

INCOMMUNICATION, AN ESSENTIAL CONCEPT IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

DOMINIQUE WOLTON

CNRS, HERMÈS

“Finally, there are three situations of communication. First, the ideal, i.e., sharing and inter-comprehension. Then, the incommunication: we do not understand each other, in spite of the common values and vocabulary. So, we negotiate, constantly, to try to cohabit. Finally, acommunication: rupture, failure. Between the three situations, the crucial role of negotiation, trust and stereotypes.

Communication? A balance of power between these three dimensions, without forgetting the central role of context, inequalities and cultural differences. The main thing, in the last century, is the discovery of the growing role played by incommunication. Everything was supposed to be made easier. Everything is becoming more complicated. Regardless of technologies. One seeks the same, one negotiates with the other. Communication? An eminently human and political question, well before a technical one. Opening on the others, and the world, without guarantee of success.

Communication? A challenge between cognition and experience. Between oneself and the other. Between the individual and the collective. How to do without it?

Saving communication? Is to think the incommunication at the time of the otherness”.

DOMINIQUE WOLTON

ABSTRACT

Communication and incommunication are inseparable, but incommunication is the condition for communication, and can no longer be considered as “the failure of communication”. Incommunication and otherness are complementary for thinking about the difficulties linked to the illusions of the “communication society”. Europe is only a sum of incommunications and only endless negotiations prevent failure, whether about the enlargement process or the incessant resolution of crises. With incommunication, we rediscover the importance of the concept of otherness. Incommunication is an integral part of political construction. To revalue incommunication, and all the contradictory dimensions of history and politics, is to escape the constant devaluation of communication, often reduced to attempts at manipulation, and to legitimize intercomprehension as a modest but essential tool for the organization of debates. Incommunication, negotiation, and translation: three essential concepts to try to manage the question of otherness.

Keywords: Incommunication, Europe, otherness, negotiation, otherness

No communication without incommunication. And vice versa. The two are inseparable, but we don't talk much about incommunication because it is assimilated to failure. If communication is often devalued, because it is difficult and identified with manipulation, it is even worse for incommunication! The less we talk about it, the better.

My hypothesis is exactly the opposite. Incommunication is the condition for communication, because it allows persisting after difficulties and failures. And the more exchanges occur, the more incommunication plays a central role. The abundance of information does not necessarily create more communication. In fact, it is often the opposite. "Informing is not communicating." This in-between situation postpones failure and values negotiation.

Incommunication then often becomes the condition for communication. This is exactly what is happening with Europe. Everything separates us, misunderstandings prevail, along with lies, mistrust, and other disputes. And yet Europe is constantly being built. Incommunication paradoxically becomes the condition for the resumption of dialogue in order to avoid acommunication, i.e., rupture, as we see with Ukraine. Incommunication means both the reality of disagreement and an invitation to negotiate to avoid failure and war. A largely underestimated strategic role.

This is the meaning of the issue of Hermes №90: "*Europe, between incommunication and war*".

To show the importance of incommunication and negotiation to bring together points of view that are often radically opposed. Anything to continue to negotiate and dismiss the acommunication.

Incommunication? A political communication concept that is at least as important as that of communication: the symbol of the interest of negotiation when everything has apparently failed. Europe, the greatest democratic and peaceful experiment in the history of humanity, has been based for 60 years on the strength of incommunication. And when war imposes itself, yesterday in Yugoslavia, today in Ukraine, it is by this approach that we try to limit the worst. Europe? A sum of incommunications, a weak pride for all that has been done, but an improbable will to avoid rupture. It is essential to recognize the theoretical and strategic importance of this concept, to the extent of globalization where the omnipresence of technology makes us believe, wrongly, in the ease of inter-comprehension. However, the opposite is true: there have never been so many borders, never have there been so many conflicts. Incommunication? The necessary concept, in the age of globalization, to avoid the multiplication of conflicts as digital globalization should sup-

posedly bring inter-comprehension. Incommunication means trying to postpone acommunication and leaving the space for negotiation open, knowing that, without agreeing on anything, we can nevertheless try to avoid the catastrophe of war. It resembles the symbol of Europe: “never agree, always together” (Wolton, 2022a, 2022b).

