SPEAKING INTO THE AIR – A History of the Idea of Communication

By John Durham Peters

Introduction: The Problem of Communication

When you take a word in your mouth you must realize that you have not taken a tool that can be thrown aside if it will not do the job, but you are fixed in a direction of thought which comes from afar and stretches beyond you.

HANS-GEORG GADAMER

Though humans were anciently dubbed the "speaking animal" by Aristotle, only since the late nineteenth century have we defined ourselves in terms of our ability to communicate with one another. The intellectual, ethical, and political implications of this revolutionary change in self-description have not been sufficiently traced. This book attempts to begin such a tracing. It is at once a critique of the dream of communication as the mutual communion of souls, a genealogy of sources and scenes of the pervasive sense that communication is always breaking down, and a reclamation of a way of thinking that avoids both the moral privilege of dialogue and the pathos of breakdown. I aim to trace the sources of modern ideas of communication and to understand why the modern experience of communication is so often marked by felt impasses.

"Communication" is one of the characteristic concepts of the twentieth century. It has become central to reflections on democracy, love, and our changing times. Some of the chief dilemmas of our age, both public and personal, turn on communication or communication gone sour. A diverse company of thinkers—Marxists, Freudians, existentialists, feminists, anti-imperialists, sociologists, and philosophers of language, to name a few—have dealt with the tragedy, comedy, or absurdity of failed communication. The difficulty of communication across various social boundaries—gender, class, race, age, religion, region, nation, and language—confronts us daily. But horizons of incommunicability loom beyond the merely human world as well, in the vexing question of communication with animals, extraterrestrials, and smart machines. Much in the century's popular culture, especially science fiction, plays on how new symbol-processing machines allow for such dangers and delights as mind control or bodily transport. Likewise, much twentieth-century drama, art, cinema, and literature examines the impossibility of communication between people. One need only mention such playwrights as O'Neill, Beckett, Sartre, Ionesco, Albee, or Havel or filmmakers such as Bergman, Antonioni, or Tarkovsky to evoke scenes of stammering face-to-face relations. Intellectuals of all kinds have likewise found in communication a topic with which to explore the outer limits of human connection and to weigh the demands we place on one another. Strother Martin's line from the 1967 film Cool Hand Luke, starring Paul Newman, has assumed an epochal significance: "What we have here is failure to communicate."

"Communication" is a registry of modern longings. The term evokes a utopia where nothing is misunderstood, hearts are open, and expression is uninhibited. Desire being most intense when the object is absent, longings for communication also index a deep sense of dereliction in social relationships. How did we get to the pass where such pathos attaches to the act of speaking with another person? How did it become possible to say that a man and woman "are tuned to different frequencies"?1 How did a term once associated with successful transmission by telegraph, telephone, or radio come to carry the political and intimate aspirations of so many people in this age? Only moderns could be facing each other and be worried about "communicating" as if they were thousands of miles apart. "Communication" is a rich tangle of intellectual and cultural strands that encodes our time's confrontations with itself. To understand communication is to understand much more. An apparent answer to the painful divisions between self and other, private and public, and inner thought and outer word, the notion illustrates our strange lives at this point in history. It is a sink into which most of our hopes and fears seem to be poured.

The Historicity of Communication

My aim is not to explore the full variety of communication problems as reflected in the thought and culture of the twentieth century, but rather to tell the story of how communication became such trouble for us. My strategy follows a distinction Walter Benjamin made between modes of historical narration. One mode he called historicism: it regarded history as preconstituted and given, a continuous chain of causes and effects existing in a homogeneous space-time continuum. The past waited demurely for the historian to conjure it up. The scholar needed only to call (with sufficient patience and rigor) and history would respond, telling of things as they really were. The other mode—the one Benjamin preferred, as I do—saw in every act of historical narration a constructivist principle. The historian did not wait for the past to speak its fullness but was an activist who brought ages into alignment with each other. Time, for Benjamin, is not just a continuum; it is full of ruptures and shortcuts—"wormholes," we might say. Benjamin is thinking of the medieval notion of time as nunc stans, an eternal present (Jetztzeit in his German), but as is always true in his work, the mystical sources are not wifty dreaming but have shrewd relevance to concrete concerns. The present becomes intelligible as it is aligned with a past moment with which it has a secret affinity. There is a simultaneity not only across space, but across time as well. The Roman Republic and the French Revolution, though nearly two millennia apart, are more closely linked than 1788 and 1789, separated by only a year. Fashion illustrates such simultaneity: in some periods past styles (swing music, sideburns, bell-bottoms) are dead and off-limits, and in others they are suddenly current again. The past lives selectively in the present. History works not in a solely linear way but by being arranged into various constellations.2

What these reflections mean for this book is that I try to illuminate the present by excavating several past moments with which I believe it has an affinity. There is little here that is directly about television, cinema, or the Internet, and not much beyond the mid-twentieth century. Yet late nineteenth-century studies in psychical research (chapters 2 and 5) or 1930s worries about how to create a warm human presence over radio (chapter 5), I believe, illuminate with some precision the questions—virtual reality, cloning, cyborgs, and global ethernets—facing us at the turn of the millennium. In the same way, such figures as Socrates and Jesus (chapter 1) or Augustine and John Locke (chapter 2) might not have a demonstrable role in the historical semantics of "communication," but they are good to think with. With brilliance and articulateness, they lay out arguments and concerns that in current thinking are often

muffled at best. Such thinkers as these make our own thoughts more fluent. All history writing, of course, is a commentary on its own age, even (or especially) that which claims to be most true to the past. Benjamin simply makes the historian's role in creating the alignments explicit.

One might ask, Why my insistence on the historicity of "communication"? Isn't communication an issue that mystifies people everywhere? That communication troubles are written into the human condition is in one sense surely true. William James put it well in his Principles of Psychology (1890):

One great splitting of the whole universe into two halves is made by each of us; and for each of us almost all of the interest attaches to one of the halves; but we all draw the line of division between them in a different place. When I say that we all call the two halves by the same names, and that those names are "me" and "not me" respectively, it will at once be seen what I mean. The altogether unique kind of interest which each human mind feels in those parts of creation which it can call me or mine may be a moral riddle, but it is a fundamental psychological fact. . . . Each of us dichotomizes the Kosmos in a different place.3

Our sensations and feelings are, physiologically speaking, uniquely our own. My nerve endings terminate in my own brain, not yours. No central exchange exists where I can patch my sensory inputs into yours, nor is there any sort of "wireless" contact through which to transmit my immediate experience of the world to you. James took the mutual insulation of consciousness to be given in the human condition. Of the isolation of different people's streams of thought, James wrote: "The breaches between such thoughts are the most absolute breaches in nature."4 In this view, humans are hardwired by the privacy of their experience to have communication problems.

James may well be right that all humans naturally have a privileged relation to themselves such that direct sharing of consciousness is impossible. Even though the impossibility of immediate communication between minds may be a fundamental psychological fact (or at least the fundamental fact of the field of psychology), it is important to note that we have not always talked this way about our mutual relations. Even though people's eyes and ears had been receiving apparently "private" data for thousands of years, James lived in a world in which breaches between individual minds had wider social and political relevance. There is, in other words, something historical and contingent about James's discovery of something transhistorical and given. Even though today "communication" might seem a fixed problem for the human species, from cave dwellers to postmoderns, only in James's lifetime (1842–1910) did communication acquire its grandeur and pathos as a concept. Two words coined in the late nineteenth century mark his intellectual horizon well: "solipsism" in 1874 and "telepathy" in 1882. (The latter was a brainchild of James's colleague in psychical research, Frederic W. H. Myers). Both reflect an individualist culture in which the walls surrounding the mind were a problem, whether blissfully thin (telepathy) or terrifyingly impermeable (solipsism). Since then, "communication" has simultaneously called up the dream of instantaneous access and the nightmare of the labyrinth of solitude.

