

A Systems Model for Political Communication: A Case Study in Academic Mythmaking

by **Kevin Heydenrych***

Abstract

This article critiques a specific systems theorist in terms of academic myth-making. Barthes (1972) argues that myths contain a kernel of truth for "the form does not suppress meaning, it only impoverishes it. But the kernel is hardly the whole corn, and if it is substituted for the whole, it will mislead any attempt to understand that whole. In this paper, I will show how this self-deception affects the systems theorist's analysis, and his practical efforts to transform social processes outside the confines of academia. The "kernel of truth" is taken as the whole truth, and hence distorts, misleads and mythologises concepts and processes upon which the analysis is based. Three articles are critically examined in view of the potential of self-deception and show that the systems analysis discussed cannot provide new insights into the "complex process of political communication" beyond entrenching the prevailing order.

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Un Théorisateur des Systèmes pour la Communication Politique: Une Etude de Cas en Mythification Intellectuelle

par Kevin Heydenrych

Cet article fait la critique d'un théorisateur des systèmes en termes de mythification intellectuelle. Barthes (1972) déclare que les mythes contiennent un fond de vérité dans la mesure où "la forme ne supprime pas la signification, mais elle l'appauvrit seulement. Mais le grain ne constitue pas la blé dans sa totalité, et s'il est donné à la place du tout, ce pourrait introduire un biais pour celui qui essaierait de comprendre ce tout. Dans cet article, je vais démontrer la manière dont ce jugement autobiaisé affecte à la fois l'analyse d'un théorisateur des systèmes et ses efforts pratiques pour transformer les processus sociaux en dehors des cercles intellectuels. Le "noyau de vérité" est considéré comme étant la vérité entière et par conséquent il dénature, introduit un biais et bâtit une mythologie des concepts et processus sur lesquels l'analyse se base. Trois articles sont analysés de façon critique pour leur propension et leur potentialité à conduire vers de jugements autobiaisés et montrent que l'analyse des systèmes discutés ne peuvent pas fournir une vision nouvelle dans le "processus complexe de la communication politique" au delà de la forteresse de l'ordre dominant.

Introduction

In *Myth Today*, Roland Barthes (1972) highlights the theoretical legitimacy of myth. Myth making works by emptying intellectual concepts of their history, by denying the fact that particular concepts are created at specific times by particular conditions and interests. Myth making is a signifying process which makes the concept or idea seem natural, beyond the reach of intellectual refutation, because it is thought that the myth has some natural metaphysical, or scientific, proof. Myth pervades everything, including academic disciplines. It is therefore difficult to be self-righteous about myth: to judge another from a position of pure truth. Who knows when that truth exists? But what we can do is engage that myth, find its history, and liberate a new definition for the natural concept it impoverishes. This is especially important for academic enterprises where the aim is to demystify the world around us (theoretically speaking that is).

This article critiques a specific systems theorist in terms of academic myth-making. Barthes (1972) argues that myths contain a kernel of truth for "the form does not suppress meaning, it only impoverishes it". But the kernel is hardly the whole corn, and if it is substituted for the whole, it will mislead any attempt to understand that whole. I will show how this self-deception affects the systems theorist's analysis, and his practical efforts to transform social processes outside the confines of academia. The "kernel of truth" is taken as the whole truth, and hence distorts, misleads and mythologises concepts and processes upon which the analysis is based.

It is with this understanding of the potential of self-deception that I will now critically examine three articles written by Paul Vorster and published in *Communicare* during 1985 and 1986. Vorster imported an American functionalist theoretical framework which is unable to understand the contemporary set of social relations in South Africa as applied firstly to the general political and economic context, and secondly to the specific mode of political communication. This theoretical deficiency is derived from the fact that its concomitant social analysis only engages the surface of the political and economic conflict, and a selective portion of it at that. I shall therefore argue that this systems analysis cannot provide new insights into the "complex process of political communication" beyond entrenching the prevailing order. As a theory it stands confused by the source of the conflict, which Vorster, as an academic, tries to overcome. This is because the conflict unfolds outside his object of study.

In his first article, condensed from his doctoral thesis, "A Systems Model For Political Communication", Vorster (1985) articulates his

systems approach to political communication. In "Political Communication in South Africa after Rubicon: A Trend Towards Professionalism?" (1986a) and "Political Advertising by Big Business after Rubicon" (1986b), he applied his theory to political advertising within the context of South Africa in the post-Rubicon speech era. This theoretical effort must be seen as a response to what Vorster himself admitted was "the communications disaster generally known as Rubicon I" (1986a). I will focus on the systems theory espoused in Vorster's theoretical paper (1985) and use examples taken from his second two articles as material to evaluate the implications of his theoretical framework.