I. The assets of the concept of incommunication

First of all, incommunication can no longer be considered as “the failure of communication”, it is its double. Incommunication is a state of affairs that leads either to negotiation or rupture. It exists along/within human communication as it does within technical communication and shows in all cases the fragility of inter-comprehension, the weight of inequalities, and context. It also reminds us of the importance of the difference between technical interactivity and human inter-comprehension. On the other hand, it is the tipping point concerning the central question of otherness. This one is not denied but becomes a state of fact whose importance is proportional to the intensity of the exchanges.

Incommunication and otherness are complementary to think about the difficulties linked to the illusions of the “communication society.” Finally, incommunication revalorizes the other concept, that of negotiation. Negotiation to avoid rupture and to try to cohabit, the known bridges instead of walls, of which Pope Francis constantly speaks, between languages, cultures, histories, etc. We don’t understand each other, but we respect each other in part, and we listen to each other a little. We look for the minimum common values rather than break up. Negotiate rather than fight, even if the outcome is not certain. Words rather than blows. All the difference, for example, in recent history between the thought and actions of Gorbachev with the fall of communism and that of Putin with the war in Ukraine.

This is one of the most important concepts to legitimize at a time when, with the globalization of exchanges, the simple but false idea that everything is going to accelerate and facilitate dominates. To take incommunication head-on is not to accept failure. It is to accept the contradictions and to try, through negotiation, to push them back a little. Negotiation and cohabitation may be modest concepts, but they are essential to avoid acommunication. Accepting incommunication also means integrating the importance of the context of inequalities of time and admitting that there are several forms of negotiation. In a word, it means reopening the game.

II. Europe

It illustrates the positive importance of this concept. Europe is only a sum of in-communications and only endless negotiations prevent failure, whether it is about the enlargement process or the incessant resolution of crises. *Europe, without an ultimately positive and active conception of incommunication, would long ago have tipped over into failure.* The wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s and in Ukraine today illustrate the fragility of balances and destinies. With incommunication is valued everything that still allows us to talk to each other and negotiate. With acommunication the opposite happens: everything that brings discord is valued, and bridges are cut. We understand that, with the enlargement of Europe and more widely with globalization, it is essential to value this concept of incommunication which tries to postpone the moment of rupture. Communication and incommunication are political concepts that directly concern peace and war. Europeans are not proud enough of the dynamic role of incommunication for the last 60 years. The United Nations and its agencies are the second examples of the essential role of incommunication in avoiding war. At the UN, it is only a question of incommunication against a negotiation background, sometimes trying to promote the norms and values that could try to unite States. Even if nobody is fooled about the “reality” of these shared values, it does not matter: the important thing is that they are accepted and put forward.

III. A new dimension of contemporary political communication

With incommunication we rediscover the importance of the concept of *otherness*. It is impossible to ignore it, but it is also impossible to let it settle like an implacable destiny, with acommunication and war as the outcome. Basically, it is the growing risks of war and rupture that explain the enhancement of this concept. “Last exit before the war,” we could say, referring to the famous sentence from Hubert Selby’s novel. And Europe has illustrated the richness and dynamism of the concept for 60 years. Recognizing its value is as important as accepting the concept of political communication. This one has imposed itself with the enlargement of politics linked to universal suffrage, to the media, to the polls, and more widely to society and to mass democracy. *It is impossible today to think about globalization without valuing the concept of incommunication.* The proof not of failure but of the possibility to exchange, to negotiate, and to cohabit, knowing that we do not agree on much. The difficulties and discontinuities of incommunication actually illustrate the discontinuities of communication.

