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Afterthoughts on “Totalitarian” Communication

ANDREAS LANGENOHL

The essays in this volume are united in the attempt to disentangle the notion of totalitarian communication from that of totalitarianism, that is, from totalitarian social and political orders. This is, to be sure, a formidable task since the attribute “totalitarian” has been designed in political theory to refer to societies or political orders in toto. According to Friedrich’s and Brzezinski’s (1965: 17) early work *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, the former “emerges as a system of rule for realizing totalist intentions under modern political and technical conditions.” Hannah Arendt, who attempted to track down the historical predecessors of totalitarian rule, made explicit its totalizing and holistic tendencies by arguing that “total domination is the only form of government with which coexistence is not possible” (Arendt 1966: xi-xii). Abbott Gleason, in reconstructing the history of concept “totalitarianism” starting with the rise of Mussolini, notes: “There is some overlap between ‘totality’, grasping/understanding the world as an integral whole, and ‘totalitarianism’, making it a whole” (Gleason 1995: 9) In this tradition, the notions “totalitarian societies” or “totalitarian political orders” have always tilted toward pleonasm, because the qualifier “totalitarian”, if taken seriously, could signify nothing less than societies or political orders as wholes. Therefore, any strategy to retain the “totalitarian” while abandoning the notion of society or political order has to take issue with the idea that elements of totalitarianism could not be decoupled from

their respective totalizing order, precisely because those elements only gain their meanings as parts of that order.

No other concept than “communication” could have fit better into the announced radical departure from the holistic understandings of totalitarianism. Communication, in a very basic sociological sense, encompasses not only intentions of the sender or the content and structure of the message but also the ways messages are being perceived, as well as the ways they are put to work. In this sense, the notion of communication is different from the concepts such as “discourse”, which can perfectly do without the idea that perception is important, precisely because they are imagined as being effective per se. A social-scientific communication model that includes the idea of perception is very much at odds with some very fundamental features of the notion of totalitarianism, as the latter, by virtue of its holism and functionalism, cannot but imply a consonance, or at least a match, between what is articulated, what is understood, and what are the effects of communication.

A corollary of this is the impossibility to use the qualifier “totalitarian” for the noun “communication” except than in quotation marks. “Totalitarian” is derived from “totalitarianism” as indicating a society and political order as a whole, not just communication or any other of its parts. If one still wishes to use the attribute “totalitarian” for analytical purposes without plunging into functionalism, one probably has to leave behind the synchronous order in which the functionality of totalitarianism was deemed to come to surface, and search for entry points beyond that order and synchrony itself.

1

The intention of the remarks at hand is to give an example for such strategy, namely, to observe “totalitarian” communication from the standpoint of its overcoming, its remnants, and its afterlife. Empirically, the reference is made to the traces of certain “totalitarian” patterns of public communication in post-Soviet Russia. What is the gain of viewing this communication patterns as post-“totalitarian” for understanding their social meaning in their contemporary context and for coming to terms with their “totalitarian” predecessors? I will start with an example from the public debates about the meaning of the “Great Patriotic War” memories for post-Soviet Russia, as they were articulated during the 1990s (cf. for the next three paragraphs: Langenohl 2000, 2002, 2005).

At the end of the 1980s, the latent contradiction between official and non-official remembrance of the Great Patriotic War typical the memory dynamics between the end of war and the end of the USSR (Tumarkin 1994; Zubkova 1995), erupted into a conflict. The critique of Stalinism served as a catalyst. As the official myth of the "cult of personality", in which the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was portrayed as the major victim of Stalin and his entourage, has made its public debut (which, among other things, led to the 1991 ban on the CPSU), the official narrative of the Party's collective sacrifice on behalf of a better social order has become questioned. One can roughly distinguish between the two competing interpretations of the Great Patriotic War since perestroika.

