

An Agenda for Communication Studies: A Dialogical Reading of *The Twilight of Common Dreams*

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to raise a point for discussion of communication studies by critically reading Todd Gitlin's argument, that is, the claim that we should build a common ground so that we can solve the dangerous situation called "cultural wars." We assume that the common ground Gitlin proposes is not only a space where we can pursue the ideal of a calm discussion between conflicting parties, but also a place in which we can nullify the claims of both sides enslaved by a dichotomic way of thinking. The first process of discussion is that we attempt to reveal the relationships between the Enlightenment and a monologic principle, referring to Horkheimer & Adorno and Mikhail Bakhtin. The second step is whether we can explore the possibilities of seeing a monologic concept as a matter of communication, posing an agenda for communication studies.

Keywords: communication studies, multiculturalism, Enlightenment, dialogism

Introduction

I had an opportunity to write a book review of *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars*, which was written by Todd Gitlin, required to present not only the points of his arguments, but also any possible agenda of communication studies derived from a critical reading of the description of "cultural wars" in the United States of America in the early 1990s. It might be said that we had a kind of demanding or risky intention to reduce what is discussed and asserted in the book to a newly presented question of communication.

Gitlin's work includes a notion of cultural wars. Although its origin came from identity-oriented discourses of each ethnic group of America, developing the dynamics of "identity politics" placing much value on women's right and diversities such as polymorphous sexuality, we could say that the concept of those wars is based on conflicting ideas of conservatism and progressivism in America. However, in this study, we have to refuse to be aligned with either side, not always intending to advocate the idea of multiculturalism. What we are most interested in is to deconstruct the utopian image of the rebirth of universal leftism that Gitlin has consistently been committed to. Furthermore, we even hold a radical perspective, from which we seek to relativize discourses of antimulticulturalism that are intensely criticized as

separatism by Gitlin. Then, we have decided to form a hypothesis that both conservatism and libertarianism, whether each side is sticking to universalism or multiculturalism, are sharing a common foundation that they assume an essentialism which eventually leads to "monologism" or a monologic way of thinking.

From the viewpoint presented above, we attempt to propose an agenda which is related to communication studies. In this paper, what we will focus on is the critical aspect of the Enlightenment. If every phase of thought, such as the nation-building spirit of the United States of America, an ideal of modernity, right-wing or left-wing discourses, and, what is called, identity politics can be identified within a philosophy of the Enlightenment, we assure that it is important to reflect on the critique of the Enlightenment. Through this procedure, we might seek to identify a "monological principle" among the nature of cultural wars, multiculturalism, universalism etc. which we will deal with in this discussion. Once any thought and idea can be reduced to the dimension of 'monologism', we argue, we can present an agenda of communication studies. The development of this paper is as follows: the description of cultural wars in America in 1990s; an attempt of critical reading of Gitlin's arguments; a possibility of the development of communication studies which are committed to the field of monologue and dialogue, referring to the critique of the

Enlightenment by Critical Theory of Frankfurt School.

Cultural wars from Gitlin's viewpoint

Gitlin's work of *The Twilight of Common Dreams* begins with the description of a symbolic event of "cultural wars" in Chapter 1 titled as "A Dubious Battle in Oakland." It was a hash argument over a series of textbooks which were expected to be adopted in California in the early 1990s. The debate was also in shape for relentless attacks against Gary Nash, a historian who wrote the textbook. "He was, after all, well known as a multiculturalist, as well as one of the most prolific American social historians of a cohort trained in the 1960s and devoted to reconstructing American history, in the words of an early revisionist slogan, 'from the bottom up' (Gitlin, 1995, p.15)" Nash made an address at "an open meeting sponsored by the Berkeley and Oakland school boards at Claremont Middle School. ... (p.17)" In the book, a hash attack against Nash is focused and described. That fact that Nash was criticized for his textbook being racist gave him all the greater deal bewilderment for his position as left-wing universalism. The relentless reproach against a democratic multiculturalist, Gitlin argued, implies that unidentified conflicts were going on in America.

