On Semiotic Ideology

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the concept of semiotic ideology and its implications. Semiotic ideology refers to people's underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs serve, and what consequences they might produce. Those assumptions vary across social and historical contexts. But semiotic ideology as such is not a kind of false consciousness, nor is it something that some people have and others do not. Rather, semiotic ideology manifests the reflexivity that is inherent to the general human sign-using capacity. It ties general semiotic processes to specific judgments of ethical and political value: to take a sign a certain way is to take seriously the world it presupposes and, often, the life that that world recommends. Two examples show how attention to semiotic ideologies sheds light on the articulation of general semiotic processes with particular social, cultural, and political ones. The analysis of social class helps show some political implications of semiotic ideologies. Clashes over the status of religious signs reveal the ontological and ethical entailments of semiotic ideologies, in which the very existence of a sign's object may be in dispute. Such ongoing semiotic processes help endow social existence with much of its constructive, uncertain, and conflictual character.

A sign does not function as a sign unless it be understood as a sign.
—Peirce MS 59, 32 (quoted in Parmentier 1994, 4)

One of Michael Silverstein's distinctive contributions to social theory beyond the specific concerns of linguistics and linguistic anthropology has been his role in revitalizing the concept of ideology. As he argued, against the pejorative use "that presupposes we know certain ideas to be dubious, in error, and therefore suspect or at least suspicious," we can extend the concept of ideology to embrace any study of mental phenomena "as historical and factual . . . making no judgment—at least in scientific and scholarly

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usage—about some independent and absolute universe of Truth (with its capital T) and Validity . . . against which ideologies are measured" (1992, 311–12). Although this general position is consistent with long anthropological tradition, here we can take Silverstein to be doing something more specific, nudging semiotic research out of the closed confines of philosophical model building into the messier, open-air landscapes of ethnography.

This clarification of the word *ideology* is crucial to understanding the fruitful concept of language ideology and its expansion into semiosis more generally. Semiotic ideology as such is not a kind of false consciousness. Moreover, semiotic ideology—like language ideology—is not something that some people have and others do not. Although semiotic ideologies vary across social and historical contexts, the existence of semiotic ideology as such is not the product of some specific historical era, social formation, or cultural tradition, as opposed to other eras, formations, or traditions. Rather, semiotic ideology manifests a fundamental reflexive dimension of the general human capacity to use signs. That said, in any given instance, it takes particular forms, and this is where its utility for social analysis lies: attention to semiotic ideologies sheds light on the articulation of general semiotic processes with particular social, cultural, and political ones. And to the extent that semiotic ideologies guide abduction, which is intuitively less certain than deduction and induction, they contribute to the uncertainty and dynamism of social existence.

Semiotic Ideology as Ideology

So what is semiotic ideology? Put simply, the concept refers to people's underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs do or do not serve, and what consequences they might or might not produce. The idea is confined to the semiotic capacities of humans, in contrast to more expansive visions of semiosis (e.g., Kockelman 2010; Deacon 2012; Kohn 2013). Going beyond language, even as most broadly defined, semiotic ideology directs attention to the full range of possible sign vehicles and the sensory modalities they might engage, including sound, smell, touch, muscular movement, pain, affect, and other somatic phenomena.[1] Whereas some semiotic ideologies take the form of explicit formulations, others remain tacit presuppositions of sign use—these various modalities of explicitness are themselves functions of particular historical circumstances. The local assumptions denoted by the term are often so unexcep-

1. See, e.g., Daniel (1996); Eisenlohr (2009); Gal (2013); Hankins (2013); Harkness (2014); Tomlinson (2014); Alatas (2016); Nakassis (2016); Strange (2016); Chumley (2017); Reyes (2017).

tional as to elude ethnographic notice. But differences among semiotic ideologies can also be so striking that they suggest quite dramatic contrasts between possible world views. For instance, it is a matter of semiotic ideology whether signs are taken to be interpretable because their relation to the world is arbitrary, or logical, or natural, or divinely ordained. Nor does it concern interpretation alone: the stakes may include whether manipulating a sign has effects on its object, whether politically (as in flag burning), legally (as in draft card burning), or in some more material sense (as in damaging a figurine in order to harm a person). Among other things, it determines what may or may not count as evidence of a subject's intentions. Semiotic ideology therefore links the ways people make sense of their experiences to their fundamental presuppositions about what kinds of beings animate the world (spirits? witches? gods? or, as in the case of indigenous Australia, geological formations?). To quote an earlier formulation of this idea,

