

Six Thinkers in Search of a Communication Theory

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What this essay offers are important statements involving various aspects of communication by six thinkers, which enables you to see the styles in which they write and gain an insight into their thinking. My thinkers and their topics are:

1. Jean Baudrillard on advertising and simulations
2. Harold Garfinkel on ethnomethodology and everyday life
3. Clotaire Rapaille on imprinting and culture codes
4. Henri Lefebvre on terrorism and everyday life
5. Wolfgang Iser on the role of the reader
6. Judith Butler on gender as choice

We begin with Jean Baudrillard, who has published many seminal works on communication. I did the drawings of the thinkers.



Jean Baudrillard

1. Advertising and Simulations

Any analysis of the system of objects must ultimately imply an analysis of discourse about objects—that is to say, an analysis of promotional “messages” (comprising image and discourse). For advertising is not simply an adjunct to the system of objects; it cannot be detached there from, nor can it be restricted to its “proper” function (there is no such thing as advertising strictly confined to the supplying of information). This lack of proportion is the “functional” apotheosis of the system. Advertising in its entirety contributes a useless and unnecessary universe. It is pure connotation. It contributes nothing to production or to the direct practical application of things, yet it plays an integral part in the system of objects not merely because it relates to consumption but also because it itself becomes an object to be consumed. A clear distinction must be drawn in connection with advertising’s dual status as a discourse on the object and as an object in its own right. It is a useless, unnecessary discourse that it comes to be consumable as a cultural object....Advertising sets itself the task of supplying information about particular products and promoting their sale. In principle this “objective” function is still its fundamental purpose. The supplying of information has nevertheless given way to persuasion—even to what Vance Packard calls “hidden persuasion,” the aim of which is a completely managed consumption....Studies have shown, however, that advertising’s persuasive power is not as great as had been supposed. A

saturation point is soon reached: competing messages tend to cancel each other out and many claims fail to convince on account of their sheer excessiveness. Moreover, injunctions and exhortations give rise to all kinds of counter-motivations and resistances, whether rational or irrational.

Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*. London: Verso. 1996, 164-165.

Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) was an influential French sociologist who made important contributions to social and cultural theory. His book, *The System of Objects*, was published in France in 1968 and then was translated by James Benedict and published in English in 1996. It was based on his doctoral dissertation. Baudrillard was interested in consumer culture and in the impact of postmodernism on society. He suggested that in postmodern societies, like the one found in the United States, simulations become dominant and are more important than what they copy. In hyperreality, the sign becomes more important than what it stands for.

Thus, he explains in a celebrated article, “The Precision of Simulacra” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Disney and is the “real” America and the real America is an imitation of Disneyland. He writes:

Everywhere in Disneyland the objective profile of America, down to the morphology of individuals and of the crowds, is drawn. All its values are exalted by the miniature and the comic strip....Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the “real” country, all of the real America that is Disneyland....Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. (European Graduate School, n.d.)

In Baudrillard’s “hyperreality” view of America, it is becoming more and more like Disneyland. As Peter Brooker explains in his book *Cultural Theory: A Glossary* (1999: 121-122):

Hyperreality. A term associated with the effects of MASS PRODUCTION and REPRODUCTION and suggesting that an object, event, experience so reproduced replaces or is preferred to its original: that the copy is “more real than real.” In the writings of the French social philosopher and commentator on POSTMODERNISM, Jean Baudrillard (1929–) and Umberto Eco (1932–), hyperreality is associated especially with cultural tendencies and a prevailing sensibility in contemporary American society.

In Baudrillard’s discussion, hyperreality is synonymous with the most developed form of SIMULATION: the autonomous simulacra which is free from all references to the real.

Baudrillard and many other European cultural theorists have focused their attention on the role of simulations and the hyperreal in America, and have been fascinated—perhaps even obsessed—with Disneyland and what it reflects about contemporary American culture and society.



Harold Garfinkel

2. Ethnomethodology and Everyday Life

From the point of view of sociological theory, the moral order consists of rule governed activities of daily life. A society's members encounter and know the moral order as perceivedly normal courses of action—familiar scenes of everyday affairs, the world of daily life known in common with others and with others taken for granted. They refer to this world as the “natural facts of life” which, for members, are through and through moral facts of life. For members not only are matters so about familiar scenes, but they are so because it is morally right or wrong that they are so. Familiar scenes of everyday activities, treated by members as the “natural facts of life,” are massive facts of the members' daily existence both in the real world and as the product of activities in the real world....In every discipline, humanistic or scientific, the familiar common sense world of everyday life is a matter of abiding interest. In the social sciences, and in sociology particularly, it is a matter of essential preoccupation....Despite the topic's centrality, an immense literature contains little date and few methods with which the essential features of socially recognized “familiar scenes” may be detected and related to dimensions of social organization. Although sociologists take socially structures scenes of everyday life as a point of departure they rarely see, as a task of sociological inquiry in its own right, the general question of how and why any such common sense world is possible....Procedurally it is my preference to start with familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble....I have found that they produce reflections through which the strangeness of an obstinately familiar world can be detected. (pages 35, 36, 37)

Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. 1967

Harold Garfinkel (1917 to 2011) taught sociology for many years at the University of California at Los Angeles and was one the founders and most important exponents of the branch of sociology known as ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodologists are interested in what people do in everyday life and the common understandings they have that make it possible for people to get along with another, live together in families, and the way people make sense of the world. We don't think very much about what we take for granted, but it is the common understandings we have, as reflected in our conversations and routine behaviors, that make the world go around.

In one experiment, Garfinkel asked his students to insist that people clarify

commonplace remarks. In one case, someone said to one of Garfinkel's students, "I had a flat tire." The student-experimenter then said, "What do you mean when you said you had a flat tire?" The person who had the flat tire was stunned for a moment and replied "What do you mean what do you mean?" Garfinkel's point was that many of our everyday interactions are based on the assumption that when someone says "I had a flat tire," the person hearing that statement will understand what was meant. In his book he cites a number of experiments when his students asked for clarifications for simple statements that led to exasperation and sometimes anger on the part of the persons making these statements.

In another experiment, he asked students to pretend that they were boarders (that is, strangers) for fifteen minutes to an hour in their homes. They were meant to make all descriptions "behaviorally," which meant they were to write an account of the experience acting as if they didn't know any history or background of the members of their families and didn't concern themselves with motives. Thus, one student wrote "A short, stout man entered the house" to describe her father, and she did the same for everyone in her family. Many of Garfinkel's students said they were unable to sustain this perspective because there was so much bickering and arguing and manifestations of hostility among members of the family.

Garfinkel devised another experiment in which students pretended they were boarders in their homes and thus were excessively polite, avoided getting personal with their family members and only spoke when spoken to. The students conducting this experiment reported that their families were "stupefied," and many were upset with the behavior of the students, even after the students explained their behavior was an assignment in one of their classes. They asked questions like "what's got into you?" or "were you fired?" or "did you break up with your girlfriend?" That was because the students didn't take larger portions of food than they should have, didn't interrupt other members of the family when they were talking, didn't bicker with others, and so on.

Generating situations that have people question the organization of familiar scenes and engender "accounts" and "explanations" for their occurrence was a method Garfinkel used to make visible the "seen-but-unnoticed," i.e. the taken for granted organization of situations. In later studies, he moved on from using "breaching experiments" to observe the fine detailed organization of the production and design of actions through which people make accountable, that is "observable-and-reportable," the organization of situations.

What Garfinkel and other ethnomethodologists teach us is that our everyday activities are much more interesting and complex than they seem at first glance. There is a point in examining the finest details of people's actions because they embody our knowledge, competence and reasoning. Ethnomethodologists, we may say, are sociologists who take second glances.



Clotaire Rapaille

3. Imprinting Codes

Most of us imprint the meanings of the things most central to our lives by the age of seven. This is because emotion is the central force for children under the age of seven....An imprint and its Code are like a lock and its combination. If you have all the right numbers in the right sequence, you can open the lock. Doing so over a vast array of imprints has profound implications. It brings to us the answer to one of our most fundamental questions: why do we act the way we do? Understanding the Culture Code provides us with a remarkable new tool—a new set of glasses, if you will, with which to view ourselves and our behaviors. It changes the way we see everything around us. What's more, it confirms what we have always suspected is true—that, despite our common humanity, people around the world really are different. The Culture Code offers a way to understand how. Once an imprint occurs, it strongly conditions our thought processes and shapes our future actions. Each imprint helps make us who we are. The combination of imprints defines us....Even our most arbitrary actions are the result of trips we take down our mental highways. We take these trips hundreds of time a day, making decisions about what to wear, what to eat, where to go, what to say in conversation, and so on. What most people do not realize, however, is that there is a Code required to make these journeys. Think of a Code as a combination that unlocks a door. In this case, we need not only to punch in the numbers, but also to punch them in, in a specific order, at a specific speed, with a specific rhythm, etc.

Clotaire Rapaille, *The Culture Code: An Ingenious Way to Understand Why People Around the World Live and Buy as They Do*. Broadway Books, NY. Pages: 11, 21, 24.

