Communication and General Semantics:

Recovering Ideas for a Unified Discipline of Human Communication

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Abstract: Our goal in this paper two-fold. First, we wish to trace some relationships between the intellectual inquiry into human nature and experience called General Semantics and its relation with the intellectual discipline of Communication. Both emerged in the early 20th century in response to advances in scientific inquiry and various, disquieting shifts in the social and political conditions of 20th century life. At the same time, both have been subject to the same forces of institutionalization that have led, we believe, to the contemporary marginalization of their intellectual insights. We will put a handful of concepts from General Semantics in conversation with some of those that we understand to be central in the discipline of Communication. These will take the form of conversations with some critical intellectual figures: Dewey, Lippmann, Cooley, Bateson, Mead and others. Second, and by consequence of the first, our paper will contribute to the intellectual history communication as an academic discipline, with an eye to refreshing many of the central problems and lines of inquiry that form communication as a science. While our goal is not to explicitly criticize the current state of the field, it is to diagnose how Communication has reached an impasse in its disciplinary aspirations.

Introduction

General Semantics is Alfred Korzybski's (1933) proposal for a general science of human nature that takes as its focal point the relationship between the language people use and the ways in which they experience, understand and act in the world. General Semantics is distinct from the linguistic field of semantics which takes as its subject matter aspects of meaning that are expressed in a language, code, or other form of representation. Rather, Korzybski was interested in humans' reactions to events in their environments, including, but not restricted to, linguistic signs and symbols, e.g., to the *event's* meaning as a whole. He referred to these holistic responses to events as "semantic reactions." He was particularly interested in distinguishing between "signal reactions" (immediate, unthinking ones) and "delayed reactions" which enable people to avoid the pitfalls of misinterpretation. General Semantics, then, was conceived of as an inclusive approach to human communication, the laws of which, if understood, could minimize, if not entirely eliminate, the pernicious influence of undetected misunderstandings between people.

Although General Semantics exists today as ongoing intellectual enterprise with its own society and journal (indeed, its own *societies* since Korzybski's ideas have been taken up in various countries) and although its influence can be discerned not only among academics, but a wide variety of social practices spanning from forms of psychotherapy and education to science fiction, it has failed to become a part of the mainstream of ideas in academic departments of Communication.

The task we have set ourselves is to reflect on the current state of the field of Communication and the aspirations of early 20th Century scholars who work provided an

intellectual rationale for its founding as refracted through the fate of the ideas of Alfred Korzybski and his followers. We hope through such an investigation to gain a deeper understanding of why, for at least two decades, scholars have noted a marked discrepancy between the intellectual foundations of the field of Communication and the modes of its institutionalization. Such discontent is expressed in a variety of ways. To take just two examples among many, John Peters (1986) writes of the "Institutional Sources and Intellectual Poverty in Communication Research" and Karen Wahl-Jorgenson (2004) about "How Not to Found a Field." In each case, the authors orient us backwards into the history of ideas and changes in social life that brought the concept of communication into prominence among philosophers and social theorists beginning in the late 19th century and continuing today.

Phrased somewhat differently, what went awry, such that the consequences of institutionalization of a set of academic and social concerns should produce fragmentation of the presumed field of study that has existed now for almost 100 years? Why has it become commonplace to read indictments such as the following:

> The American field of communication, at least at its institutional core of research and training, associations and conferences, textbooks and journals, remains today not far advanced beyond its aims of nearly half a century ago (Beniger, 1994, p. 26)
> or
>
> Both prior to that coalescence [of the field as a distinct domain in the 1940's] and following it, a significant feature of communication research has been its fragmentation as topic concern across virtually all the disciplines and fields of the social sciences and humanities (Delia, 1987, p. 20)
> or

.... the identity of communication research merged into the dominant structure of society where it was absorbed in the reproduction of power and the maintenance of the economic system, and in the language of domination, and lost its ability to recognize its own history (Hart, 1992, pp. 7-8).

General Semantics, exorcised from the field so completely that it is briefly noted in only one of the sources just cited , has suffered its own problems and shortcomings, to which we will return later in this paper. But first we need to review, at least briefly, the reasons for these kinds of critiques and their implications for understanding the current state of the "discipline."