> The Gricean (1957) distinction between natural and non-natural meanings does not apply in the same ways for all people because (among other things) different ontologies (what is "natural"?) underwrite different sets of possible signs (what intentional agent might turn out to lie behind a "non-natural sign"?). In my research in Sumba, in eastern Indonesia, for instance, occasions when what I took to be "natural" signs—an accidently torn cloth, a lost gold valuable, or an illness—were interpreted by people as "non-natural"—as registering intentions of persons or other agentive beings (Keane 1997). Another example is Trobriand yam exchange. A poor harvest has the causal consequence of limiting the size of one's yam prestations. But Trobrianders may take this limited prestation to express a donor's stinginess or perhaps the malevolence of spirits towards the gardener. (Keane 2003, 419)

Like the concept of language ideology (Silverstein 1979; Gal and Irvine 1995; Schieffelin et al. 1998; Kroskrity 2000), semiotic ideology can be treated in relatively narrow terms, as the rationalization of semiotic or linguistic forms and practices. Thus one might take the body of a laborer or the timbre of a singer's voice to be iconic of something essential about those whom they are taken to index. This insight has been well established for language. For instance, some of the best-known register systems, such as the *krama* (high) and *ngoko* (low) levels in Javanese, take their sociosemiotic power from being construed as indexical icons of the speaker's personal character (Errington 1988). Similarly, semiotic ideology mediates between abductive inference or interpretation, which are general cognitive processes, and the more specific material and conceptual cir-

cumstances that prompt them, the forms of judgment to which they give rise, along with the hopes and anxieties that attend them.

The concept of semiotic ideology draws our attention to the many ways (ranging from tacit to fully explicit) in which assumptions about what signs are contribute to the ways people use and interpret them, and on that basis, form judgments of ethical and political value. Semiotic ideology can play a crucial role in religious or political clashes, in which the very existence of the object of signification is itself in question (Keane 2008). This is obvious in the case of atheist attacks on religious shrines, such as occurred during the Bolshevik secularization campaigns in Russia and the Cultural Revolution in China. Or people may agree on the existence of the object, but bitterly dispute the exact nature of its signs. A significant component of the early Reformation attack on the papal institutions—and, indeed, of schisms among the reformers themselves—concerned the ontological status of such signs (or sign vehicles) as liturgical ritual, the sacred character of the Latin language, the materiality of the Eucharist, and the visual nature of iconography relative to the transcendental world—the objects—to which they were semiotic links (Keane 2007). In other words, whereas Protestants and popes may have agreed on most fundamental truth claims about God, Creation, and Christ, the pragmatic and ethical asperity of their conflict focused on how those claims are mediated—what would or would not count as signs of the truth and what can be hoped for from such signs. We will return to this point shortly.

By expanding the scope of the concept of language ideology, the expression "semiotic ideology" is meant to draw attention to the dynamic interconnections among different modes of signification at play within a particular historical and social formation. For instance, adepts at ritual speech in Sumba who follow the ancestor spirits insist that words are ineffective if they are not transmitted on the basis of material goods; conversely, the exchange of goods is equally ineffective without words to direct them (Keane 1997). Those goods must be produced by someone, are subject to scarcity, allow their recipients to enter into future transactions, and so forth. As a result, ritual "meaning" is thoroughly enmeshed with, although not reducible to, material "causality" (of which, therefore, any given ritual event is indexical). The social organization of ritual and its articulation with the political economy of horses, buffalo, pigs, textiles, gold, and ivory depend not simply on a rule or norm but on the underlying assumptions about what does or does not count as a sign, and about how signs do or do not function. This semiotic reflexivity in turn draws on assumptions about the nature of the world, the kinds of beings that inhabit it, and the kinds of causes

and effects with which they are involved. And a Sumbanese Christian who performs exactly the same ritual speech will be wielding those words within an utterly different representational economy. Whether the effects are aesthetic enjoyment, hermeneutic exercise, or the emblematic display of "tradition," they will be detached from any serious material preconditions or consequences (Keane 2007).

Viewed from this angle, semiotic ideology functions within a representational economy (Keane 2003). Representational economy refers to the totality of technologies, media, institutions, and practices prevalent in any given historical and social context, insofar as they have effects on another. The term *economy* is meant to indicate, first, that it is not something natural, like an "ecology," and, second, that it is a system of logical and causal relations among unlike things that are prone to having unintended consequences for one another. For example, the development of the internet, meant originally for military purposes, had dramatic effects on print media, their broadcast function, and their gate-keeping authority and thus for the very ideas of "facts" and "news." As we all know, it has had an unforeseen impact on everyday sociality (Turkle 1997; Gershon 2012), to say nothing of global politics. Dependent on new kinds of technological infrastructure (Hu 2015), the internet entailed new causal possibilities and constraints for participants, and placed them in new commodity chains, some leading right to the heart of warfare in central Africa (Boltanski 2014). At the same time, the relative value of written prose, visual images, and sound were also put in play. As access to the internet became more mobile, the centrality of "place" to the pursuit and dissemination of facts and news was also altered, their temporal rhythms and social organization radically flattened, and so forth.