Clotaire Rapaille, a French psychoanalyst and marketing expert, argues that countries are all different because of the way children are socialized and “imprinted” from their birth to the age of seven. In essence, what happens is that children learn certain codes about food, clothing, manners, and all kinds of others as they grow up and these “imprints” shape their behavior, in large measure, for the rest of their lives. What we call culture, in the anthropological sense, can be thought of as the pattern of codes people learn when they grow up in different culture and subcultures. These different codes explain why French people are so different from English people who are so different from American people who are so different from Mexican people who are so different from Chinese people who are so different from Japanese people...and on and on it goes. Some people are able to change their codes—if for the example, they emigrate from China to the United States, especially if they move when they are young.

Rapaille offers an extreme example which involves the way French people and American people think about cheese. The French code for cheese is “alive,” and so they do not refrigerate it but keep it in containers (cloches) where it ages and starts to smell. The American code for cheese is “dead,” and so they kill the cheese through pasteurization, wrap it in plastic and put it in what he calls “morgues,” that is—refrigerators. American cheese is often pre-wrapped, what he calls “mummified” and then kept in refrigerators. If you go to fancy food shops, you now find cheese, from many good cheese-making countries, that is not pre-wrapped—but most Americans still probably keep that cheese in their refrigerators.

He discusses any number of other topics that show the differences between people in different countries and explains these differences by the imprinting that children undergo as they grow up. By seven, Rapaille argues, they have become Americans, Italians, Chinese, whatever and probably will remain so for the rest of their lives. As a result of travel, people become exposed to other cultures and often take good things (French cheese, champagne) and bad things (McDonald’s hamburgers) from the countries they visit. This does not mean we are becoming a monoculture—in which we are all the same; it means our tastes have broadened and are more eclectic. So the codes can be modified but not changed to any substantial degree.



HENRI LEFEBVRE

Henri Lefebvre

4. Terrorism and Everyday Life

Any society involving, on the one hand, poverty and want and on the other a privileged class (possessing and administering, exploiting, organizing and obtaining for its own ends as much social overtime as possible, either for ostentatious consumption or for accumulation, or indeed for both purposes as once) is maintained by the dual method of (ideological) *persuasion* and *compulsion* (punishment, laws and codes, courts, violence kept in store to prevent violence, overt violence, armed forces, police, etc.) A class society (and we know as yet no other) is a repressive society....A *terrorist society* is the logical and structural outcome of an *over-repressive* society; compulsion and the illusion of freedom converge; unacknowledged compulsion besiege the lives of communities (and of their individual

members) and organize them according to a general strategy...In a terrorist society, terror is diffuse, violence is always latent, pressure is exerted from all sides on its members who can only avoid it and shift its weight by a super-human effort; each member is a terrorist because he wants to be in power (if only briefly); thus there is no need for a dictator; each member betrays and chastises himself; terror cannot be located, for it comes from everywhere and from every specific thing; the "system" (in so far as it can be called a "system") has a hold on every member separately and submits every member to the whole, that is, to a strategy, a hidden end, objectives unknown to all but those in power, and that no one questions.

Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. 1971. New York: Harper and Row. Pages 143, 144, 147. Translated by Sacha Rabinovich.



On the cover of Henri Lefebvre's (1901-1991) classic *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, we see a table with a checkered tablecloth on which this is a bottle of milk, a glass of milk, and a bowl of cereal in front of a window. In the window we see an atom bomb exploding. This cover deals with the topic of the book—the ordinary nature of everyday life and the extraordinary nature of class societies where, according to Lefebvre, we all live in terrorist societies and our lives are shaped by unacknowledged compulsions. Lefebvre was a Marxist who used various aspects of everyday life to make his argument about, as he saw things, the destructive nature of capitalist societies.

He believes that everyday life, not economics, was the sphere where class based societies were dominated by elites and suggested that we can counter the repressive nature of these societies by making our everyday lives become a "work of art," and encouraging the rediscovery of "festival." In the Middle Ages, festivals were the means by which peasants escaped—for a limited period of time—the drudgery of their daily lives and the repressive nature of the Catholic church. Lefebvre was an extremely influential professor who taught at a number of French universities and whose work fell in and out of favor many times during the course of his long life.



Wolfgang Iser

5. The Role of the Reader

...In considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in reacting to that text....The text as such offers different “schematized views” through which the subject matter of the work can come to light....If this is so, then the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic, and the aesthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity, it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two. The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader--though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text. The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader....A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader’s imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative. In this process of creativity, the text may either go not far enough or may go too far, we may say that boredom and overstrain form the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play.

