Abstract: The standard theory of communication relies on the technological definition of communication, that is, on the technological notion of rationality. But in the 20th century some major epistemological and philosophical changes affecting this notion occurred. Among them, one of the important developments was connected with psychoanalysis, both as a theory and practice. This essay tries to look into the concept of communication in the light of psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious, both in Sigmund Freud’s and Jacques Lacan’s challenges to the modern concept of communication as only a rational activity.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, communication, theory, Freud, Lacan, provocation

The word ‘provocation’ only partially comes from the Latin word provocatio. When I say that it comes partially, I do not have in mind the form of the word itself, the sign or the signifier ‘provocation’, but rather the meaning of the word, its meaning in modern times. In classical Latin, the word provocatio was initially used to mean an appeal to a higher (or different) court, which in legal practice or jurisprudence was subsequently termed appelatio (initially, appelatio also meant solicitation, name, title, address, and finally invocation). When reading Plautus and Terence we come across Provoco ad te or provocco ad populum, which mean ‘I appeal to you’ or ‘I appeal to the people’, while Titus Livius (Livy) uses the word provoco in his story on Horace when the latter appeals to a higher court after being ac-
cused of assassinating his sister. This meaning of the word *provocatio* is legal, legal-political, and it was lost with the disappearance of the right which it signified, namely the right to appeal, to have an additional, supplementary, appellate legal proceeding.

As a matter of fact, the word ‘provocation’ has kept the meaning which in ancient Rome was colloquial or even associated with street language and which comes not so much from the verb *provoco*, which is to a certain extent legal and political or legally codified, as from the Roman circus or, more precisely, from the noun *provocator* which pertained to the gladiator challenger. In the Roman arena, prior to gladiator fights, a *provocator* is the one who, at the beginning or after a break, makes spectators stand up, who irritates them with his gestures. He is a challenger, not only, and not even primarily, of other fighters, his potential enemies, but just as much of the spectators watching their fights. His intention is to excite them, make them stand up, invest their passions in the event that follows. The challenger elicits spectators’ affects, shifts them from an ordinary, peaceful state into a state of commotion and explosive reactions: in a word, one could say that his task is to make an audience into an audience, to make it a single body that reacts like a single body. Cicero and other authors use this meaning of the term, which is also the one that was passed on as tradition. It is in this way that, throughout Latin medieval times until the modern era, provocation has come to mean, above all – a challenge.

For the moment, I will stick to the semiology of this term. If we take a look at it from a historical angle, we see that there has been an effort to legally (scholarly) codify provocation as *provoco*, but that it has not been passed on, that there has been no semantic and historical transfer, there has been no *traditio*, but it has become the meaning related to spectacles, to fights, to streets, to arenas, to a ‘vulgar’ meaning of challenge. And it will remain so. It will have its wider, somewhat shifted meanings, or it will at least undergo a certain metamorphosis to some of its variations and nuances, but its core will maintain the meaning of a challenge which generates or is supposed to generate an affective reaction, a reaction that is equivalent to an emotional or bodily or even somatic excitement. Thus, from the legal meaning of *provoco* as an ‘appeal’, where a capacity to make a judgment (as a judgment in the legal as well as in the logico-epistemological sense) would have to do with strengthening our intellectual, reflexive and also our speculative powers – that is, those powers which philosophy is interested in, provocation, quite to the contrary, or at least in a different, very different direction, as an ‘ordinary’, ‘everyday’ term, pertains to a challenge directed towards our af-
ffective powers, our body, so that it, our body, reacts in a way in which our affects react before our intellect, reason or mind. While in Roman times the gladiator as provocator had to excite the spectators so that they could scream and support the fighters, so that they could derive pleasure from screaming and supporting them, in modern times a provocator (provoker) remains the one who challenges, who invites attention, who tries to provoke a reaction through affects. The so-called political provocator is a case in point – it is a person who at a political gathering uses a gesture – and here a gesture, an act, is very important, given that it almost goes beyond the spoken words (I will come back to this below) – trying to provoke a more intense or even exaggerated reaction, so that that which exists latently, as an emotional correlate of a political stance (the so-called political charge) could be rendered visible, manifest, or so that this correlate could be used for accelerating the whole process, possibly also to its excessive forms. Such a political provocator can be someone who belongs to the very political body within which he operates – an orator or a leader that incites others to assault or – and this is very important for the analysis of the term – he might not belong to it at all, that is, he can be positioned against it, as an ‘undercover participant’, the so-called agent provocateur, attempting to induce a reaction that can be used as a pretext, as an alibi, for subsequent action by the police or an authority. Generally speaking, the existence of political provocators of one or another type demonstrates that politics has become an arena, that it has come out of the context of ordinary, peaceful debate or discussion and shifted towards the street, where it is not only a confrontation of political ideas, but has become – or is at least on the verge of becoming – a physical clash.