The System

A system is a "whole which functions as a whole by virtue of the interdependence of its parts" (Vorster, 1985). From this we can discern two perspectives of the systems approach. The first is termed "holism". Vorster writes: "wholeness can be viewed as ... implying that the system is different from the sum of components that, taken together, form the system", for, "when the component parts are related to each other interdependently, the result is a collectivity that takes on its own identity separate from the individual identities of the components". In short, holism states that "the whole is bigger than the sum of its constituent parts". A problem arises when one asks how the system becomes a collectivity which takes on its own identity, as a "whole". This is a problem which is not addressed directly by Vorster, but is more fully articulated by a secondary source. Angyal (1985) notes that an explanation like the one used by Vorster implies that the systems' wholeness is due to "additive aggregations": $a+b+c+\dots+n+$ something-extra-on-top to make it a little bigger, and "independent". But Angyal argues that it is "by means of their position in the system" (i.e. their "positional value") that components are utilized by the system to attain its wholeness.

One can see then that the issue of attaining wholeness is quite confusing. How exactly are constituent parts linked together to form that whole? Do we add up the components' theoretical "weights", or recognise the system's "wholeness" by analysing the geography of the system? Where are the components posited, how useful are they for the system? I shall return to this point later. For the meantime, to help elucidate the theoretical foundations of "wholeness" the second perspective of the systems approach must be dealt with: the assertion that the constituent parts are linked together in a systematic way. It is these linkages that form the basis of the system's wholeness.

According to Vorster (1985), three types of relationships link components:

Structural relationships: The relationships which imply spatiality "in the sense of beside, above, under, face-to-face". Angyal concurs: "the object does not participate in the system by an inherent quality but by its positional value in the system". Members of the system gain their value from their coordinates, not from their "immanent" inherent qualities. In other words, "having value" is not determined (theoretically speaking) by how benign or liberating that particular member or subsystem is for the individuals within it, but rather by how the subsystem allows the system to run smoothly, by how it coordinates "correctly" within the structure.

Functional relationships: That type of relationship which stresses that the components of the systems are events rather than material objects. The structure is "to be found in an interrelated set of events which return upon themselves to complete and renew a cycle of activities. It is events rather than things which are structured, so that social structure is a dynamic rather than a static concept". It is these "events" which add content and therefore structure to the system: the "event" has a function, which then determines its "positional value".

Evolutionary relationships: The relationships which deal with the structural and functional change of relationships through time; in other words, with the "history of the entire system". But there is a problem with reducing history into "a relationship". Evolution is not a relationship, but rather a way of describing the changing relationships and dynamic processes that are a part of (not separate from) the relationships between components. In other words we should be looking at the historical/evolutionary changes of structural and functional relationships (accepting for a moment Vorster's use and definition of these terms) as central to their process, determining to some extent the various contemporary forces which they attempt to articulate theoretically, and not as something which we can discuss separately, descriptively. A further problem with focusing on the "evolutionary", as Michelle Foucault (1969) points out, is the fundamental epistemological neglect which such an understanding has of the existence of radical breaks that occur in social, intellectual and political systems through time. The phenomena of rupture and discontinuity is theoretically neglected and an "indestructible system of checks and balances" (Foucault, 1969) over-emphasized, to the detriment of the actual theory.

The tendency to describe history, firstly, solely as "evolution", and secondly, in terms of a separate entity which is another, symmetrical relationship in the overall analysis, is symptomatic of a functionalist discourse. This discourse attempts to legitimate present social conditions, and de-legitimate those elements which threaten it by removing historical cause from the analysis. I will identify the form this tendency has taken in Vorster's analysis.

One of the most important principles of the systems approach is the classification of the system "according to its measure of openness" (Vorster, 1985).

The most common aspect of openness as characteristic of social systems is the free exchange of information (as its energy) between the components of the systems, and the system and its environment.

While (relatively) closed systems experience difficulty in maintaining themselves, an open system can through the principle of equifinality achieve a fair degree of homeostasis or balance.

According to the principle of equifinality "a system can reach the same final state from differing initial conditions and from a variety of paths" (Katz and Kahn, 1966). In other words, there are many ways to reach the same goal. But there is more to "open system". Katz and Kahn (1966) note that closed systems tend towards entropy—a steady state where the members of the system (molecules, for instance) have equal energy—and hence move towards equilibrium. That is, "it tends to run down ... its differentiated structures tend to move toward dissolution as the elements composing them become arranged in random order". The structures (not the individual elements) are dissolved. For open systems to survive, on the other hand, they:

"must move to arrest the entropic process; they must acquire negative entropy. The entropic process is a universal law of nature in which all forms of organization move towards disorganisation or death. Complex physical systems move toward simple random distribution of their elements and biological organisms also run down and perish. The open system, however, by importing more energy from its environment than it expends, can store energy and can acquire negative entropy" (Katz and Kahn, 1966).

The authors emphasize that open systems can only survive by importing energy. The structures of the theoretical open system, by definition, have to become more elaborated and differentiated for the system to survive. The "balance" in this case is not one of equality, it is one of differentiation. This problem is exacerbated when it is implied throughout a systems analysis (as it is in Vorster's work) that the system is inherently valid, not to be negotiated or questioned. In

Vorster's analysis the system takes on an aura of naturalness, an almost biological certainty.

"Where is Papa-system?" Asks Baby-system

Implied in Vorster's systems approach is that political communication operates within a wider system of communication, which is itself a subsystem of something bigger. What is this overarching system (Papa to all the rest)? It is of course the South African political system, which, for the benefit of further exploration of political communication, needs to be defined in terms of the systems approach.