Wolfgang Iser. “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach.” In David Lodge, ed. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. New York: Longman. 1988. (pages 212, 213)

Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007) was one of the proponents of “reception theory,” which marked a shift from focusing on texts themselves, and their structure and techniques of composition, to the audiences of texts and the role they play in the scheme of things. Reception theorists suggest that all texts have “gaps” or “lapses” in them which enables different readers to read the same texts differently and find different meanings in them. We are not talking about taste here—there’s no disputing taste, and Iser’s focus is not on whether you like a text or not, but on the indeterminate nature of texts, of the way they can have so many meanings to different people, based on their education, socio-economic class, cultural sophistication and so on.

Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of

Minnesota Press, 1983, pp. 74) explains the relationship that exists between reception theory and other approaches to literature—a by extension, mass mediated culture, pop culture...whatever you want to call what we see on television, when we go to see films and so on. He writes:

Reception theory examines the reader's role in literature, and as such is a fairly novel development. Indeed, one might very roughly periodize the history of modern literary theory in three stages: a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and the nineteenth century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a market shift of attention to the reader over recent years. The reader has always been the most underprivileged of this trio—strangely, since without him or her, there would be no literary texts at all. Literary texts do not exist on bookshelves: they are processes of signification materialized only in the practice of reading. For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author.

Eagleton wrote his book in 1983 and since his book was written, new approaches to literature have happened such as the rediscovery, so to speak, of semiotic theory and the influence of postmodernism, post-colonial theory and Feminism on contemporary thought.



Judith Butler

6. Gender and Choice?

Is there “a” gender which people are said to *have* or is it an essential attribute that a person is said to *be*, as implied in the question “What gender are you?” When feminist theorists claim that gender is the cultural interpretation of sex or that gender is culturally constructed, what is the manner or mechanism of this construction? If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its construction imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation? Does “construction” suggest that certain laws generate gender differences along universal axes of sexual differences? How and where does the construction of gender take place? What sense can we make of a construction that does not assume a human constructor prior to that construction? On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. When the relevant “culture” that “constructs” gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology but culture, becomes destiny. On the other hand, Simone de Beauvoir suggests in *The Second*

Sex that “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one.” For Beauvoir, gender is “constructed,” but implied in her formulation is an agent, a *cogito*, who somehow takes on or appropriates that gender and could, in principle, take on some other gender...There is nothing in her account that guarantees that the “one” who becomes a woman is necessarily female.

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

The material quoted from Judith Butler’s book, *Gender Trouble*, comes from a section titled “Gender: the Circular Ruins of Contemporary Debate” in which she suggests there are problems with many of the formulations writers have made that gender is “social constructed.” She points out that saying gender is “social constructed” often only means it is as determined as the biology-is-destiny formulations, except that it is culture that is the determinant, not biology. Her book is generally thought to be one of the key texts in feminist theory. It is not, let me point out, an easy book to read and her argument is carried on at a very high level of intellectual sophistication.

David Gauntlett, a British media and cultural theorist, discusses Butler’s work as follows and offers the following insights into her work:

Butler argues that we all put on a gender performance, whether traditional or not, anyway, and so it is not a question of whether to *do* a gender performance, but what form that performance will take. By choosing to be different about it, we might work to change gender norms and the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity. This idea of identity as free-floating, as not connected to an 'essence', but instead a performance, is one of the key ideas in queer theory. Seen in this way, our identities, gendered and otherwise, do not express some authentic inner “core” self but are the dramatic *effect* (rather than the cause) of our performances.

<http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-butl.htm>

This notion, that gender is a performance, suggests that we look upon gender differently than we’ve done in the past. Gender is not something we are born with but something that we adopt or choose, for one reason or another, to suit our purposes. Her thinking about gender also involves a rejection of binary oppositions as the way to make sense of gender. Binary thinking works as follows: if male, not female, and if female, not male. But if gender is a performance, binary oppositions no longer matter and the rise of non-binary gender affirmations in millions of people suggest that we no longer consider gender to be “fixed” at birth, but a matter of choice.

Conclusions

Communication, it has been said, is a field into which many scholars from different disciplines wander, spend time investigating some topic of interest to them, and then wander off. Some of these scholars find communication so interesting that they devote their careers to the subject. What is important to recognize is that we gain valuable insights from scholars in many disciplines, such as sociology, literary theory, Marxist theory, psychology, anthropology, linguistics and so on, that are extremely valuable.

Arthur Asa Berger is the author of more than one hundred articles and ninety books on semiotics, media studies, communication, tourism, and humor. Among his books on communication are: *Media Analysis Techniques*, *Media and Communication Research Methods*, *Signs in Contemporary Culture: An Introduction to Semiotics*, and *Ads, Fads and Consumer Culture*.