This enhancement of the word incommunication finally concerns a considerable number of human, social and political situations. We do not stop exchanging neither negotiating to postpone failure. Think and act with incommunication to avoid acommunication. The main goal? *Save time*. Avoid the chain of catastrophes, as we have witnessed the threats of war since at least the 19th century. The more the world accelerates and shrinks, the more it is necessary to slow down and “lose time” to avoid the irreparable. Incommunication contributes, in its own way, to maintain this intermediate state which is never “lost time.” The faster everything goes and the more complex it becomes with intertwining the political, social, cultural, and globalization aspects, the more it is necessary to escape the illusion of speed, transparency, and rationality. Diplomacy has always known the importance of incommunication in negotiations.

Despite the lack of communication, the important thing is to value all the common points (languages, histories, values...) to avoid the victory of otherness. Incommunication is an integral part of political construction. Mr. Orbán is not Mr. Putin, the enlargement of the negotiations to the otherness is a way to avoid tipping into failure.

IV. Incommunication and the digital world

Another form of incommunication exists, one that is not linked to history and its upheavals but to the misunderstandings resulting from digital technologies. For more than a generation, the Internet and digital economy have been introduced as the means to overcome historical violence and to build a model of “peaceful society” based on information and communication. This is not the case; the digital world does not dissolve historical and political conflicts and confrontations. This is particularly true in Europe, the most digitalized space in the world. We are even witnessing the opposite. Digital technology can be integrated into all forms of totalitarianism, particularly in Russia and China. *The complement of the growing incommunication is not technology but politics*, that is to say, the integration of the factors of incommunication in the logic of political concertation. Incommunication, a new political concept, must remain distinct from the digital world. The latter is not an alternative; it can even be a gas pedal of antagonisms. Technical prowess is not complementary to cultural and political values. At the endpoint of the networks, there are societies and civilizations that have nothing to do with technical performance. Technology is not a substitute for politics, or else it is the triumph of technical ideology. And this one can perfectly contribute to accelerating the risks of

acomunication. No, the digital revolution is not a new stage of political history.

Incommunication is not a waste of time at a time when the digital world does not cease to want to accelerate everything through the GAFA and the reign of the information industries' speed. The order of politics is not that of speed and technology. Neither it is the reign of scientism. The passage from the 20th to the 21st century is that of the continuity of information and its flows to the discontinuity of communication.

V. The incommunication to push back the risks of acomunication

Three fundamental fields must be recalled to show the complexity of the question of incommunication. *First*, acomunication is increasing as the technical "globalization" of information and communication flows proceeds. Therefore, valuing the concept of incommunication is essential to avoid that abundance increases disorder. Pipes are global, and humans and societies are not.

Then, to value incommunication is to value history, cultures, styles, stories, debates, and contradictions in relation to the illusions and seductions of technical communication. It is human beings who wage wars, not robots or networks. The more technical communication expands, the more it is essential to rebalance with more human communication. And the confrontation of multiple incommunications is typically of the order of political communication, or of human communication, but is ultimately not a matter of technical communication.

Finally, this challenge is political, social, and cultural. It is about the gaps between Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe. Inequalities have never been resolved, and disputes are growing in the East as the memory of the Cold War fades and the difficulties of misunderstanding increase. The "superiority" of the West does not diminish, and demands for justice and equality continue to grow. In short, the dispute between the East and the West of Europe is a cultural, anthropological, and political reality before being economical and social. Digital Europe is not a solution. We must rediscover our histories and confront them.

VI. Five situations of radical incommunication in Europe

Five examples evoke, each in its own way, the importance of the space of incommunications in the construction of Europe. They have more to do with anthropology than with politics. Anthropology is more "profound," and less official. For

example, if Europeans are generally very critical of European politics, we can see from qualitative studies that there is simultaneously an adherence to the project. There is the discourse, and there are deep-seated beliefs.