Recuperating Origins

Historical accounts of the origins of the field of communication research typically begin by noting the social concerns, intellectual agendas and institutional innovations that occurred shortly before, during and following World War II. Czitrom (1982) notes the burgeoning public attention to changes in social life associated with the rapid development of railroads, the telegraph, and other "modern media" and modes of transportation that accompanied the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the late 19th century. It was only in the 1880's and later decades, notes Peters (1999) that "communication" became an explicit problem of academic investigation although the term, can be traced back beyond Latin to Greek origins or great antiquity where the core ideas of "placing in common, exchange, and cognate terms" have appeared in varied mixtures and uses.

Central to the narrative of the emergence of communication as a public and academic concern in the decades around the turn of the 20th century is the near-panic level of fear

connected with the idea of total control brought about by propaganda campaigns during World War I and the continuation of these concerns through World War II and the cold war. Owing to the advent of radio just prior to World War I, it had for the first time become possible for states to broadcast their view of reality instantaneously across battle lines and international borders in the vernacular of the people they were trying to influence; literacy was no longer a requirement for "propagation of the faith." Simultaneously, this new media technology made possible internal means of propaganda that the state and large corporations could aim at their own populations.

As ably summarized by Peters (1999), several interconnected ideas about the central issue issues of communication circulated widely by the 1920s: communication as management of public opinion; ways to eliminate semantic ambiguity to make "clear communication" routine; efforts to understand how self and other are constituted; and the possibilities of coordinated social action. However, when it became institutionalized Communication as a university discipline in the American context – both in basic research and education – the study of was conspicuously narrow, and many of its constituent concerns, were marginalized. In part we believe that fractionation with the nascent discipline was situated within an inherited division of labor between the human, social, and behavioral sciences which did not encourage it to develop a unified theory and associated methodology. But in good measure, it was the dominance of the field-as-institutionalized by government, military, and commercial concerns that controlled the process of institutionalization.

The Disciplinary Landscape

First, it is important to note that where institutionalized in universities, Communication allied itself with the social sciences which were differentiating themselves from the humanities and arts at the same time communication was coming to academic and public consciousness more generally.

William Kessen (1990, p. 12) provides a useful catalogue of starting dates for the different social science disciplines which provides a rough index of the division of the intellectual terrain within which the discipline of Communication had to establish itself within the social science (we have taken the liberty of slightly extending Kessen's list):

1880 Academy of Political Science
1884 American Historical Association
1885 American Economic Association
1892 American Psychological Association
1899 National Institute of Social Science
1902 American Anthropological Association
1905 American Sociological Association
1916 The American Educational Research Association,
1924 The Linguistic Society of America

This list is useful because it makes explicit the way in which the "sciences of man" or "humane sciences" were subdivided not only to the exclusion of history, literature and art, all of which figured into important historical understandings of communication, but also alienated from each other. Individuals were distinguished sharply from society and ceded to psychology (note that the origin of the word, individual, meant a member of society!). Culture, individuals, and society, were all walled off from each other. The historical was separated from the present, the political from the economic, and so on. Little wonder then, that when the traditionally invoked "fathers" of Communication began to write about public opinion, propaganda, and advertising, they did so from the secure position of existing disciplinary departments. Communication is precisely what

was excluded when the social sciences set out dissect human nature, and murdered it in the process.

The road not taken

Owing to the necessary brevity of our presentation, we will focus on the ideas associated with American pragmatism which, as others before us have noted played a central role in formulating a potential discipline both before, and immediately following, World War I (e.g. Della, 1987; Hardt, 1992; Peters, 1999).   Sadly, in our view, the ideas of such important scholars as John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Charles Horton Cooley as well as others influenced by these thinkers, never coalesced in institutionalized form. Had they done so, the discipline would have taken on a quite different character than it did.

John Dewey is central to this account because of his widespread influence over many decades and the direct influence beyond the confines of academia. It was Dewey, in considering the processes by which societies operate and replicate themselves, who declared:

> "Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication. There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. (*Democracy and Education* ,1915, p.4)

About a decade later he added:

> … communication   is instrumental as liberating us from the otherwise overwhelming pressure of events and enabling us to live in a world of things that have meaning. [Communication also enables] a sharing in the objects and arts precious to a community, a sharing whereby meanings are enhanced, deepened, and solidified in the sense of communion (*Nature and Experience,* 1929, p. 166)

Best known for the application of such ideas in the organization of education, Dewey also took an intense interest in "the media," of his day especially newspapers, at one time toying with the project of starting a newspaper ("Thought News") as a means of creating socially organized intelligence Nothing came of this project, and although Dewey wrote directly about problems of communication only rarely in his later life, his influence was greatly amplified through the work of his students from a period he spent at the University of Michigan, Charles Horton Cooley and Robert Park.