This dualism of "communication"—at once bridge and chasm—arose from new technologies and their spiritualist reception, which capped a long tradition of speculating about immaterial mental contact (chapter 2). Briefly, technologies such as the telegraph and radio refitted the old term "communication," once used for any kind of physical transfer or transmission, into a new kind of quasi-physical connection across the obstacles of time and space. Thanks to electricity, communication could now take place regardless of impediments such as distance or embodiment. The term conjured up a long tradition of

dreams about angelic messengers and communion between separated lovers. "Communication" seemed far superior to the age-old grubby face-to-face work of making lives together in language. It was swift as lightning, subtle as the ether, and wordless as thoughts of love. Interpersonal relations gradually became redescribed in the technical terms of transmission at a distance—making contact, tuning in or out, being on the same wavelength, getting good or bad vibes, or "Earth to Herbert, come in please!" Communication in this sense makes problems of relationships into problems of proper tuning or noise reduction.

As I examine such media of transmission and recording as the post office, telephone, camera, phonograph, and radio in later chapters, my focus will be not on how they affected face-to-face communication as an already constituted zone of human activity, but rather on how such media made "communication" possible as a concept in the first place, with all its misfires, mismatches, and skewed effects. The potentials for disruption in long-distance "communication"—lost letters, wrong numbers, dubious signals from the dead, downed wires, and missed deliveries—have since come to describe the vexations of face-to-face converse as well. Communication as a person-to-person activity became thinkable only in the shadow of mediated communication. Mass communication came first. Already in what is perhaps the first, and certainly the most articulate, account of communication as an ideal of interpersonal understanding—Plato's Phaedrus—communication is defined in contrast to its perversion (by manipulation, rhetoric, and writing). Communication is a homeopathic remedy: the disease and the cure are in cahoots. It is a compensatory ideal whose force depends on its contrast with failure and breakdown. Miscommunication is the scandal that motivates the very concept of communication in the first place.5

The Varied Senses of "Communication"

One might fairly object that I have unfairly narrowed the meaning of "communication." The term deserves a closer analysis. Like many notions hailed as unmixed goods, it suffers from the misfortune of conceptual confusion. Confusion, if it suggests the mixing of well-defined intellectual contours, may even be too precise a term, since "communication" in much contemporary discourse exists as a sort of ill formed, undifferentiated conceptual germ plasm. Rarely has any idea been so infested with platitudes. Communication is good, mutuality is good, more sharing is better: these seemingly obvious dicta, because unexamined, sweep too much under the rug. I wish it were easier to find arguments by thinkers defending such propositions explicitly and rigorously. Because "communication" has become the property of politicians and bureaucrats, technologists and therapists, all eager to demonstrate their rectitude as good communicators, its popularity has exceeded its clarity. Those seeking to make the term theoretically precise for academic study have sometimes ended up only formalizing the miasma from the culture more generally.6 The consequence is that the philosophically richest thinking about communication, taken as the problem of intersubjectivity or breakdowns in mutual understanding, is often found in those who make little use of the word.7

"Communication" is a word with a rich history. From the Latin communicare, meaning to impart, share, or make common, it entered the English language in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The key root is mun- (not uni-), related to such words as "munificent," "community," "meaning," and Gemeinschaft. The Latin munus has to do with gifts or duties offered publicly—including gladiatorial shows, tributes, and rites to honor the dead. In Latin, communicatio did not signify the general arts of human connection via symbols, nor did it suggest the hope for some kind of mutual recognition. Its sense was not in the

least mentalistic: communicatio generally involved tangibles. In classical rhetorical theory communicatio was also a technical term for a stylistic device in which an orator assumes the hypothetical voice of the adversary or audience; communicatio was less authentic dialogue than the simulation of dialogue by a single speaker.8

As in Latin, one dominant branch of meaning in "communication" has to do with imparting, quite apart from any notion of a dialogic or interactive process. Thus communication can mean partaking, as in being a communicant (partaking of holy communion). Here "communication" suggests belonging to a social body via an expressive act that requires no response or recognition. To communicate by consuming bread and wine is to signify membership in a communion of saints both living and dead, but it is not primarily a message-sending activity (except perhaps as a social ritual to please others or as a message to the self or to God). Moreover, here to "communicate" is an act of receiving, not of sending; more precisely, it is to send by receiving. A related sense is the notion of a scholarly "communication" (monograph) or a "communication" as a message or notice. Here is no sense of exchange, though some sort of audience, however vague or dispersed, is implied. Communication can also mean connection or linkage. In the nineteenth-century United States, "steam communication" could mean the railroad. In Hawthorne's House of the Seven Gables we read: "She approached the door that formed the customary communication between the house and garden." In the sense of linkage, communication could also mean coitus.9 Curiously, "communication" once meant what we now call intercourse, while "intercourse" once meant what we now call communication (the varieties of human dealings). The ambiguous term "relations" underlies both.

Another branch of meaning involves transfer or transmission. The sense of physical transfer—such as the communication of heat, light, magnetism, or gifts—is now largely archaic, but it is the root, as I argue in chapter 2, of the notion of communication as the transfer of psychical entities such as ideas, thoughts, or meanings. When John Locke speaks of "Communication of Thoughts," he is taking a term with a physical acceptation and appropriating it for social uses. Here too there is nothing necessarily two-way about communication. One can speak of the one-way transmissions of advertising and public relations as communications, even if no response is possible or desired. One senses that the purveyors of these things would like them to work like communicable diseases, another transmissive sense of the term. A third branch of meaning is communication as exchange, that is, as transfer times two. Communication in this sense is supposed to involve interchange, mutuality, and some kind of reciprocity. The nature of the exchange can vary. Communication can mean something like the successful linkage of two separate termini, as they say in telegraphy. Here simply getting through, as in delivery of mail or e-mail, is enough to constitute communication. If both ends know the message has arrived, then communication has occurred. A further, colloquial sense of communication calls for the exchange of open and frank talk between intimates or coworkers.10 Here communication does not mean simply talk; it refers to a special kind of talk distinguished by intimacy and disclosure. An even more intense sense of communication as exchange dispenses with talk altogether and posits a meeting of minds, psychosemantic sharing, even fusion of consciousness. As Leo Lowenthal put it, "True communication entails a communion, a sharing of inner experience."11 Although Lowenthal is not necessarily saying we can share inner experience without the materiality of words, he nicely states the high-stakes definition of communication as contact between interiorities. And though clearly not the only definition of communication, it is the one that has risen to prominence in the past century. Here the normative pathos is most intense.

"Communication" can also serve, in a much more modest way, as a blanket term for the various modes of symbolic interaction. Here communication is free of special pleading about what we humans should be capable of but is a descriptive term for our relations in signification. There is something of this in the King James translation of Matt. 5:37, "But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." Here communication translates logos, one of the richest words in the Greek lexicon. Ranging across such senses as word, argument, discourse, speech, story, book, and reason, logos served as an overall term for the capacities that followed from the fact that humans, as Aristotle said, are animals possessing the word. Matt. 5:37 suggests that our speech be simple, but the usage suggests a general policy about humans and the logos.

