

## **The Cultural Turn in Communication Studies** **Positions on culturological observation of communication**

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**Keynote Speech at the Symposium “The Relevance of Cultural Studies” at  
Athens University, June 26, 03**

In social sciences and humanities of the late last century has been developed a tendency of analyzing social practice (communication, organization and systems of it) by a cultural view of consideration. This “cultural turn” was somehow provoked by the end of capacity of explication of structural scientific models and by the need of new, open and changeable conceptions facing an ever changing and complex social universe. The cultural turn seems to go farer than traditional theories went: it concerns the epistemology, theory-building, the interest of application, and even the social practice itself. It happens within a radical change of paradigms and signifies a transition or a transformation from closed to open systems of conceptualization.

There are backgrounds of that change, which build somehow a meta-theoretical environment: constructivism as a theory of notion, postmodernism as a concept of an esthetic casuality and culture as a source of meaning and as a context of every day living. The constructive perspective gives a view of communication as a movement of appropriation of reality and as a construction of sense. Communication and culture within that conception are not events, done in structures and intending determined results, but cultures of communication and a communication of cultures, social observation of observations. Communication is a social practice relating to cultural practice and meaning a social practice of culture. Culture is the social practice relating to communication and meaning a social practice of communication. The social practice, observed by the interest of coming so far to understand each another combines the same time content and acting format of creating reality. The interest of observation is difference. The differentiation of realities in systems of shared observation generates the sense of communication, which is by all means the construction of meaning, always self-related to the cultural memory. Communication is the way to get reminded to the cultural environment as it is also the way to get out of it and to re-produce and to re-generate a new universe of meaning. Communication is the resource of working out surprise, contingency and complexity.

### **Discourse Complexity**

Discourses are the cultural manners of delivering of experience, knowledge and meanings. They are socially recognized platforms of exchange in varying demarcated territories. The signify habits, structures of social power,

expectations, expectations of expectations, and – last not least - mechanisms of distance and closeness (integration/ assimilation/accommodation/alienation). There are at least three distinguishable contextual discourse systems surrounding the organization of life of individuals in complex structured societies:

- *The every-day-discourse* performs the integration of someone in social-related connections, where he takes and gives contributions of socially trivial but personally meaningful sense. Anything and everything can be a subject of meaningful behavior. Within the every-day-discourse one finds the basics of social habits and is able to overtake them while repeating (reminding) by that way the experience of (intimate, familial) confidence. The every-day-discourse always seems to be the first address and the ultimate point of reference of decisions.
- *The environment-discourse* (Milieu , Lebenswelt) represents the framework of meaningful reference for the individual organization of information and communication in order to develop decisions of thinking and behaving, which meet in a congruent manner the socially ruled environment. Within that discourse system one uses conversation as a means of social (cultural) correctness in thinking and behaving.
- *The media-discourse* represents the conversational connection, which mediates the two universes of every day life and culturally organized social environment. The media discourse does not depict the two other discourse universes, but constructs a new or own (overall) reality of meanings by observing them and mediating them mutually each to another. The media-discourse maintains the position of keeping an overall observation and so to be protocol of agenda.

## **Change of Perspectives**

Since (mass) media claim somehow an authoritarian and specified position, they follow a monocontextual view and create (construct) a world of meanings, but behave as if their purpose was to depict worlds of meaning. The monocontextual view of world is tied to distinctions, which guide the observation but in the same time it is not willing to be an integrated subject of observation. By that way there are created “blind windows” or latent structures. But, only an observation of observation, that means an observation of second order is capable to recognize those latent structures. Only an observer of second order as able to observe the fact, that the observing system does not have capacity to observe, what it is not able to observe.