Reflexivity Is Ubiquitous

Semiotic ideology refers to the reflexivity inherent in human uses of signs. This is precisely what Charles Sanders Peirce is speaking of in the epigraph to this article, when he proposes that a sign only functions as a sign if it is understood to be a sign. That is, reflexivity is not something extraneous to the ways signs work or something added on to them: it is a necessary component of their working, at least within human social worlds. If, for example, indexes in themselves "assert nothing" (*PWP*, 111), then they must be furnished with instructions (Hanks 1996, 46–47)—and that is the work of semiotic ideology. Semiotic ideology involves the variety of ways that people attend to the nature and func-

tions of signs and guides them as they sort out which aspects of their experience are or are not candidates for even being signs at all. Although semiotic ideology bears on metapragmatic function (Silverstein 1993), here I focus on its role in guiding the construal of semiotic ground that links sign vehicles to objects.

To take one of anthropology's hoariest chestnuts, from E. E. Evans-Pritchard's (1937) work on the Azande of central Africa, when a termite-ridden granary falls while I am sitting under it, I may take it to signify in various ways. As Evans-Pritchard makes clear, no one has any doubt about the physical causes of such an event, that wood is weakened by termites. But why, the victim asks, did the collapse occur at the precise moment when I was sitting underneath? If my world includes witchcraft, a plausible construal of the event is that it indexes the workings of a hostile, if occult, agent. Indeed, to go beyond Evans-Pritchard's own account, if the witches that plague my world are the kind of beings who send messages, then the event could be taken as a warning directed at me. If my world does not include such agents, the event might be a function of karma, ritual error, moral transgression, or mere bad luck. It fails to signify at all or, at most, merely indexes the frailty of wood and the prevalence of termites. The collapse of the granary would fail as a sign other, perhaps, than as an instance of the general category of misfortune. Most likely, however, the victim could ignore the signifying potential of the event altogether—it would be meaningless (a possibility not yet sufficiently explored in anthropology, but see Engelke and Tomlinson [2006]). Notice, then, that the interpretant of the fallen granary (that I am the victim of chance or of malevolence) turns on an ontological question, namely, what are possible objects for a sign? Mediating these is the semiotic ideology that construes what ground might link the sign vehicle and its object.

Although the discussion that follows draws selectively on Peirce, it does not pretend to be in all respects faithful to his system (or systems, which, along with his lexical proliferations, notoriously vary from one manuscript to another) and favors eclecticism over doctrinal purity. In the spirit of pragmatism, the aim is to find usable concepts for empirical purposes, and many of the citations of Peirce are drawn from the anthropological contexts in which they have appeared. As anthropology always makes reference to empirical experience, much of this article will focus on the phenomenology of the sign vehicle (which, along with the object and interpretant, forms the sign). What counts as a sign vehicle, and thus as an experience of a sign, may turn on what counts as a possible sign user, and all of those on the local distinction between subjects and objects. His-

torically, changes in one—what could be an agent (a witch? an ancestor? a false teaching? a god? a social class? a political party? an ethnic group? a computer program? a selfish gene? a virus?)—will be reflected in changes in what can be taken to be the sign vehicle of an intention or, instead, something else, such as mechanical causality. As just noted, the contrasts between ancestral spirit followers and Protestant converts on Sumba in how people handle and value material goods are implicated in how they use and interpret words, and vice versa. In this context, where the articulation of words and things plays a central role in non-Christian rituals, matter and materialism pose special difficulties for the more austere Protestants. Their efforts to regulate certain verbal and material practices, and the anxieties that attend them, center on the problem of identifying—and even becoming—a human subject that is at its core supposed to be independent of, and superordinate to, the world of mere dead matter. For them, getting their semiotic ideology right is no "academic question": it has eternal consequences for the immortal soul.

