

Paul Cobley

A BRIEF NOTE ON DIALOGUE

After Ponzio, dialogue can never be the same. The “dialogue” that is taken for granted in common parlance involves two players. It is customarily characterized by figures such as negotiation, interaction and “meeting halfway”. It involves an impulse to dialogue in which there is a decision to recognize the difference of the other and to grant it respect. It features an ethics in which one makes the effort to mediate between the positions of oneself and another, paying attention to the relation of another to one’s own position. It commonly comprises two coming together in compromise, consensus and functional agreement.

In the work of Ponzio, all of these conceptions of dialogue, with their reassuring liberal overtones designed to underwrite the self-satisfied rationality of enlightened citizens, are revealed to be a sham. Yet Ponzio insists on dialogue and, indeed, despite his towering achievement in his many fields of interest, it is possible to argue that, at the very core of his thinking, there lies this single concept: dialogue not as an initiative but as a constant demand. In “The I questioned”, for example, he investigates politics, war and global communication, each considered within the Levinasian frame of a critique of a non-dialogic conception of dialogue. As Ponzio writes, “Levinas’ philosophy is not a philosophy of dialogue but a critique of dialogue according to the dominant conception founded on the category of identity” (2006: 10). While the critique of dialogue is at the centre of all of Ponzio’s work, it is utilised in different, politically specific ways. To begin with, it is a conception of dialogue which, in going beyond the liberal notion of meeting others halfway, negotiating and compromising, actually *opposes* such agentive programmes, recognizing in dialogue a compulsion and demand rather than self-identified good will. Such a framing of dialogue is to be found, too, of course, in Bakhtin; as Petrilli and Ponzio succinctly state:

For Bakhtin, dialogue is not the result of an initiative we decide to take, but rather it is imposed, something to which one is subjected. Dialogue is not the result of opening towards the other, but of the impossibility of closing (1998: 28).

Yet, it would be a mistake to imagine that dialogue after Ponzio is merely a gloss on Bakhtin and Levinas.

There are two main reasons why this is the case. The first is to do with the ways in which Ponzio's critique of dialogue, arguably even more so than that of Levinas, is no mere philosophical exercise. If Ponzio's work is to be understood as an elaboration of the specificities of his Bakhtinian insight into the impossibility of closing, then its domain of functioning is manifest in the way that his critique of dialogue is really lodged at all the variegated formations of capitalism. Taking "The I questioned" as an example once more, Ponzio follows Levinas in putting the formation of "Identity" under interrogation. As Levinas would have it, there is a common misconstrual of "I-other" relations in which the common conception of dialogue is often implicated. As Ponzio puts it, dialogue should not be seen in the service of mere self-affirmation:

On the contrary, as formulated by Levinas, dialogue is passive witness to the impossibility of escape from the other; it is passive witness to the fact that the other cannot be eluded, to the condition of involvement with the other apart from initiative taken by the subject who is called to answer *to* the other and *for* the other. The "I" is constitutionally, structurally dialogic in the sense that it testifies to the relation with otherness, whether the otherness of others or the otherness of self (2006: 11).

For Ponzio, then, dialogue provides the crucial means for addressing the communication-ontology relationship, especially in the phase of global communication.

A few words should be added on this last topic, although Ponzio has been eloquent in this respect in a number of publications. What global communication has made clear is that, in touting the inclusiveness of capitalism, it has reached a crisis point in the latter's own palpable logic of exclusion. Capitalism so strongly advertises the logic of inclusion that it seems to protest too much. Like his contemporaries, Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben, Ponzio seeks to demonstrate that the very rule of capital subsists on the naturalization of exceptions (see Agamben 1998, 2005 and Badiou 2003, 2005). If I read Ponzio correctly, what capitalism represses – and it does so in many forms – is the very compulsion of dialogue that his work describes. As a rigorous thinking through of the complexities of contemporary politics and as an overview of the diversity of capitalism's insidious work, Ponzio's analysis seems to exemplify theory in the grand style. (The kind of theory which, if emanating from a Francophone base, is celebrated in the star system of Anglophone media. It

need hardly be added that there are examples of such celebrated theory which cannot hold a torch to Ponzio's *oeuvre*).