That is the point of challenge to the system of science: to maintain the position of observing the media communication system out of a position of second order,

which has to be legitimized by widening the limits of (just) analyzing the media system structures to a horizon of considering the environmental social practice (which is culture out of communication and communication out of culture). The way of questioning is not (any more): what is media doing (meaning) to the social environment, but: what are the cultural-communicative conditions in society of giving a (that) meaning to media in any section of organizing the social system (politics, economy, education, every-day-conversation). The eye has to be kept on the cultural connectivity, in order to understand the position of media in society. A polycontextural view, which is to be demanded in order to legitimize the competence of social analysis as an opener of closed perspectives can be developed by the change of perspectives: from structure-view to culture-view. Above all social-political questions of media use (production and consumption) have to be re-questioned in the framework of that new developed perspective, because an other standpoint of consideration gives a new look to the observed systems.

Thus culture can be unmasked as a system of domination and domination as a system of communication, structured by symbols, gestures, games and rituals. The polycontextural screening of social communication needs more to be than just a scientific systematization, it needs to become communicology, which is an heuristic approach to the changeable rationality of communication.

### **Levels of changes**

The change of thinking is made on different levels of science:

*Level of epistemology:*

Theories move to become symbolic orders, which produce meaning. They are taken as communication systems with communicative characteristics: open, changeable, provisional.

*Level of methodology:*

Research moves from quantitative to qualitative methods. The symbolic structure of social world demands interpretative (hermeneutic) methods, in order to understand the construction of sense and to integrate the concerned systems and to make them to be a part of a learning process.

*Level of social theory:*

The attention goes to the cultural constitution of social environments, their models of creating and generating meaning. It goes to the question of how models of sense are generated and how communication makes the world meaningful.

*Level of research interest:*

The subject of communication research is not communication (which is a subject of behaviorism or cognitivism), but how society considers communication (reflexive-constructive perspective of research). That interest leads from analyzing communication to the attempt of understanding communication

phenomena and causes the shift from a structural view to a cultural view of society.

### **Doubts toward the scientific competency:**

It became a general supposition among the social science community within the last ten years, that the theoretic models, by which communication was or still is explained scientific, mislead the understanding of communication of society and the society of communication and, of course, mistake not only in theorizing, but also in applying theories to practice. By considering communication as a tool in between of reason for and effect of it became a matter of course to work with technical, even mechanical metaphors. The rationality of communication was unspoken argued by causal, technical and rationalized processes.

Facing the increasing complexity of media communication and – within itself and at the same time environing it – of societal communication, the question raised, whether such trivial conceptions are structured in a sufficient complex manner in order to maintain the competence of explaining, ordering, classifying, and exploring (functions of theory) the diverse experience in communication. My criticism mainly refers to the constructivistic systems theory, which takes the notion as known, that communication always is communication about something. That is the reason why communication always is a social act of observation. In that sense media systems are, as other systems as well and insofar they can be considered as acting systems in and for communications, observing systems. This particular use of the term observation might surprise as it might contradict the assumption, observation is what a conscious gesture looks like. The constructivistic system theory (N. Luhmann) removes the term of observation from human consciousness or from a psychic system by conceptualizing communication as an act of creating reality-sense by observation.

Understanding communication in that way it makes clear that science – as an observing system is a communication system, which constructs – on an other level of observation of observations – reality: somehow certainty of knowledge on something. As science is a communication system, it is also confronted with the possibilities (constructing a reality understanding of societal communication) and as well with insufficiency (failing observation by a closed circuit system of observation). Therefore I need to stress at least the following positions of conservative science in order to make clear, that an insufficient (monocontextural, hierarchic or even dogmatic) use of science in a context of social topics must be contra-productive. It does not come so far to explain, what communicology stands for, namely for an understanding topology of human attempt to be.

The following positions of a scientific self-description in reflecting social communication have to be pointed out as obsolete and mistaking ways of thinking the rationality of communication:

*Ontology:*

As a scientific discipline the communication and media studies do not yet refrain from theorizing communication as an objectable event, which happens any way and by itself and by its own means (quasi physical structures) beyond any observation of social practice. Behind that ontological understanding of communication maintains the paradigm of an acting system, neglecting that a system is, what is by purpose decided to represent a system. A system is, what is considered to be a connecting modul, containing a specific universe of structures (relations), in order to maintain specific functions, and which differs from an environment.