The Awareness and Unawareness of Mediation

What is at stake in the semiotic ideology more generally? Consider a passage from Gregory Bateson's essay on play:

> In the dim region where art, magic, and religion meet and overlap, human beings have evolved the "metaphor that is meant," the flag which men will die to save, and the sacrament that is felt to be more than "an outward and visible sign, given unto us." Here we can recognize an attempt to deny the difference between map and territory, and to get back to the absolute innocence of communication by means of pure mood-signs. ([1955] 1972, 183)

An earlier generation of anthropologists would have read this as a charter statement for the power of signs to construct social realities. The emphasis would have been on the constitutive powers of flag and sacrament. At the limit, this constitutive power could be seen as self-confirming. In principle, the sacrament and other rituals, like felicitous performatives more generally, do not fail—assuming all felicity conditions hold, even the drunken, lecherous priest still effects a valid marriage by saying "I hereby do thee wed" (Austin 1955). But if we are to take seriously the world-creating power of signs, then we must attend to the possibility that they might fail. The very potential for failure is one measure of the consequentiality of a social action (see Keane [1997] for an extended demonstration of this point in the case of ritual). To bear in mind the potential

for failure is also one way to keep things real. For even the most conservative and hegemonic of social orders is ultimately unstable and history-riven.

By now the argument for the social construction of (certain kinds of) realities is more or less settled in its fundamentals, at least among anthropologists. I want to direct attention to another aspect of Bateson's remarks. For the sacrament to work, something else has to happen first, the suppression of reflexivity. That is, people must "attempt to deny the difference between the map and the territory." A denial of this sort is an instance of semiotic ideology, that is, it is a particular construal of the relationship between sign vehicle and object for which there is available at least one alternative construal. One could, after all, acknowledge that map and territory are different, and that the map is a sign of the territory. Or one could refuse to make that acknowledgment. Bateson's phrasing in this passage is noteworthy. It suggests that in principle the starting point is an awareness of the difference, which must subsequently be denied. And to say that this denial is an "attempt" suggests that it could fail.

In Bateson's highly compressed exposition, this denial aims at a return to "innocence." This word seems to function in two valences, referring both to immediacy, that is, to the absence of mediation, and to an ethical judgment, that is, to the absence of guilt. The link between these two is anticipated a few pages earlier in the essay, when he writes of

> a stage of evolution—the drama precipitated when organisms, having eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, discover that their signals are signals. Not only the characteristically human invention of language can then follow, but also all the complexities of empathy, identification, projection, and so one. ([1955] 1972, 179)

The fall from grace precipitated by Adam and Eve's eating of the apple is a semiotic condition, the advent of mediation. More exactly, it is a fall from the lack of awareness of mediation, since, in this account, signs (Bateson's "signals") had always been signs—it's just that Adam and Eve were unaware of that fact. Robert Yelle suggests something similar when he writes that "many of our theories of the sign have developed out of this process of confronting the fact of rhetorica. . . . [And] the rise of a consciousness of rhetoric appears to link several of those [religious] traditions that have been identified as "Axial," a category that also invokes the notions of a rise of critical consciousness and the transcendence of or disembedding from a prior condition below the threshold of such awareness" (2013, 13; see also Peters 1999). But, of course, Bateson's invocation of the Biblical story implies that something more than mere episte-

mology is in question. This is why the effort to deny that signs *are* signs, to return to the condition of *im-mediation*, is a quest for the condition of innocence. Innocence is a term of judgment; it indicates an ethical stance.

But why the very heavy load with which Bateson endows reflexivity (empathy, projection, and so on)? After all, isn't being aware of the difference between map and territory merely an epistemological matter? Let me summon another reference to that primordial Fall from grace, this one by Harvey Sacks:

> Human history *proper* begins with the awareness by Adam and Even that they are observables. . . . By the term 'being an observable' I mean having, and being aware of having, an appearance that permits warrantable inferences about one's moral character. (1972, 281, 333 n. 1)

Sacks makes explicit a connection to the original Biblical scene that Bateson only implies. When Adam and Eve eat the apple, they acquire something more than mere knowledge. They become self-conscious. Realizing they can be seen by another, that is, seeing themselves through the eyes of an imagined spectator, they discover that they are naked, and that nakedness has an ethical value. This, of course, is why they hide themselves from God. In hiding themselves, they manifest the link between reflexivity, the multiplicity of perspectives, and ethical judgment. I want to take this a step further and suggest that the condition of being subject to ethical judgment is identified with the capacity for a specific kind of reflexivity. The shift of ethical stance from innocence to being subject to judgment is brought about by a shift of semiotic ideology, from apparent immediacy to the awareness of mediation. To repeat, semiotic ideology is not merely an epistemological matter. In what follows, I want to propose that semiotic ideology often matters because of its ethical or political entailments. (That there are such entailments is one reason the word *ideology* came to have the pejorative connotations of dangerous illusion against which Silverstein makes his case.)

