changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings
from the 10th International Conference
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

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Contents

PLENARY SPEECHES

SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES

SPACE AND/IN SOCIETY

VISUAL CUTLURES

ART

ADVERTISEMENT

LANGUAGE, TEXTS AND TEXTUALITIES

BODIES & MINDS

LITERATURE

Continuities, discontinuities and ruptures in the history and theory of semiotics

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Abstract

The object of the present paper is the domain of semiotic theories and thus my approach is meta-theoretical. The organising principle will be the opposition continuity vs discontinuity, on which a theoretical matrix is constructed, with the purpose of a deeper understanding of the semiotic currents and their relations. The analysis follows six axes: a) The irreconcilable opposition between European Saussurean semiotics and North American Peircian semiotics. b) The continuous development of Saussurean semiotics. c) The relation between structuralism and poststructuralism. d) The influence of Marxism on classical semiotics. e)The influence of Marxism on poststructuralism. f) The relation between poststructuralism and postmodernism. The paper closes with a typological matrix displaying the classification of the semiotic currents in respect to the theoretical matrix above, some brief thoughts about the diffusion of the main semiotic currents and a proposal for what I believe to be a fertile future orientation for semiotics.

Keywords

Saussurean semiotics , Peircian semiotics , structuralism , poststructuralism , postmodernism , Marxism

The object of the present paper is not any specific semiotic system, in which case the level of analysis would be theoretical, i.e., metalinguistic. My object is the domain of semiotic theories in the strict sense – that is, excluding semiotising approaches, such as phenomenology or the British school of cultural studies – and the emphasis is placed on their own and their comparative semiotic nature; given this object, my approach is meta-theoretical. Semiotic theories of the last century will be compared with their source of origin, namely the work of Saussure and Peirce respectively, as well as with each other, and also there will be a comparison between the theories of these two authors. Within this framework, the guiding theoretical principle and major axis of analysis for comparison will be the opposition *continuity* vs *discontinuity*, both covered by the even more general concept of 'change'. These two poles may seem straightforward, but it becomes clear on closer scrutiny that they are too general and not necessarily exclusive. From the further analysis of this binary pair, there emerges a series of concepts defining the following analytical categories:

(1) Continuity:

(a) lack of theoretical development, which I consider as 'stagnation',

(b) direct development, which I shall call 'direct dynamic continuity',

(c) less direct development, which I call 'moderate discontinuity in continuity', and

(d) transformation, which I shall call 'marked discontinuity in continuity'.

(2) Discontinuity:

(a) radical transformation, which I consider as 'continuity in discontinuity' and

(b) rupture, which I shall call 'radical discontinuity'.

Table 1. Continuity and discontinuity in the development of semiotic theories.

Relationship		Original theory	Related to	Research object
Continuity	Stagnation	Peirce	Later developments	Greatly extended
	Direct dynamic continuity	Saussure	Linguistic Circle of Copenhagen, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Eco, Greimas	Greatly extended
	Direct dynamic continuity	Poststructuralism	Postmodernism	Comparable
	Moderate discontinuity in continuity	Saussure	Russian Formalism, Prague Linguistic Circle, Moscow-Tartu School of Semiotics	Greatly extended
	Marked discontinuity in continuity	Structuralism	Poststructuralism	Comparable
Discontinuity	Continuity in discontinuity			
	Rupture	Saussure	Peirce	

These concepts will compose the theoretical matrix for the comparison of the different semiotic currents. They are completed with an assessment of the degree to which the area of application of a theory was extended in comparison to that of a preceding theory. This assessment does not refer to the type of change of the theory, but to that of its object of analysis: thus, the limits of the domain may remain more or less 'comparable' or they may be 'greatly extended'.

My second axis of analysis turns towards the external influences on semiotic theories. I selected Marxism, due to its strong influence on poststructuralism. In such a case, we deal with the relationship between two theories: (A), the influencing theory (Marxism), and (B), the theory influenced (semiotics). The analytical categories of these relationships are the following (Table 2):

(1) theory (A) is articulated with (B) on equal terms,

(2) theory (A) integrates (B), (A) functioning as the wider framework of (B), the latter conserving most of its structural traits,

(3) theory (A) is integrated by (B), (B) functioning as the wider framework of (A),

(4) theory (A) is used partially by (B), that is, elements of theory (A) are used by (B), without any structural alteration of (B),

(5) theory (B) is used partially by (A), that is, elements of theory (B) are used by (A),

(6) theory (A) is absorbed by (B), losing its structural traits, and thus it is radically transformed by (B), and

(7) theory (B) is absorbed by (A), losing its structural traits.

Table 2. Influence of other theories on semiotics: The example of Marxism.

Relationship	Semiotic theory
Theory (A) is articulated with (B) on equal terms	
Theory (A) integrates (B)	Medvedev and Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Barthes, Rossi-Landi, social semiotics
Theory (A) is integrated by (B)	Structural Marxism
Theory (A) is partially used by (B)	Eco
Theory (B) is partially used by (A)	
Theory (A) is absorbed by (B)	Lévi-Strauss, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism
Theory (B) is absorbed by (A)	

The course of Peircian semiotics

It has become a ritual habit in introductory courses in semiotics, handbooks on semiotics and semiotic papers to pay respects to the two founders of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. This is on the one hand justified both theoretically, since the theories of both authors treat of signs, and historically, since their life spans largely overlap (Peirce: 1839-1914 – Saussure: 1857-1913). On the other hand, it levels out major differences, epistemological, theoretical and historical. Epistemological, because Saussure, a linguist, worked as a scientist and was interested in the study of natural language and by extension of all cultural systems, his 'sign' referring exclusively to the latter: thus, his *sémiologie* is socio-logical; while Peirce, educated as a chemist, opted for philosophy and was interested in the philosophy of knowledge, his 'sign' and 'semiotic' forming part of a theory of logic: his approach is logical. Theoretical, because Peirce formulates a theory of the individual sign and its classifications, while Saussure, together with a theory of the sign, formulates a theory of the relationships between signs, opening the way to a theory of a whole of signs, the text. The historical difference is that the development of the two approaches was quite uneven, as will become clear below. A radical discontinuity, an epistemological rupture divides the two approaches (Table 1).

