

Identity and Taciturnity in Communication Today

European Union is now reality. Economic union is becoming stronger and cultural union is imposing itself. All this may no doubt have its positive aspects; however, unification of economic interests, of intellectual thought, of scientific inquiry, of fashion, taste and desires even, of the way of speaking, if not of languages, has its negative consequences as is always the case each time a new form of identity is created (whether it be the identity of a person and his role, of a class, group, association, political party, nation, or language).

Symptomatic of reinforced unity in the European Community is the fact that a new word has been coined: "extra-communitarian". This word refers to what remains outside, is alien, does not belong to the dominant identity group. As an adjective it is not simply descriptive but involves a whole series of different forms of behavior: the failure to recognize given rights, prejudice, denials, negations, and rejection of anyone classifiable as an "extra-communitarian". This new term involves a *new stereotype*, and like all stereotypes, its meanings and consequences are not definitively fixed, just as the behavior it promotes is not fixed in a written code. If the term "extracommunitarian" were only used to designate all those people and political areas which do not belong to the European Community, its reference would be so obvious and matter of fact that to explain it would be simply redundant and altogether useless. "Extracommunitarian" refers to immigrants who work or are looking for work in Europe: Algerians, Philippine house maids, black street vendors, and most non-European people who move from one job to another and live precariously, vainly attempting to become an integral part of European society. The argument against these people is that it is unfair for an "extracommunitarian" to deprive a member of the European Union of work, it is unfair for him to benefit from the same rights and prerogatives. The black man in Europe is subject to a *doubly negative* stereotype: the first concerns the color of his skin, and is of a racist type: the second concerns the fact that he comes from the outside as regards a given political and cultural community, and is of a nationalist type.

Europe is now witnessing the formation of a series of reductive, narrow areas of action as well as other distinctions with respect to that between community members and "extra-communitarians": the distinction between developed and underdeveloped countries, between North and South, between those who belong to a certain nation or region or even to a certain city and so-called foreigners, intruders. All this is not the consequence of ideological stances of a nationalist or parochial order, but the wish rather to defend private materials and interests (such as a job for ourselves or for our children) against alien appetites.

Another result of the conquest of unity in Europe is that those same tendencies toward *ethnocentrism* and *logocentrism* which had been put into question, thrown into "crisis", ridiculed and re-dimensioned in terms of philosophical and ideological criticism, thanks also to the encounter with different peoples, with different customs and languages, are now re-emerging.

Revival of the Western logos cannot be explained uniquely in terms of the history of ideas but has a precise economic reality at its foundations: Capitalism. European union is the union of European Capitalism and as such involves such phenomena as the reduction, if not complete elimination, of barriers to exchange, and of the various inconveniences stemming from the different currencies; furthermore, economic union promotes the formation of monopolies, the concentration of capital into multi-national societies, the homologation of needs as induced by publicity. Capitalism is today the winner in Europe. Revolt and the subversion in European Socialist countries must be associated in particular with the attraction exerted on these countries by the victory of European capitalism, and consequent reinforcement of the European Community. The fall of the Berlin Wall can only be explained along the same lines.

Two things must be kept in mind when analyzing the crisis of Marxism in socialist countries. First of all, the term "socialism" was often applied to something—"Real Socialism"—which, in fact, was no less than an alienated form of socialism (conceding that elimination of the free market and concentration within the State of the means of production will suffice to justify evaluation of a social system in terms of Socialism). This alienated form of socialism unjustifiably made claims to the ideas of Marx (on this aspect the best critique is formulated by Adam Schaff in his writings on alienation in socialist countries). In the second place, we must remember the powerful force of attraction exerted by capitalism. In spite of anti-Stalinist stances and the current unpopularity of Stalinism in all political line-ups, the defeat of "Real Socialism" is commonly identified with the defeat of Communist ideology. This is rather peculiar, for it is a Stalinist idea: in fact, similarly to Stalin, the basic assumption is that what has not worked and has now been refused is socialism. The bad reputation of such words as "Marxism" and "Communism" after the crisis of Socialism in European countries (but remember also the terrifying action of repression—Tien An Men—in the People's Republic of China in the name of Communism) has provoked a condition of unease, disorientation, and rejection of Marxism and Communist ideology even among parties of the same name.