Charles Horton Cooley referred to communication as "the threads that hold society together" in a way homologous to that in which a nervous system unifies the activity of a human being. Moreover, according to Cooley, communication was both constitutive of individuals and society and the foundation of history. ("Society is a matter of the incidence of men on one another. And since this incidence is a matter of communication, the history of the latter is the foundation of all history" (Cooley, 1897, p. 7374). Included in the category of communication are all of the artifactual systems of his time: "gesture, speech, writing, printing, mails, telephones, telegraphs, photography, and the techniques of the arts and sciences all of the ways in which thought and feeling can pass from man to man." In broad strokes, we see here some of the central motives for developing a new discipline: the conflicts and collaborations between men and women were both expanding and shrinking, but in either case rendering more significant, the fact communication is central to the order of society, politics, and economy.

Cooley's belief in the double-sided nature of communication as constituting simultaneously the individual and the social group led him to propose the idea of "the looking glass self" in which the self is formed only in constant intercourse with others, e.g., through

communication. As a consequence of each person's self image being shaped by other's images of them, no uniform, binary, differentiation of self and other is possible. Rather, what constitutes both "self" and "other" will depend intimately on the patterns of communication that mutually constitute them. Very similar ideas were developed by G. H. Mead, Kurt Lewin, and many others; the central concern became, for these scholars, to abandon notions of a transcendental or *a priori* subject of communication and instead reverse the terms – to ask how individuals are in fact produced through their communicative relations and, if how, when we adopt this "bottom up" view, do these communicative relations between individuals make social order possible?

Cooley was even less inclined than Dewey to engage directly in research on the media, but his writings provided an overall framework within which to view communication as a process uniting "macro" social and "micro" individual phenomena, as well as a driving force in sociohistorical change.

Whereas Cooley eschewed the rough and tumble of involvement in the media, Robert Park left academia and entered journalism upon graduating from the University of Michigan in 1887 after taking half a dozen courses from Dewey. He is a particularly interesting contributor to these events because he provides a bridge between the academic concerns over the shortcomings of the social sciences on the one hand and articulated practical concerns about the impact of the new media on the development of society that would come to dominate the institutionalized study of communication on the other.

After spending a decade as a working journalist in several large urban areas, where he covered the police beat, (an occupation that inevitably makes one wonder what can be done to cure societies ills) Park tried to assist Dewey's efforts to create a "thought" newspaper, and

finally returned to graduate school in the belief that he needed to get a better theoretical grasp of the phenomena known as "news" and "public opinion." His studies took him eventually to Europe, where he worked with German scholars central to the debate over what kind of enterprise psychology might possibly be, wrote a dissertation on "The Crowd and the Public," in which he attempted to distinguish different mediational characteristics of the two kinds of collectivities.

Park, like the other early 20th century figures we have been discussing, focused on how conditions of mediation affect the relationship between the individual and society; in particular, he suggested that modern communications made possible a molding of public opinion that was based on reasoning and thinking rather than feeling and instinct which were said to characterize crowds. Optimistically, he believed that improving journalism might be able to facilitate a form of intelligence greater than that of a crowd. He is also important for initiating concrete research, within the discipline of Sociology, aimed at problems that would become central to the new discipline of Communication in later decades.

The last figure among early American communication theorists whose ideas both provide a starting point for developing a genuine discipline and the practical concerns that would preoccupy those who institutionalized the discipline is Walter Lippmann. The epigram for his classic book, **Public Opinion** (1922), is Plato's parable of the cave and the opening chapter is an extended meditation on the special quandaries introduced by cultural mediation for the organization of large-scale societies.

> Looking back [on the onset of World War E.P. &M.C.] we can see how indirectly we
> know the environment in which nevertheless we live. We can see that the news of it

comes to us now fast, now slowly; but that whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat as if it were the environment itself. " (p. 4)

He goes on to say that in all such cases where retrospective analysis yields information of our blindness to our circumstances, there is "one common factor" at work.