First, intellectuals of the communist or the so-called "national-patriotic" creed insisted on deriving a civic and religious set of norms and values (love for the motherland, a willingness to make sacrifices, the feeling of have fought for the right thing) from the war experience and the USSR victory. This interpretation, in regard to its content, continued the official commemoration rituals and semantics of the Soviet Union and saw them as a prototype of such identifying memory. Its followers accused their opponents of being traitors and desecrating the memory of the war dead. The death in war was thus interpreted as sacrifice; historical persons (for instance, the Marshal Zhukov) served as heroic identification figures. By commemorating the war in their writings and statements, the intellectuals like Aleksandr Panarin, Vladimir Bogomolov, Kseniia Mialo or Gennadii Gusev, identified nation (*natsiia*, *narod*) and government with a strong, autonomous and self-sufficient state (*gosudarstvennost'*) the "natural" unity of which had to be expressed by a war remembrance.

Alternative interpretation was promoted by the intellectuals denying to the Soviet order any legitimacy. They stressed the political, military and moral failures of the Soviet leadership during wartime, which in their opinion "unnecessarily" and dramatically increased the number of deaths in the war. One of the main catchwords was the "clumsy war" [*bezdarinaia voina*] which, according to this interpretation, costed Soviet troops and civilians an extraordinarily number of unnecessary deaths, for which Stalin and the political-military elite should have been held responsible. The most radical position in this respect was held by writers like Georgii Vladimov (*General i ego armii*a, 1994) and Viktor Astaf'ev (*Prokliaty i ubity*, 1992), who almost iconoclastically denied any significance of the Soviet victory. According to them, millions of soldiers and citizens did not sacrifice their lives on behalf of a greater good, but became victims (and involuntary saviors) of a terrorist regime,

strengthened by its victory over Nazism, they even strengthened. Such views entailed an opposition between people and polity, the climax of which was seen in the Great Patriotic War. The opposite views were branded by this group as biased in favor of "Stalinism".

2

In order to highlight the communicative specifics of the public discussion outlined in the last section, and to relate it to the question of "totalitarian" communication, it is worth making some theoretical and methodological remarks. Let us start with theory. In order to understand about what contemporary communicative practices tell us about former "totalitarian" communication we need a theory of time and tradition. This does not necessarily imply that we need a model of how "totalitarian" communication evolves and disintegrates. Such a model would still operate within the limits of systemic functionalism, and we might feel bound to misinterpret the collapse of the Soviet Union as an example of "adaptive upgrading" as envisioned (or hallucinated) by Talcott Parsons: "This system may evolve toward an approximate equivalent of the British parliamentary system of the eighteenth century" (Parsons 1971: 127). Rather, we might ask the question what the remnants of Soviet system tell us about its functioning. That is, we might search for the imprintings of totalitarianism in the post-totalitarian development.

Postcolonial literary theory gives us the first hint. Homi Bhabha, for instance, holds that the full social and cultural meaning of certain aspects of colonialism becomes only apparent in a cultural, political and epistemic space that bears the consequences of colonialism after its demise (Bhabha and Comaroff 2002). He refers to psychoanalysis and the notion of the symptom in order to project historical colonial constellations against the backdrop of their cultural (particularly literary) consequences at the present time. One may receive inspiration from this reference without being necessarily confined to a psychoanalytical model of temporality: a theoretical notion of time might be of help in coming to terms with "totalitarian" communication from the vantage point of what came after. One may, for instance, ask how a certain communicative style of public address, common among contemporary post-Soviet intellectuals, might be interpreted as the consequence of the *end* of totalitarianism - in particular, the end of some of its communicative structures. In other words, in order to understand the working of

"totalitarian" communication, we ought to see what totalitarianism has left behind, and why.

3

Now pone could move on to methodology. It is possible to account for the totalitarian structure of empirical communicative constellations through investigating it as a particular mold of some general communicative features. While working on public communication in Post-Soviet Russia (s. section 1), I have used a sociological model of communication that focused on the transformative ("performative") effects of communication in interactive and institutional settings. This model both depicts certain key features of communication, and projects those features on post-"totalitarian" communication in Russia. This paves the way for the third, and final, step, in which the structures of public communication in Russia will be interpreted as a remnant of the Soviet public sphere, or a product of its communicative mechanisms.