"Communication" can mean something similarly general. As Charles Horton Cooley wrote in 1909, "By Communication is here meant the mechanism through which human relations develop—all the symbols of the mind, together with the means of conveying them through space and preserving them in time." In this book I will use "communications" in the plural in this sense. As Raymond Williams puts it in a serviceable but too psychological definition, communications are "the institutions and forms in which ideas, information, and attitudes are transmitted and received."12 They might include tombs, hieroglyphics, writing, coins, cathedrals, stamps, flags, clocks, the press, the post, telegraphy, photography, cinema, telephony, phonography, radio, television, cable, computer, the Internet, multimedia, virtual reality, or any other signifying medium.13 "Communication," in contrast, I take as the project of reconciling self and other. The mistake is to think that communications will solve the problems of communication, that better wiring will eliminate the ghosts.

Although I am skeptical that the word "communication" can ever fully shake the ghosts of wordless contact, the term marks out a marvelous zone for inquiry: the natural history of our talkative species. Communication theory claims this zone. As I argue below, the notion of communication theory is no older than the 1940s (when it meant a mathematical theory of signal processing), and no one had isolated "communication" as an explicit problem till the 1880s and 1890s. Throughout I use "communication theory" not to refer to any extant practice of inquiry, but in a loose, ahistorical sense for a vision of the human condition as in some fundamental way communicative, as anchored in the logos. In this way communication theory becomes consubstantial with ethics, political philosophy, and social theory in its concern for relations between self and other, self and self, and closeness and distance in social organization. Though few of the figures examined in this book had any notion of "communication theory," our current situation allows us to find things in their texts that were never there before. As Benjamin knew, the present can configure the past so as to open up new points of rendezvous.

Sorting Theoretical Debates in (and via) the 1920s

These terminological distinctions do not exhaust the variety of conceptions about communication. At two points in the twentieth century, communication was an especially hot topic of intellectual debate: after World War I and after World War II. These debates clarify the varieties of this plastic concept and also provide a more contemporary window for approaching the rest of the book.

All the intellectual options in communication theory since that time were already visible in the 1920s. In philosophy, "communication" was a central concept. Major works probing the possibilities and limits of communication include Karl Jaspers, Psychologie der Weltanschaaungen (1919); Ludwig Wittgenstein,

Tractatus Logico-philosophicus (1922); Martin Buber, I and Thou (1923); C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, The Meaning of Meaning (1923); John Dewey, Experience and Nature (1925); Martin Heidegger, Being and Time (1927); and Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents (1930). In social thought more generally, large-scale communication to the many, be they "crowd," "mass," "people," or "public," was a theme in such works as Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (1922); Ferdinand Tönnies, Kritik der öffentlichen Meinung (1922); Edward Bernays, Crystallizing Public Opinion (1923); Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness (1923); Carl Schmitt, The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy (1923, 1926); Dewey, The Public and Its Problems (1927); Harold Lasswell, Propaganda Technique in the World War (1927); and Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1922). Modernist masterpieces by Eliot, Hemingway, Kafka, Proust, Rilke, and Woolf all explored breakdowns in communication. The dada movement, at its height during the war, actively provoked such breakdowns. Surrealism countered by finding connection everywhere. Everywhere, "communication" was on the agenda.

"Communication" meant very different things in this highly diverse body of work. In one view, communication signified something like the dispersion of persuasive symbols in order to manage mass opinion. Such theorists as Lippmann, Bernays, and Lasswell all offered a historical narrative about the increasing importance of "communication" and "propaganda" in modern society. Industrialization, urbanization, societal rationalization, psychological research, and novel instruments of communication all provided unprecedented conditions for the manufacture of consent among dispersed populations. The experience of the First World War, moreover, proved that symbols are not just aesthetic ornaments but prime movers of social organization. Strategically cultivated perceptions lost or won battles and sent men in the trenches to their graves. Lasswell, for one, argued the inevitability of manipulation as a principle of modern social order and its superiority to the earlier reliance on more brutal forms of social control: "If the mass will be free of chains of iron, it must accept its chains of silver."14

The scale, systematicity, and putative effectiveness of mass-communicated symbols raised tough questions for the future of democracy. If the will of the people, the feste Burg of democratic theory, was little more than a bog of stereotypes, censorship, inattention, and libido to be manipulated by experts or demagogues, what did that say about the rationality of the public? Different authors had different answers to this question. Walter Lippmann argued for the obsolescence of popular sovereignty and its replacement by expert rule. His belief in the manipulability of the many, however, was tempered by an equally strong sense of the impenetrability of the people: popular irrationality could be both malleable and intransigent. Carl Schmitt, the brilliant conservative political theorist who was later briefly Kronjurist for the Nazis, thought people's faith that government business got done through public discussion in a parliament that reflected public opinion in general was little more than a joke. It is "as though someone had painted the radiator of a modern central-heating system with red flames in order to give the appearance of a blazing fire."15 At the opposite end of the political spectrum, Marxist theoretician Georg Lukács saw the art of party organization as not just a technical but an intellectual (geistige) issue for the revolution. The revolutionary process was inseparable from the development of class consciousness on the part of the proletariat and hence involved choosing the right slogans and rallying cries.16 Whereas Lippmann saw the calculated production of public opinion as proof of the unfeasibility of popular democracy, Lukács saw such production as precisely the necessary prelude to revolutionary action. Neither, however, believed in the spontaneous self-organization of popular will; each gave a major role to a "vanguard," whether of social-scientific experts (Lippmann) or intellectual party leaders (Lukács). Communication, in short, was conceived of as the power to bind a far-flung populace together

for good or ill; it had the stuff to make or break political order, a notion that also informs, alas, another book of the period, Adolf Hitler's Mein Kampf (1925).

A second vision saw communication as the means to purge semantic dissonance and thereby open a path to more rational social relations. It is closely related to the propaganda view as cure is related to disease. The Meaning of Meaning (1923) by the Cambridge critics C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards is probably the best exhibit of this view and, even more, of the dominant view of communication as the accurate sharing of consciousness. Their twin enemies were "the impasse of solipsism" and the "veritable orgy of verbomania" in the modern world, classic 1920s worries about inaccessible individuality and mass gullibility. (These concerns recapitulate the solipsism/telepathy dualism.) Their project was a "science of symbolism" that would have widespread application in clearing up controversy and confusion in human intercourse. Ogden and Richards believed that many troubles resulted from mixing the symbolic and emotive functions of language, "the same words being used at once to make statements and to excite attitudes." (There's the old bugaboo: one word, many uses.) Their diagnosis of modern democracy could be Lippmann's: "New millions of participants in the control of general affairs must now attempt to form personal opinions upon matters which were once left to only a few. At the same time the complexity of these matters has immensely increased." But their remedy differed. Lippmann argued that such complexity required shifting the burden of rule from the people to experts, but Ogden and Richards called for an educated public: "The alternative [to elite rule] is to raise the level of communication through a direct study of its conditions, its dangers, and its difficulties. The practical side of this undertaking is, if communication be taken in its widest sense, Education."17

Communication, for Ogden and Richards, thus has both a macro and a micro application. Their purification of the language of the tribe would help at both international and interpersonal levels. In a long British tradition distrusting the deceit of words found in such thinkers as Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Bentham, and Russell, Ogden and Richards viewed language as a necessary but flawed instrument: "Words . . . are at present a very imperfect means of communication." Indeed, Ogden spent three decades proselytizing on behalf of "Basic" English (British American Scientific International Commercial), a proposed universal language consisting of 850 English words. (Note that each word in the acronym represents an empire.) Language ties us dangerously to our primeval origins: "Tens of thousands of years have elapsed since we shed our tails, but we are still communicating with a medium developed to meet the needs of arboreal man." Indeed, the word-magic so prominent in early human cultures—the belief that the name gives power over the thing—has not declined but increased in the twentieth century, thanks to the ability of the "symbolic apparatus" to disseminate clichés. Whereas propaganda preyed on atavistic word madness, semantic analysis would provide a medium of communication for the needs of modern scientific men and women.18

At the interpersonal level, the chief danger was the mismatching of intention: "Normally, whenever we hear anything said we spring spontaneously to an immediate conclusion, namely, that the speaker is referring to what we would be referring to were we speaking the words ourselves." This conclusion they thought especially dubious where sharing ideas is the aim. Since meaning is in the mind of the beholder, the labyrinth of solipsism always looms. "In most matters, the possible treachery of words can only be controlled through definitions, and the greater the number of such alternative locutions available the less is the risk of discrepancy, provided that we do not suppose symbols to have 'meaning' on their own account, and so people the world with fictitious entities." The fear of fictions, the risk of discrepancy, the

need of a scientific metalanguage, and the horror of populating the universe with anchorless meanings —these positions resound in later semantic views of both communication and its failures.