The landmark for Peirce' s work was the publication of the six first volumes of his *Collected Papers* (1931).The diffusion of Peircian semiotics during the first three quarters of the twentieth century was extremely slow and before World War II only one author, Charles W. Morris (see Morris 1971), can be considered as his successor. A key role in the diffusion of Peirce's ideas after the War was played by Thomas A. Sebeok. In 1958, Sebeok followed Morris's lectures and through him was acquainted with Peirce's theory, while also being informed about Roman Jakobson's work. As Sebeok himself recounts, he first became interested in what he calls animal communication in 1962 and soon turned to semiotics. The result was the delimitation of a new field, 'zoosemiotics' (see Kull 2003, p. 50). Zoosemiotics draws on Morris, who acted as a bridge between Peirce and Sebeok (Martinelli 2010, pp. 4.171; Martinelli, Maran and Turovski 2011, p. 1). About fifteen years later, Sebeok extended zoosemiotics to 'biosemiotics', due to the decisive influence of the biologist Jakob von Uexküll (Kull, 2003, pp. 51-52), and grounded it directly in Peirce's semiotics. In 1984, a manifesto of Sebeok's new orientation was published in *Semiotica* (Anderson et al.),[1] promoting a new 'paradigm' in semiotics: it proposed a general and global semiotics, there called 'ecumenical semiotics'. Zoosemiotics may be considered as the first Peircian theory that created a school. Biosemiotics, its extension to the whole of life, should count as a second school in the Peircian tradition.

Sebeok's ambitious 'global semiotics' (1997) includes 'anthroposemiotics', that is, the semiotics of culture, as only one part of it, the other part being biosemiotics, studying natural processes in all kinds of living organisms: for Sebeok, semiosis coincides with life (on Peirce, Ogden and Richards, Morris and Sebeok, see also Λαγόπουλος 2004, pp.

75-76, 98-101, 103-14; Gottdiener, Boklund-Lagopoulou and Lagopoulos 2003, vol.1).

In the terms of the matrix I introduced above, Peircian scholars have the tendency to stay with Peirce's work, without developing it, an attitude reminiscent of the hermeneutic tradition. Peircian semiotics is marked by theoretical stagnation. On the other hand, its research object has been greatly extended, even more if we take into account that there have been attempts to apply Peircian semiotics to the domain of cultural studies (Table 1).

The continuity of development of Saussurean semiotics

Central and Eastern European structuralism and semiotics
Unlike the development of Peircian theory, a succession of semiotic[2] schools based on Saussurean theory have appeared. They are usually discussed in a linear fashion, according to their historical appearance. A closer look at them, however, shows two discrete general tendencies, one Central and Eastern European and one French, which of course were not isolated from each other. I shall start with the first tendency.

Roman Jakobson was the main propagator of Saussurean theory and a major personality of Russian formalism (1914-1934). Russian formalism evolved through three stages and during the last stage greatly widened the horizons of semiotics by studying on the one hand intertextuality and the insertion of the text into larger systems up to the cultural system as a whole, considered to be the 'system of systems', and on the other the communication circuit, focusing on the communication space between author or text and reader (Sebeok 1994: Russian Formalism).

The tireless Jakobson moved to Prague in the early 1920s and was active in the foundation of the Prague Linguistic Circle (1926), the successor of formalism. In 1929 he was a co-author of the Theses of the Prague Circle (see Winner 1998), which marked the constitution of structuralism (Steiner 1982), a term introduced by Jakobson. In the Theses, natural language is seen as only one of the semiotic systems, and other systems, such as literature and the arts, are considered as objects of study, the whole of these systems constituting culture as a complex system of communication.

The Moscow-Tartu School of Semiotics, the descendant of Russian formalism and the Prague Linguistic Circle, was founded in 1964 around the central personality of Juri M. Lotman. This school formulated a manifesto, the Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures (Uspenskij et al. 1973). In these Theses, culture is considered as the object of semiotics, the typology of cultures as its main goal and the text as the basic unit of culture. Culture is conceived as a holistic cybernetic system, composed of relatively autonomous, functionally correlated and hierarchically ordered semiotic sub-systems. In the early 1980s, Lotman formulated the concept of 'semiosphere', using as his prototype in a metaphorical manner the biological concept of 'biosphere', whence he conceives of the semiosphere as a semiotic *continuum* and as a presupposition of the cultural

sub-systems. Here Lotman unfortunately anchors the basic structure of all semiotic systems in the right-left asymmetry of the human brain, thus ending up founding culture on biology (Lotman 2005 and 1990).

As I believe is clear from the development of the above three schools, while they remain generally faithful to the Saussurean theory, they hold a dynamic view on the semiotic systems which is not found in Saussure, and show a special interest in the study of texts, that is *parole*, which was for Saussure of secondary importance. In fact, already from its first stage, Russian formalism showed a special interest in aesthetic texts, namely literature and the arts. Thus, the three schools may be characterised, when compared to Saussure, as moderate discontinuity in continuity, offering loose variants of their prototype. Simultaneously, they greatly extended Saussure's research object (Table 1).