A political movement is defined as "a continuing act performed by an aggregate of persons in a power perspective of elaborated demands and expectations" and politics as "a continuous defining of collective action in the context of a mutual power relationship characterised by differences and conflict regarding the authoritative allocation of scarce resources" (Vorster, (1985).

The definition of a political movement is more than adequate for dealing with the political spectrum in South Africa. It is able to identify all major political tendencies ranging from the Azanian Peoples Organisation (AZAPO) to the Afrikaner Weerstand Beveeging (AWB), in which "an aggregate of persons" elaborate "demands and expectations". But Vorster's definition of politics confuses the issue because he contextualises the "collective action" in a power relationship which is mutual. What exactly this means is unclear because does the 'mutual' imply:

- that all political movements are engaged in the conflict over power (something which is quite obvious), or
- that all movements engaged in this conflict are structurally parallel, i.e. they each theoretically have equal opportunity in gaining access to the allocation of resources?

Vorster seems to be referring to the second meaning of 'mutual' because the totality of 'political movements' he investigates did theoretically have equal access to political power as it was then constituted in the mid-to-late 1980s. This limited definition is possible as Vorster only analyses political parties as components of the political system! All other contenders, like the United Democratic Front (UDF), the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan African Congress (PAC), AZAPO and the AWB were summarily excluded. For instance, in his article "Political Communication in South Africa After Rubicon: A Trend Towards Professionalism?" (1986a), Vorster analyses the changing mode of

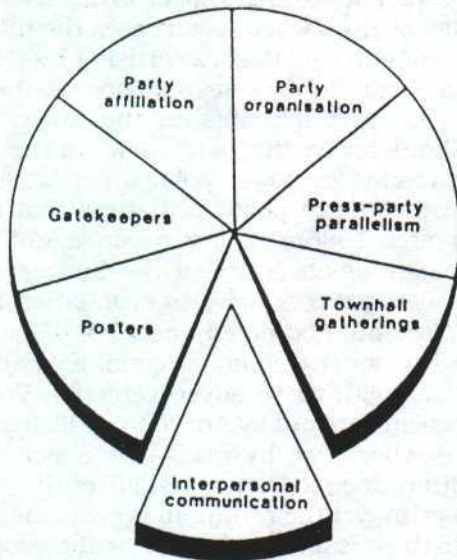
'political communication' in South Africa. Instead of doing just that he deals only with party affiliation, party organisation, press-party parallelism and townhall gatherings (which activate and reinforce party loyalty), amongst others (all dealing with the needs of the parliamentary parties). (See Figure 1).

Even when Vorster allows others space in his discussion of political communication (as he does when he analyses the role of big business in political advertising in "Political Advertising by Big Business after Rubicon"), they are only to express opinions as they directly affect their daily business. He admonishes the American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham) for casting 'a shadow' on the pristine world of advertising by "dabbling in power politics per se, and no longer in expressing their opinions in political matters that affect commerce and industry" (Vorster, 1986b). This is because AmCham initiated an advertising campaign which criticised the State of Emergency and demanded that measures conducive to negotiation be implemented. These measures, it should be noted, included demands such as the release of political prisoners, common equal education and political rights for all. Along with these advertisements, Vorster insists, we must read a document sent out by AmCham to its member companies suggesting civil disobedience by blacks as a political tool. These demands deal with economic issues that affect the general welfare of capital in the long run, yet the AmCham is castigated because it does not restrict itself to those issues appropriate to the supposedly apolitical discourse of business. The notion that business is 'apolitical' and must therefore not meddle too much in politics is very naive. Capital always has interests in political stability which ensures the maintenance of its profits. It therefore aligns itself with those forces which ensure the safety of that stability and its interests. Thus, just as AmCham involved itself in political matters to serve its long term interests (both in the United States and in the future South Africa), so too did those businesses in South Africa who supported the anti- disinvestment campaign directly involve themselves in politics to serve their own interests.

No commercial enterprise can hold a privileged moral position over another because it will always have direct interest in maintaining certain economically favourable conditions in the socio-political sphere. These stable conditions do not necessarily have to reflect in any way the general interests of the population, regardless of where and which business supports them. This is a vital point which Vorster forgets. Erroneously then, non-party political and social movements, business interests, and so on, are seen as outsiders to the process of politics, and are theoretically allowed an opinion only if it is not too radical.

The only 'events' which are deemed 'political per se' are the Parliamentary parties.