Communication for Ogden and Richards was not the coordination of action or the revelation of otherness, but a matching of minds, a consensus in idem: "A language transaction or a communication may be defined as a use of symbols in such a way that acts of reference occur in a hearer which are similar in all relevant respects to those which are symbolized by them in the speaker." This formulation, to be sure, makes pragmatic allowance for slippage ("similar in all relevant respects"), but the criterion of successful communication remains the identity of consciousness between speaker and hearer. Psychology therefore remains the best science for studying communication: "It is evident that the problem for the theory of communication is the delimitation and analysis of psychological contexts, an inductive problem exactly the same in form as the problems of the other sciences." Compared with other positions we will examine, theirs is squarely in the tradition of communication as contact between minds via some delicate and error-prone sign medium. Communication is as rare and fragile as crystal. Their mentalism logically entails the specter of miscommunication, for if meanings inhere not in words but in minds or references to objects, nothing can guarantee successful transit across the distance between two minds. They are the true heirs of John Locke, whose notion of communication I discuss in chapter 2. Their utopia of a concourse of consciousnesses can become the maze of isolated souls whose gestures of communication are nothing but impossible gambits. Little wonder this lonely crowd is so vulnerable to the wiles of propaganda!19

Ogden and Richards's fear of solipsism was echoed in the modernist masterworks of the 1920s, which gives us a third conception: communication as an insurmountable barrier. Propaganda analysis was driven by the modernization of society and politics; the sense of impossibility was at the heart of literary and aesthetic modernism. One worried about one-way communication, the other about no-way communication. Dramas of interpersonal desolation, for example, are at the core of T. S. Eliot's enormously influential poem The Waste Land (1922). The poem's once notorious difficulty forces communication breakdown in the very act of reading and consists, in large part, of a series of tableaux of communication breakdown, usually figured as sexual malfunction. The desire to connect always fails:

—Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not

Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither

Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,

Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

(LINES 37–41)

I have heard the key

Turn in the door once and turn once only

We think of the key, each in his prison

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.

Kafka's posthumous The Castle (1926) is a novel of shadowboxing with an institutional other whose identity and motives remain forever enigmatic. For Kafka, as I will argue in chapter 5, interpersonal communication is no different from mass communication: both are broadcasts to invisible, absent, or veiled audiences. Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse (1927) probes the gendered dimension to the modernist soul box by playing the oceanlike, infinitely sympathetic and mutable consciousness of Mrs. Ramsay off the cold, scimitarlike, logical mind of Professor Ramsay. Lukács's History and Class Consciousness, in turn, gives a class analysis. He sees solitary selfhood not as a general existential condition but as a specifically bourgeois plight: the system of private property creates souls who know only the freedom of preying on other isolated individuals. Solipsism in philosophy is the correlate of lived conditions. "Capitalist reification brings about simultaneously an overindividualization and a mechanical objectification of people." Lukács's analysis gives us a way to see 1920s worries about isolation and propaganda as two sides of the same coin.20 Much of the dark side of communication was first traced not in Ingmar Bergman's films or Samuel Beckett's plays, but in Weimar Germany and by writers of the lost generation. In any case, the specter of claustrophobic selfhood has resonated through the art and social thought of the twentieth century, with its accompanying fear of the impossibility of communication.

Thus far, these three visions show important continuities with the late nineteenth century. The dream of perfect communication through semantics recapitulates the dream of telepathy, a meeting of minds that would leave no remainder. The fear of inescapable solipsism recurs in the microdramas of modernist literature. Again, communication as bridge always means an abyss is somewhere near. And even in the propaganda view, the antinomy recurs: communication working telepathically has an evil twin in the specter of the mesmerized mass in the clutches of the leader, just as the fear of closed consciousness appears at the mass level as the fear of the lonely crowd, atomized and mutually oblivious. As I will argue in chapter 2, the dream of mental contact sets up the nightmare of mutual isolation. Longing for shared interiority, the horror of inaccessibility, and impatience with the humble means of language—these are the attitudes that "communication" typically instills and that I want to combat.

Two other visions of communication from the 1920s remain: those of Martin Heidegger and John Dewey. These are paths less taken but are fertile sources of communication theory that I want to rehabilitate. Despite their profound differences, each rejects the mentalist vision and its accompanying subjectivization of meaning; each makes an end run around the solipsism/telepathy couplet. Heidegger's Being and Time (1927), perhaps the single most influential work in twentieth-century philosophy, announced its distaste for any notion of communication as mental sharing: "Communication [Mitteilung] is never anything like a transportation of experiences, such as opinions and wishes, from the interior of one subject into the interior of another."21 The transmission of messages or assertion of facts was for Heidegger a special case; more fundamentally, Mitteilung is the interpretive articulation of our "thrownness" into a world together with other people. Being with others is fundamental to our existence. To be human is to be linguistic and social. Speech can make our relations explicit, but there is no question for Heidegger of communication's failing between people any more than there is of people's ceasing to dwell in societies and in language. We are bound together in existential and lived ways before we even open our mouths to speak. Communication here does not involve transmitting information about one's intentionality; rather, it entails bearing oneself in such a way that one is open

to hearing the other's otherness. As in Jaspers's Psychology of World-Views (1919) or Buber's I and Thou (1923), here communication is about the constitution of relationships, the revelation of otherness, or the breaking of the shells that encase the self, not about the sharing of private mental property.

Certainly communication has its dangers for Heidegger. Whereas for Ogden and Richards the chief worry is discrepancy or clouded meaning, for Heidegger it is inauthenticity. The chatter of the crowd and the brooding omnipresence of "das Man"—a coinage variously translated as the "anonymous anyone" or the "they-self"—threatens to drown out "the call of conscience" and the care (Sorge) of being. The dictatorship of "das Man" is inconspicuous and hard to detect, but it can swallow up authentic selfhood.22 Heidegger claimed to be describing a perennial existential possibility in human life—the descent into distraction—but in fact it has a clear historical and political dimension. As Peter Sloterdijk puts it, "Everything we have heard about [das Man] would be, in the final analysis, inconceivable without the precondition of the Weimar Republic with its hectic postwar life feeling, its mass media, its Americanism, its entertainment and culture industry, its advanced system of distraction."23

The political dimension is also clear in Heidegger's disdain for the public sphere. Like his fellow Nazi Carl Schmitt, Heidegger took politics as a matter of sorting out friends and enemies, not of compromise and discussion. Government by public opinion was a prescription for the reign of chatter. In contrast to Ogden and Richards, Lippmann, and Dewey, Heidegger found the question of how to provide accurate information to the citizenry all but irrelevant. He wasted no love on the democratic public. His notion of communication was neither semantic (meanings exchanged) nor pragmatic (actions coordinated) but world disclosing (otherness opened).24 Communication as the revelation of being to itself through language resounds variously through those influenced by Heidegger—Sartre, Levinas, Arendt, Marcuse, Leo Strauss, Derrida, Foucault, and many more. Some took his vision as an agonistics of impossible dialogue, others as a mode of authentic encounter, but no one in the Heideggerian inheritance has any time for communication as information exchange.