Provocation has come to modern sport from the sporting practices in Roman times. A player, especially one in team sports or particularly popular ones, can, at his own risk, always employ provocation to challenge either the crowd, so that they could react ‘inadequately’ and by doing so encourage a member of the team they support also to react ’inadequately’. He could alternatively challenge his opponents so that they themselves react ’inadequately’. In other words, that provocation is a challenge directed towards opponents trying to make them overstep the bounds of decency codified by the general rules and conventions of the game and by doing so turn the opponents into ‘enemies’. The whole new context that provocation as a challenge creates and which I preliminarily call emotional-affective context is a play on the brink, on the boundary, and most frequently on both sides of this boundary, which makes, one could argue, the Latin term escape its own legal-political codification, resist becoming provoc, invite, appeal and continue its ’street’ life within the semantics of challenge, a challenge of affects.
We also use the phrase ‘to lose one’s temper’ when we talk about provocation as a challenge. If someone provokes me, and if they are successful, then I lose my temper. What would it mean here ‘to lose one’s temper’ or ‘to become edgy’ or ‘to get on someone’s nerves’? ‘Do not get on my nerves’ is not really synonymous with ‘do not provoke me’, but it rather testifies to an affective state or to an affect which is an effect of the provocation. A Serbian dictionary explains the phrase ‘to become edgy’ as ‘to experience something irritating, something that produces nervousness’, and ‘to get on someone’s nerves’ means ‘to render someone completely nervous, bring someone to a state of excitement’\(^1\) in the same way in which the dictionary postulates two principal meanings of the word ‘provocation’. The first is the above-mentioned ‘challenge’ or ‘challenging’ and the second is a somewhat more specific meaning related to medicine where it has to do with ‘the stimulation of the symptoms of a certain disease for the purposes of diagnosis and therapy’.\(^2\) The latter meaning, a more restricted one and somewhat technical, diagnostic-therapeutic meaning, emphasises the role of the body.

Or the role of the psyche which is there as an experience, as an event, as an intermediary or a medium for the body. If provocation is a challenge to the latent to become manifest, if we are in the field of symptoms, then we are not far away from psychology, or more precisely, from psychoanalysis. I am only trying here to offer some food for thought, to map various possible paths. In the same way, if semiology, in its diachronic, historical perspective, suggests that the attempt to codify provocatio as a legal (legal-political) practice of provocare cannot be seen as a standard transfer, as an established semantics of this term, but rather that it has been passed on, till the present day, as a challenge that interferes with the boundary of the standard, which interferes, that is, with the standard itself, then provocation as a challenge is an act of decodification, of decoding. In what follows, I will try to analyse provocation as communication along these lines: 1. the shift from the latent to the manifest, from affect to effect, the appearance of symptoms and their treatment, which one could call the psychoanalysis of communication; 2. provocative communication as decodification, as decoding and simultaneous recoding in a different place, on a different level; and 3. provocation in the broadest sense as a speech mechanism that calls for a response, for assuming responsibility. In doing this, my reference to psychoanalysis will be methodological because the transfer from the latent to the manifest is a

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2 ibid., vol. V, p. 146.
hermeneutical and methodic transfer and not specifically psychoanalytic. I will also need to use the term ‘decoding’ in its somewhat stronger, if you will, more provocative sense than the one which is normally used to mean understanding of a certain message, its ‘deciphering’.