Figure 1. Traditional mode of political communication (Vorster, 1986a)



Once the second meaning of 'mutual' is used a problem arises because the definition of political movement becomes misleading all "aggregates of persons in a power perspective of elaborated demands and expectations" cannot be accounted for. The metaphor of the kernel and corn ably demonstrates this discrepancy. Political parties that elected to participate in the Tri-Cameral system in the 1980's could indeed be considered 'political movements'. But to consider those parties only as 'political movements' is theoretical suicide and helps to concoct a damaging myth about the contemporary South African political situation. Because a significant number of movements did not have or want access to the then constituted parliamentary system due to judico-political conditions (e.g.. UDF, ANC, AWB, AZAPO), it does not mean they were not involved in a power struggle. Thus Vorster has inadvertently created a myth: parliamentary politics = Politics. To put it another way, the myth describes the Tri-Cameral system as the only place where (legitimate) politics occurred in the 1980's. Political parties and political movements are overlapping but different 'events', yet are collapsed into one such that a whole host of

political movements have been denied a legitimate theoretical existence - absurd! This myth had its bubble burst, at last, in 1990.

The theoretical contradictions resulting from this reductionism become clearly visible by analysing Vorster's use of Easton's general model for political systems.

"In Easton's model there are decision makers (the authorities) and the members (the public). The members provide the system with inputs that can take the form of demands or support. Acting through the authorities, the system itself continuously performs a conversion process that yields outputs. The outputs can be in the form of decisions, policies, actions or services. In order to maintain and perpetuate itself, the system is concerned with balancing the inputs and the outputs, while maintaining the support in relation to the demands made on it (Vorster, 1985).

One assumes, although it is not stated, that decision-makers and members are divided into components which compete over scarce resources. Using the reductionist equation, political movements = political parties, one might be able to accept the assertion that the system is able to 'balance' the inputs and the outputs: that demands and conflict emanating from parties are able to be contained and resolved within the realms of the Tri-Cameral Parliamentary system. But some political movements have been excluded from Vorster's construct of the 'political system'. The 'outputs' demanded by the 'inputs' of these disaffected movements would result in an imbalance of the theoretical system, which would then lead to a negation of homeostasis, and hence in the discontinuance of the system that Vorster models. They are therefore unable to be articulated in Vorster's analysis; or, from another perspective, they are actively ignored in an attempt to negate their actual theoretical legitimacy. Gouldner's critique of Talcott Parsons, a structural-functionalist who originated the concept of the 'social system', explains the reductionism inherent in the systems approach, exemplified here by Vorster's excommunication of certain social movements.

Gouldner (1970) points out that Parsons' social theory requires that the system's elements be constituted a priori, before empirical research: "Parsons assumes that the whole system must be conceptually constituted prior to the empirical investigation of any specific part or pattern". Thus all the parts of the system are specified before research. To be more specific, system components are postulated. And this forms the basis of later research, as if the system already has an empirical legitimacy. As Gouldner points out, it is demonstration by purely 'literary means'.

What drives the *a priori* conceptualisation of the system?

Underlying the notion of the social system is both the desire for, and belief in, the inherent integration of society - and the need to technically maintain that integration. An important part of 'integration' is interdependence: the fact that a change in one component of the system will affect a change in the system's other components, or one component will be affected by a change in another component; and, that the survival of one component depends on the interaction with, and survival of, the other components in the system (if the system itself is to survive). In short, interdependence is the mechanism of system survival.

But, as Gouldner (1970) continues, components in the system experience dialectical tensions. On the one hand, components need to interact with each other to maintain systems survival; and on the other hand, components need to survive as themselves to maintain themselves as components, to retain their "functional autonomy". Thus, built into the systems theory is the fact that components may resist integration into the system.

If a component does not gain benefits from the system reciprocal to its inputs it will attempt to retain as much functional autonomy as possible. It will refuse the 'benefits' of interdependence, and hence threaten the survival of the system which is dependent on interdependence. On the other hand, if the component does derive benefits from its interdependence with other components within the system (sometimes accruing to itself more than it has put in), then it will attempt to maintain the system, and minimise its own and the other components' functional autonomy. It is "those parts that identify with system management" that tend to "strive toward fuller integration, reducing the autonomy of the parts and increasing their submission to the requirements of the system as a whole, as they, the system managers, define it". This 'managerial element' though, even if identifying with the system, has its own interests to protect. It has special interests in "the maintenance of some measure of autonomy for itself" (Gouldner, 1970). This measure of autonomy and the benefits accrued to it often depend on denying other components those benefits (outputs) which are theoretically justified by the inputs from the deprived components.

Returning to Vorster's work, we can see what assumptions have determined his systems categorisation. His systems model is determined a-priori without empirical research justifying the assemblage of components (Figure 2). The model proposed by Vorster is based on the assumption of (social) systems' integration, mostly because, from his perspective, it will ensure the maintenance of the benefits accrued to the management sector (those managing the

economic and political 'system' of apartheid) by continuing, or trying to justify, the 'interdependence of parts'.