It is the insertion between man and his environment of a pseudo-environment. To that pseudo-environment his behavior is a response. But because it **is** behavior, the consequences, if they are acts, operate not in the pseudo environment where the behavior is stimulated, but in the real environment where action eventuates ... For certainly, at the level of social life, what is called adjustment of man to his environment takes place through the medium of fictions. By fictions I do not mean lies. I mean representation of the environment which is in less or greater degree made by man himself. (Lippmann, 1922, p. 15)

These examples illustrate basic themes that characterize this early period in which a unified discipline of communication seemed within reach: 1/ the order of society and the relations between men -- whether a matter of conflict or coordination -- requires communication an investigation into what places men in common with one another; 2/ to the question of who is the human being, a question that has preoccupied philosophy for several centuries, communication responds with an original formulation: people are conditioned and constituted through the patterns of communication that order their selves, their relation to others, their social relations; 3/ finally, the conditionality of communication on mediational means incorporated in to human interaction understood through investigation of mediating social practices at various levels of scale in social life.

The Road to Institutionalization

What all of the thinkers discussed in the previous section shared in common was institutional independence from the military and large commercial interests for research oriented towards the

production of knowledge useful to advertising, national defense, and media producers. Such independence was conspicuously absent when the "fathers of the field" became ensconced in university or commercial institutions. Harold Lasswell, once a sociologist at the University of Chicago helped set the tone for this new field in his monograph, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927). John B. Watson of Johns Hopkins University, famous primarily as a founder of the psychological approach known as behaviorism, left academia to work for the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency where he sought to demonstrate the usefulness of his psychological approach for solving practical problems of marketing (Buckly, 1982). Lazarsfeld's *Radio Research* (1941), and many of his other studies, were also directly geared towards the administrative study of opinion and influence via mass communication*s*.

From early on links between the study of propaganda and advertising were clearly recognized, but so too were links between propaganda and public opinion. Lasswell (1927, p. 627) pointed directly to the link between the two topics, as well as the social psychological study of attitudes by defining propaganda as "the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols."   It comes as no surprise, then, that the first proposal to set up an academic unit to study communication came in the form of a proposal for a "Committee on Communication and Public Opinion" at the University of Chicago where Lasswell collaborated with Douglas Waples, a professor in Chicago's Graduate Library School, or that Waples went on to work in the Office of War Information during World War II.

Despite these great forces of institutionalization, the study of communication described above was not entirely marginalized. Peters marks the institutional development of

Communication departments by distinguishing between the terms "communication" and "communications." The latter term, which we take to be dominant in contemporary academic departments, he relates back to Cooley's the mechanisms and media through which human relations develop: film studies, literacy, newspapers, television, the internet, etc. And in each case, an investigation where the terms "mechanism" and "effect" are undifferentiated. In "communication" Peters retains the issue of "resolving self and other" (p. 9). We sympathize with this distinction, and believe it provides a useful juncture for circling back to our interest in the ideas of General Semantics and the forces which shaped their marginalization in both departments of Communication and Communications Studies.

Yet, these and related circumstances help account for the fact that Communication departments at American Universities have persistently and uncomfortably straddled its institutional neighbors and remained saddled with a theoretical and methodological identity crisis. This history accounts, in great measure, for why communication's prospects as an identifiably distinct *discipline* remain uncertain, and also accounts for why incorporating the humanities, social sciences and arts which were historically joined in human thinking about communication, broadly conceived, has generally has failed to develop. It is our belief that while "communication" is among the most used and conspicuous terms of 20th century intellectual programs, it has nevertheless been circulated with such endless eclecticism that it has dashed any hope of organizing itself into a intellectual discipline; that is, into a method of knowledge production which generates and disputes normative claims about the order of phenomena in the world; that produces and debates concepts; that refines questions of method and the limited scope of inquiry necessary to generate a discipline? If this is the case,

then while the term may endure as a fecund source of new ideas or reflections, it will hardly function as the organizing concept of a discipline.