French structuralism and semiotics
The case is different with the French line of semiotics, because it is more strictly Saussurean and can be considered as 'classical' or 'orthodox' semiotics. My first reference will be the most Saussurean among Saussureans, Louis Hjelmslev. The major representative of the Linguistic Circle of Copenhagen (1931), Hjelmslev together with Hans Jørgen Uldall elaborated 'glossematics' (1936), in the form of a 'linguistic algebra', as a general theory of semiotics (see, for example, Johansen 1998). Eventually, Hjelmslev's theory (1961) heavily influenced the course of French semiotics.

During World War II, Claude Lévi-Strauss was introduced by Jakobson to structuralism, from which emerged his structural anthropology. Lévi-Strauss's model is Jakobson's and Nikolai Trubetzkoy's structural phonology. Following their views, Lévi-Strauss states that, just as phonology, anthropology moves from conscious phenomena to their unconscious 'infrastructure' in the mind, focuses not on elements but on their relationships, is concerned with structures and formulates universal laws. According to Lévi-Strauss, his approach to anthropology is founded on a theory of communication and he situates his anthropology on the plane of signification, calling it a *'science séméiologique'* (Lévi-Strauss 1958, pp. 39-44, 48-49, 57, 95-96, 399).

About fifteen years after Lévi-Strauss's establishment of structural anthropology, semiotics as *sémiologie*, a novel approach emerging from Lévi-Straussian structuralism, was founded with Roland Barthes's landmark Éléments de sémiologie (1964). It is Barthes's merit that he took the next big step after Lévi-Strauss. While without any doubt strongly influenced by the latter, he went back to the source, Saussure, and his strictest follower, Hjelmslev. Barthes offers the foundation for a holistic cultural semiotics (for example, Barthes 1957), as is also the case with Algirdas Julien Greimas (for example, Greimas and Courtés 1979) and Umberto Eco, who is easily classified in the French tradition (for example, Eco 1972 and 1976).

In spite of his global approach to semiotics, Eco does not extend his work to a systematic analysis of *parole*. This was given its most complete form by Greimas, the founder of the Semiolinguistic Research Group, also known as the School of Paris. In the early 1990s, Greimas opened new paths for semiotics with his 'semiotics of passions', which make the leap beyond binarism by taking into account the spectrum of 'less' and 'more' between two semantic poles (Greimas and Fontanille 1991).

With the French school we witness a direct development of a dynamic continuity from Saussure and the production of elaborated variants of his theory. Thus, it is closer to Saussure than the Central and Eastern European trend in semiotics. Due to this closeness the dimension of *langue* weighs more heavily on the French semiotic orientation, with as a result a more static character and a loss of the focus on diachrony and the dynamic relationships between semiotic systems that are part of the Central and Eastern European trend. Just as Central and Eastern European semiotics, however, the French school greatly extended the research object of semiotics in comparison to Saussure's original theory (Table 1).

The influence of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss on poststructuralism

In order to assess the influence of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss on poststructuralism, we need to examine some of their major concepts. We shall start with Lévi-Strauss.

Lévi-Strauss's conception of culture coincides with both the formalist and the structuralist definition of it as a system of systems. Society for him is composed of a set of interrelated 'orders', such as the kinship system, social organisation, mythology or the culinary system, each of which has the form of a structure. The formal properties of the relationships between these orders, which are highly abstract, constitute the 'order of orders' of a society (Lévi-Strauss 1958, pp. 346-348, 363-366). Lévi-Strauss sets himself the task of studying what he believes to be the unconscious universal logic of the mind; the unconscious is identified with the symbolic function, which imposes structural laws (Lévi-Strauss 1958, pp. 40-41, 224-225 and 1955, pp. 469-470).

According to Lévi-Strauss, an individual structure belongs to a family of kindred structures, related to each other by rules of transformation and constituting a group of transformations. There is also a diachronic change of structures, which is structural and also follows a rule of transformation: the synchronic structures are replicated by the diachronic structures (Lévi-Strauss 1958, pp. 49-60, 225, 252, 306, 342, 366). The above theoretical foundations have multiple ramifications, some of which we shall immediately visit.

It seems to me clear that with structural diachrony historical change loses its historicity, because history is frozen within an *a priori*, which is the a-temporal, a-historical, super-synchronic unconscious matrix. While we may well conceive that it is history that creates the structures, Lévi-Strauss is not of the same opinion. He believes that his proposal identifies real history and the systemic diachronic history of the anthropologist is objective.

His history concerns a 'mechanical' time, which is reversible and non-cumulative, contrary to the historians' history, which concerns a 'statistical' time, which is not reversible and has a determined temporal orientation. For Lévi-Strauss, the history of the historians is not objective (Lévi-Strauss 1962, pp. 92, 207, 212, 339-342, 347-348 and 1958, p. 314).

Another conclusion from the universal matrix is Lévi-Strauss's strong opposition to the idea of primitive thought. According to him, the logic of mythical thought and that of Western positive thought do not really differ in the quality of their mental operations, but only as to the nature of their object of investigation. These two modes of thought are not due to unequal stages of the development of the human mind and knowledge; they are equally valid, and 'savage' thought is logical and of the same nature with our own logic. Given this position, we understand why Lévi-Strauss believes that the idea of progress cannot be considered as a universal category of human development.

Lévi-Strauss believes that his structural true history conceives of what the historian's history is by definition unable to conceive: the equality between Western culture and other cultures. He believes that the result of Western history is to attribute to the Papuans, for example, the metaphysical function of the 'Other'. Ethnocentrism cannot accept as natural the diversity of cultures, but considers it as a monstrosity (Lévi-Strauss 1958, pp. 254-255, 368, 1962, pp. 5, 21, 24, 32-33, 341, 354-357 and 1961, pp. 19, 36, 38, 68).