Now, theoretically, the only way to convince oneself of the legitimacy of interdependence (as defined in an integrationist sense) is to include in the model only those components which coincide with, or do not fundamentally threaten, the needs of that management sector which seeks to maintain the system. Hence, by focusing on the Tri-Cameral Parliamentary system, which has the added benefit of being considered by many (whites) as being unquestionably 'political' (while other institutions and 'events' - the issue of sport tours, for instance - are very questionably 'political'), Vorster can isolate a unit of study which brings with it an a-priori definition of politics. This definition is at the same time relatively unthreatening to hegemonic interests, and is based on a conception of politics which is popularly accepted, and hence (hopefully) not open to question (it has in it that kernel of truth mentioned earlier). But it is also a definition which excludes a whole range of 'political movements' from what Vorster's version of the systems theory defines as 'politics'. It is now possible to see why the sense of arbitrariness has crept into 'the system'. It is determined by unsubstantiated, a priori assumptions. It is these assumptions which feed into the theory and cause theoretical reductionism. This reductionism has serious implications for the study of communications within the political framework, for, with Papa-system lost, how can Baby-system do anything but flounder? Much of the reductionism inherent in this particular definition of "what is political" is also repeated and compounded in similar forms in the articulation of the 'subsystem'.

Yo, You down there, I'm talking with you!

Vorster notes that systems theory is "in line with the transactional approach to communication which emphasizes that people communicate *with* each other rather than *to* each other" (my emphasis) (Vorster, 1985). This assertion has a validity when viewed in a specific sense: when two or more people are communicating in an unstructured environment, or at least as participants in a horizontal social context. "Yo" here implies a uni-directional flow of information, or energy, and "with" presumes a structure-less framework, one where participants have equal access to the channels of discourse and are able to mobilise them equally well.

In the real world, however, the ideal of equal access to the channels of discourse does not exist, especially in the process of political communication. Even in terms of the systems approach which admits

at least some form of social structure this notion remains a fantasy. Accepting for a moment Vorster's definition of "Political System", we get a fairly good idea in the figure reproduced from Vorster's "A Political Communication System" of the hierarchical nature reflected in a systems analysis.

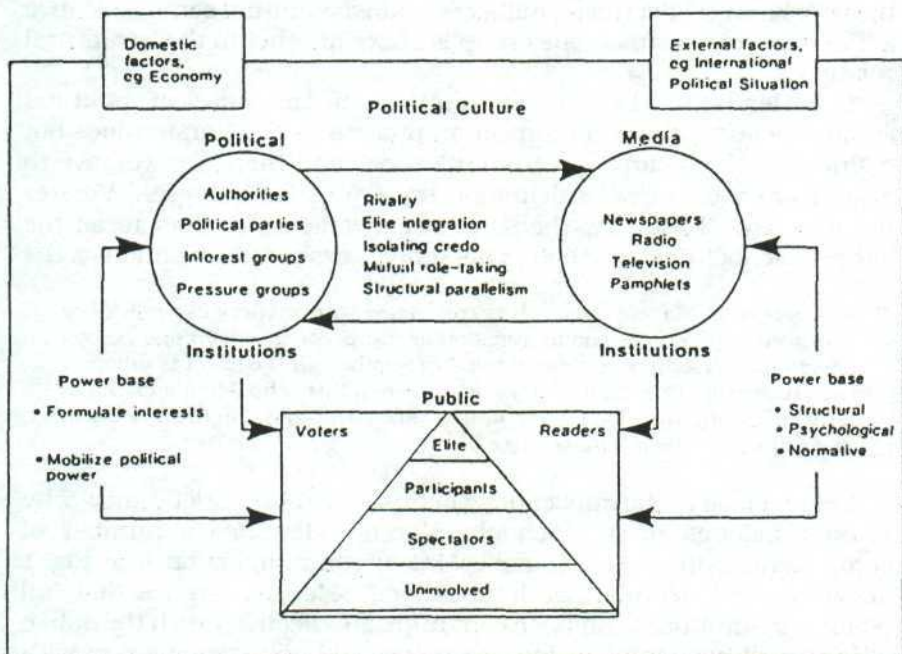
According to the diagram there are different components in the political communication system which become subsystems in themselves. I'll start my analysis by looking at one of these subsystems, the 'Public'. The Public has four categories which might be defined according to the degree of involvement of their members in the political and communication process: the 'elite', 'participants', 'spectators' and 'uninvolved'. Vorster does not himself define these categories, but it is quite clear (by looking at the terminology used) that a small section of 'the Public', the 'elite', is structurally 'above' the rest of the population. Vorster does not say why there is an elite; does it exist because of the talents and energy of the individuals involved, or is an elite maintained by political inequality (e.g. franchise according to race) or economic inequality (developed along class lines)? Looking at the bottom end of the triangle, who are 'the uninvolved': children ... or the disenfranchised? The society to which Vorster applies his systems approach, South Africa, has structural imbalances built into it, worse than most other societies (which all have structural inequalities to varying degrees).

This power hierarchy is most explicitly noticed when we look at the 'interaction' between sectors of the different subsystems. We could imagine that some form of communicative 'transaction' occurs in a structurally horizontal situation between members of the elite from the 'Public' component and members of political parties from the 'Political' component - top businessmen and party political leaders talking over the dinner table, for instance; it is hard to imagine that political leaders announcing the State of Emergency over the television to disenfranchised blacks (members of the 'uninvolved public~) are transacting talking with rather than to.