The tendency characterizing present times is the disintegration of strong ideologies. If, together with Rossi-Landi, we define ideology as "social planning" and if we believe that confrontation and clashes even between contrasting or different ideologies is vital to ideology, three things should be observed: 1) the social plan dominating in Europe today coincides with a plan for the development of capital. This plan is rooted in things themselves, in reality, to the point that more than the *ideology of capital*, it is its logic; (2) In Europe the European Commission is the organism of social planning in the perspective of such ideology; (3) there is no sign of opposition to the dominant *ideo-logic*, at least not in any conscious, organized form. It would seem (at least at the macroscopic level) that the struggle, dialogue and dialectic between ideologies has now been replaced by the monotony of a single dominating viewpoint. As such, the latter does not need to search for a name since it sees nothing from which it must differentiate itself. The dominant viewpoint imposes and reproduces itself *automatically* and *silently* through the logic of the development of Capitalist society. If it must necessarily resort to a name, this is a generic, abused, ambiguous name, a kind of "umbrella term", a *passé-partout*: "Democracy".

A more important point to underline is that even politics is losing ground, a fact we must attribute to the "crisis of ideology". Political activity today does no more than respond to purely technical and administrative necessities. Politics represents the set of mechanisms that support and promote presentday capitalist society; nor is it exact to speak of bureaucracy with which politics has identified throughout history. Instead of the bureaucrat we now have technicians, specialists in social questions: the politician today is a technician. Rather than promoting political movements with different and contrasting orientations, the choice of a political leader today generates forms of clientelism: the greatest expert in politics will gain the most clients. Obviously, a movement that opposes one of these dominating orientations officially is not a force in opposition, but simply another force aspiring to the power and primacy of the leading position. All this must be considered in the light of the prevailing tendency toward corporativism.

Dominant behavior is oriented by interests that confirm and reinforce one's own sphere of identity, of "indifferent difference". Beyond the larger spheres of interest there also exist numerous small spheres, including private interest. Nonetheless, if we agree that the public sphere should also consider and recognize the interests of otherness, even the broadest sphere of interest is a private sphere insofar as it is concerned with the assertion of its own identity.

In relation to the problem of Europe's identity, guarded at the price of the rejection of otherness, we must also remember the widespread phenomenon of migration toward Europe. This phenomenon is not a matter of *emigration* (which is less spectacular and more controllable), but of *migration* (a newer, more complex and far more difficult phenomenon to deal with).

Extending our argument to a worldwide level, we must also add that the end of the Cold War, with the ensuing easing of tension between the USSR and the USA, is no doubt of prime importance for world peace. However, this development has its negative side as well: the formation of an almost monolithic block with minimal internal ideological diversity, which implies yet again the advantage of identity over otherness. If such leveling of the differences were at least to guarantee peace, we might have a reason for tolerating it; but, as we have observed, when the logic of identity has the upper hand there will always be an external enemy against which a coalition must be formed. Though maybe not a direct consequence, the fact remains that with the end of the Cold War, world peace has not been achieved; still worse, with periodical crises in the Gulf we are witnessing the danger, not yet completely averted, of a new world war.

Today, the ideo-logic of productivity and efficiency not only exalt the physical-mathematical sciences or scientific research functionally oriented toward the improvement of production, but also the human sciences promoting technological progress and scientific development and ignoring the question of the sense of man.

From the viewpoint of identity, whether it be identity of the individual, of a group, of a nation, of a language, of a cultural system, of a large community such as Europe, or of the entire Western world, the sense of man will not be discovered but only mystified, for in the perspective of identity it is made to coincide with restricted and limited interests as much as they are current and topical; private interests as much as they are shared.

Homologation of the communicative universe reduces listening to wanting to hear, connected with *silence*, and diminishes the spaces of *taciturnity* where the freedom of listening is as necessary as the freedom of speech.

The words "silence" and "taciturnity" as we propose them here correspond to the Russian words "tishina" and "molchanie", as used by Bakhtin (1970-71).

Bakhtin distinguishes between the conditions for perceiving a sound, for recognizing a verbal sign, and for understanding the sense of an utterance. Silence belongs to the first two, that is, to the *conditions for perceiving a sound*, and the conditions for *recognizing a sign*. Taciturnity concerns the conditions for *understanding sense*.