Finally, the universal matrix lies behind a major philosophical reversal. Lévi-Strauss states that the aim of the social sciences is the dissolution of man. We understand that this dissolution is due to a double regression, the first from the 'I' of an individual or a culture to the 'us-matrix' of humanity and the second from 'us' to biology/nature. This continuous and overambitious regression, which aims also to cover animal psychology, ends, for Lévi-Strauss, with the integration of life within its physico-chemical origins (Lévi-Strauss 1962, pp. 326-328, 347). The set of Levi-Straussian ideas that we have presented above was integrated into the very core of what later was called poststructuralism. Even his universal matrix, which at first glance does not seem to have any connection with poststructuralism, lies behind reinterpretations that I shall discuss below.

Both Lévi-Strauss and Saussure had a profound influence on individual poststructuralist authors. I shall start with Saussure's influence on Jacques Derrida. The cornerstone of Derrida's philosophy is the concept of value, which Saussure relates to the arbitrariness of the sign. Value is for Saussure the foundation of *langue*, the social and systemic part of language, which he contrasts to its use, *parole*. Value is purely differential in nature, a quality which is correlative with arbitrariness, and *langue* consists only of differences, i.e., pure values (Saussure 1971, pp. 25, 30-31, 100-101, 116, 158-160, 163). Here, I would like to point out another radical epistemological clash between Peirce and Saussure: while for Peirce the sign follows the traditional conception of representation, for Saussure representation and reference are abolished and the sign is given a radical relational and differential nature.

Derrida finds that the thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign, for which he prefers the term "non-motivation", is fundamental, but he gives priority to the correlative thesis of difference as the source of value (Derrida, 1967b: for example, pp. 65-77). Due to the system of differences, no linguistic entity is in reality present as such, but only as it relates to other entities, which are equally not present (the definition of value), and any assumed 'centre' or 'central' signified which could be considered as original, positive and transcendental is impossible, with as a result an extension *ad infinitum* of the freeplay of the substitutions of signification. (Derrida 1967a, for example, pp. 42, 423, 1967b, for example, p. 73 and 1972, for example, pp. 16-18, 37-38, 45-46, 78). According to Derrida, the differential effects in the semiotic systems are the 'product' of the structurality of structure, *différance* (Derrida 1972, for example, pp. 16-18, 38-39, 78 n. 22 and 1967a, pp. 83, 90-92, 95).

Derrida is also close to Levi-Straussian structuralism, but he is simultaneously strongly critical of it, because the Levi-Straussian structure presupposes a present 'centre' – and thus it becomes a presence. The structures of structuralism are static, while Derrida proposes an infinitely open matrix produced by *différance* and ruled by systematic transformations attached to differences (Derrida 1967a, for example, pp. 27-28, 43-44 and 1972, for example, p. 39). In this manner, Derrida proposes essentially a structuralism without structures; however, he believes that the centre is a necessary function, with the aim of organising a structure and limiting its freeplay (Derrida 1967a, for example, pp. 13-14, 27-28, 36, 41-44, 409-411). The dynamics of freeplay disrupt presence and being and reveal the derivation of the subject from the semiotic movement of *différance*; there is no presence of the subject in itself outside and before that movement. *Différance* excludes the search for truth and leads us beyond the subject, man and humanism (Derrida 1967b, for example, p. 37 and 1972, for example, pp. 27, 39-41, 48).

The combination of the views of Derrida – though without reference to him – with the post-May-'68 climate in Paris, which I shall discuss below, marks Jean-François Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne* (1979). Lyotard dismisses the legitimating 'grand narratives' of modernism, such as the Hegelian dialectics of the Spirit and the Marxist emancipation of humanity – without abandoning the political Left – as unable to validate postmodern scientific discourse. This is another way of defending the abolition of a centre. Lyotard opts for an anti-model to the grand stable system, an 'open system', where a 'differentiating' (*différenciante*) activity is at work, according to which a meta-prescriptive discourse generates new discourses and rules of the games. This concept is manifestly an empirical use of *différance*. For Lyotard, contrary to the grand narratives, postmodern science operates with local 'small narratives' (Lyotard 1979, pp. 25-27, 28 n. 46, 29, 99, 103-105, 107).

The combined influence of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss also lies behind the mature form of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis. The post-war Lacan adopted linguistics as a

pilot science and starts from the concepts of the signifier and the signified, violating however the principle of their inseparability, since he focuses on a supposedly autonomous signifier (Lacan 1966, pp. 496-501).

The role of Saussurean linguistics in Lacan's theory is generally recognised, but this is not the case with the influence of Lévi-Strauss, which is not generally noticed in the bibliography. Lévi-Strauss offers Lacan a guide in order to give a mathematical expression to what he considers to be the relationships between signifiers. He starts with a pair of binary oppositions +/-, which corresponds for him to the fundamental alternative between presence and absence, and ends with a formalist universal matrix à la Lévi-Strauss, which is the model for his *'chaîne signifiante'*, the foundation of his theory (Lacan 1966, pp. 47-50, 501-502).

Michel Foucault, in the first formulation of his history – or 'archaeology' – of the sciences and of knowledge in general, uses *épistémè* as his central concept. He defines *épistémè* as an unconscious epistemological 'order', a 'grid', a system of rules, corresponding to a specific historical period, which embodies the preconditions of knowledge in this period (Foucault 1966, pp. 11-14, 170-171, 384-385). The reasons for these historical transformations remain unaccounted for by Foucault.

According to Foucault, then, a supra-individual, unconscious but culture-specific 'grid' presides over human thought. It is evident that there is a close connection between the concept of *épistémè* and the matrix of Lévi-Strauss, as well as the laws of the unconscious of Lacan, with the important difference that Foucault historicises both concepts. In all cases, however, the subject is eliminated. One more similarity with Lévi-Strauss is the lack of progress in respect to thought systems.