Continuing with this notion and returning to an earlier point it is now clear how, in one sense, the concept of holism is used to mystify the workings of 'the system'. By asserting that the whole is bigger than the constituent parts it is possible to deny the fact that one group (the management sector) can control 'the system' for its own benefit. By hiding the most politically powerful group (in this case the National Party and their supporters) in amongst three or four other terms in a little circle in a diagram with another little circle and three other boxes it is very easy to produce an analysis that masks unequal structural power relations. This is especially so when very little attention is given

to relationships between sectors which are subsumed under different subsystems. (e.g. who in the 'Political component' or 'Public component' has the resources or contacts to buy advertising, which is a part of the 'Media component'?).

Figure 2. A Political Communication System (Vorster, 1985)



Assuming communication as a transaction process is problematic. Kunczik himself a proponent of systems theory, says that the transaction model (proposed by Bauer in 1964) essentially equates "two-dimensional interpersonal communication with largely one-directional mass media communication". One cannot presume a mutual exertion of influence between two 'partners' when there is essentially an asymmetrical power relationship between the mass communicators and their recipients, or, to put it another way, within a society where there is an unequal distribution of control over the

systems of communication. Assuming that in general people are not disposed to unforced altruism, we cannot expect a mutual transactive communicative process to flower. Especially not within the genre of advertising. The notion of 'transactive communication' in the political communication sphere is particularly misleading in South Africa, but even more generally it cannot be conceived that in social reality people in one power structure or group talk 'with' people in another power structure or group. They either talk to, contest, or are ignored by those within structurally autonomous groups/components. In fact, the very basis of advertising militates against a mutual communicative act and for one in which one group is above another in the 'structural relation'.

This leads us to an examination of the core of political communication: the communication process itself. Vorster does not define what he means by communication, and therefore we have to glean from the text what definition underpins his analysis. Vorster fits into what Fiske "for the sake of convenience", refers to as the 'process school' (Fiske, 1982). This school sees communication as the

"transmission of messages... It is concerned with matters like efficiency and accuracy. It sees communication as a process by which one person affects the behaviour or state of mind of another. If the effect is different from or smaller than that which was intended, this school tends to talk in terms of communication failure, and to look to the stages in the process to find out where the failure occurred."

Before I look at the implications of this I must first briefly show why Vorster belongs to this school. Vorster identifies a number of components within 'traditional' political communication (see Fig 1 above: posters, townhall gatherings etc.). He then argues that "all political institutions wishing to communicate effectively with the public at large will have to consider also using paid advertising space with professionally formulated messages in addition to utilising the more traditional modes of political communication" (Vorster, 1986a). Thus, as time progresses, information sending methods must become more efficient, and slot into the machinery of marketing. Thus communication becomes "the process by which one person affects the behaviour or state of mind of another". Communication becomes a tool for persuading others of the 'correctness' of a particular point of view.

This emphasis becomes deficient in Vorster's analysis in two ways. The first is due to his definition of the forms of the political communication (because of his insistence on isolating parliamentary politics as Politics). The second, and related deficiency, is his insistence

that the lack of the 'correct' response to the political messages emanating from the State President and government are due to a 'failure' of 'communication'.

It is illuminating to note what constitutes for Vorster communicative events - gatherings, posters, advertisements etc. It does not occur to him that demonstrations which erupted in black South African townships (usually aimed at targets of structural oppression the police, beerhalls, state transport services etc.) were in themselves acts of political communication: a series of demonstrations are "a continuing act performed by an aggregate of persons in a power perspective of elaborated demands and expectations" with a view to enacting an "exchange of messages and symbols that are significantly influenced by, or have consequences for the functioning of the political system which, in turn, influences the communicative system". By Vorster's own definition he has excluded integral components of political communication - one of them being the messages and symbols of that sector excluded from the parliamentary system and which used extra-legal means for their conveyance. This was due to the arbitrary constitution of components in his communication model which 'allows' him to exclude those components which will undermine the integrative function of the system.

By defining 'political' in a more or less arbitrary (and hence exclusivist) manner the rest of the system is affected by the sense of the arbitrary. What becomes 'political communication' is in fact party communication. The systems approach, if it had any relevance to begin with, floats around on the surface of a boiling sea and ignores the bubbling beneath it because it fails to recognise that below the surface of the sea one also finds water.

Another related deficiency is that Vorster focuses his attention on advertising as a form of political communication (in line with his view that political communication is party-to-(white) people message sending). The function of advertising is to socialise us so that we "are prepared to play our roles as consumers (political adherents)" (Dirksen and Kroeg, 1968). Advertising is to stimulate demand for a product, which, in this case, is a party ideology and programme. Thus an emphasis is placed on an extreme form of "process" communication where the purpose of the government's use of advertising is communication - but as a unidirectional talking to, rather than with event. Advertising (and the other 'traditional' forms of communication to varying extents) implies a hierarchical social relation. In this case we have the government elected by a racial elite on top, with the rest of the population graded downwards. And when a disruption occurs in the socio-political structure (usually, as with 'the riot', taking place

outside of that system which Vorster terms 'political') the fundamental failure to contain that disruption is, in Vorster's terms, the inefficiency of the communication (information sending) process.