In keeping with the best grand theory of the late twentieth century, Ponzio's elucidation of dialogue is resolutely anti-humanist. In some ways, Ponzio's re-reading of Bakhtin, for example, is analogous to the groundbreaking re-assessment of Marx by Althusser (Althusser and Balibar 1970). Ultimately, Althusser saw Marx as breaking, radically, with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man. From about 1845 onwards, Marx began to work with new concepts, including the social formation, production forces, the relations of production, the superstructure, ideology, determination in the last instance (by the economy) and specific determination of other levels of the social formation. For Althusser, this is not a mere detail; it is "Marx's scientific discovery" (1977: 227). That this break is necessary is spelled out by Althusser when he writes:

Strictly in respect to theory, therefore, one can and must speak of *Marx's theoretical anti-humanism*, and see in this *theoretical anti-humanism*, the absolute (negative) precondition of the (positive) knowledge of the human world itself, and of its practical transformation. It is impossible to *know* anything about men [sic] except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes. So, any thought that appeals to Marx for any kind of restoration of a theoretical anthropology or humanism is no more than ashes, *theoretically*. But, in practice, it could pile up a monument of *pre-Marxist* ideology that would weigh down on real history and threaten to lead it into blind alleys (1977: 229-30, emphasis in the original).

Of course, Ponzio's explication of Bakhtin is called a "re-reading" despite the fact that it looks increasingly like the most accurate presentation of the Russian writer's dialogue. So, too, with Althusser and Marx. To make the matter clear, what is common to both instances is the necessity of eradicating any basis for claiming a liberal Bakhtin/Marx, plus, in the process, the grounding of new co-ordinates for a politics which does not rely on the commonplaces of humanism.

The anti-humanism of Ponzio's dialogue and the theory of capitalism contained therein are particularly apposite in the present moment. They are posited at a time when successive social democratic governments in Europe have pushed the most sickly and sickening liberal humanist policies, touting multiculturalism with one hand whilst waging war in Iraq, anti-Islamism and a War on Terror with the other. Furthermore, in the contemporary Western academy, it cannot be coincidental that, in the humanities, some intellectuals have acted as shoeshine boys of humanism through, especially, their complicity in the publishing

phenomena of “postmodernism” and (especially “culturalist”) cultural studies (cf. Badiou 2001).

Coming to the second reason why Ponzio’s dialogue is far from being a gloss on Bakhtin and Levinas is evident, one finds, in fact, the figure of a third. If the anti-humanism of dialogue is of a piece with grand theory then it can be argued to have even greater affinity with the work of Ponzio’s other *maitre de penser*, Thomas A. Sebeok. Sebeok himself traces his intellectual, semiotic lineage back through Peirce to Locke and, ultimately, Hippocrates; he is in no way moved by the humanist appeals of Condillac and other Enlightenment thinkers. In fact, his concern with endosemiosis and the immensity of the web of semiosis in general, disqualifies the absurdities of much humanism from his thought. In theoretical terms, the communication among humans which forms the basis for humanist ideology amounts to pretty small beer. Sebeok calls for a consideration of the human body

which consists of some 25 trillion cells, or about 2000 times the number of living earthlings, and consider further that these cells have direct or indirect connections with one another through messages delivered by signs in diverse modalities. The sheer density of such transactions is staggering. Only a minuscule fraction is known to us, let alone understood. Interior messages include information about the significance of one somatic scheme for all of the others, for each over-all control grid (such as the immune system), and for the entire integrative regulatory circuitry, especially the brain (2001: 14-15).

The communications to be found in the human body are merely extensions of the kinds of communication carried out by the earliest, and most enduring, organisms on the planet - bacteria. There is no doubt that communication between humans, particularly in the formation “communication-production”, the profit-making imperative of global communication as identified by Petrilli and Ponzio (2005), has assumed a crucial position and has become, potentially, disastrous for the planet. Yet, where theory is concerned, there is a need to adhere to the larger picture of semiosis that Ponzio’s dialogue, informed by Sebeok, attempts to present.

