pulls. Our only constant is our mutual yet imbalanced and fluctuating forcefulness.

So, what is being pushed-and-pulled over? Information? Factual knowledge? Hardly, since we have nothing quite that brute in our fluidly unstable worlds. What we instead tussle over are the unfixed premises of our beings as people: values. Everything we understand is, in measures, good, bad, right, wrong, beautiful, ugly, funny, somber, important, trivial. . . . These understandings not only *accompany* our senses of everything we know, they *are* our senses of everything we know, and they guide us moment by moment. Since everything we know is relationally made, relationships may be defined in this way: as negotiations of values that gird personal and social ethical frameworks and—in effect—make us who we are in light of others.

We place great stake in these negotiations because everything we have is in the balance (well, *imbalance*). If communication is relational, then “I” is contingent on how others respond to me and how I respond to them. To maintain my identity, then, *I value having my values valued by others whom*

*I value*. So do you, of course, so when you and I interact, we engage in moral confrontations, however imperceptibly at times. The intricate and shifting web of these confrontations among innumerable diverse people is called humanity.

Humanity, it follows, is an organic network of persuasive power in which staked values are continually inscribed, enforced, and transformed. In every interaction, we illuminate and confront certain moral preferences. Do we protect them? Propagate them? Relinquish them? No matter what, we do not have full control, because many other superseding values concurrently play out within our complex and changing ethical systems. This multilayered interplay of values is where personal and relational instability and change happens. (A mundane and very simple example: I hate sushi. You love sushi. I love doing things with you more than I hate sushi. So I grow to love sushi, at least when I eat it with you.) Our means of tinkering with values, then, are values themselves, which spiral in on themselves concentrically. Note that the persuasive power in which we stake our values is *itself* a manifestation of values, having currency only if our resources are things that we imbue with fear, want, need, or whatever. So communication is a process of persuasive evaluation *and* evaluative persuasion that continually spirals—and sometimes tumbles—in on itself.

## Value Negotiations on Local and Societal Levels Are Intertwined

The large point thus far is that communication is inevitably persuasive, even if our levels of reflection, intentionality, and assertiveness vary. It is through these persuasive transactions that we build and rebuild our humanistic worlds, which are appropriately understood as fluid and complex systems of power-laden relationships. Now I address these systems, defining them as interweavings of local and societal discourses.

In local settings, we interact with varying qualities. To borrow from Stewart and Logan’s (1998) conception, these variations may be laid out on a continuum. On one end, we fulfill social roles for each other in generic contexts, enacting and reacting to acceptably decorous scripts (e.g., “Paper or plastic, ma’am?” or “Get up to your room, young man, and don’t come down till you’ve thought about what you’ve done!”). Moving along the continuum, we communicate in ways that affiliate and differentiate us according to our senses of often-overlapping cultural memberships (e.g., the Grateful Dead sticker you see on that Mercedes’ bumper, or the two female students who sit next to each other in an otherwise all-male class). The other end of the continuum finds us interacting not in measurable and scripted social roles, but as unique persons capable of reflecting and responding in dialogic ways. As we move fluidly through these varied modes, we enact and reproduce

different ethical versions of ourselves. Many of these moral structures exist simultaneously, and typically overlap and even contradict.

We also participate nonlocally, engaging in group- and mass-discourses in relatively “public” contexts. These discourses generally affiliate and coordinate us within more-or-less cohesive yet permeable organizations and cultural bodies, creating and recreating overlapping structures and social orders. They do this by enabling the interplay of stabilizing and destabilizing social movements, which ensures that larger social formations—like big-scale versions of interpersonal relationships—are always in flux. In an age of ever-expanding technologies and media, our mass discourses defy regional, temporal, and cultural confines, plugging us into more-complicated arrays of relationships and understandings. In these arrays, we encounter and contribute to multiple overlapping ethical frameworks.

“It is always the case,” notes Anthony Giddens (1984), “that the day-to-day activity of social actors draws upon and reproduces structural features of wider social systems,” which are “not necessarily unified collectives” (p. 24). To speak of interpersonal, societal, private, and public communicative moments in the same breath is to invoke what Giddens calls a braided “copresence” that is manifested in “fluctuating lines between enclosure and display” (p. xxvi). However convenient it may be to tease apart interpersonal and collective communicative processes and structures (as I have done in the prior two paragraphs), doing so risks the trappings of a dualist approach: missed opportunities to recognize the subtle, complicated, and organic qualities of the interplay. In seeing relational life as interwoven—at once private and public, local and global, and immediate and timeless—I hope to do away with simplistic dissociations of free will (agency) and determinism (functionalism), while celebrating the fact that we do have, well, *some* personal control. But our potentials to conscientiously affect our worlds are limited—ironically by structural constraints of our own comaking.