The other two articles ("Political Communication In South Africa After Rubicon: A Trend Towards Professionalism?" and "Political Advertising by Big Business after Rubicon"), in which Vorster applies his theory to advertising, are focussed on the press, as the "fourth estate", and the overcoming of the 'inefficiency' of the process of communication through these channels by utilising "paid space". Paying for advertising space overcomes 'noise' from muddling editors and reporters, and opens up new avenues of access for the government message. Advertising bypasses the whole subsystem of 'gate-keeping' and 'communicating' direct to the audience. Because Vorster is unquestioning about the common sense view of communication, which restricts its focus to a uni-directional process of information sending, he is unable to see that no matter how many advertisements are placed as part of a campaign a large segment of the 'Public' will continue to interpret the content of the advertisements in an oppositional manner due to reasons which are rooted outside of the 'communicative system', and outside of the 'political system' (as defined by Vorster).

Vorster discusses in depth how the 1986 opening of Parliament "address and subsequent advertisement" by the State President created an awareness of and interest in the new policy of reform, a desire for more information, and an attitude change and action. Vorster recognises that there are "some misgivings as to the possible effectiveness of this specific advertisement" (Vorster, 1986a). Firstly a product, "the reform", needs to back up the marketing, secondly, a coherent campaign needs to sustain this awareness and interest. In this respect Darryl Phillips provides a coherent discussion on using classical marketing and communications techniques for selling reform. He emphasises that it is "a pointless exercise to market a product which does not exist, except in the imagination of the designers" (Phillips, 1985). In other words, it is pointless, from a marketing perspective, to advertise what is not there. Therefore to theorise a communication package for potential use by the government one needs to analyse what the package actually is, and whether it will be acceptable to different sections of the population. Vorster fails to do this. There develops, therefore, an attendant weakness in Vorster's conceptualisation of the message-receiver relationship, for the problems with the advertisement are seen in terms of inefficient marketing techniques. It does not occur to Vorster that the failure of the advertisement might be due to the conflict waged over the interpretation

of the content, and not due to the weakness in the design and distribution of the advertisement.

To show the absurdity of restricting an academic analysis of communication to uni-directional information sending (but implying otherwise) let me indulge in a metaphorical example. Visualise the town crier peering over the castle wall shouting to the amorphous mass of Kings subjects that his Majesty's favourite pet horse is to arrive any minute "and would all please respond by lining the roads!". "Yo", he shouts, "I'm talking with you, now do as I say!". When the crowds fail to respond on that sweet and balmy afternoon the town crier is hanged for not shouting loud enough, and the subjects are whipped for failing to listen to that indisputably wonderful and generous offer.

Mr. Systems' Youth: A Critical Biography

In his essay, "The Political Character of Science" (1971), Dallas Smythe traces the development of Western science from Newton, through the positivist tradition to the behaviourists and logical-positivists. This tradition focuses on a mechanical view of the world where science is above being implicated in politics, it is 'neutral'. It is a tradition which became synonymous with American social science through the efforts of sociologists such as Lasswell, Watson, Parsons and in communication Marshal McLuhan. Gouldner has a useful term for the 20th Century development of this tradition—Academic Sociology. Briefly, it was developed in the United States by academics who were orientated towards the established middle class and who sought 'pragmatically to reform rather than systematically rebel against the status quo' (Gouldner, 1970). The Academic sociologist became a professional intellectual rather than a critical intellectual: oiling the wheels of society in the service of the powerful rather than critically examining it. Social science became technical, quantitative, segmentalised and institutionalised. Further "In general it may be said that behaviourism and logical positivism have provided the Twentieth Century rationalism for conservative conformist and escapist activity." (Smythe, 1971)

The systems theories of the social sciences developed to maturity in the 1960s and are an extension of the logical-positivist tradition with their focus on the components as atomised social subsystems connected to each other in The System; and on the supposed neutrality of the researcher Developing Smythe's ideas further, firstly by looking at the 'conservative, conformist' aspect, and secondly at the 'escapist' aspect we discover why Vorster imported this tradition.

America, with its political focus on 'the election' and with a history

of rabid anti-communism, is ripe for the conservative and conformist activities of the positivist theorists. Establishment social scientists, who to a large extent control academe, expend their energies in developing strategies for maintaining social quietude within the borders of the United States and within the borders of those countries where American capital has vested interests, most notably in South America. Carol Brightman and Michael Klare detail the use of university professors and think-tanks in the development of counter-insurgency models, social intelligence gathering techniques, psychological warfare operations, the production of sociological and anthropological information which can be used by the government to intervene politically in foreign countries, and the development of political-military strategies for the maintenance of American power in the global arena. In South Africa, Vorster, as part of the establishment with interests in maintaining the present racial elitism, would naturally like to find a conservative theory which he is able to use to mobilise political communication for that evolutionary, and rather slow change package—the Reform. This he has found in the systems theory, which, as McQuail (1975) points out, and I have already shown, has the end result of biasing attention towards “system maintenance and equilibrium”.