Possibly the most productive meeting of Ponzio with Sebeok is to be found in their concurrence on issues of selfhood (see Sebeok, Ponzio and Petrilli 2001), each agreeing in *Semiotica dell’io* that “La questione dell’io é inevitabilmente connessa con quella dell’altro” (Ponzio 2001: 137). This volume is inspired, principally, by Sebeok’s observations on the very basis of selfhood, but also evinces a persuasive congruence of Sebeok’s “biosemiotic” arguments and the critical interventions in the analysis of modernity to be found in Ponzio

(and Petrilli). In his essays on the subject, Sebeok focuses on anxiety, love and the self-apprehension of body size in the maintenance of the self. Key to each of these, of course, and to the act interpretation, is the demand of dialogue which comes from outside. For Sebeok, the primeval way in which this takes place involves the “demand” from another organism. This demand is worked through in the semiotic mechanism of the immune system. It is worth replaying Sebeok’s summarised propositions on the self, here:

- (1) There are at least two apprehensions of the Self:
 - (a) *immunologic*, or biochemical, with semiotic overtones;
 - (b) *semiotic*, or social, with biological anchoring.
- (2) The arena of the immune reaction is contained within the skin; the arena for signal anxiety is normally between the perimeter of the Hediger “bubble” and the skin of the organism, the former containing the latter.
- (3) Invasion of (a) is initially signalled by the immune response, of (b) by anxiety, with the latter serving as an early warning system for the former.
- (4) In evolution, (a) is very old, whereas (b) is relatively recent. There is a corresponding advance from a purely metonymic nexus to one perceived as causal efficacy.
- (5) Communicational errors occur in both processes, and may have devastating effects on the Self (1991: 40).

Interesting though these observations are in themselves, they are important in the present context for the way in which they map so appositely onto Ponzio’s analyses of modernity.

For Ponzio, dialogue is the result of the demand of the other and it would be relatively simple – and still worthy – to acknowledge this demand in terms of key features of the contemporary social formation. Levinas and Bakhtin (and, even more so, their commentators) try their hands at this. Yet, the autonomous greatness of Ponzio’s dialogue is related to its inspiration in Sebeok’s work. It does not stop at mere societal observation. Rather, it is predicated on a proper “depth” analysis. By this is meant not simply a psychological analysis: Ponzio is not fooled into extrapolation from the circumstances of a mere human communicative interaction. Rather, again, Ponzio’s dialogue is motivated by *semiotics* and, in particular, a global semiotics which sees sign processes at work across all practices and across all species. In short, in the process of communication.

For Ponzio, indubitably, it is in the sphere of communication that dialogue is repeatedly stymied. Although he proceeds from the tyrannies of global communication and its inculcation in “communication-production”, along with Petrilli he also draws from Sebeok the importance of communication, on a dialogic basis, as the “bond that links body, mind and

culture” (2005: 230). As such, Sebeok’s semiotics is indispensable in its “attention to the signs of interconnection between the body and species” (2005: 230). As has been noted, Sebeok’s project involves investigation of the principles of *all* communication, only a very small per centage of which is verbal. Thus, in his essay “Nonverbal communication” (2001), he draws attention to communication among cells, among higher organisms and “endosemiosis” *within* organisms. Sebeok embraces communication between plants, animals and human animals; he draws attention to the many sources of communication; and he outlines the various channels of communication (1991). In the general repression of dialogue that Ponzio identifies, a considerable portion derives from the denial of communication beyond the verbal.

If the political significance of Sebeok’s influence in Ponzio’s dialogue cannot be seen immediately, it may be worth quoting Sebeok who, himself, in “The evolution of semiosis”, cites Lovelock’s “Gaia thesis”, noting that

All living entities, from their smallest limits to their largest extent, including some ten million existing species, form parts of a single symbiotic ecological body dubbed *Gaia* . . . Should a view, along these lines, of a modulate biosphere prevail, it would in effect mean that all message generators/sources and destinations/interpreters could be regarded as participants in one gigantic semiotic web... (2001b: 29-30).

In this light, what might be considered “care of the self”, can only realistically proceed from a *dialogic* “care of others”, where “others” must mean the entirety of the semiosphere. It is in this sense that Ponzio, along with Petrilli, has been compelled to map the contours of a future semioethics.

The scope of the current discussion of course, prevents a consideration of this last development but, suffice to say, it is one of the destinations of dialogue. And anyone with the slightest doubt that Ponzio’s conception of dialogue represents the position of a thinker in the grand theoretical sense should be compelled to visit such places to which his dialogue leads.

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Paul Cobley is Reader in Communications at London Metropolitan University, is an Executive Committee Member of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS), a member of the Semiotic Society of America and of the Media Communications and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA). He is the author of a number of books, including *The American Thriller* (2000) and *Narrative* (2001). He edited *The Communication Theory Reader* (1996), *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics and Linguistics* (2001), *Communication Theories* 4 vols. (2006), and (with Adam Briggs) *The Media: An Introduction* 2nd ed. (2001); he co-edits two journals: *Subject Matters* and *Social Semiotics*.