The taciturnity of responsive listening is an interpretant of the verbal sign insofar as it is a sign. Once the taciturnity of responsive listening is set aside, we are left with silence which is obviously of no interest to the utterance. Indeed, the utterance escapes silence.

Homologation of the communicative universe concretely invests the verbal sign with the conventional characteristics of the signal alone, or with the natural characteristics of sound. From the necessity of the natural to the repetition of the conventional, or, as Charles S. Peirce says, from *indexicality* to *symbolicity*, such is the sphere reserved for the sign which thus loses its ambivalence, ductility, possibility of interpretants as characterized by originality, autonomy, absolute otherness—all qualities he attributed to *iconicity*. Enclosed within the universe of silence and the constriction of speech according to laws, conventions and habits, the sign loses its character as a challenge, as a provocation with respect to identity and the closed totality; the sign loses its ability to question what

seems stable and definitive as though this were endowed with the characters of naturality. But all this can be accomplished by the sign through taciturnity, by its tacit refusal to collaborate with the closed universe of discourse, by escaping monologism, by exceeding the logic of equal exchange between the signifier and the signified, between the interpreted sign and the interpretant sign. "The disturbance of silence by sound is mechanical and physiological [...]. Taciturnity is possible only in the human world", says Bakhtin (1970-71). The sign's constriction within the space of silence, its separation from taciturnity and from the freedom of listening, from listening open to polysemy, denies the sign its human character and renders it mechanical and natural causing it to oscillate between conventionality of the signal and naturality of sound, of what does not claim a sense.

Silence belongs to the sphere of language as a system, to language as reiteration, as reproduction of the *order of discourse* (Foucault). Taciturnity, instead, belongs to the sphere of the unrepeatable utterance, it shares in the "unfinalized totality of the logosphere" (Bakhtin). Taciturnity enables the utterance to escape the inquiring, coercive silence of the linguistic system whose fascist character, as Roland Barthes (1978) says, does not lie in the fact that it impedes speech but, on the contrary, compels it, imposing the repetition of fixed meanings sanctioned by the order of discourse. Silence imposes speaking but is not listening. Taciturnity is listening and as responsive listening it constitutes a pause in the unrepeatable utterance. Silence in the system of language intended as a "closed discourse universe" (Marcuse) abolishes listening which belongs to historical unrepeatability and to the open, unfinalized totality of the logosphere. Listening is one thing, to want to hear is another: listening allows us to speak and to choose what we want to say, it allows for manifestation and is turned to signs in their constitutive multi-voicedness and contradictoriness; to want to hear compels us to speak, imposes univocality, relevance to questions, coherence, noncontradiction.

In all forms of society the realization, management and reproduction of power is achieved through control over the communication system: however, this has only clearly emerged recently. In the current phase of the capitalist system, dominion is obviously not achieved through the possession of things but through control over communication relations, over mercantile exchange and production. More simply, we could say that the ruling class is the class that possesses capital, but the expression "capital" must now be specified in terms of *communication control*. If in mercantile exchange in general the "arcanum" of merchandise can be identified by tracing communication relations between humans, now, more than ever, in today's capitalist system, *production is communication*. With the expansion of capitalism, the market has realized its tendency to becoming a world market and communication has also achieved worldwide dissemination. This means that all communication programs are part of a single global project which coincides with the plan for the development of capital. This plan is grounded in the reality itself of capital, so that *the ideology of capital is its own logic*.

The consequence is unitary, compact, monologic communication oriented toward a single, dominant viewpoint; an orientation which obliges us to speak according to a given logic and which imposes silence. As observed elsewhere, it is not so much a question of the end of ideology as of the fact that dominant ideology imposes and reproduces itself in this phase of social reproduction, without encountering opposition, automatically, quietly. Therefore, communication today is characterized by the defence of Identity, by reproduction of the Same, by the Totality, by Reality, by the Being. In a universe where everything communicates with itself, where what is communicated regards Identity and its reproduction, communication is emptied and silence imposed. In the relation between the interpreted and interpretant there is no excess, no margin; this relation is realized on the basis of an identification process in which the sign's escape into the interpretant ends with a return to self, with the negation of what is other and reassertion of identity.