Nash's embarrassment not only communicates itself to Gitlin, but also it leads to the formation of his awareness of the issues. We can say that the political and social context should be observed in the struggle for preferred symbols, as Gitlin puts it, "The debate was not about actual textbooks to be used as practical instruments of schooling but about symbols, overloaded with emotional meaning, totems of moral conviction. (p.23)"

The motives underlying a whole of his work, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, is explicitly described as follows: "All family fights are different, but Oakland's textbook fight has a familiarizing. Who by now isn't used to atrocity tales in the culture wars? But why is there so much bitterness on all sides? Why such hypersensitivity? Why have so many people who have suffered grievously from the West's many abrogations of Enlightenment reason lost faith in the Enlightenment? What has become of the ideal of a Left—or, for that matter, of a nation—that federates people of different races, genders, sexualities, or for that matter, religious and classes? Why has this ideal been neglected or abandoned by so many of the poor and minorities who should share the Left's ideal of equality? Why are so many

people attached to their marginality and why is so much of their intellectual labor spent developing theories to justify it? Why insist on difference with such rigidity, rancor, and blindness, to the exclusion of the possibility of common knowledge and common dreams? (p.32)"

According to Gitlin's insight, the idea of a nation state at the birth of the United States of America is a production of an ideology and a phrase of "we, people" as an idea was created. In other words, a nation of America is constituted by discourses which advocate freedom, preach peace and speak about future. This image of a nation state as a philosophy has properly been represented by the Western Enlightenment.

It has been necessary for Americans to create a particular discourse and continuously reproduce it in order to seek the unification of their nation. We could say that America has effectively made use of an image of the Other, or "foreign enemy," as a source of energy to help construct such a discourse, in the middle of the situation destined to believe in "American Dream," present "American way of life," and continue to argue their own justice. For instance, during the World War II, America turned to the cause to fight against fascism as an external enemy. However, after America won the victory and at the same time lost its enemy they had depended upon, America was domestically exposed to the potential risk of "an upsurge of class, race, and political tensions. (Gitlin, p.61)" Fortunately, the begging of Cold War dissolved the danger of fragmentation.

Dominant discourses in the middle of Cold War continued to project a negative representative of slavery or subordination onto the communist camp in contrast to a positive representation of "freedom" onto American side, creating and forming our own identity under the dichotomy of "We / Others." This dichotomy has been playing an important role in giving unity to America over four decades. Thus, the nation composed of diversely cultured origins has obtained enough energy to unify itself by setting up any external threat. After fighting against Fascism, an alternative external enemy of Communism came to America, where a new dichotomy of "freedom/slavery" was represented, successfully unifying national consciousness by directing American people toward their own common goal. (Prosperity in economy helped America remain to be a united nation.)

However, in the late 1960s, an image of Americans as good persons who live in idyllic good old days collapsed

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dramatically. The antiwar movement driven by American intervention in Vietnam, the civil-rights movement, the women's liberation movement, the gay liberation movement etc., became a huge ground swell. On top of that, a skepticism toward the foundation of knowledge which had supported Modern Knowledge shook the universalism idea, getting involved with political despair and weakening the basis of leftist groups. Furthermore, individual campaigns based on a demand for its own interest started, creating an alternative idea of identity.

The collapse of the Berlin Wall suggested a potential danger of internal divisions of America. The integration of American people had been promoted by sharing their common dreams and fighting against their common foreign enemies. The fact that they lost their common opponents implied the loss of device which helped integrate America as a nation state. The Communist defeat urged American people to find an alternative enemy. In the early 1990s, the basic philosophy of multiculturalism, which was combined with new values of "Political Correctness," tuned into an easy target for the media and right-wing groups. The media would make the ideal a topic of popular discussion, while political rights successfully positioned PC forces as a renewed "barbarian," which led to the representation of two competing sides: a dichotomy of leftist and rightist forces. The campaign of correcting PC resulted in putting right-wing groups together. In this context, the public denouncement against Gary Nash was made. Nash came to be a common target for both advocates of PC and conservatives. This assumed a provocative aspect, namely, a struggle over preferred symbols, or "culture wars" surrounded by an atmosphere of anger, incoherence, intolerance, etc.