Experience of the Sign

What is a sign such that one could suppress what one could have known about it, or discover in it something new? In one realist reading of Peirce, a sign vehicle is capable of furnishing knowledge of its object, in a process that tends toward ever better knowledge of the world. This is so even if there is no end point at which that knowledge is secured with finality, insofar as any given object as construed by an interpretant is merely one step within an ongoing chain of semiosis, each producing further objects of further interpretants. The claim

is based on the proposal that the sign functions along two vectors, not merely one of representation, from sign vehicle to object, but also one of determination, from object to sign vehicle (Parmentier 1994, 4). But for the human user and interpreter of signs, the latter is only inferential, an inherently fallible abduction based on an encounter with a sign vehicle (Urban 1996), for any phenomenology of semiotic experience would have to take the encounter with a sign vehicle as prior to knowledge of an object. It is this phenomenology of the sign that is described by Peirce's first trichotomy (qualisign, sinsign, and legisign), referring to the character of the sign vehicle in itself.

Richard Parmentier stresses the epistemological side of this: to be able to reflect on a sign vehicle is to be capable of gaining true knowledge about its object. He quotes Peirce to this effect: "I shall endeavor consistently to employ the word 'object,' namely, to mean that which a sign, so far as it fulfills the function of a sign, enables one who knows that sign, and knows it as a sign, to know" (MS 599, 31–32, in Parmentier 1994, 4). Put simply, first one knows the sign vehicle (*if* one does know it—notice that qualifying aside, "so far as it fulfulls the function"), and on that basis one subsequently knows its object. In Peirce's words, "since a sign [i.e., the sign vehicle] is not identical with the thing signified, but differs from the latter in some respects, it must plainly have some characters which belong to it in itself. . . . These I call the *material* qualities of the sign" ("Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," quoted in Manning 2012, 12). It is the possession of material qualities that endows the sign vehicle with affordances on the basis of which alternative semiotic ideological construals of the ground can be abducted. By implication, it is the phenomenological encounter with a sign vehicle—a certain experience—that leads one to its object. But only if one takes that experience to be the experience of a sign of an object. Otherwise there are no maps, only territories.

One of Peirce's more memorable examples of indexicality is the bullet hole in the wall (*PWP*, 104), indexing the firing of a gun at some time in the past. A roughly contemporary variation on the image is visible in the introductory portrait of that great semiotician Sherlock Holmes (Doyle 1930). In describing their shared quarters, Dr. Watson notes that Holmes, in a moment of malaise, had embellished his sitting room wall with a pattern of bullet holes spelling out VR in honor of the queen. Of course those marks only render acquaintance with their object, the firing of the gun, to one who recognizes them to be bullet holes. One can easily imagine their landlady having hired a carpenter wielding a hand drill to decorate the place. And everyday life is replete with a hypothetically infinite quantity of phenomena that remain imperceptible as indexical

signs to the naive eye. Unlike Watson, had Holmes encountered even a solitary bullet hole, he would have grasped its implications. For it is his capacity to see an index of intentions, where others see only a smudge, a stain, a wormhole, or an eccentricity of personal demeanor, that elevates him to the level of the detective genius. What are indexical signs to him are to others not recognizable as signs at all.

Commenting on the passage from Peirce quoted above, Parmentier remarks that "two parts of reality [i.e., sign vehicle and object], might be in a relationship of mutual determination and representation, but unless the knower had some independent knowledge of this fact, there would be no sense in which one of the parts could function as a sign of the other part *for* this interpreter" (1994, 4). It is the ground that provides the basis for this interpretation. Yet there is in phenomenological terms an asymmetry here: the sign vehicle is what we experience, the object that whose character (in the case of iconicity) or existence (in the case of indexicality) we infer from it, on the basis of the ground. But how do we know what the ground is without knowing in advance what the object of the sign is? After all, the object is in principle that which can only be inferred from the sign of which it is a part (and, since semiosis is an unlimited process, so too is the number of objects, each one of which is inferred by successive interpretants within an ongoing series of signs). I argue this is what semiotic ideology provides. For the ground is not simply given as such, unless we already have access to the object. But in principle there can be no such access, which remains only a matter of inevitably fallible and revisable abductions, based in turn on prior fallible and revisable abductions. When Peirce speaks of "two infinite series, the one back toward the object, the other forward toward the interpretant" (MS 599, 38, quoted in Parmentier 1994, 10), he depicts us as, in effect, starting from the sign vehicle and looking outward in two directions from a starting point which is the experience of the sign vehicle itself. Although the philosopher might stress that quality of infinitude, the ethnographer's first concern will be with people for whom the world of everyday life is relatively finite, most of the time, because it is, as a practical matter, knowable. That this apparent knowability floats on a sea that is in unending motion is something whose implications we will return to below.