Starting at the end of the 1960s, Foucault retreated a further step from the Levi-Straussian matrix, though without losing contact with it. There is now no longer one general system of knowledge in each historical period, but a plurality of discourses of knowledge, which are practices, a Marxist concept. As with *épistémè*, the discourse-practices are subject to internal rules, the 'rules of formation' of the discourse or practice, and discourses are discontinuous with each other. The relationships between these discontinuous discourses lead Foucault to the conclusion that the subject, being the node of these discourses, explodes in a plurality of positions. Now the 'order of orders' takes the historicised form of the 'series of series' ruling the discursive formations. In respect to the referent of these discourses, Foucault once more follows Lévi-Strauss in insisting on the subjectivity of the historical fact. The positivist objective 'fact' is replaced by Foucault with a semiotic entity, the 'discursive event', with the rationale that discourse absorbs reality (Foucault 1971, pp. 54-62).

The above discussion emphasised the strong continuities between structuralism and poststructuralism, but there have also been external influences on the latter, which brought with them a remarkable discontinuity. According to Manfred Frank, poststruc-

turalism combined classical structuralism (the continuity) with a reinterpretation of German philosophy, the old German anti-modernist and anti-Enlightenment romanticism (the discontinuity), which became an instrument for the subversion of structuralism. Frank also expands this list in two other directions, pointed out already by Lévi-Strauss: first towards psychoanalysis and secondly towards Marxism, mainly the idealistically tinged Frankfurt School (Frank 1989, pp. 7-30).

I would consider as the central theoretical opposition between structuralism and poststructuralism in Saussurean terms that between *langue* and *parole*. I believe that poststructuralism was to an important degree the product of a major event, the social unrest of May '68. This was a turning point for the rejection of *langue*, the dangerous static structural system, in favour of *parole*, the supposed unbounded, 'free' communication in conjunctural situations. This theoretical opposition was accompanied by an epistemological opposition: the rejection of the scientific attitude of structuralism as 'scientificity' and the adoption of a science-hostile hermeneutic approach.

Similarities and dissimilarities both connect and separate structuralism and poststructuralism. Which in the final balance weighs heaviest? Frank concludes that poststructuralism is in reality a 'neostructuralism', and I believe that the preceding account leads to the same conclusion: there may be a marked discontinuity between them, but it is a discontinuity in continuity, resulting in the transformation of structuralism and the production of new variants of it. In respect to the research object, the research object of both approaches is comparable (Table 1).

The articulation between Marxism and Saussurean semiotics

The influence of Marxism on structuralism/semiotics started as early as the 1920s with the work of Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev and Mikhail M. Bakhtin. While these authors as Marxists were critical of semiotics, they were the first to propose an articulation of semiotics with and within Marxist social theory. According to Bakhtin and Medvedev, each ideological sphere is determined by, but also determines, this ideological environment, that is, the 'objects-signs' in which ideology is incorporated, 'while only obliquely reflecting and refracting socioeconomic and natural existence' (Medvedev and Bakhtin 1978, pp. 7-15). The result of this encounter between semiotics and Marxism is the organic integration of the former within the latter (Table 2). A similar approach lies behind the much later work of Pierre Bourdieu.

Without such an elaborated theoretical rationale, Roland Barthes in his early work made the same connection between society and the semiotics of ideology. According to Barthes, the fundamental operation of this ideology is the transformation of the products of history into eternal universal essences (i.e., history into nature) and the maintenance of the inalterable hierarchy of the world. Due to this ideology, the bourgeoisie cannot imagine the Other, whom it opts to deny, ignore or identify with itself. Barthes

opposes to this kind of language the revolutionary *parole*; revolution abolishes the myth (Barthes 1957, pp. 9, 193-195, 224-225, 234, 239-244).

The ideas of Medvedev and Bakhtin were rediscovered forty years later by Louis Althusser's structural, Levi-Straussian Marxism. Althusser, reading Marx structurally, argues that society is constituted by three major 'instances': the economic, determinant in the last instance; the legal and political; and that of ideologies and theoretical formations (philosophy and sciences) (Althusser and Balibar 1968, pp. 120-125). Structural Marxism imposed on Marxism the static structuralist logic, thus integrating it, while however retaining major aspects of Marxism (Table 2).

The transformation of Marxism by semiotics is much more advanced in the case of Lévi-Strauss. He starts by stating that the universal logic he identifies was suggested to him by the convergence between Freudian psychoanalysis, geology and Marxism,[3] three areas that he believes offer the framework for the location of ethnography (Lévi-Strauss 1955, pp. 57-62). Inspired by Marxist theory, he classifies social orders into two categories: the 'infrastructural', 'lived' orders, such as the kinship system and social organisation, which belong to an objective reality, and the mental, 'superstructural', 'conceived' orders, such as mythology and religion (and art and cooking), which do not correspond directly to objective reality (Lévi-Strauss 1958, pp. 347-348). This theoretical approach poses a major epistemological problem from the Marxist point of view, because Lévi-Strauss's infrastructural orders are seen as pure semiotic systems, while for Marxism the foundational processes in society are not semiotic but material processes. This sociological reversal, according to which the whole of society is absorbed into the semiotic, became the hallmark of poststructuralism (Table 2).

Finally, we find an interesting example of the influence of Marxism on semiotics in the foundations of Eco's semiotic theory. Manifestly based on Ferruccio Rossi-Landi's (1983) Marxist semiotic theory (Table 2), he counter-proposes to the traditional division of semiotics into syntactics, semantics and pragmatics a division into a theory of codes (semiotics of signification) and a theory of sign production (semiotics of communication). Eco states that both the production and the reception of an utterance, linguistic or other, presuppose different forms of social labour (Eco 1976, pp. 3-4, 29, 151-156) – Table 2. This idea reflects Rossi-Landi's concept of linguistic labour.