John Dewey, also writing in 1927, was equally concerned with distraction: "No one knows how much of the frothy excitement of life, of mania for motion, of fretful discontent, of need for artificial stimulation, is the expression of frantic search for something to fill the void caused by the loosening of bonds which hold persons together in immediate community of experience." Dewey's historical account of such froth is more precise than Heidegger's: the conquest of scale through technology and industry and the subsequent disappearance of the face-to-face community. Like Heidegger, Dewey eschewed a semantic view of language as intermental plumbing, carrying "thought as a pipe carries water." The mediation of thought by language was not dangerous, but fruitful and necessary. He viewed as folly the attempt to create a consensus in idem between isolated individuals, in either a spiritualist or a scientific guise. In his educational ambition, however, he was more like Ogden and Richards than Heidegger: he aimed for the reinvigoration of communication on a large scale to correct for the loss of "immediate community of experience."25 Dewey's conception of communication as pragmatic making-do in community life represents a final strand for analysis.

Like the other pragmatists, and like Hegel, Dewey regarded the universe as more than matter and mind: it was also the worlds that open up between people. What Hegel called Geist, Peirce called "thirdness," and Royce called "the world of interpretation," Dewey called "experience"; in his very old age he proposed the term "culture" instead. For Dewey, communication went on in the public world of experience interwoven through shared signs and practices; it could not be reduced to reference to

objects without or psychic states within. To be sure, he thought the discovery of individual private experience "great and liberating," but it was also misleading if it painted communication as the junction of two sovereign egos. With Heidegger he viewed language as the precondition of thought: "Soliloquy is the product and reflex of converse with others; social communication not an effect of soliloquy."26 Thus solipsism would be the luxury of already socialized individuals who had forgotten their histories.

Next to his onetime colleague George Herbert Mead, Dewey is perhaps the best exemplar of a theorist of communication as partaking. Like Mead, Dewey thought the ability to place oneself "at the standpoint of a situation which two parties share" was the distinctive gift of humanity. Communication meant taking part in a collective world, not sharing the secrets of consciousness. It involved the establishment of a setting in which "the activity of each is regulated and modified by partnership." Meaning was not private property: rather, meaning was a "community of partaking," "method of action, "way of using things as a means to a shared consummation" or "possible interaction."27 Misunderstanding meant upset interaction, not minds failing to meld. Dewey's analysis features the smoothness with which things get done in language: we attend meetings, play games, pay bills, arrange rides, make promises, and get married. The splendid weirdness of being (Heidegger) or the danger of populating the universe with fictions (Ogden and Richards) seems remote indeed from the busy world of Mr. Dewey. Yet Dewey is quite close to Heidegger's term Mitteilung: mit = with, teilen = to share or divide. Communication in Dewey's sense is participation in the creation of a collective world, which is why communication for Dewey always raises the political problem of democracy.28

Dewey took the disappearance or distortion of participatory interaction as the most alienating feature of the age. Heidegger's notion of the fall from authentic encounter was not entirely different. The notion that grace is found in dialogue was widely shared in social thinkers of the 1920s: Buber wanted to replace I-It relationships with I-Thou ones; Heidegger called for authentic confrontations; Lukács called for a joyful reconciliation of subject and object. That face-to-face dialogue or at least confrontation offered a way out from the crusts of modernity is one of the key themes in thinking about communication since the 1920s, in antimodern thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Arendt, and Levinas, all of whom recognize the ultimate impossibility of dialogue, and in a host of lesser figures who do not.

In sum, five intertwined visions are clear in the 1920s: communication as the management of mass opinion; the elimination of semantic fog; vain sallies from the citadel of the self; the disclosure of otherness; and the orchestration of action. Each captures a particular practice. The variety of visions may be due in part to the variety of practices. Heidegger wants uncanny poetry in the woods, Ogden and Richards want universal clarity of meaning, Dewey wants practical participation and aesthetic release, Kafka narrates nightmares of interpersonal asymptotes, and Bernays wants to manufacture goodwill as Hitler wants to manufacture bad will. Heidegger's celebration of language's uncanniness lives on in deconstruction's repeated exposé of the impossibility of communication; Ogden and Richard's project survives in semantics and in the culture of scientific research more generally and informs what is probably still the dominant view of communication, the successful replication of intentions; and Dewey's vision anticipates language pragmatics and speech act theory's interest in language's seemingly modest, but astounding, ability to bind people in action. For Heidegger communication revealed our simultaneous togetherness/otherness as social beings; for Ogden and Richards it allowed a clean meeting of minds; and for Dewey it sustained the building of community and the dance of creation.

Each of these five views is also anticipated in earlier doctrines. Communication as propaganda was famously captured in the quip of Juvenal, the Roman satirist, that it takes nothing more than panem et circenses to satisfy the masses—bread and circuses.29 The dream of mental conjunction via semantic agreement was traced by John Locke, and the dream of shared consciousness reaches to medieval angelology and mysticism. The breakdown of communication was explored by Kierkegaard and Emerson, and Hegel saw communication as the staking of an existential claim to recognition as a human among other humans. Finally, communication as the coordination of action appears in the British empiricists and is a central theme in pragmatism before Dewey's Experience and Nature.30 The 1920s serve as a window for both what has come since and what went before.

Today the most influential thinkers about communication are probably Jürgen Habermas and Emmanuel Levinas. Certainly each has much of originality. But their lineages are clear enough. Habermas, like Dewey (though it is Mead he more frequently invokes), takes communication as a mode of action that not only implicates a morally autonomous self but is also a process that, if generalized, entails the creation of a democratic community. Habermas is emphatic that communication is not the sharing of consciousness but rather the coordination of action oriented to deliberation about justice. The term has for him an undeniable normative tint.31 Levinas, in turn, builds on the phenomenological inheritance of Husserl and Heidegger to understand communication not as fusion, information exchange, or conjoint activity but as a caress. The failure to communicate is not a moral failure, it is a fitting demise for a flawed project. As he wrote in 1947 of modernist isolation: "The theme of solitude and the breakdown of human communication are viewed by modern literature and thought as the fundamental obstacle to human brotherhood. The pathos of socialism breaks against the eternal Bastille in which each person remains his own prisoner, locked up with himself when the party is over, the crowd gone, and the torches extinguished. The despair felt at the impossibility of communication . . . marks the limits of all pity, generosity, and love. . . . But if communication bears the mark of failure or inauthenticity in this way, it is because it is sought as a fusion."32 The failure of communication, he argues, allows precisely for the bursting open of pity, generosity, and love. Such failure invites us to find ways to discover others besides knowing. Communication breakdown is thus a salutary check on the hubris of the ego. Communication, if taken as the reduplication of the self (or its thoughts) in the other, deserves to crash, for such an understanding is in essence a pogrom against the distinctness of human beings.

The task today, I will argue, is to renounce the dream of communication while retaining the goods it invokes. To say that communication in the sense of shared minds is impossible is not to say that we cannot cooperate splendidly. (This was precisely Dewey's point.) On the other hand, to point to the pervasiveness of pragmatic coordination is also not to say that no abysses loom in the self and the other. (This was precisely Heidegger's point.) Habermas, to my taste, underplays the strangeness of language; his French foes such as Derrida (himself importantly influenced by Levinas) underplay its instrumentality. Each of the Dewey-Habermas and Heidegger-Levinas-Derrida lineages grasps important truths about communication that are inaccessible to the propagandists, semanticists, and solipsists in our midst, but neither has quite the full palette of colors. The one position has too much gravity while the other floats in a zero-gravity chamber. Habermas's sobriety misses what Charles Sanders Peirce called the play of musement; Derrida's revelry misses the ordinariness of talk.