Reflexivity in Naturalization Processes

Peirce's second trichotomy (icon, index, and symbol) is surely the best known and most widely appropriated component of his system. It refers to the ground, or relation between sign vehicle and object. But what secures our apprehension

of the ground that connects them? Without direct access to the object, on what basis can I assert that the ground is, say, iconic (a resemblance between sign and object) rather than indexical (a relation of causality or contiguity)?

One answer to this question would seem to be provided by the third trichotomy, that of rheme, dicent, and argument. Whereas icon, index, and symbol classify the relationship between sign vehicle and object, rheme, dicent, and argument are metalevel construals of that relationship as represented by the interpretant. Confining ourselves to human sign users, the third trichotomy refers to what someone takes the ground, that is, the relationship between sign vehicle and object, to be. But this distinction would seem to depend on an underlying assumption that the analyst or observer knows what the real ground of a sign is. Or at least we are invited to think so. For to say that "interpretants have the power to apprehend semiotic grounds as being other than they are" (Parmentier 1994, 13) presumes that the analyst can distinguish between that apprehension and what is actually the case. It portrays an analyst whose account of the ground differs from that which is accepted by someone else. Indeed, it suggests that the analyst is in a position to know what is, in fact, the truth of the matter—unlike that other person, who is in error. This distinction (the basis of the pejorative definition of "ideology" to which Silverstein's words quoted above refer) would seem to presume direct access to the object.

This distinction is not merely an epistemological quibble: it lies at the heart of the utility of semiotic concepts for social and political analysis. This is made clear when we speak of rheme, dicent, and argument not as things, but as processes. Consider, for example, rhematization (Gal 2013; see also Chumley 2017), the social dynamics by which signs are taken to be iconic. Rhematization is a shift of focus from indexical to iconic. As a result of such a process, for instance, a speech register would be taken by a listener not to index a social persona but rather to be iconic of it. The purpose of such analytical distinctions is to offer a precise account of naturalization in social life. A register that is taken to be iconic might, for instance, might seem to provide information about the true essence of the speaker. By contrast, if it is taken to be indexical, in principle it can point only to certain correlations between speakers, their ways of speaking, and their circumstances. In this view, speech variation might be construed as merely the product of purposeful choices by a speaker, context-specific effects, or even chance, rather than as evidence of their true social identity or personal character. On such distinctions turn much everyday ethical and political judgment.

Naturalization, of course, has been a long-standing component in sociopolitical analysis. The critical power of the idea of naturalization depends on the

claim that something which is not natural (e.g., race or gender) but instead is—in reality—the product of social history, is, nonetheless, thought to be natural. For this approach to have any coherence, it requires that we be able to distinguish between what is in truth the case, and what is taken (by others) to be the case ("ideology" in the pejorative sense). This motivates the application of the trichotomy rheme, dicent, and argument to social analysis. For instance, Christopher Ball uses the term dicentization to mean the process of taking an iconic sign to be indexical. As Ball puts it, this is the process by which a likeness or conventional relation is interpreted as an actual relation of connection (Ball 2014, 152). Just as noted above, here too, the word "actual" here seems to imply that the analyst has some presemiotic acquaintance with the object. Otherwise, how can we distinguish between the second and third trichotomies, what the ground actually is, and how it is taken?

We will return to the question of the object in a moment. But first observe that the semiotic reflexivity that this distinction exemplifies is a condition for the possibility of human sociality as such. Otherwise human uses and interpretations of signs would be mere matters of coding and decoding formulae. This may seem obvious, but it's precisely the mistaken idea that semiotic approaches reduce their topic to rigid codes that seems to have led some anthropologists to reject them (Bloch 2012), even when drawing on semiotic concepts in practice (e.g., Gell 1998). Here's Bateson again: "the paradoxes of abstraction must make their appearance in all communication more complex than that of mood-signal [which Bateson treats as indexical signs], and that without these paradoxes the evolution of communication would be at an end. Life would then be an endless interchange of stylized messages, a game with rigid rules, unrelieved by change or humor" ([1955] 1972, 193). Not just change and humor would be lost, so too would fiction, imputations of character, as well as any form of intention reading, on which depend hints, irony, sarcasm, and, indeed, the attribution of responsibility and the workings of cooperation. As has often been observed, any human social interaction beyond the most mechanical and rule-governed requires that people be capable of lies, indirection, and speculation (Tomasello et al. 2005). They must seek out one another's intentions, efforts that are fallible and subject to ongoing revision in real time. Humans are not telepathic but nonetheless persist in attempted mind reading (Wellman 1992). Their (fallible) intersubjective capacities draw on the ongoing processes of semiotic reflexivity. In particular, this reflexivity centers on the relations between sign vehicle and object, the ground, and how people construe those relations, the third trichotomy.