*Triviality:*

Communication science always maintains a position of capacity in explaining the social reality and claims plausibility by a mechanistic understanding of the relationship of structures within a social system. It takes the relational processes within a system as a structured and organized (organizable) matrix, which connects one acting to an other. That logic of process represents a mechanical triviality, which gives certainty of control on functions and effects and excludes the complexity of surprise. Interested exactly in that – since it gives overview-feeling on complexity -communication science develops systemic models, where the sequences of action are linear and consequently following causal connections.

*Causality:*

The relationship between reason and effect always serves as an analyzing pattern of control. Insofar science is used as a tool of minimizing risks and maximizing prognosis, it is interested in understanding structures and giving structures a reasonable character. The character says, by what actions structures are generated, what rules have to be fulfilled, what effects do they have towards the (organizational) neighborhood. In order to achieve a handsome, homological and practical model of communication, the connections between interests of sending and effects by receiving messages are thought to be (or even: have to be) congruent in a way of causal determination and as a natural course of events of a certain stimulus to a certain response.

*Technicity:*

The interest of science in control and predictability of social movements, processes, and metaprocesses induces models of calculation, of functionality of structural characteristics and capacities, and of technical courses of events while facing the casuality of social

constructions. Communication does not have the quality of technique by itself. It is the way, how to consider it, which gives the order of technicity and mathematicity to it.

## **Cultural Turn und Cultural Studies (CS)**

Insofar Cultural Studies concentrate on the cultural environment of communication and insofar communication is understood as a social practice of observation of experience, which relates to and generates and performs culture, communication studies is a program of knowledge-based cultural intervening the communication society with critical models of observation the social practice of culture. Following that program, the cultural turn comes out quite radically. Cultural Studies in Birmingham developed as institutional centre. The Cultural Studies negotiates in principle with relationality of culture, media and power and its interweaving with social processes. Following that interest of enlightenment the CS developed a specific concept of culture, which goes to the particularly following criteria on the reason:

### *Culture as Every-day-life:*

Culture brings an understanding perspective of the popular culture - *culture exists thus as a contextual everyday life organization*. Cultural Studies directs its view therefore towards the cultural problematic of topics, which of them affects the quality of the society and also to conceive new media terms. They discuss the question on quality of cultural forms and practices, sharpen the attention and consciousness in relation to social functions of such valuations and try to uncover traditional mystification and setting - as for instance the contradiction between art and commerce, the authenticity of the art, or the genius thought. Culture is regarded as a paradigmatic resource, the view of communication culture must be aligned anthropologically also, because subjectivity, individuality and identity are always culturally caused and constituted depending on the context.

### *Culture analysis:*

The beginning of the Cultural Studies understands itself as culture analysis (*Kulturanalyse*) and as culture criticism, whereby culture is defined as contradictory and non-struggled dynamic context, which is also always structured in balance of power. The analysis is limited not only to advanced culture, but is also referred as "popular culture" (*Populärkultur*). Popular culture steps not only as economic size strongly into feature, but also as important factor into education and human socialisation. It affects thus considerably, as humans understand themselves and their life and gives the world a sense. Popular culture becomes an important and powerful component of the material historical reality, which crucially canalizes the development possibilities of the human existence.

*Culture as a struggle for meanings (Kampf um Bedeutungen):*

Culture always closes, like already above mentioned, power structures, and contributes regarding the abilities of individuals and social groups to define and carry out their needs, to the production of asymmetrical conditions.