The task is to find an account of communication that erases neither the curious fact of otherness at its core nor the possibility of doing things with words. Language is resistant to our intent and often, in Heidegger's phrase, speaks us; but it is also the most reliable means of persuasion we know. Though

language is a dark vessel that does not quite carry what I, as a speaking self, might think it does, it still manages to coordinate action more often than not. This middle position is represented in recent debates by Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, but I also want to identify it with a pragmatism open to both the uncanny and the practical. Pragmatism, in its Emersonian lineage, remembers both the wildness of the signs and tokens around us and the massively practical fact that we must find ways to get on with business. Dewey and Habermas know the latter but generally forget the former, an oblivion that stains their vision of democracy through dialogue.

Technical and Therapeutic Discourses after World War II

A key feature of 1920s thinking was the lack of any distinction between face-to-face and mass communication. "Mass media," a term freshly minted in the 1920s, constituted a vague horizon: the shadow of "the symbolic apparatus" (Ogden and Richards), "distraction" (Heidegger), "instrumentalities of communication" (Dewey), "advertising mediums" (Bernays), or "chains of silver" (Lasswell) loomed. The idea of "mass media" as a distinct field of institutional and discursive activity, however, had not yet appeared. "Communication" was a term without specifications of scale. It could occur in mass education or in a dyad. In the 1930s, the basis for contrast between mass communication and interpersonal communication began to develop; communication began to split off from communications. The 1930s saw the rise of an empirically oriented social research tradition—often with commercial relevance—on the content, audiences, and effects of new mass media, especially radio, Paul F. Lazarsfeld being the key figure; a sustained body of social theory and social criticism, much of it concerned with communication and its distortion in mass culture, from the German Jewish émigrés of the Frankfurt school; and the brief heyday of propaganda analysis, which aimed to slice through the cognitive smokescreens abroad in the land. Though characteristic attitudes developed in the 1930s about the social meaning of the mass media—as relatively harmless providers of entertainment or powerful consciousness industries—and much work of importance was done in addition to that mentioned, such as in Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, Q. D. Leavis's Fiction and the Reading Public (1932), Dewey's Art and Experience (1934), Rudolf Arnheim's Radio (1936), and works by Kenneth Burke, the next explosion of intellectual and public interest in "communication" came after the war.

The late 1940s was probably the single grandest moment in the century's confrontation with communication. One source was the excitement around information theory (originally in fact known as communication theory). Information theory developed from what might be called the "information practice" of telecommunications, specifically from research on telephony at Bell Laboratories starting in the 1920s and on cryptography during the war. Claude Shannon's Mathematical Theory of Communication (1948) was many things to many people.33 It gave scientists a fascinating account of information in terms of the old thermodynamic favorite, entropy, gave AT&T a technical definition of signal redundancy and hence a recipe for "shaving" frequencies in order to fit more calls on one line, and gave American intellectual life a vocabulary well suited to the country's newly confirmed status as military and political world leader. "Communication theory" was explicitly a theory of "signals" and not of "significance." But as the terms diffused through intellectual life—and they did so at violent speed— these provisos were little heeded.34 "Information" became a substantive and communication theory became an account of meaning as well as of channel capacity. Indeed, the theory may have seemed so exciting because it made something already quite familiar in war, bureaucracy, and everyday life into a

concept of science and technology. Information was no longer raw data, military logistics, or phone numbers; it was the principle of the universe's intelligibility.

One consequence of the impure diffusion of information theory was the rewriting of the great chain of being. On the smallest level, where the secrets of life are "coded, stored, and transmitted," we find J. D. Watson and F. H. Crick, discoverers of the double helix, viewing DNA as a code of genetic information. Neural synapses became switchboards and nerves telephone lines (reversing the metaphor from that of the nineteenth century, when telegraphs and telephones were "nerves"); messenger RNA proteins were dubbed "informosomes." Moving up the chain, hormones and enzymes were couriers and the brain an "information processor." In the social world, we learned that marriages will work better when men and women "communicate more" and "share information about their feelings" with each other; that good managers must communicate effectively (that is, share information) with employees; and internationally, that better flows of information between nations aid worldwide peace and understanding. From the blueprint of life itself to the world political order, communication and information reigned supreme.

The academy is another clear example of the infiltration of the discourse of information. Several specialties define themselves in terms of the production, manipulation, and interpretation of information: computer science, electrical engineering, statistics, expository writing, library science, psycholinguistics, management science, and much of economics, journalism, and communication research. (People studying communication still sometimes have to explain that they are not in electrical engineering.) The recent booming interdisciplinary confluence under the name "cognitive science" would not be possible, one senses, without information as intellectual connective tissue. Some have gone so far as to suggest that all inquiry into human affairs should redescribe itself in terms of a new trinity of concepts: information, communication, and control.35 Such schemes are the latest in the dream of unified science that runs from René Descartes to Rudolf Carnap; information was a stimulant to such dreams, just as geometry, evolution, thermodynamics, statistics, and mathematical physics each, in its heyday, promised to unify all human knowledge. The postwar fallout of information theory is still with us.

Resulting from this heady mix was a notion of communication as information exchange, a notion most closely related to the semantic view of Ogden and Richards and more distantly related to the long angelological tradition of instantaneous contact between minds at a distance. More important, this new view effaced the old barriers between human, machine, and animal. Anything that processed information was a candidate for "communication." The wild shape of this category is evident in the first paragraph of a text that did much to make information theory available for interdisciplinary poaching, Ford Foundation physicist Warren Weaver's commentary on Shannon:

The word communication will be used here in a very broad sense to include all the procedures by which one mind may affect another. This, of course, involves not only written and oral speech, but also music, the pictorial arts, the theatre, the ballet, and in fact all human behavior. In some connections it may be desirable to use a still broader definition of communication, namely, one which would include the procedures by means of which one mechanism (say automatic equipment to track an airplane and compute its probable future positions) affects another mechanism (say a guided missile chasing this airplane).36

An extraordinary category, this, including music and missiles, speech and servomechanisms. Weaver takes us from the preferred communication situation of the semanticists (one mind affecting another) through language and the fine arts to human behavior (the ride is getting bumpy). Then he "broadens" his definition to include Korean War–vintage military technology. What made this string of sentences, this patch of discourse, intelligible—and exciting—to so many thinkers in the 1950s? For one thing, it fit the age. The two great technologies of the Second World War—the computer and the bomb—share more than a common origin. They share a common cultural space and symbolism. Information is often spoken of in nuclear terms: its half-life (as it decays like radioactive matter), its fission, and its molecular or granular quality. It shares semiotic space with subatomic physics, coming in bits, flashes, bursts, and impulses, and is often treated as mental photons: the minimal quanta of the cognitive stuff. Both the bomb and information cater to a secret pleasure in possible apocalypse, the exhilaration moderns (so used to the thrill of the new) feel in contemplating self-destruction. The computer stands at the latest moment of history and the bomb at the last one.

Less speculatively, communication was a concept able to unify the natural sciences (DNA as the great code), the liberal arts (language as communication), and the social sciences (communication as the basic social process, as Wilbur Schramm put it). By finally removing communication as an activity from any privileged anchor in the human body or soul, communication became a site for exploring posthuman couplings with aliens, animals, and machines (chapter 6). Ordinary interaction seems a frail and inadequate attempt to reach across the void compared with the speed and accuracy of servomechanisms. But the quest for authentic connection with other people, perhaps as if in compensation, was also of huge cultural moment. Communication as therapeutic self-expression, a warmed-over descendant of the existentialist call for authentic disclosure, also spread through the culture like wildfire after the war.