Returning to General Semantics

We suggest that General Semantics and its founder Alfred Korzybski are interesting in the context of this paper because they provide a window on the ethos common to an intellectual period prior to Communication's institutional consolidation. This ethos proposed to study communication as a *discipline* that understands human experience in terms of our species' biological history as reconfigured by, and in, cultural-historically constituted material-symbolic activities. Importantly, the human species' capacity to act beyond natural constraints necessitates communication and coordination as the conditions of survival. Thus the motivation to develop a discipline of Communication, at least from the perspective of General Semantics, was not simply to form a response of the reliance of the State and market on communication technologies, nor were its concerns with propaganda *per se*. Rather, General Semantics and the impetus to the discipline of communication emerged from the devastating destruction of the first World War as a crisis in our understanding of human nature's capacity for war and the existential uncertainty that conditions human life, of which only human communication -- *i.e.,* producing something in common between humans -- appears as the solution.

To rephrase the ideas expressed earlier in a manner to considering the well springs of General Semantics, communication as an intellectual discipline emerged *in the century when humanity finally acquired the means to eliminate itself and all life from the face of the earth.*

The question here is not war *per se,* but rather the contingent, mediated nature of human coordination and mutual orientation that governs human development and civilization. To exist outside of such coordination is to exist in a state of war. Recall our earlier invocation of Lipmann's idea of humans living in a pseudo environment. What we neglected to highlight was the anecdote which opens his discussion

> There is an island in the ocean where in 1914 a few Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans lived. No cable reaches that island, and the British mail steamer comes but once in sixty days. In September it had not yet come, and the islanders were still talking about the latest newspaper which told about the approaching trial of Madame Caillaux for the shooting of Gaston Calmette. It was, therefore, with more than usual eagerness that the whole colony assembled at the quay on a day in mid-September to hear from the captain what the verdict had been. They learned that for over six weeks now those of them who were English and those of them who were French had been fighting in behalf of the sanctity of treaties against those of them who were Germans. For six strange weeks they had acted as if they were friends, when in fact they were enemies. (1922, p. 1)

This short parable embodies much of the spirit of communication as an intellectual discipline. It reveals the fragility of the contingencies that coordinate individuals with each other against the persistent backdrop of war; i.e., of life without others. Against those events and objects that human beings find in common, there exists a constant threat of self-destruction. Communication, however, is not a political philosophy. We can summarize the method that embodies its spirit in general way by insisting that the study of human nature requires an account of culturally mediated thoughts and actions, along with their attendant emotions, embodied in our collective activities, all of which are grounded in our physical body and nervous system. It is in this context, which links the core concerns of Communication with

those of Communication*s* that provides a linkage between the individual story of Alfred Korzybski and the contemporary field of Communication/s.

General Semantics: Some Key Conceptual Underpinnings

General Semantics is most often remembered by invocation of a few key concepts and slogans, such as "the map is not the territory" and "the word is not the thing defined," which will be the focus of several of the talks at this session. In our view, the complex way in which these expressions organized the general inquiry of General Semantics is typically under-appreciated. At its core, these statements are expressive of Korzybski's attempt to investigate the mediated conditions of human epistemology and its inseparable relation to our experience of the world. Korzybski believed that scientific thought -- particularly mathematics and physics -- exhibited the most rational ways of knowing, and that scientific thought provides the most accurate language by which to describe the physical reality of the natural world. This conclusion was based on the idea that controlled experiments demonstrate that the "structure" of the language of science corresponds well to the structure of the natural, physical world. The "map" of physics or mathematics provides a reasonable fit to the "territory;" the former provides a common ground by which to order dialogue and thought about the latter.

However, the same cannot be said, Korzybski argued, of the language human beings use to organize their social, political and personal relations; moreover, the language humans use to organize their experience is often at a distance from the conditions of those experiences. The structure of everyday language, Korzybski often remarked, does not

adequately organize human experience vis-a-vis the reality of the artifice of human civilization in which human beings share their lives. Human life is spoken of, communicated about, and acted on with languages (or maps) that do not correspond well, or have much in common with, reality (or territory). *Science and Sanity* therefore attempts to develop a mode of scientific inquiry -- which in its application to the humane or social sciences could be considered critical inquiry -- that *assumes* that the conditions for knowledge and experience of human life are always mediated by *maps*; i.e., by artifacts, both symbolic and material, among which language is perhaps the most important.