Five key words make possible a more detailed characterisation on the term "Cultural Studies"

1. *Radical contextuality* - Under the radical contextuality understands one the fundamental dependence of the culture studies on the respective connection, indifferently whether historical, sociological or pragmatic kind - the view of Cultural Studies is always individual and subjective.
2. *Theory understanding of Cultural Studies* - Under it fall theoretical-oriented basic positions of the Cultural Studies, whose individual contexts are not accessible empirically. They are characterized by openness, theoretical versatility and a critical reflexive attitude. It is important in this connection that in the understanding of Cultural Studies is not to be seen context-free theories .
3. *An interventionist character of Cultural Studies* - Cultural Studies proceed from the political character. It does not concern an undirected production from knowledge, but gives therefore, to produce knowledge referring to conflict resolutions, but according to Grossberg "certain distance from the existing spheres requires of activity of politics".
4. *Interdisciplinarity*  
Culture is understood as a conflict field. As seen from this point of view the term culture can hardly be seized in a discipline.
5. *Self reflection*  
Cultural Studies bend itself constantly regarding reviews in order to insure itself and of course correct itself as forward laying to make necessary their possible way.

### **Discursivity and Multiculturality**

If one understands theory as contextually obtained, provisional answer or as question perspective only, then researching is forced to position itself in research process with its theory understanding. Cultural Studies shows that those are active recipients inside and productive, i.e. however they do not see, media moguls are aimless and they would not successfully use their position of power. However John Fiske sees borders of the interpretation, which are due to the polysemy of the texts – no purely textual representation play of significant ones.

A text is understood as raw material, which functions as raw material for culture research, that can be analyzed regarding certain forms (e.g.: Narration, ideological problem, addressee, subject position, etc). The meaning of a text cannot be determined by the analysis of the text alone, but only by the consideration of the contexts of reception - adjustments are made on a temporary basis.

John Fiske proceeds particularly from the diversification of current medium discourses: Multi-discursivity and Multi-culturality. They are a substantial component of societies, in which power and resources are unequally distributed and also of great importance for occupations on the media branch - he recognizes five forms of the argument:

- Fight for the accentuation of a word or an sign in a way, which serves specially for social interests.
- Argument around the choice of words, pictures and discursive repertoires.
- Fight to let the suppressed voices come to word.
- Fight for the articulation and re-articulation.
- Argument around entrance to the public discourse.

The discussion around the choice of words, since reality is only discursive articulated, brings in a close relationship between events and discourses. For John Fiske there are mobile, strategically and tactically formed alliances of social interests, which develop historically and contextually - thus flowing between opposition and agreement.

In order to be able to recognize this, it is necessary to argue with the culture perspective also in the training since after Lawrence Grossberg a separation from culture and society is not possible - Cultural Studies must embody culture in practical everyday life of human kind, in the whole way of life totality. Culture is to be understood as a process, as a process of communication.

Cultural practices operate on various levels, and produce various effects, which cannot be understood by any theory, therefore is also impossible to teach in an environment which a firm theory is mediated.

## **Results and changes**

The cultural turn brought some challenging positions for communication sciences. A shift on emphasis and arguments can be determined in one period of the last three decades and on four linked levels among themselves:

- on the level science and of the theory of knowledge,
- within the range of the sociological methodology,

- in the empirical interests of research,
- on the level of the social theory.

On every four levels of collective meanings, a new, central value is attached to symbolic structures: the social world appears through collective to constitute *meaning structures*. These structures become preferentially the subject of empirical studies. Science appears as a socially manufactured symbolic organisation with their methodical problem centred in the reconstruction of the meaning patterns of the social world.

### **Criticism and Conclusion**

The central criticism at the Cultural Studies is its content and methodical “extensibility”, which is primarily in-acted concerning the reproach of the arbitrariness, criticized for example by Tony Bennett who in this circumstance, recognizes a danger, on which the “elasticity from the CS arises”. Into the same direction Angela McRobbie, points out that “the fact that under approval of the pluralism everything has own ways to go and every object of investigation is regarded as one that possesses legitimate cultural content”.

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