The skepticism of modernism prevalent in Europe in the 1960s led the U. S. to see a paradigm shift of knowledge. We could realize that some of Gitlin's arguments are rather convincing. Admitting the universalistic Enlightenment had apparently been rejected since the outset of Structuralism, Gitlin made clear the assumption that critics had denounced the idea of the universalism. It is pointed out that narrow-minded advocates of identity politics were unaware that the spirit of criticism to question an idea of the Enlightenment was, after all, a product of the philosophy of the Enlightenment. In light of this context, Gitlin urges the necessity of "common ground" for calm discussions instead

of spewing invective at one another, stressing "the renaissance of leftist ideology." (We could identify Gitlin's retrospect for the 1960s in the tone of his discussion, though.) There seems to be a sort of fundamentalism in America today, where various interest groups proclaim the importance of being different and yet reject other people with different values. Gitlin notes that Americans are unhappy because they lack a common ground where they can have a temperate discussion about their own common problems. In order to cope with the challenge, Gitlin emphasizes the necessity of the very ground on which Americans can share their problems. It is stressed that we should continue discussions on issues that present no easy conclusions by overcoming the difference and promoting reflective discussions about leftist ideology that was once nearly lost.

Instinctively we recognize that a critical reading of what Gitlin asserts would lead us to present a certain hypothesis for communication studies. We could categorize all of the ideologies such as the national foundation of America, the universalism including leftist philosophy, a form of separatism advocating multiculturalism, into a product of the Enlightenment. Following this assumption, we could argue that we regard an ideology that would adhere to its only idea or ideal as "monologue," which could be deconstructed or relativized from an alternative viewpoint of "dialogism."

Based on this premise, we could propose an agenda for communication studies related to the potential adaptation of the relationships between a monological and dialogical principle, which would contribute to the deconstruction or overthrow of a rigidified or fixed way of thinking.

This paper quotes a couple of main thoughts which would help us develop the thesis. These ideas have something in common in that both belong in the same equation. One is "Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the Enlightenment, and the other is Mikhail Bakhtin's thought of language. The main purpose of this paper is to raise a point for discussion of communication studies by applying these two perspectives to a reading of Gitlin's work of *The Twilight of Common Dreams*.

Discussion

The inspiring work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the founder of Frankfurt school, *Dialectic of*

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Enlightenment (1972) is one of the thought-provoking texts of Critical Theory, giving a crucial momentum of leading to a reflection of the Enlightenment in today's industrialized and information society. (Although the draft was written in the 1940s, their arguments may have applicability to contemporary issues.) They warned that the "enlightened" modern world where we were supposed to have escaped from "barbaric" worlds of mythology by exercising rationality, still remains "barbarous" and the situation was getting worse. Their insightful idea shown in the preface is threading through the whole texts. "...why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.(Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972, xi)" In the beginning of the chapter of "The Concept of Enlightenment," their interpretation of Enlightenment (Enlightenment as an object we should feel misgivings about) appears in the following suggestive texts. "In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant. The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy.(p.3)"

Horkheimer & Adorno argue that a mathematical way of thinking created through the act of what is described as "They (men) substitute formula for concept, rule and probability for cause and motive.(p.5)" lies at the foundation of the Enlightenment. "It (enlightenment) confounds thought and mathematics. In this way the latter is, so to speak, released and made into an absolute instance.(p.25)" Through Enlightenment, the mathematical procedure would turn into a criterion responsible for human thought, making us give up our way of "thinking about thought" and depend on the mathematical method that would govern our human thought. We could say that the feature of this mathematical way of thinking is identified in the process of the reduction of thought to things. In other words, human thought, in itself, rich in flexibility and bearing the aspect of chaos, is substituted with the dimension of things or "materialized" phases. "Thinking objectifies itself to become an automatic, self-activating process; an impersonation of the machine that it produces itself so that ultimately the machine can replace it.(p.25)" It is believed that the Enlightenment can allow us to open our eyes with human attribute of reason, so that we

can develop an increased understanding of the world. But in fact the situation was totally the opposite. It is pointed out that a machine inherent in a mathematical way of thinking, or thought as a tool dominates human thought, namely, something strange happens: thought dominates thought.