The artifice of human civilization, for Korzybski, is both the condition for, and the result of, mediated practice. At its core is the principle of *time-binding,* the fact that human beings "transmit from generation to generation" the material and symbolic results of their practices of everyday life. Although time-binding is typically understood at the cultural-historical level of human practices, Korzybski was careful to define its operations even in moment-to-moment interactions between individuals in their conversations and coordinating practices. Time-binding as a principle of human activity and the conditions for human experience is unique to human nature. In fact, by suggesting that "transmission," in its varied forms, is at the heart of human experience and knowledge-making, Korzybski was proposing nothing less than a theory of mediated activity: all human activity is mediated by ways of knowing ("maps") that organize a relation with others in a shared reality ("territory"). The *concept* of time-binding was therefore a way of making evident and open to inquiry the fact that human action, or behavior, is never separated from the cultural-historical conditions that have made it possible in the first place. One not only has to ask, "what kinds of maps

organize such and such a practice or experience," but, at the same time, ask, "how are these maps the results of particular cultural-historical processes and practices?" To understand human organization and coordination in the world is always, from the perspective of time-binding, to unearth the symbolic and material conditions -- themselves historical and cultural achievements -- as communication practices.

Non-correspondence between the thought that organizes knowledge of the world and the reality in which it takes place results in a normal, but unhealthy, relation between human beings which Korzybski refers to as "unsane." *Science and Sanity* sets out to formulate a new field of inquiry that will assist people to become "sane," that is, to resolve the problem of the coordination and conflict between the assumptions that order their thinking and speech with the structure or reality of the human life world. To move from insanity in the direction of sanity means to inquire critically into, or reflect upon, and to re-organize through conversation the ways in which we make sense of the world; i.e., the shift from insanity to unsanity or sanity requires a commitment to studying and re-organizing communicative practices. Korzybski drew on mathematics and quantum physics to propose what he claimed to be a scientific method to provide humanity with a theory of meaning as a theory of the contingent relations between things in human nature and terms or words in human language. The work of Korzybski's famous phrase "the map is not the territory" was to open up and make possible a common field of problems at the center of which is communication, coordination, and culture or, in our terms, mediated human activity. But if thought and experience are conditioned by communication practices, this still leaves the question of how to order the fact of human nature's biological inheritance in the context of the artifice of

human civilization. This inheritance cannot be marginalized at the cost of foregrounding cultural-historical, symbolic-material activity. How could an inquiry into human nature proceed without an account of human embodiment, sensual life, and our nervous systems (especially the brain)?

Following in the footsteps of many late 19th and early 20th century scholars including Marx, Comte, Durkheim, and Korzybski argued for the idea of "homo duplex," the idea that human beings live simultaneously in two worlds which they struggle, often unsuccessfully, to distinguish. The first is the sensual, physical world of nature, which Korzybski calls the "extensional" world. The second is where social, political, and economic life exists, which Korzybski calls the "verbal," the "intensional" world of language and consciousness. The truth of a proposition in the intensional world does not mean that it is true of the extensional world of sensual and physical reality. General Semantics provides an interesting take upon the long standing Man-is-double problem because it argues that the processes that order both worlds are common to each, *even if* the truth conditions of each are at odds. Contrary to inherited divisions in the sciences, General Semantics argues that in order to render intelligible how humans make sense of the world, the sciences should not suppose that humans' natural selves and conscious selves are mutually exclusive, but rather that they can be brought into alignment via the processes that order both. The sciences (human or otherwise) should not suppose that the problem of *communication* is different in kind within or between these two worlds. Each emerges of the same, complementary processes on a common plane of organization that Korzybski calls "structure," and a common set of mechanisms, which he calls *abstraction*. At the intersection of the these worlds is, in short,

both a concentration and doubling of the human being. Korzybski often works, in *Science and Sanity*, to distinguish himself from the early 20th century context of the social sciences, refusing the inherited division of intellectual labor of the university. To divide a knowledge of Man into various epistomological practices was, at the same time, to remove any chance of producing a science or form of inquiry into the nature of Man in his plurality with other human beings. In place of these sciences, General Semantics tries to develop a method in which Man is actually *put back together* by a method that foregrounds the imperative of communication as the condition of human experience.