The first debate is linked to the post-war period in Ukraine and the question of the enlargement of Europe from 27 to 30 or more. In it lie the History and the rivalries between the two Europes, of the West and the East. All the stereotypes, clichés, racism, and nationalism that structure debates of mistrust, even hatred, emerge here. The post-war Ukraine forces to rethink the identities and relationships between all the protagonists of these confrontations. The question of otherness is central here. The second debate concerns immigration, the symbol of otherness. Here Europe betrays all its democratic traditions. A shame. Why so much hostility towards migrants? They have always been linked to European adventure. The third debate concerns “interreligious dialogues”, in other words, what is at the basis of countless communications. Only recently have we moved from the “wars of religion” to the search for an interreligious “dialogue.” And still, violence is very quickly at the rendezvous, and the dialogue narrows... Fundamentalisms are reborn, and not only on the side of Islam. The fourth antagonism, less violent but just as decisive for the future, revolves around indifference towards youth. They are offered almost nothing to them, except for a few examples, such as the far too narrow Erasmus program for students. Youth, though naturally European, is left fallow, explaining the return of radicalism and other nationalisms. Europe is no longer experienced as a mobilizing utopia, at least not as much as the digital ideology! As if networks were a political utopia that would change human beings and society... The last area of confrontation concerns the “ecological transition.” Some see it as the “last utopia,” others, more modestly, as a new policy to be developed and not necessarily the model for a new society. Five areas of political and cultural confrontation. These political or historical antagonisms are not the most dangerous, but rather the silence, the indifference, and the absence of contradictory and cultural debates.

As we have understood, from the point of view of the future of Europe’s political utopia, the essential is in the confrontation between incommunications and projects. Anything but silence or technocratic rationality. Europe illustrates the main hypothesis: incommunication is not a failure but an opportunity. Three conclusions:

1. Re-examine the relationship between speed and slowness in history and politics. Leave behind the ideology of immediacy so closely linked to globalization and the triumph of digital technology. Accelerating unceasingly in the hope that the culture of the present would avoid conflicts? History and its contradictions come back all the more violently as we pretend to ignore them, especially in a

“transparent” world where we see everything without always understanding. Incommunication and its contradictions are the way to recognize the importance of time and history. To debate everything contradictorily, to avoid mortifying silences.

2. To make incommunication an essential concept for the construction of Europe. A widening of the field of deliberation, as a kind of “bridge” between contradictory visions. If incommunication prevails to this extent, we must open all the closets. Talk about everything, get to know each other, without closing ourselves off from the community. Europe, whatever its definition, only exists with openness to the world. Not too many external borders. There are so many inside already...
3. The place of incommunication reminds us of the importance of human communication compared to technical communication. The weight of human and social relationships against the speed and efficiency of technical and digital systems. These can perfectly well become factors of antagonism, especially if the only horizon left is technical, economic rationality.

Revaluing incommunication is revaluing all the contradictory dimensions of history and politics. It is also escaping the constant devaluation of communication, often reduced to attempts at manipulation. It, therefore, legitimizes intercomprehension as a modest but essential tool for organizing debates. Everything is to be taken into account in communication, even incommunication, the important thing being to avoid acommunication and the violence that results from it. At a time when “the transparency of the world” and “the efficiency of technology” should allow us to master the violence of History, it is not useless to mobilize all the resources of communication and incommunication to avoid the ravages of acommunication...

And if we needed a word to illustrate the importance of this new concept, we could talk about translation. Managing incommunication is as necessary and difficult as ensuring translation. It is constraining but indispensable. Translation? Trying to understand each other when we do not understand each other. And Europe knows something about this, with more than twenty-five official languages!

Incommunication, negotiation, translation three essential concepts to try to cohabit as much as possible and to try to manage the most complex and violent question: that of otherness. *Finally, to think about incommunication is to think about the status of otherness in communication.*

REFERENCES

Wolton, D. (2022a). *Vive l'incommunication. La victoire de l'Europe*. Paris: Les Pérégrines.

Wolton, D. (2022b). *Communiquer, c'est négocier*. Paris: CNRS Éditions.