Smythe states that by “asserting the individual is an isolated atom” the theorists of the positivist tradition “provided a model for the academic world which coincided ideologically with the model of free-enterprise capitalism ...” (Smythe, 1971). In South Africa, there is a shift of emphasis, however, because what coincides between the systems model and that of the ideology of apartheid is the fracturing of society into “isolated atoms” (groups) in such a way as to escape legitimate group political and economic demands. The systems model proposed by Vorster provides an ideological justification for the maintenance of an economic elite in a more benign but still racial (and Verwoerdian) manner. The major political problem with importing this theory from the United States to promote social quietude within South Africa is that the division between the elite and the masses is far more pronounced and identifiable in South Africa than in the United States. There is a different balance of power in South Africa.

The escapism of local academic models will differ quantitatively and qualitatively from their American and European counterparts and sources. In South Africa the anti-apartheid struggle was by the late 1980's an irreversible trend being waged by the majority of the politically active population. In America, such a struggle is hardly even a minority concern. Referring back to systems theory and Gouldner's critique, it is well to note this point that in the American

post-war welfare society:

"Parsons saw systems equilibrium as a derivative of systems initiatives and processes, as resting essentially on the conformity that all give to the legitimate expectations of each other... with its operating assumption that the stability of society is strengthened by the conformity with the 'legitimate' expectations of deprived social strata which, in turn, are then expected to have a willing conformity with conventional morality. The operating assumption is that deprived strata will be 'grateful' for the aid they are given . . . and that they will conform to the expectations of the giver" (Gouldner, 1970).

This is the case in America, where even in that "stable" society social unrest has occurred (e.g.. 1960's race riots and civil rights movement).

In South Africa the economic and political circumstances are very different. Firstly the size of the economically deprived strata is a lot larger, and secondly, America does not categorically exclude the majority of its population from the voters roll:

"In most liberal capitalist democracies, the State ensures continued accumulation and legitimises this in the name of the 'general interest' Universal franchise in these countries lends a modicum of credence to the belief in a 'general interest'. In South Africa there is no universal franchise, and so the most important means of general consent building is missing from the South African hegemonic armoury" (Gramsci, 1979).

These kinds of issues affect the process of communication, and especially political communication. But it is precisely these issues which are ignored by Vorster as he uses the systems model to explain "political communication".

Conclusion: American Dream Turned Sour

It is in Vorster's work that we recognise how, to paraphrase Antonio Gramsci: the dominant ideological group poses all the questions "around which the struggle wages not on a corporate level but on a 'universal' plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups" (Gramsci, 1979). As Vorster poses the questions, in the framework of systems theory he goes through the process of 'universalising' the notion that political programmes such as the reform package, which are the product of a specific group and a specific time (and thus belong to a corporate body) are beneficent for and wanted by everyone. He is an example of an academic tied to the dominant political group who, during the '80s,

constantly set the agenda of the political debate and those matters inextricably linked to it. But this agenda misleads Vorster more than anyone else because he fails to recognise the whole spectrum of communication that is political but oppositional in nature. Hence he finds the solution to the 'break down' of communication in techniques which fail to provide for real communication, or for circumstances where that favourite phrase used by the government "the process of dialogue" can become meaningful.

Functionalist sociology, says Armand Mattelart, never considers the prospect of transformation suggested by dysfunction. In fact, in his terms, "this so-called universal theory reveals itself to be a false theory since it is not verifiable in practice" (Mattelart, 1979). Applying this to the systems theory, what is a period of disorder or 'anomic crisis' within the system

"from the standpoint of both the component individuals and the cultural system [be a] cutting of bonds that releases them to try something else that might better succeed Anomic disorder may unbind wasted energies, sever fruitless commitments; and it may make possible a ferment of innovation that can rescue the individuals, or the cultural system, from destruction" (Gouldner, 1970).

So, using a systems theory to theorise communication, it is possible to ignore power relations, or pass them off with: "in a democracy two of the crucial components, the press and the government, would function beside each other, and not with the government above the press" (Vorster, 1985). It is also possible to ignore the issue of who manages the system, and in whose interests it is maintained. It is very easy, in fact, inherent in this particular systems approach, to reduce communication to uni-directional information sending. When the information isn't received 'correctly' then the theorist goes back to the drawing board in order to make the communicative process more efficient, and more repressive. But let me look at the negative aspects of this, from the point of view of the theorist and his or her group. Let me take advertising, the communication genre central to Vorster's theory, as a vehicle for explanation. It is used extensively in American elections to persuade voters one way or another. In South Africa Vorster discusses advertising in the context of persuading people (many of whom are non-voters) against a fundamental radical change of the political power relations as practiced presently. But, "advertisements speed up the time in which [political] products are accepted, [but they] do not create a demand or a new trend" (Dirksen and Kroeg, 1968) or reverse one already on its way! And so, no doubt, political advertising and the kind of political communication as

envisaged by Vorster will slow the process of political and economic change. But this is where Mr. System loses himself, because he has shrouded himself in his own myth. The temporary maintenance of the status quo must happen in such a way that when the system crumbles the majority of (white) South Africa will be unprepared for it because they have been denied access to real communication between all South Africa. The American Dream today might just be the South African Nightmare tomorrow.

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