What does provocation mean from a psychoanalytic angle? To provoke, as we have already seen, means to challenge the body or something of a bodily nature, to stimulate a reaction that has to do with ‘nerves’. More precisely, to provoke means to stimulate desire. Desire is the way in which the body addresses the subject, the consciousness. It is the central point of all three psychoanalyses that we inherited from the twentieth century. These is, first of all, the psychoanalysis of its founder Sigmund Freud. Then there is the theoretical psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. And finally there is an attempt to revisit Freud by Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze.

All three of these psychoanalyses have desire as their central issue. In the history of thought, all the way from Plato to Aristotle, who were the first to think about desire, it has been defined through lack, or shortage, through absence. I want something because I do not have it; my thirst exists because of the absent water. I am hungry because I lack food. I want a Porsche because I cannot have it. And so on. Freud’s contribution represents a great shift in the history of thinking about desire. Desire is still understood along the axis of lack or absence, but Freud tries to make a shift and think desire from the angle of its fulfilment, from the angle of pleasure. Another Freud’s move is to tightly associate desire with the body, with bodily energies, with instincts. That is, above all, a methodological move: if a scientist wants to explore his subject, he must approach it from there where it is most visible, where it reaches its climax. For Freud, that is the field of sexuality. Desire is here perceived as libido, as passion, as craving and lust or, what is also important, as obstinacy, or as a caprice (which is also the meaning of the word libido). To say that desire is a caprice or whimsical passion is not to say that it is something strong, but that such a strength has its own way, that it escapes control – where this control would be the control of the consciousness, that is to say, there is a portion of desire which belongs to the non-conscious, to the unconscious. How can we reach that realm?

Freud reached it by studying dreams. In the first notable book on psychoanalysis – The Interpretation of Dreams (Traumdeutung), published in 1900, Freud says that dreams are a via regia, a royal road to the unconscious. A dream is a Wunscherfüllung, a way to fulfill desire, to realize it. I dream about water if I am thirsty. While dreaming, I eat chocolate or drive a Porsche.
Desire is still related to a shortage, which means that dreams are an illusory, simulacrum-like, phantasmic fulfilment, a fulfilment which does not fulfil, if not only temporarily in a twisted manner (from the point of view of consciousness – non-real and therefore unconscious). This enabled Freud to tap the unconscious, to reach the unconscious as a new object of his interest, but the price was paid by the fact that desire, in spite of the attempts to direct it towards fulfilment, towards something positive, remained associated with the axis of lack or shortage.

I will shorten this reference to the elementary Freud’s assumptions and cite a story that Freud tells in the seventh and final chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams* entitled ‘The Psychology of the Dream Processes’. Here Freud evokes a dream for which he says is ‘especially worthy of our attention’, the dream which is typical, exemplary, and which he heard from someone else, from a lady who herself had heard it during a lecture on dreams. (Freud does not give the sources of his data on dreams, except for those ’public dreams’ that can be found in literature; the source is here explicitly referred to as ‘unknown’, ‘its original source is unknown to me’). What is this dream about?

Here is the citation from *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

The preliminary conditions of this typical dream were as follows: A father had been watching day and night beside the sick-bed of his child. After the child died, he retired to rest in an adjoining room, but left the door ajar so that he could look from his room into the next, where the child’s body lay surrounded by tall candles. An old man, who had been installed as a watcher, sat beside the body, murmuring prayers. After sleeping for a few hours the father dreamed that the child was standing by his bed, clasping his arm and crying reproachfully: ‘Father, don’t you see that I am burning?’ The father woke up and noticed a bright light coming from the adjoining room. Rushing in, he found that the old man had fallen asleep, and the sheets and one arm of the beloved body were burnt by a fallen candle.

Here is the explanation that Freud gives:

The meaning of this affecting dream is simple enough, and the explanation given by the lecturer, as my patient reported it, was correct. The bright light shining through the open door on to the sleeper’s eyes gave him the impression which he would have received had he been awake: namely, that a fire had been started near the corpse by a falling candle. It is quite possible that he had taken into his sleep his anxiety lest the aged watcher should not be equal to his task.
Here is the explanation that Freud adds:

We can find nothing to change in this interpretation; we can only add that the content of the dream must be over-determined, and that the speech of the child must have consisted of phrases which it had uttered while still alive, and which were associated with important events for the father. Perhaps the complaint, ‘I am burning’, was associated with the fever from which the child died, and ‘Father, don’t you see?’ to some other affective occurrence unknown to us.