The therapeutic project forms the second site of the postwar buoyancy about communication. As in Ogden and Richards, "communication" here was a dream of a clarifying method that would work at both interpersonal and international levels. More specifically, the formation of the United Nations, especially UNESCO, gave some intellectuals enormous hope about "communication" as an agent of global enlightenment. Psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan, who coined the term "interpersonal" in 1938, worked at UNESCO with the idea that the same kinds of disturbances that inhibited communication between two or a few people could also be treated on a much larger scale.[37] Julian Huxley, biologist and first leader of UNESCO, had the dream of employing mass media to spread secular scientific humanism (as a successor to religion) across the globe.[38] Gregory Bateson, who had feet in both the cybernetic excitement of information theory and the psychiatric vision of communication as therapy, is another key figure.[39]

Carl R. Rogers, the leader of person-centered, humanistic psychology in the postwar era, is perhaps the best example of a therapeutic theorist of communication. As he put it in a talk given in 1951, "The whole task of psychotherapy is the task of dealing with a failure in communication." Communication breakdown for him was the fate of the neurotic, whose communication both with himself and with others was in some way damaged—blockage of communication occurring between the unconscious and the ego, for instance. "The task of psychotherapy is to help the person achieve, through a special relationship with a therapist, good communication within himself." Good communication with others would follow. As Rogers summarized, "We may say then that psychotherapy is good communication,

between and within men. We may also turn that statement around and it will still be true. Good communication, free communication, within or between men, is always therapeutic."

Rogers's argument mixes a rigorous recognition of the real difficulty of taking the place of the other together with the happier therapeutic talk of mutual understanding that a whole culture industry would later make pervasive. A chief virtue required for good communication, he argued, was the courage to get out of one's emotion-laden private perspective and restate the views of one's opponent; this is exactly the standard that John Stuart Mill laid down for public discussion in his On Liberty (1859) and a piece of practical advice offered in communication seminars ever since. Rogers recommended expanding the method of small group understanding to much larger forums, such as the strained relations between the Americans and the Russians (this is a cold war text, of course). If both parties attempted to understand rather than to judge, important political fruit might result. An all but messianic vision of therapeutic communication as the balm of souls, couples, groups, and nations pervades the text: putting it to use, he suggested, was worth trying, given "the tragic and well-nigh fatal failures of communication which threaten the existence of our modern world."40

As with information theory, high hopes about communication as an agent of global education and therapy were accompanied by a foreboding sense of danger, the "well-nigh fatal failures" that Rogers had in mind. Postwar communication theory was decisively shaped, at least in its social-scientific guise, by the cold war. In the 1950s, specters of lonely selves and manipulated masses reappeared in texts confronting the postwar prosperity and its centerpiece, television. As in the 1920s, part of the story was the fear that communication could go bad, mesmerizing masses or isolating individuals. The telescreens and Big Brother in Orwell's 1984 (1948) have become staples in commentary on the meaning of mass media, but similar concerns can be found in David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd (1950), C. Wright Mills, The Power Elite (1956), Günther Anders, Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen (1956), Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy (1957), Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (1958), Aldous Huxley, Brave New World Revisited (1958), Raymond Williams, Culture and Society (1958), and Jürgen Habermas, Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962). Mass society imagery in the 1950s American intellectual life was, at one level at least, a coded version of the paranoia that it could indeed happen here: television viewers might turn out to be the secret siblings of the red zombies on the other side of the Iron Curtain, whose lifeline to liberty in this narrative was, significantly, a radio station, Voice of America (the good and evil twins of communication again). Though it is unclear whether mass society theory ever was an articulate program (in retrospect the notion seems as much the invention of its detractors as of its supposed proponents), it is not hard to identify a certain sensibility in 1950s deliberations on the state of the many in a mediated world: the democratic public as crowd; consumer pleasures stultifying public engagement; and the five A's of mass society theory—alienation, anomie, anonymity, apathy, and atomization.

Just as the bomb shaped the imagery of information in communication theory, so it made palpable the potential of communication gone wrong. As Chicago sociologist Louis Wirth argued in his 1947 presidential address to the American Sociological Association, the effort to use mass media to create a worldwide consensus was not guaranteed to succeed: "Along with the perfection of these means of human intercourse science has also perfected unprecedented means of mass destruction. But in the case of neither the instruments of mass communication nor of atomic energy do the inventors of the instrument dictate the use to which they shall be put."41 For both information theory and the dream of

a worldwide communication therapy, the bomb was a spur to the imagination, evoking both excitement about the release of new energies and anxieties about the extermination of the species.

Not only the bomb, however, shaped communication theory; as Kenneth Cmiel has shown, the fear of democratic disaffection and the moral enigma of the Holocaust presided over efforts to think through communication in the 1940s. Cynicism and evil were the fundamental problems that Robert Merton, Hannah Arendt, and Emmanuel Levinas faced first in the 1940s, and in each case the resultant vision of communication was some kind of answer to the intractable questions. Merton saw communication as an agency of national community building; Arendt as a means of discovering truth and, later, of giving birth to new political orders; and Levinas as an ethical obligation to the otherness of the other person. This threefold crossing of modernization, antimodern, and postmodern theorists is fateful for the rest of the century's social thought.42 Merton saw communication as a kind of Durkheimian social glue; Arendt as a disclosure of the political potentials of human association; and Levinas as a respect for the autonomy of others, a respect that made communication in an instrumental sense all but impossible.

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In the postwar ferment about "communication," then, two discourses were dominant: a technical one about information theory and a therapeutic one about communication as cure and disease. Each has deep roots in American cultural history. The technicians of communication are a diverse breed, from Samuel F. B. Morse to Marshall McLuhan, from Charles Horton Cooley to Al Gore, from Buckminster Fuller to Alvin Toffler, but they all think the imperfections of human interchange can be redressed by improved technology or techniques. They want to mimic the angels by mechanical or electronic means. When AT&T boasted a few years back that "telecommunity is our goal; telecommunications is our means," it stated the technical vision of communication with remarkable economy. The therapeutic vision of communication, in turn, developed within humanist and existentialist psychology, but both its roots and its branches spread much wider, to the nineteenth-century attack on Calvinism and its replacement by a therapeutic ethos of self-realization, and to the self-culture pervading American bourgeois life.43 Both the technical and therapeutic visions claim that the obstacles and troubles in human contact can be solved, whether by better technologies or better techniques of relating, and hence are also latter-day heirs to the angelological dream of mutual ensoulment.

The message of this book is a harsher one, that the problems are fundamentally intractable. "Communication," whatever it might mean, is not a matter of improved wiring or freer self-disclosure but involves a permanent kink in the human condition. In this James was right. That we can never communicate like the angels is a tragic fact, but also a blessed one. A sounder vision is of the felicitous impossibility of contact. Communication failure, again, does not mean we are lonely zombies searching for soul mates: it means we have new ways to relate and to make worlds with each other. My emphasis on the debt that the dream of communication owes to ghosts and strange eros is intended as a corrective to a truism that is still very much alive: that the expansion of means leads to the expansion of minds.

The therapists miss the eccentricity of the self to itself and the public character of signs. They imagine the self as a holder of private experiential property and language as a courier of its messages. Their cure is often as bad as the disease. As Theodor W. Adorno wrote, "No less indiscriminate and general than the alienation between people is the longing to breach it."44 The technicians, in turn, miss finitude, the fact that any prosthesis meant to restore damaged communication will be an imperfect fit that chafes

the stump. As Kafka notes in an epigraph to this book, those who build new media to eliminate the spectral element between people only create more ample breeding grounds for the ghosts. A cheerful sense of the weirdness of all attempts at communication offers a far saner way to think and live. The achievements that technical and therapeutic talk usually ascribes to "communication"—understanding, cooperation, community, love—are genuine human goods. Even information exchange is indispensable, in its place. But the attainment of communicative goods can never be easy or formulaic; so much depends on dumb luck, personality, place, and time.