In this, I am referring to the work by sociologist Max Miller, who has tried to combine the speech act-based grounding of sociality in language, as developed by Jürgen Habermas, with the empirical research on communicative interactions within children groups (Miller 1986: 1990). Miller's aim was to shed empirical light on the socialization processes in which, according to Habermas, subjects acquire the ability not only to act according to norms, but also to reflect on them and thus arrive at a "post-traditional" (Habermas 1998), or "reason-based" (*vernünftige*), identity (Habermas 1976). While Habermas, referring to the models of socialization into norms and value judgments, developed by George Herbert Mead, Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg (Habermas 1984: 67-69; Habermas 1987: 58-60, 97-100, 174), writes the possibility of post-traditional type of socialization and identity into the context of the macro-societal processes of systemic differentiation (Habermas 1987), Miller's fine-grained conversation analysis makes such processes empirically visible not as individual achievements but as collective learning.

The notion of learning, in Miller's approach, is not tied to any theory of personality development, a passage through stages of moral consciousness, or any other path-like concepts of individual personality. He sees interactional processes neither as mere extensions of pre-existing communicative, cultural, social, or other frames, nor as collisions among individually tempered psychic structures, but as a dynamic commu-

nicative process in which the normative grounds of communication be altered in the process of interaction (Miller 1990: 92). Learning, in this approach, has a decisively sociological meaning. Far from being encribed into an perennial social “frame” or into the individual’s psychic economy, learning lurks in a precarious setting of mutual interaction. Even if collective learning may be inhibited by certain social frames or the personality traits of interlocutors, the social process in which learning takes place follows an interactional logic.

Miller develops his theory of collective learning from the vantage point of three special types of learning which he jointly calls “communicative blockades of learning” (*kommunikative Lernblockade*, Miller 1990: 92). The default functioning of collective learning processes is an interactive process in which the normative grounds of communication can be altered and rearticulated while interaction is going on. Further, these grounds are given perspective through the introduction of one-sided learning process privileging certain highly specific ways of collective learning. What distinguishes encompassing learning processes is precisely the absence of those learning blockades. These “blockades” are learning processes in their own right, because they may very well lead to a reformulation of the moral grounds of the conversation. What turns them into “blockades” is, according to Miller, their non-communicative rationality - that is, their tendency to eschew argumentative reasoning. The notion of the blockade is not designed to denounce certain communicative patterns, but rather to highlight the empirical preconditions of collective learning based on communicative rationality. This clearly sets Miller apart from that of Habermas, since he is much more interested in facts of communicative rationality than in its potentiality (cf. Miller 1986: 13).

Miller distinguishes between the three specified learning mechanisms, or “blockades” of collective learning that prevent communicative rationality from manifesting itself (Miller 1990: 92-3). “Authoritarian learning” inhibits the argumentative reformulation of the normative and cognitive grounds of the interaction on the basis of an identification of truth with power. “Ideological learning” labels any contrary position as being corrupted by non-argumentative reasoning (for instance, special interests), robbing it of the possibility to be true. Finally, “regressive learning” puts obstacles to communicative rationalization because it allows for deemphasizing obvious contradictions between different value judgments, which are instead claimed to form a single, coherent, and homogeneous position.

4

It is this sociological understanding of learning that makes Miller's concept applicable to the analysis and of private conversations and public discussions alike (cf. Miller 1986: 24). In studies devoted to the discursive remembrance of the Great Patriotic War in post-Soviet Russia, I have argued that what characterizes the post-Soviet debate about the Great Patriotic War has been (in the 1990s at least) an ideological learning blockade separating anti-Soviet and pro-Soviet camps (s. section 1). Those two positions not only presented interpretations of War diametrically opposed each other, but also denied each other the right for public expression by ascribing to the opponent special interests incompatible with truth. Without going into much detail, it is interesting to pose the general question: in what sense could this ideological blockade of collective learning be interpreted as a remnant of "totalitarian" communication in the Soviet Union, and what does it tell us about the latter's structure?