As the logical conclusion from reading the texts of "The Concept of Enlightenment," we could determine that human thought is destined to be "monologued." "In the metamorphosis the nature of things, as a substratum of domination, is revealed as always the same. This identity constitutes the unity of nature.(p.9)" A rational reason is automatically supposed to establish a concept of oneness as an ultimate goal: "one form," "a single spirit," "unity." We could say that human thought is controlled by reason that will focus on unity. That is to say, a rational thought is influenced in a monologue narrative and ends up in a controlled object we can think of. A concept of subject, or nature as an unified one, namely, subject and nature reduced to object would presumably fall to the level of the mere tool-oriented object of thought. The principle that is dominant in such a way of thinking is a dichotomy. A logical thought pattern (law of excluded middle) based on the assumption that every proposition is either true or false holds a dominant position. In fact, two terms of A/B do not belong to a matter of substance but to a symbolic form. The following texts of Horkheimer & Adorno are highly suggestive. "...just as the Olympian gods had every kind of commerce with the chthonic deities: so the good and evil powers, salvation and disaster, were not unequivocally distinct. They were linked together like coming up and passing away, life and death, summer and winter.(p.14)" Dualistic thinking premised on each term including an unambiguous meaning can be said to be a principle of monologue that would produce a single way of thinking and a single concept. This way of thinking is to depend on a single fixed ideal or absolutely the only idea. The order of discourse (Foucault, 1982) created by reference to such a single concept seems to be beyond ordinary linguistics (including sociolinguistics).

Mikhail M. Bakhtin, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), finds a strong association between the Enlightenment and a principle of monologue, proposing a concept of "dialogism." It can provide a perspective of communication studies from which we can see the characteristics of the Enlightenment as a kind of program

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extracted from Horkheimer & Adorno's discussions. According to Bakhtin, "The consolidation of monologism and its permeation into all spheres and ideological life was promoted in modern times by European rationalism, with its cult of a unified and exclusive reason, and especially by the Enlightenment.(p.82)" This monologic mode would concentrate the interest of thought on what is unambiguous and central, eventually contributing to the formation of monologic discourses. "All that has the power to mean, all that has value, is everywhere concentrated around one center – the carrier. All ideological creative acts are conceived and perceived as possible expressions of a single consciousness, a single spirit.(Bakhtin, pp.81-2)" More specifically, "...unity is nevertheless illustrated through the image of a single consciousness: the spirit of a nation, the spirit of a people, the spirit of history, and so forth.(p.82)" Moreover, Bakhtin notes in reference to the relationship between European ideas and a monologic principle. "All of European utopianism was likewise built on this monologic principle. Here too belongs utopian socialism, with its faith in the omnipotence of the conviction.(p.82)" Following this discussion, all of what we would turn to, including the idea for the foundation of the United States of America, leftist ideologies, and the ideal of identity politics found in multiculturalism, would be rooted in the monologic principle.

If we can say that seemingly solid unity, integrity, and idea are a product of the monologic principle, and such a concept is nothing more than illusion, we have to shake the underlying thought pattern of dichotomy in the principle to its foundations. Following what is asserted in the text, "the monologic utterance is, after all, already an abstraction, ...(Vološinov, 1973, p.72)," we could make a further discussion with reference to the attribute of a monologic way of thinking. What appears to be a substantial or fixed concept by materializing objects of thought, can be a product of abstraction in the context of a monologic principle. Bakhtin and Vološinov's insight suggests that a viewpoint of dialogism will lead us to deconstruct a monologic way of thinking and acting.