The Sign and the Ontology of Its Objects

As I suggested above, the notion of two infinite series extending toward the interpretant and the object, respectively, is typically allied with another one. For what prevents this infinity from being debilitating or even leading to epistemological nihilism is the notion of an interpretive community. This community develops ever more refined interpretants over the course of historical time:

> The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. The very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of an infinite increase in knowledge. ("Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," quoted in Ball 2014, 151)

True, the "infinite series" places the real asymptotically out of reach of any given interpretive community at any historical moment, but this does not eliminate the expectation that in principle it might become the object of a sign. Presumably this expectation is consistent with Peirce's goal of putting scientific knowledge on a firm basis. (Readers of Peirce may differ on the ontology of this infinitely receding reality, a question which our less metaphysical purposes do not require us to settle here.)

But human semiosis is replete with objects of all sorts. Unlike "natural kind terms" such as "gold" (Putnam 1975; Kripke 1980), not all of them are best understood as moments in chains of semiosis that progress toward a better knowledge of the real independent of their social history. Bateson evokes the flag for which men will die. Famously, in Benedict Anderson's (1991) version of this image, to die for the flag is to die for an imagined community. To be sure, to say that community is imagined is not to say that it is not real (and to say the flag is a mere piece of cloth is, of course, itself a matter of semiotic ideology). It matters sociologically that, whatever the philosopher or sociologist might say, people characteristically take those objects to be real, stable, and present to them. The sign, in this context, if not wholly constitutive of its object—for all sorts of other conditions are required for a successful imagined community—it is at least a crucial catalyzing factor in the historical emergence of that object. The very existence of a community, in this sense, is semiotically mediated. For that imagined object to be real for those who imagine it, if we follow Bateson, would require some lack of reflexivity—those who die for the flag must take their community to be something more than imagined, that flag to be something other than an arbitrary pattern on a piece of cloth.

On the reality of objects that the observer might take to be unreal Peirce offers this comment:

> The word "witch" is a sign having a "real Object" in the sense in which this phrase is used, namely to mean a supposedly real Object, not the Sign, and in intention or pretension not created by the sign. . . . It is real in the sense in which a dream is a real appearance to a person in sleep, although it be not an appearance of objects that are Real. (MS 634, 27, quoted in Parmentier 1994, 21)

What is the semiotic ideology implicit in this statement? On the one hand, to compare the witch to the dream is to take the position of the outside (or at least the awake) observer who knows the truth of the matter—that both witch and dream are only "supposedly" real. In this respect, the observer knows what kind of sign the witch really is, as well as the kind of sign the believer in witches takes it to be. Yet in this passage Peirce seems not to privilege that view, to the extent that he also says that the appearance of being real makes the object real to someone. Here we must bear in mind that aspect of his definition of the sign, that it represents something to someone. Once we do that, however, we have to wonder just how the sign is determined by its object in a way the observer can be confident of. This seems to throw us into a relativistic—even a subjectivistic—reading of Peirce rather than the realist one. But here it would be useful to distinguish among different kinds of objects, products of different kinds of construction, discovery, and contestation.

The inherently contestable character of semiosis in human worlds that derives from reflexivity and the ideologies that govern it is hardly confined to religion or occult forces such as witchcraft, or political projects like nationalism. As Summerson Carr (2011) shows, for instance, social workers called on to decide whether former drug addicts will remain clean into the future, something for which there can be no "direct" knowledge, face similar problems. Consistent with the tradition of social facts represented by the Durkheimians, Parmentier finds the contract to be exemplary. A contract is the quintessential social fact; recall that Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* ([1925] 1990) was presented as a history of the origins of contracts. What is crucial in that case is that the object of the sign, the contract, mediates relations between persons, but only insofar as they take it to be a particular social fact, with bearing on a counterfactual—a future that has not arrived. As a social fact, the reality of the contract as a potential semiotic object is contingent on the reality of the social relations it constitutes.

We might render this in pragmatist terms by saying the contract is something that is significant first by virtue of having an effect on actions, rather than by representing a prior state of affairs in the world. And like witches, the contract as a sign is perpetually vulnerable to distinctively political forms of contestation.