Communication, in the deeper sense of establishing ways to share one's hours meaningfully with others, is sooner a matter of faith and risk than of technique and method. In the thinner sense of tuning to the same frequency, the concept is ultimately unhelpful as a solution to our most vexing puzzles. It makes knowing into the governor of our dealings with others. It puts the burden on husbands and wives, diplomats and colleagues to dial in: yet once the parties face each other in the same language, the adventure has not ended, but only begun. The dream of communication stops short of all the hard stuff. Sending clear messages might not make for better relations; we might like each other less the more we understood about one another. The transmission of signals is an inadequate metaphor for the interpretation of signs. "Communication" presents itself as an easy solution to intractable human troubles: language, finitude, plurality. Why others do not use words as I do or do not feel or see the world as I do is a problem not just in adjusting the transmission and reception of messages, but in orchestrating collective being, in making space in the world for each other. Whatever "communication" might mean, it is more fundamentally a political and ethical problem than a semantic one, as I argue with respect to Hegel and Marx (chapter 3). In renouncing the dream of "communication" I am not saying that the urge to connect is bad; rather, I mean that the dream itself inhibits the hard work of connection. This book bids us out of Wittgenstein's fly-bottle. Too often, "communication" misleads us from the task of building worlds together. It invites us into a world of unions without politics, understandings without language, and souls without bodies, only to make politics, language, and bodies reappear as obstacles rather than blessings.

Instead, the most wonderful thing about our contact with each other is its free dissemination, not its anguished communion. The ultimate futility of our attempts to "communicate" is not lamentable; it is a handsome condition. The notion of communication deserves to be liberated from its earnestness and spiritualism, its demand for precision and agreement, demands whose long history I attempt to illustrate in this book. The requirement of interpersonal mimesis can be despotic. Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James struck the right note: acknowledging the splendid otherness of all creatures that share our world without bemoaning our impotence to tap their interiority. The task is to recognize the creature's otherness, not to make it over in one's own likeness and image. The ideal of communication, as Adorno said, would be a condition in which the only thing that survives the disgraceful fact of our mutual difference is the delight that difference makes possible.

Notes

Introduction

1. Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation* (New York: Ballantine, 1990), 288.

2. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (1940; New York: Schocken, 1968).

3. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Great Books of the Western World, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins, vol. 53 (1890; Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 187.

4. James, *Principles of Psychology*, 147.

5. See Briankle G. Chang, *Deconstructing Communication: Representation, Subject, and Economies of Exchange* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), chap. 5.

6. One example would be Wilbur Schramm, one of the institutional founders of communication studies as an academic field. See "How Communication Works," in *Processes and Effects of Mass Communication*, ed. Wilbur Schramm (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1954).

7. My views on communication studies as a field can be found in John Durham Peters, "Institutional Sources of Intellectual Poverty in Communication Research," *Communication Research* 13, 4 (1986): 527–59; "The Need for Theoretical Foundations: Reply to Gonzalez," *Communication Research* 15, 3 (1988): 309–17; "Genealogical Notes on 'The Field,'" *Journal of Communication* 43, 4 (1993): 132–39; and "Tangled Legacies," *Journal of Communication* 46, 3 (1996): 85–87.

8. Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), 3.204, and Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik: Eine Grundlegung der Literaturwissenschaft* (Munich: Hueber, 1960), 379–84. Thanks to Donovan Ochs for help on this point.

9. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "communication," 5b.

10. Tamar Katriel and Gerry Philipsen, "'What We Need Is Communication': 'Communication' as a Cultural Category in Some American Speech," *Communication Monographs* 48 (1981): 301–17.

11. Leo Lowenthal, "Communication and Humanitas," in *The Human Dialogue: Perspectives on Communication*, ed. Floyd W. Matson and Ashley Montagu (New York: Free Press, 1967), 336.

12. Raymond Williams, *Communications* (London: Penguin, 1962), 9. In contrast to the common usage that calls the academic field "communications," I will use "communication studies."

13. The motley list is a standard genre in treatises on media that I have no intention of omitting.

14. Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1927), 227.

15. Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (1923; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 6.

16. Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (1923; Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1968), 452, 495.

17. C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, 8th ed. (1923; New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952), 20, 40, viii, x. Ludwig Wittgenstein, to his credit, thought it a "miserable book." "I have seldom read anything so foolish," he wrote to Russell; he thought it offered far too easy an answer. Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 214.

18. Ogden and Richards, *Meaning of Meaning*, 15, 26, 29. See also W. Terrence Gordon, "Undoing Babel: C. K. Ogden's Basic English," *Etc*. 45 (winter 1988): 337–40, and Gordon, "From *The Meaning of Meaning* to Basic English," *Etc*. 48 (summer 1991): 165–71.

19. Ogden and Richards, *Meaning of Meaning*, 15, 205, 206.

20. Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, 480, 507.

21. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927; Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1962), 162.

22. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 126.

23. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 199.

24. Stephen K. White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

25. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), 214; Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (1925; Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 134.

26. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 136, 135.

27. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 140, 141, 146, 147, 148.

28. John Durham Peters, "Democracy and American Mass Communication Theory: Dewey, Lippmann, Lazarsfeld," *Communication* 11, 3 (1989): 199–220.

29. A richer genealogy can be found in Salvador Giner, *Mass Society* (New York: Academic Press, 1976).

30. For an empiricist forerunner, see George Berkeley, *The Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), section 20: "Besides, the communicating of ideas marked by words is not the chief and only end of language, as is commonly supposed. There are other ends, such as the raising of some passion, the exciting to or deterring from an action, the putting the mind in some particular disposition."

31. See especially Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, 2 vols. (1981; Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

32. Emmanuel Levinas, "The Other in Proust" (1947), in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 164.

33. Claude Shannon, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1949). Warren Weaver is listed as a coauthor, but the theory was Shannon's. The more socially astute text of the same moment was Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics; or Communication and Control in the Animal and Machine* (New York: Wiley, 1948).

34. For the diffusion of information theory, see Randall Louis Dahling, "Shannon's Information Theory: The Spread of an Idea" (master's thesis, Stanford University, 1957).

35. James R. Beniger, *The Control Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). My critique: John Durham Peters, "The Control of Information," *Critical Review: A Journal of Books and Ideas* 1, 4 (1987): 5–23.

36. Warren Weaver, "Recent Contributions to the Mathematical Theory of Communication," in *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 1.

37. Harry Stack Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, ed. Helen Swick Perry and Mary Ladd Gawel (New York: Norton, 1953).

38. Julian S. Huxley, *UNESCO: Its Purpose and Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1948).

39. An able treatment of the intellectual and political scene of the American social sciences in the postwar era, and of the formative years of cybernetics in particular, is Steve Joshua Heims, *The Cybernetics Group* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

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26. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 136, 135.

27. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 140, 141, 146, 147, 148.

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40. Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming A Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 330, 337.

41. Louis Wirth, "Consensus and Mass Communication," *American Sociological Review* 13 (February 1948): 1–15.

42. Kenneth Cmiel, "On Cynicism, Evil, and the Discovery of Communication in the 1940s," *Journal of Communication* 46, 3 (1996): 88–107.

43. See Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1979); Lasch, *The Minimal Self* (New York: Norton, 1984); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1981); and Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880–1930," in *The Culture of Consumption: Essays in American History, 1880–1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon, 1983). A fine recent radical critique of therapeutic culture in the United States is Dana L. Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics: Rhetoric of Therapy* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1998).

44. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (1944–51; London: Verso, 1974), 178.