The influence of Marxism on poststructuralism

We cannot really understand the nature of poststructuralism without reference to the events of May '68. Poststructuralism had begun to emerge a few years before the May '68 uprising, but it was May '68 that shook the French (mainly Parisian) intellectuals and with its social, political, and cultural turmoil played a catalytic role in its formation. The slogans and graffiti of May '68, an active force of the uprising, combine surrealism and psychoanalysis. A central role in both the uprising and the graffiti was played by the Sit-

uationist International, a Leftist movement akin to surrealism whose leading figure was Guy-Ernest Debord (see his *La société du spectacle*, 1992). This complex mixture had a decisive impact on the major poststructuralist authors, though this does not imply that they had not been exposed before May '68 to some of the above currents.

Robert Wicks, receding further back in time than May '68, argues that dadaism and surrealism had a strong impact, still underappreciated, on French philosophy and the whole of French thought in the twentieth century. He also points out the influence of the Dadaists and the Surrealists on the major representatives of poststructuralism. To these two sources of influence on poststructuralism, Wicks adds a third influence, existentialism, which he sees as being transformed by its contact with Saussurean linguistics (Wicks 2003, pp. ix-x, 11, 14-16, 295-296, 298).

An interesting example of a pre-May '68 connection to surrealism is given by Lacan. In the thirties, during his passage from psychiatry to psychoanalysis, Lacan met Salvador Dali, who was then involved in the heavily Freudian surrealist movement. Dali's 'paranoid-critical method of interpretation', closely related to his paintings, asserts the intrusion of the unconscious in the field of visual representation. Dali's influence on Lacan, in addition to the general cultural context of the thirties, led Lacan, who was studying the paranoiac delirium, to explore the function of the unconscious in the field of the representation of reality. Dali's focus on form was crucial for Lacan's re(mis)interpretation of Saussure and his apotheosis of the signifier (Constantinidou 2012). In May '68, Lacanian psychoanalysis came to be affiliated with the political Left.

While deconstruction seems to be the antipode of Marxism, Derrida finally came to take position on this issue with his *Spectres de Marx* (1993). Derrida was affiliated with the Left and participated in the demonstrations of May '68. He combines a reverence for Marx's thought with a determined attack on the discourses celebrating the death of Marx and Marxism and extolling capitalism, the economy of the market, neo-liberalism and liberal democracy. For Derrida, who wants to be a 'good Marxist' (his quotation marks), deconstruction would be impossible without Marxism and is faithful to it as a radical critique. He believes, however, that Marxism needs to be radically changed, something which for him is in agreement with the Marxist spirit (Derrida 1993, for example, pp. 36, 90, 95-96, 101-102, 142, 145, 148-153, 269). This strikes me as a very unexpected Marxist baptism of deconstruction.

Barthes was a socialist, but a critical one. In literary theory we may speak of two polarised Barthes: on the one hand Barthes the classical semiotician of the fifties and sixties, and on the other the dedicated poststructuralist of the seventies. His differentiation between the supposedly passive 'readerly' (*lisible*) texts of classical literature and postmodern 'writerly' (*scriptible*) texts is well known. The latter are literature as labour, they are created by productive 'writing', they transform the text into a constellation of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds, and allow readers to play with the text, a play which is also

a form of writing as linguistic labour (Barthes 1970, pp. 9-10, 17). We recognise in these brief positions a complex node of influences: the Marxist concept of labour, the central situationist concept of play, the Lacanian signifier and the Derridian freeplay of signification.

On the author, Barthes adopts both a sociological and a semiotic point of view. In the context of the first, he argues that in literature the author as individuality is a correlative of positivism, the latter representing the culmination of capitalist ideology. From the semiotic viewpoint, the existence of the author provides a final signified (Derrida's centre) that limits the text and closes the proliferation of meaning. But the identity of the author finds its own death in the practice of writing (Barthes 1970, pp. 9-14, 17, 146-149).

Barthes agrees with the views on language of Stéphane Mallarmé, the downgrading of the author and the centrality of automatic writing of the Surrealists (Barthes 1988, pp. 147-148). He identifies the pleasure of a text with 'drifting' (d*érive* – Barthes 1973, pp. 32-33), a surrealist and situationist term that for the Situationists indicates a psycho-geographical wandering in urban space, subverting the city of pure visuality. What remains unchanged in the two stages of his life is his position with the political Left.

The revolutionary situationist views, in combination with the approach to the city championed by Henri Lefebvre, also inspired the Utopie group, founded in 1967. One member of this group was Jean Baudrillard, who knew Debord personally. Baudrillard openly acknowledged his debt to situationism and his approach is related to the latter, mainly in its early form (Plant 1992, for example, pp. 5, 35-37, 107, 111-112, 115, 117, 118, 121-122, 137, 164-166, 172; Sadler 1998, pp. 47, 66, 176 n. 101). The key concept that Baudrillard came to use later, *simulacrum*, the transformation of reality into the hyperreal (Baudrillard 1981, for example, pp. 10-11), is a description of culture matching the surrealist credo (Wicks 2003, p. 15).

In March 1968 a students' movement emerged at the university of Nanterres, the Mouvement du 22 Mars, and two person involved in it were Lyotard and Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Lyotard had been affiliated with the Parti Communiste Français and was strongly criticised by its partisans when he left it. He was also a member of the Socialisme ou Barbarie group – with ideas close to those of the Frankfurt School – which Debord joined in 1959, only to abandon it about two years later, having however adopted a large part of its political theory (Plant 1992, pp. 5, 14-15, 96; Ford 2005, pp. 113, 117-11).