An idea of Bakhtin's dialogism dates back to a concept of "Mennipea" or Mennipean satire created by Lucianus in the second century. Bakhtin's concept of "carnival" derives from a philosophy of Mennipea. Mennipea is "full of sharp contrasts and oxymoronic

combinations(Bakhtin, 1984, p.118)." To put it more specifically, such contrasts and combinations show "the virtuous hetaera, the true freedom of the wise man and his servile position, the emperor who becomes a slave, moral downfalls and purifications, luxury and poverty, the noble bandit, and so forth.(p.118)" In other words, "The Mennipea loves to play with abrupt transitions and shifts, ups and downs, rises and falls, unexpected comings together of distant and disunited things, mésalliances of all sorts.(p.118)" Michael Holquist, a leading student of Bakhtin, in his work *Dialogism Bakhtin and his World*(1990), views dialogism as follows and attempts to foreground the mechanism of dichotomic thought. "...dialogue can help us understand how other relationships work, even (or especially) those that preoccupy the sometimes stern, sometimes playful new Stoics who most dwell on the death of the subject: relationships such as signifier/signified, text/context, system/history, rhetoric/language, and speaking/writing.(Holquist, 1990, p.19)" That is, this kind of relationship of A/B is explored "not as binary oppositions, but as asymmetric dualisms(p.19)" This perspective can be attributed to the idea that "the world is a vast congeries of contesting meanings, a heteroglossia so varied that no single term capable of unifying its diversifying energies is possible.(p.24)"

Incidentally, Gitlin's arguments are the construction of a common ground on which we discuss each other and the reconstruction of strong leftist groups. But in his assertion we cannot find any specific method to make his beliefs realize. They remain to be referred to as a "dream" that should be shared with. What is the common ground Gitlin mentions? Is this a stage where both right wing and multicultural power can make a compromise with each other so that they may discuss calmly? In short, does this mean offering an opportunity to end what is called "cultural wars?"

If we can develop this sort of question into an addenda for communication studies, we can make a further discussion. We argue that "a common ground" is not only a space where we can pursue the ideal of a calm discussion between conflicting parties, but also a place in which we can nullify the claims of both sides enslaved by a dichotomic way of thinking and we may demonstrate a "Mennipean" change in thinking to help us overturn their own persisting

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values. It is necessary for communication studies, especially, rhetoric criticism to relativize each identity that multiculturalists pursue, and to recreate their own values, as well as dissimilate and downgrade an ideal image of Americans, justice and morality which rightists call for. (The carnivalesque way of thinking presented by Bakhtin seems effective on this occasion.)

Another claim of Gitlin, that is, an emphasis on a necessity of “the rebirth of powerful leftist groups” appear to reveal his nostalgia for the 1960s Left he once belonged to. His sentiments regrettably seem to end up undermining the persuasive power of his arguments. It may be true that his strategy to put leftist sides at the forefront as a symbolic countermeasure to the growing integration of rightists contributes to the reappearance of left / right. In addition, we admit that Gitlin deplores today’s multiculturalism obsessed with separatism, because leftists once having advocated universalism had their energy removed by identity politics-oriented multiculturalism. But even though we successfully find any more universal ideology beyond multiculturalism and give the highest priority to the philosophy, we will not be able to escape from a monologic principle we have described in this paper and may result in falling into fixed or rigidified ways of thinking.

Conclusion

The first process of discussions in this paper was that we attempted to reveal the relationships between the Enlightenment and a monologic principle through a specific argument in Todd Gitlin’s work. It should be noted that we would not aim to intend to make a detail description of the issues extracted from Gitlin’s assertions such as identity politics over multiculturalism, liberalism and leftist philosophy as universalism. Instead, we have meant to reveal the relationships between the Enlightenment of modern rationalism and a momentum of ideologies, making an attempt to point out the fact that both of them are inherent in a monologic orientation seeking the one and only essence (or something very central). The second step was whether we could explore the possibilities of seeing a monologic concept as a matter of communication. The reason why we spotlight a monologic principle is that we expect it to be dealt with “dialogism” Bakhtin proposed if we can replace any ideologies (be it universalism or separatism) with a dimension of monologue. This preliminary discussion will

lead us to a new agenda for communication studies. The next work we have to focus on is to demonstrate various discourses in the context of dialogism and examine how they are based on a monologic principle. An accumulation of all these considerations, we assure, will allow us to identify an effective way to transcend any dominant discourses that inevitably limit our space of thought.

Note

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