And also:

Now, when we have come to recognise that the dream has meaning, and can be fitted into the context of psychic events, it may be surprising that a dream should have occurred in circumstances which called for such an immediate waking. We shall then note that even this dream is not lacking in a wish-fulfilment. The dead child behaves as though alive; he warns his father himself; he comes to his father’s bed and clasps his arm, as he probably did in the recollection from which the dream obtained the first part of the child’s speech. It was for the sake of this wish-fulfilment that the father slept a moment longer. The dream was given precedence over waking reflection because it was able to show the child still living. If the father had awaked first, and had then drawn the conclusion which led him into the adjoining room, he would have shortened the child’s life by this one moment.  

Why then does Freud find this dream exemplary, paradigmatic, when it is so easy to interpret it? It is exactly because it is so easy: while earlier a lot of effort was needed for dream interpretations, ‘we encounter a dream which is easily explained, and the meaning of which is without disguise’. Exactly because of this hermeneutical easiness, Freud concludes ‘how incomplete is our psychology of dreams’ and sets off to revise it.

What is it that is lacking here, what is deficient about this interpretation? It is complete, it explains all elements of the dream, but it does not provide the key to a theory of dreams as wish-fulfilment. From the point of view of dream hermeneutics, the dream is transparent; but from the point of view of psychoanalysis, it is provocative. It is actually provocative to the extent of

interfering with some of the key assumptions. The first of these is the one which Freud developed in relation to the Oedipus complex, invoking the mythical story in which Oedipus kills his father in order to marry his mother. Here, in the dream, it seems that the roles have been reversed: the father is the one in the centre; he dreams and wishes; he rekindles and indirectly ends his child’s life, if only phantasmically, through his waking. Through his belated waking, one must say, when the child had been already, or at least partially, burnt. He, the father, in his own dream dreams about the child saying: ‘Father, don’t you see that I am burning?’ That is to say that the father, while dreaming, attributes fire to the child in which, from Freud’s point of view and on the basis of his Oedipus complex, it is difficult not to discern an element of desire.

Incidentally, the Oedipus complex was perhaps Freud’s greatest provocation at the emergence of psychoanalysis. This provocation did not only disturb the culture in which it was believed that children did not have a sexuality of their own, the culture in which family was seen as a cell or the principal societal element, but it disturbed experts as well. The first among those were philologists and antiquity scholars who warned that in the myth, or at least in the Sophocles version of it in his tragedy *Oedipus the King*, the unfortunate Oedipus does not marry his mother, Jocasta, because of his desire, but because he, as the new ruler of Thebes, has to do so. In the same way, he does not kill his father, Laius, because he hates him, but he kills him because Laius attacked him as a stranger. Neither at that moment nor later did Oedipus know that the person attacking him was his father – he only subsequently learnt this. So the criticism was that the story which Freud took as a model for the development of libido did not in fact have the elements on which Freud’s model insisted. Freud, however, was not discouraged by such criticisms of classical scholars in the same way in which he was not interested in ethnologists and anthropologists’ remarks claiming that the myth about Oedipus was not universal, that it did not exist in other cultures, but only in those European cultures which emerged from ancient Greek civilization and that therefore it could not be universalized as a general model of libido function. Freud remained adamant in spite of all these criticisms. Oedipus – that is the destiny of the subject and his desire in the father-mother-child triangle.

This Oedipal model is also employed when Freud adds his own interpretation, claiming that the dream was actually a fulfilment of the father’s wish to prolong his child’s life, when the father is the one given priority, when he is the one who is ‘good’, and whose wish is ‘natural’ and ‘normal’, where the child’s phantom or spectre could be taken as the one which is violent, be-
cause it enters the dream accusing the father, although the child, even when
dead, is a victim of the father’s carelessness.