According to Lyotard, capitalism controls research through power and power through technology controls 'reality' (Lyotard 1979, pp. 72-78). Sadie Plant points to the impact that May '68 had on the views of Lyotard (as well as Deleuze and Guattari). She refers to Lyotard's encomium of the avant-garde and argues that his attack against theory – and his economy of desire, as well as Deleuze's and Guattari's philosophies of desire – are of situationist origin. She also attributes to May '68 the origin of Foucault's problematics of power, to which I shall turn immediately below (Plant 1992, for example, pp. 107-108, 111-112, 115-118, 121-122).

Under the influence of Althusser, Foucault in his youth joined the Parti Communiste Français; he left the Party after about two years, but remained a Left-wing militant to the end of his life (Gros 1996, pp. 4, 7, 9; Merquior 1985, pp. 20, 99, 101, 116). While the early stage of Foucault's thought is characterised by the concept of *épistémè*, he later abandons this concept for the notion of 'discursive formations', according to which culture is conceived as multifocal and ultimately regulated by power, a conception derived from Marxism. Without denying the importance of the state apparatus, Foucault's interest is focused on micro-scale power, the 'micro-physics' of power. This problematics of power marks the whole of his later work.

To conclude, most masters of poststructuralism were affiliated to the political Left already before May '68. In the events of May '68, a particularly French kind of Marxism was amalgamated with surrealism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. A further mixture with German romanticism, this whole articulated on structuralism, had as a result the poststructuralist view that the referent is totally opaque and inaccessible and any kind of knowledge purely and solely refers to the semiotic domain. Material society – and I do not mean here an essence, but a cultural construction – is ignored and revolutionary social acts are replaced by revolutionary cultural products, whether they are products of knowledge, literature or the arts. Still, a fundamental contradiction remains: though the referent is inaccessible, one major referent permeates poststructuralist discourse: capitalism, whence a fundamental contradiction of poststructuralist thought.

On the whole, the fate of Marxism with poststructuralism was a copy of its fate with Lévi-Strauss, i.e., it was absorbed into semiotics, with the important difference however that it infused poststructuralism with left-wing political thought of the kind that emerged in May '68.

The relation between poststructuralism and postmodernism

We should keep separate in our minds cultural phenomena and cultural theories. Before becoming a cultural theory, postmodernism was a cultural phenomenon in the domain of the arts that appeared much earlier than the corresponding theory, namely already in the late fifties. Andreas Huyssen observes that it is then that the term 'postmodernism' appeared in North American literary criticism. Already in the seventies, according to Huyssen, we encounter 'a genuinely post-modern and post-avant-garde culture' (Huyssen 1988, pp. 61, 161, 183-184, 188-189, 190, 195-197).

A slow transmission of poststructuralism to the U.S. had started after the mid-sixties. However, the decisive moment was the use by Lyotard of the term 'postmodern' in his *La condition postmoderne* (1979). Postmodern theorising emerged from the close analogies between American postmodern culture and French poststructuralist theory, thus it represents the Americanised form of French poststructuralism. Unavoidably, however, poststructuralism was adapted and to a certain degree reinterpreted in the context of local cultural phenomena and habits of thought.

Postmodernism, like poststructuralism, is radically against grand theories, something that does not prevent its theoreticians from having a clear idea of the main traits of their own theory. These were very well formulated by Ihab Hassan (1987, pp. 167-173), who identifies what he calls a tentative set of traits of postmodern culture, namely postmodern theorising, literature and art. Hassan believes that the overarching characteristic is 'critical pluralism' and gives two lists of traits. The first is that of the 'deconstructive' traits: *indeterminacy*, *fragmentation*, *decanonisation*, *selflessness / depthlessness*, the *unpresentable / unrepresentable*. Hassan continues with the 'reconstructive' traits: *irony, hybridisation, carnivalisation, performance / participation, constructionism, immanence*.

These traits, following more or less directly from poststructuralism, also directly encounter the positions of Lévi-Strauss discussed above. I indicated with reference to poststructuralism its major contradiction of denying the possibility of knowing reality, while simultaneously constantly referring to the very real phenomenon of capitalism, and this is also the case with postmodernism. Of course, both the Poststructuralists and the Postmodernists are right in referring to this extra-semiotic material socio-economic factor, because sociologically postmodern society is indeed closely related to capitalism.

Here, I would like to recall Frank's view about poststructuralism as a philosophical rather than a scientific movement, and state that generally postmodern theorising, such as that by Hassan, is not a sociological metalanguage on postmodern culture, but a normative theorising internal to it, reflecting the ideological-philosophical views of an *artistic* avant-garde. The traits of postmodernism presented by Hassan reveal a grand narrative, which is inconsistent with a supposedly radical theory of small narratives. And this is the other major contradiction of postmodernism.

I believe that the preceding discussion shows the close connection between poststructuralism and postmodernism. Postmodernism is the direct, dynamic continuity of poststructuralism and the research object of both is comparable (Table 1). However, the difference between American and French culture is not erased: postmodernism is the depoliticised version of poststructuralism.

Some comments on today's and tomorrow's semiotics

Tables 1 and 2 summarise my conclusions on the goals set in the beginning of this paper. This last section extends this glance at the present dynamics of my two matrices, assesses the positions of the different semiotic currents and makes some comments about the future development and possibilities of semiotics.

The semiotic explosion of the sixties and seventies had wide repercussions on the whole sphere of anthropology, the humanities and the arts. This impressive diffusion was not without negative effects for semiotics. Frequently, while semiotics revitalised the multiplicity of fields with which it came into contact, it was absorbed by their traditional habits. Semiotic terminology became part of their everyday vocabulary, but in

a rather imprecise manner, thus losing its systematic character (something that also happened with Marxism). The domain of Saussurean and Peircian semiotics is today an evolving, splitting and conflicting kaleidoscopic domain, creating a confusing nebula.