Monologism in communication finds correspondence on the verbal level in the tendency toward *monolingualism*: on an external plane, as |linguistic imperialism, the imposition of one language over others; on an internal plane as the leveling out of language, the loss of effective diversity among internal languages, the loss of expressiveness to the advantage of easy, direct, efficient and speedy communication.

But homologation does not concern verbal language alone. It concerns all behavior insofar as it is sign behavior. To a universal market there corresponds universal communication expressing the same needs, desires, and fancies globally. To "closure of the universe of discourse" there corresponds *closure of the communicative universe in general*, of the *human semiotic universe*. As Italo Calvino writes:

At times it seems to me that a pestilential epidemic has struck humanity in the faculty that characterizes it most, i.e. its use of the word. A plague of language which manifests itself as the loss of cognitive force and immediacy, as automatism tending to level out expression into the most generic and abstract formulations, to dilute meanings, to blunt expressive heights, to put out all flashes produced by words in new circumstances. But inconsistency is perhaps present not only in images or languages, but also in the world. This plague also strikes the life of people, the history of nations, thus rendering all (hi)stories formless, incidental, confused [...]. My uneasiness is for the loss of form which I observe in life [...]. (Calvino 1988:59)

Taciturnity is not only muteness. Taciturnity is not rejection of language. It is also indirect discourse, the distanced word, the ironic word, parody, laughter. In his *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift til de filosofiske Smuler* (1843), Kierkegaard, the theoretician of the indirect word, observes that the direct, objective word is not concerned with otherness, with the other word with respect to itself, it does not constitute real and proper communication, it communicates silence alone.

Taciturnity as indirect speaking may consist of "that *shifting action*" exercised on language which Barthes in *Leçon* considers as a characteristic of literary writing. "The writer", says Bakhtin, "is he who knows how to work on language while standing outside it, is he who possesses the gift of indirect speaking" (Bakhtin 1959-61; Eng. trans.:110). Moreover, the writer, says Bakhtin, "clothes himself in taciturnity" (Bakhtin 1970-71; Eng. trans.:149, I prefer "taciturnity", to "silence"). But this taciturnity, continues Bakhtin, "can assume various forms of expression, various forms of reduced laughter (irony), allegory, and so forth" (*ibid.*).

In literary writing it is possible to do what Perseus the "light hero" praised by Italo Calvino does in the myth when he defeats Medusa. Perseus defeats the monster which has the power of petrifying with its gaze, neither by looking at it directly, nor by not looking at it and turning his eyes away, but by looking at it indirectly, at its reflexion in his shield. Likewise, writing can escape the petrification of reality by looking at things indirectly. This enables Calvino to write the following:

I do not care to ask myself here whether the origins of this epidemic of language should be searched for in politics, in ideology, in bureaucratic uniformity, in the homogenization of mass media, in the scholastic diffusion of average culture. What I do care for are the possibilities of healing. Literature (and perhaps literature alone) can create antibodies...ready to fight against the spreading of the plague of language [...]. My uneasiness is for the loss of form which I observe in life [...] and which I attempt to resist with the only defense I can think of: an idea of literature. (Calvino 1988:58-59)

The indirect word of literature, this form of allusive, parodic, ironic silence, this form of laughter, is today perhaps what most affirms the rights of otherness against homologation with identity in the communication of silence. (On the practice of literary writing as taciturnity, cf. Ponzio 1993d). Because of the indirectness of his gaze which enables him to avoid the petrifying effect of ideology as it identifies with a realistic view of existence, the writer appears as our new Perseus who subdues

Medusa. This is the idea behind the title of my most recent book on literary writing, *La coda dell'occhio*.

The potential of the practice of taciturnity in today's dominant form of communication, silence, is analyzed by Pasolini in a paper of 1974, "Il romanzo delle stragi" (see Pasolini 1990:89-90). Pasolini begins by crying out against the conspiracy of silence with an "I KNOW", and continues:

I know the names of the persons responsible for the coups d'etats and slaughters in Italy and for the series of putschs installed as a system of protection for state power.

Such knowledge comes from the fact of being a writer, a storyteller, a novelist who wants to know about everything that happens, about everything written about what happens, who wants to imagine everything not known to everyone or silenced, who puts together the disorganized and fragmentary pieces of a whole, coherent political scene, who re-establishes logic where arbitrariness, madness and mystery would seem to rule. All this is part of the profession of writing and the instinct of the profession.