## Communication as Political Participation

Politics, in my definition, lives in those innumerable interstices and intersections of interpersonal and societal relating. It is not a discrete sphere within a so-called public realm, occasionally bumping into other spheres such as economics and law.<sup>2</sup> Nor is its chief (or only) function to develop and execute public policy. Instead, politics is our universal condition. It is brought to life when we interact, confront others’ ethics and our own, and forge senses of each other and ourselves in relation to broader social groups. In making sense of these things together, we bring them into existence. The tensions that play out in this amorphous web have enormous (mostly unintended)

consequences, from the qualities of our friendships to the invasiveness of our laws. It is this ongoing tensional process that galvanizes us all as coparticipants within a shared political state of being.

When I watch CNN’s *Crossfire*, for example, I understand why we are reluctant to think of politics in this way. I also get a hint as to why political apathy and cynicism so miserably pervade American society (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Even when political matters gain our attention, they tend to do so in ways that abstract themselves from our everyday experiences on the job, in the home, at the bowling alley, or wherever our “real” lives take us. We talk *about* politics, but not, we think, *within* it. Politics bores us, entertains us, angers us, affiliates and divides us . . . but always from a distance and with implicit permission to simply turn it off. It is something mostly done by other people (politicians) in other places (“inside the Beltway”) and tends to be, by definition, ugly, mean-spirited, and backhanded. (The appropriated term *office politics* exemplifies this sense.) The potentially definitive *Crossfire* version of politics is *The Jerry Springer Show* dressed up in white collars (and bow ties). We see that how people with ideological differences relate to each other is no different than how people with marital differences do when performing for a live studio audience: with divisive simplifications, personal insults, yelling, and worse. And just as violent videogames purportedly relieve our pent-up angst rather than train us to enact it in real life, our ability to abstract those politicians on *Crossfire* (as with those “trailer-trash hicks” on *The Jerry Springer Show*) as objects of spectacle seems to vaccinate us from obligation to participate ourselves.

This *Crossfire*-ization of politics, though, is merely a symptom of a more systemic problem. What underlies and precipitates this symptom are the notions that participation and obligation pertain only to democratically leaning societies like the United States and, more troubling, that political participation is something we may choose to do. This essay’s biggest point is that we—meaning *all of us*—are *always* participants in encompassing political relationships, processes, and structures, *all of which* exceed formal jurisdictions. This is true, by default, of our constant communicative involvement with others, regardless of whether our immediate government is dictatorial (in which we believe we are not allowed to be political), republican (in which we celebrate our choice whether to exercise certain political rights, even in light of Sean “P. Diddy” Combs’s famous 2004 directive to “vote or die”), or anything else. Being political is not a prohibited thing, a choice, or an obligation; it is a condition. The root question is not whether we choose or have the power to behave politically, but whether we recognize the political consequences of our minute-to-minute interactions.

As I have claimed throughout this essay, our personal value systems are reconstructed in these minute-to-minute interactions, and they bleed into and out of larger societal value systems. This complicated intereffluence is what I call

“politics” because it is where *unum* and *pluribus* confront and absorb one another, then seep forth again, transformed.<sup>3</sup> In my conception, the private and the public are not distinct spheres, either detached or overlapping. They are one and the same. So as I read my daughter a bedtime story, share a joke with an office colleague, or honk my car horn at a neighbor, the best thing I can do is reflect on how we are affecting each other and what values are transpiring between us. Once I have done that, I am a bit better poised to reflect on how such value constructs are not “mine” by possession or right, but how they are “ours.” I may notice that as we continue to engage with others in our complex worlds, the “ours” transcends my local dyadic settings and interacts with innumerable other “ours” in that great boundless public of intersecting ethical collectives.

A final point: My call is not derision of those (myself included) who work hard to promote explicit forms of civic engagement. Whereas I assert here that quintessentially “civic” discourses such as deliberation and dialogue are no more or less political than others, I do not intend to demean their real potentials for empowering common people and affecting public policy. Surely, citizens’ direct involvement in policymaking is vital for any society, and utterly necessary for democracies. But I believe that we—as scholars, officeholders, reporters, laypeople, and whoever—tend to devote our attention to political tangibles like public opinion, grassroots movements, policy-making procedures, and campaign advertising effects largely because these are causal things that we are able to isolate and measure. Meanwhile, we neglect the ways in which all sorts of other invisible and untraceable discursive forces shape our societies and ourselves.

We ignore such forces for two chief reasons, I think. For one, these are fluid and complex things that defy our empirical methods. For another, the prioritization of simple causal factors in a supposedly delimited political sphere preserves our liberal-individualistic beliefs in freedom of choice and personal power. These commitments, in turn, preserve the potential for dominance and the perception of consent—the requisites of one’s abilities for success in this increasingly globalized, free-market, and supposedly information-aged world of ours. To acknowledge that our political processes occur not just in our public, political spheres but within the universes of our relational webs, we fear, would be to acknowledge our partial lack of control and choice and, in so doing, to relinquish them completely.

## Notes

1. See Baxter and Montgomery (1996) for an excellent articulation of a relational perspective.

2. This spherical conceptualization of politics is exemplified in this television news report: “As always, Wall Street has one eye on politics” (WCBS-TV, 2004).

3. Whereas the notion of *e pluribus unum* is a hallmark of republican democracies, the tension between individuals and their larger societies (and the global worlds beyond) is endemic to any social structure, from anarchies to dictatorships.

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