Poststructuralism and postmodernism have been extremely influential in the last 40 years; like classical structuralism, they were diffused to the fields of the humanities and the arts and even more widely in the social sciences, where they reached even human geography. Almost simultaneously began the diffusion of Peircian semiotics and biosemiotics, due initially to Sebeok's activities in both the U.S. and internationally. This diffusion seems to have coincided with a certain decline of postmodernism and may be due to a certain desire to keep up with fashionable trends in the field, but due to the lack of any deeper knowledge of Peircian semiotics this influence usually takes a rather weak form, from ritual references to rather elementary attempts at applications; to all appearances, this diffusion will continue.

Peircian semiotics has, however, a major epistemological drawback. Any attempt to directly apply a philosophy to a scientific field encounters insurmountable epistemological obstacles. This difference between philosophy, whether Peircian or, for example, phenomenological, and science has a major implication. Each scientific field incorporates four levels of operations, from the more abstract to the more concrete: an epistemological level, a theoretical one, a methodological and a level of techniques. Philosophy is the background of the first level, but it cannot be scientifically applied without the other levels. If Peircian philosophy aspires to be an operational semiotic theory, it can only demonstrate this by using itself as a starting point for the elaboration of specific semiotics for each cultural field, with their specific methodologies and techniques, a scientific work that has not been undertaken by Peircian scholars. Biosemiotics also suffers from this lack and the proof is that Peircian terms represent an extremely small minority among current biological terms.

Saussurean theory, on the other hand, belongs to the scientific domain and thus can be applied. There is historical evidence for that, which also shows that this possibility did not follow from a direct extrapolation of structural linguistics, even if initially this is what occurred. It took many years of intensive work, mainly in the francophone world but also elsewhere, by a very great number of scholars and for many decades to establish *specific* principles for the great variety of semiotic systems.

Contrary to this epistemological work, Peircian scholars not only limit themselves to Peirce's philosophical terms, which are necessarily of a general nature, but also adopt an exegetical position towards them, with as a result a lack of critical spirit and the ossification of his theory. The result is that Peirce is absent from any textbook of cultural studies, which is not the case with French structuralism and poststructuralism. Some Peircian scholars attempt to face this lack by extending their scope to applications in different cultural areas, but they end up just renaming terms without any further con-

tribution to the development of these areas, formulating static typologies or using terminology metaphorically, as is the case notably with biosemiotics, which attempts to found itself on concepts such as 'sign', 'representation' and 'communication', and thus suffers from anthropomorphism, that is, the naïve projection of culture on nature.

Classical semiotics is a *scientific* domain and thus the clash with poststructuralism and postmodernism was inevitable. Both these tendencies are not scientific, they do not want to be scientific ('scientistic' is the slogan), they are philosophical and, violently attacking positivism, adopt – usually in a messianic style – *interpretative* methods. They have a philosophical and theoretical background, imbued with ideology, some traces of methodology and no techniques. We should not, however, ignore the fact that they have had one very positive result, namely the extension of the horizon of semiotic research objects.

Recently, we have witnessed an attempt to articulate semiotics with biology on the part of cognitive semiotics, for which neuroscience is thought to be the key for the understanding of semiotic systems. There are clear epistemological limits to this approach. Biology may offer knowledge of the biological processes taking place in the biological *brain*, which are more or less common to the human species. They are not without interest, since they establish the framework within which semiosis takes place. So far this enterprise is legitimate, but what should be understood is that this articulation is unable to account for the *cultural mind*, that is, the structuring of the semiotic systems in their cultural relativity. Any extrapolation from the brain to the mind ends up in an unfortunate search for semiotic universals, a search which violates this relativity.

To conclude, I believe that there is a certain interest in the articulation with biology, provided it is accompanied by the epistemological caution referred to above. However, this orientation is of marginal interest to semiotics. Semiotics should turn its attention to a totally different kind of articulation. Certainly, semiotics is defined according to the law of relevance and thus the level on which it operates is that of immanent analysis, which allows the *description* and *interpretation* of semiotic systems and texts. This enterprise is of course entirely legitimate. It cannot, however, account for the emergence and deeper transformation of the semiotic systems, that is, it does not offer an *explanation* of them. Explanation of a system presupposes its integration within the wider system to which it belongs.

The theory of semiotic systems is part of the theory of society and thus of the social sciences. Culture is not the only component of society: culture is inseparable from both the *material* socio-economic component of society (including elements such as technology, the technical and social division of labour, social stratification) and its political component (including institutions). Culture depends, within a context of reciprocal relationships, on *material social* processes. Thus, the wider system integrating semiotic systems is society as a whole. The epistemological articulation of semiotic with material processes leads to a theory of *social semiotics* (Table 2), which needs to become explicit, or at least implicit, in semiotic research.

Instead, then, of a biology of semiosis, I propose a *political economy* of semiosis, which would be in a position to account for the *production* of semiotic systems. To avoid misunderstandings, political economy only illuminates the above articulation and explains the general structuring of the semiotic systems, that is, the general organisational axes that traverse them, through the factor of ideology. However, this only offers the framework for a systematic semiotic analysis and must be completed in depth with the instruments of immanent analysis, and only classical French semiotics disposes of all the necessary levels of analysis: epistemology, theory, methodology and techniques. Thus, positivism may be extremely problematic as a general epistemology, but there are parts of it, necessary for any scientific investigation, which do not seem to have found a reliable replacement; the formal method is still irreplaceable. And it is here that classical semiotics will have many things to offer in the future, even more if articulated with political economy, either explicitly or at least implicitly, an articulation that inescapably reshapes both semiotics and Marxism.

Endnotes

[1.] This manifesto is the only Peircian text comparable to the Saussurean Schools and Theses.
[2.] I use the term in a general sense to include, besides structuralism and semiotics, poststructuralism and postmodernism.
[3.] To which we should of course add structural phonology.

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