The dream, however, interferes with the Oedipal model and thus provokes a revision of psychoanalysis. Freud’s principal revision will follow long after the appearance of *The Interpretation of Dreams* with his work entitled *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1919), where, along with the pleasure principle, Freud introduces the death drive; along with Eros there is also Thanatos. Next to our wish to live, there is a wish to die; given that the former is a wish for what is missing or absent, the latter is nothing but an ill-fated repetition of the former, its continuation along the same axis of lack or absence.

And as much as the introduction of the Oedipal libido – and particularly its presence in children – was a provocation for the bourgeois culture, in the same way the introduction of the death drive as primordial was a provocation for the humanistic culture. Thought could not have remained the same after these provocations by Freud. First, in relation to the discovery of the unconscious, it meant that we do not communicate only with others, ‘externally’, but we also communicate on different levels with ourselves, ‘internally’, and some of these levels, like the unconscious, interfere with our ‘self’, so that our own *communio* is an arena of drives, wishes, of consciousness and the unconscious in a community in which every one of us forms with ‘themselves’; and second, if there is indeed in ourselves the death drive which in a strange way transforms the wish away from its satisfaction or fulfilment, then *communicatio* ceases to exist as the ‘transmission’ of messages and becomes a certain kind of ‘co-operation’ of forces that escape our control, forces to which we are exposed every time we wish something or send a message to ourselves – and, especially, to others – *communicatio* becomes a reversal, a challenge of life in the face of death. In both of these cases we again touch upon the topic of provocation.

Lacan’s revision of psychoanalysis, characterized by ‘the return to Freud’, actually drew our attention to what Freud, for example, added to the interpretation of his ‘paradigmatic dream’ in relation to words and to the child’s speech, claiming that those words and the dream in its entirety – as any other dream – were a sort of puzzle, or as Freud used to say, an image in which objects were there instead of signs. But if in our conscious life, signs are there instead of objects, the unconscious knows about images in which the relations are reversed, where the objects have become signs, symbols, languages (discourses). Lacan positions the formula ‘The unconscious is structured like a language’ in the very centre of his theoretical psychoanalysis:
the unconscious is a movement or rotation between the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary, i.e. psychoanalysis is a type of reading – or an attempt to read – the subject in all of these three orders: the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. The Oedipal triangle (father – mother – child) is now perceived as a linguistic triangle in which the subject exists as a ‘lack of being’, that is to say as a subject of the desire which develops along the axis of lack. At any point in our existence, language produces this ‘lack of being’ which thus becomes the destiny of every subject.

A revision proposed by Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, mostly given in the book entitled Anti-Oedipus (1972), takes these triangles, these hermeneutic and theoretical triangulations of the subject and his wishes, as signs of the ‘metaphysics of lack’, of a philosophy of lack and negativity. For Deleuze and Guattari, wish is not lack or shortage, wish is, to the contrary, a surplus: it is productive; wish induces the subject to create something there where that something is lacking. And this does not apply solely to dreams. Wish is, above all, productive when we are awake: social relations, our social life, these are ‘fluxes’ of desire; the unconscious is like a machine (‘desiring machines’) which at one point continues its journey so that it can create something or it cuts energy fluxes so that it can divert towards other ‘desiring machines’ aspiring to form with them an order, a chain, a link, a movement forward. Desires are not that which has been repressed, as Freud would argue; they are not primarily something ‘symbolic’ or purely ‘discursive’, as they would be according to Lacan; desires are liberating, creative, and they always point at something ‘external’, towards a field which has not been codified by an order that would cut or break them, but towards a field in which they unite to produce something new. Desires decodify, decode, ‘deterриториализ’ (they liberate us from our attachment to the same ‘territory’, established order or petrified culture).

Finally, I would like to emphasise to what extent psychoanalysis, as postulated by Freud, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, has changed our understanding of communication. The concept of communication, which we still need to construct, must comprise the discovery of the unconscious, new conceptions of desire and the interaction between the bodily and the somatic. The analysis of provocation as a kind of communicative sign should make us appreciate the role of the bodily – the role which has until now, almost without exception, been neglected in communication theories.

(Translated from the Serbian by Bojan Bilić)
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