The most important thing here is that it is *only* ideological learning that has persisted from the Soviet to the post-Soviet phase. There is a certain plausibility in assuming that, in the context of the Soviet Union, ideological learning was saturated with both authoritarian and regressive forms of learning. As for the former, there existed institutions and persons to whom authority in ideological disputes about the truth was ascribed, the most prominent and efficient of which being Stalin (cf. Yurchak 2006). With respect to the latter, glossing over some crucial contradictions always inherent in Soviet doctrine was an everyday business in the regulated public sphere of the Soviet Union. It was only ideological learning that survived the demise of the Soviet Union and the disentanglement of political and discursive power that came with it.

5

It seems that in order to return to a grandly holistic picture of totalitarianism, we have taken a long detour in which all three learning blockades add up to a monolithic structure that allegedly governed the whole of society, polity, and culture of the Soviet Union. Still, upon closer inspection, we can see that only ideological learning has survived until post-Soviet Russia, having been less weakened by the dramatic institutional shifts accompanying the demise of the Soviet Union than the two other forms.

Consequently, it is the most useful of all the three for understanding the communicative structure of the Soviet public sphere. This adaptability of ideological learning has to do with the fact that its enabling conditions reside neither in its societal or political institutionalization (as with authoritarian learning) nor in the semantic content of what is articulated (as with regressive learning). While authoritarian learning was stripped of its influence with the demise of the party/state institutions of the USSR, regressive learning sank in glaring criticism once the authoritarian framework was removed. In contrast to both, the resources for ideological learning seem to reside in the *performative gain* that two or more parties can accumulate in a mutual ideological argumentation. Indeed, it may be reasonable to continue (or reengage in) ideological learning even after the authoritarian power structures are gone and the semantic patterns radically changed, because all the parties in a dispute can benefit from it. While in the Soviet Union ideology-criticism was contingent upon party power and state intervention, during the 1990s it has been grounded in the positive-sum game between opposing political positions and attitudes, for instance, between defenders and deniers of the glory of the victory in the Great Patriotic War. Both sides benefited from the ideological structure of the argumentation, with the profit consisting mainly in the agonal consolidation of public agencies.

Admittedly, ideological blockades are able to constitute relationships and positions in the public sphere merely on the basis of their communicative reciprocity, jointly raising the heat by denying each other the right to speak. In this sense, ideological structures display a higher degree of performativity than an authoritarian or regressive learning. Authoritarian learning depends on the availability of power resources other than communication. Regressive strategies in a dispute are directed not so much at one another as at followers that have to be sold convincing stories. Regressive learning, in its turn, has the communicative structure of a sermon, not of a conversation. Only ideological learning has the performative potential to constitute mutually consolidating positions by the sheer force of dispute. Ideological learning, thus, is the most self-sufficient of learning blockades, one that is able not only to go on after drastic institutional changes, but also to realize its socially constitutive potential in an environment free of totalitarianism proper.

6

This brings us back to the theoretical context of this short essay, namely to the concept of temporality that is needed to understand "totalitarian" communication beyond the functionalist approach to totalitarianism. The provided survey of the (post-) "totalitarian" communication in the USSR and in post-Soviet Russia shows that the ideological learning blockade is not only the most self-sufficient communicative structure of public communication at our times, but that its potential to generate positions solely through communicative acts has only flourished after the disappearance of the authoritarian and the regressive learning blockades. In other words, while all three blockades of collective learning were at work in the Soviet political and societal order—albeit to different degrees and under different historical circumstances—the potential power and performative productivity of ideological learning had been conditioned by regressive and authoritarian learning. If, thus, one accepts the argument that structural features of society may only become visible in their social and cultural meanings affecting later societal constellations, one comes to a conclusion that ideological learning not only preserved but radicalized the communicative structure which was controlled before by other communicative constellations.

Picturing Soviet social and political order as an always precarious, and changing, regime of checks and balances between ideological, authoritarian, and regressive learning, this interpretation gives another blow to the holistic understanding of totalitarianism. The hermetically sealed and functionally regulated environment that traditional totalitarianism theory had made us believe has never existed. The analysis of "totalitarian" communication interferes with this fiction, reminding us of the precariousness of political and social orders which upheaval radicalizes some of their features while letting others down.

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