The concept of *structure* -- the "complex of ordered and interrelated parts" -- is a simple and powerful construction that makes no assumptions about the phenomena to which it is applicable (1933, pg. 56). Yet structure is central to the method of studying communication, Korzybski argued, because it requires the analyst to make evident a pattern of common relations -- e.g., between words, events, actors, assumptions, etc -- as the contingent foundations for knowing, existing, and making meaning. Persistent attention to structure entails the persistent unearthing of the contingent relations that make knowledge possible. The practice of expressing the contingencies of knowledge and experience relates to a principle that Korzybski called "non-allness" -- the principle that words, things, or events are meaningful only at particular moments in time and as a part of contexts; the meaning of an "event," for example, is meaningful only if we qualify the knowledge we have about it as a part of the particular contexts about which we speak. Reciprocally, the absolute singularity -- or non-identity -- of each event emerges as a function of the relations it occupies in a particular context and moment of interaction. We see in this characterization a kinship with

figures such as Wittgenstein, the branch of French sociology that would develop as structural anthropology, and Gestalt theory in psychology. Such relational thinking was central to the work of Gregory Bateson, who was quite explicit not only in referring to the idea that "the map is not the territory" but the constant struggle it requires to maintain relational thinking in the face of an overwhelming tendency to create an asymmetrical, cause-effect relation between subject and object. We also see a connection here with cybernetics and information theory; the shift in physics to probability from mechanics. For General Semantics, the communicative subject is at the same time the subject of probabilistic physics; of biological, connectionist processes; and of culture as the context of meaning and interaction.

Rather than speak of a person, subject, or human being, however, Korzybski often speaks of the "central nervous system," a reference that is usually misconstrued. The central nervous system of the human organism is an abstraction system which, at the sensual and neural levels, may operate unconsciously, or "silently," yet generates a vertical cascade of abstractions that allows for consciousness to emerge. This vertical trajectory, from the lower level abstractions of the central nervous system of the human organism "close to life," to the development of higher mental functions, allows Korzybski to treat the human actor as an organism that continually processes difference and that operates in a "semantic environment." The term "semantics" in *General Semantics* is intended to convey, then, the way in which human behavior (semantic reactions) never exists outside of culturally mediated environments, but rather as the persistent activity of reconciling difference or, to put it another way, *reflexivity* and *feedback*.

Viewed in this manner, General Semantics suggests the basic elements we need in order in order to produce a unified theory of human communication that takes as its basic principle the assertion that the conditions of human experience are, at the same time, the result of human culturally mediated activities. The concept of the "semantic environment" -- wherein function secondary concepts such as structure, abstraction, and map -- is, in short, the space of communication, the field of the common, wherein mediation and coordination ("betweeness") is possible through perpetual difference making and reconciliation. In the language of General Semantics, to be "sane" is to achieve coordination between the state of one's semantic environments and the current state of the world. This relation, however, is in a permanent state of flux; change and difference are the norm of this dynamic system; the common must be reproduced; and the existential uncertainty that results from having persistently to reconcile difference between one's language and one's state in the world is the condition of consciousness and communication.

Conclusion

The absence of General Semantics from most contemporary histories of Communication*s*, and mostly likely its absence from university courses, corresponds less to the failure of General Semantics as an intellectual program than to failures of Communication's institutionalization into an academic program. Martin Gardner's *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*, in which General Semantics is harshly criticized, is often referred to as evidence of the foundational intellectual problems of General Semantics. But this book, published in 1957, was probably written in a period when two things had already happened:

1/ the institutionalization of Communication*s* as an academic department had formalized into the academic program that left the pursuit of an intellectual discipline of Communication by the wayside; 2/ the co-optation of General Semantics by pulp science fiction, popular culture, cult religion, and mental health movements had, in part, already begun to dominate its unserious reception in academic circles and the public generally. Furthermore, isolated from its intellectual kin, General Semantics could be criticized at some distance without fears of recrimination within the academy. It is telling, in this regard, that Gardner's chapter on General Semantics makes no reference to the study of Communication as an intellectual discipline.

Yet Communication as an intellectual program has endured, sometimes in unlikely intellectual and academic venues. This symposium is evidence that, through forms of funding, the study of human nature, thought, and action as a problem of communication lives on. Moreover, this symposium is evidence that the distributed nature of inquiry into Communication as a discipline has still found not departmental home. General Semantics may appear dated. Its language harks back to another time. But at the level of ideas, and at the level of organizing sets of questions about human nature, it remains inspiring and relevant reading.

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