Social Identities as Semiotic Objects

What is the "object" of a semiotically mediated social identity? Consider Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of class in mid-twentieth-century France. In his account, classes are socially and politically real yet also ideological constituted—that is, contingent upon, and contributing to, contestable relations of power. Although Bourdieu does not use the vocabulary of semiotics (for an account of class that does, see Reyes [2017]; for a more general linguistic-semiotic approach to social identities, see Agha [2007]), his analysis of habitus is, in effect, an account of the production of indexical icons:

> The relationship that is actually established between the pertinent characteristics of economic and social condition (capital volume and composition [. . .]) and the distinctive features associated with the corresponding position in the universe of life-styles only becomes intelligible when the habitus is constucted [*sic*] as the generative formula which makes it possible to account both for the classifiable practices and products and for the judgements, themselves classified, which make these practices and works into a system of distinctive signs. ([1979] 1984, 170)

In Bourdieu's sociology, class is not an objective fact like "capital volume and composition", or even the life chances shaped by differential access to educational institutions or the marriage market. It is a position within a socially constituted system of signs, in ways that his objective facts are not. A working class habitus, for example, is both indexical of the structuring structures that produce it, and, as a naturalization of a social type, it is also iconic:

> Tastes in food also depend on the idea each class has of the body and of the effects of food on the body, that is, on its strength, health and beauty, and on the categories it uses to evaluate these effects, some of which may be important for one class and ignored by another, and which the different classes may rank in very different ways. Thus, whereas the working classes are more attentive to the strength of the (male) body than its shape, and tend to go for products that are both cheap and nutritious,

> the professions prefer products that are tasty, health-giving, light and not-fattening. Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, *embodied*, helps to shape the class body. ([1979] 1984, 190)

Of course the concept of habitus has an objectivistic basis. The structuring structures that habitus reflects, are not, for Bourdieu, themselves ideologically constructed in any of the usual senses of the term. But for them to register as *class*, they must be mediated in two respects. They must have materially causal effects on bodies and their sensibilities. Those bodies and sensibilities must in turn be taken, reflexively, to be signs (which Bourdieu portrays as ordered in a quasi-structuralist system of contrastive values).

But between the sociological analyst and the French layperson, the ontology of the object of those signs is in question. For if the body is the sign vehicle, what is its object? As depicted by Bourdieu, the working-class body is indexical of a position within a political economy. That position, and the political economy that forms its relevant context, is the object (or, more precisely, one component of the object), which has causal effects on the food available to one, the physical activities one engages in, and, ultimately, the taste for necessity by which these become matters of choice. All of these contribute to the production of the sign vehicle, namely, certain bodily forms. Not so for the French layperson. For the body to bear a meaningful social identity, that is, to be recognizable as the embodiment of class as such, it must be taken as iconic of an object that is above all a matter of ethical and aesthetic evaluation. Not the product of economic chances, but of characteristic dispositions and aspirations, of virtues and vices. The social and political meaning of class, in this analysis, draws on a particular semiotic ideology. Roughly speaking, by taking the ground as (primarily) iconic, this ideology construes the object of the bodily sign to be the character, taste, and other essential qualities of a certain social type. In contrast, the sociological analysis takes the ground to be indexical and thus points toward a different sort of object, say, the objective life chances manifested in the embodied individual.

Transcendental Beings as Semiotic Objects

We might suppose that after some conversation the layperson might agree with the sociologist that the political economy of France has a bearing on class identified bodies. They might both also converge on some version of the classic fact/value distinction to the effect that, given the bodies that result from the economic facts, the ethical evaluations they prompt are something added on. The bodies would be facts seen in the light of certain values. Put another way,

the ground might change, or at least shift weight, from iconic to indexical, while the interpretant retains an evaluative component. The latter might remain more or less the same (behold the embodied strength of the working class) or not (witness the unhealthy results of class oppression). Nonetheless, the sociologist and the French layperson could, in this case, agree that they inhabit the same universe, in which the ontological status of the relevant semiotic objects—or that reality toward which they point us—remains stable.

But in human affairs, agreement about ontologies is hardly guaranteed. And one key symptom of ontological disjuncture is the clash of semiotic ideologies. Such clashes are especially apparent in the history of religions, which can place the very existence of the sign's object in question and thus exert pressure on the construal of that sign's semiotic ground. This, in essence, is what iconoclasm and other attacks on religious signs are about. The ontological status of the purported objects of iconographic and ritual signs was a central point of contention in Christian missionary encounters with colonial subjects (Keane 2007). As noted above, a similar set of themes appears in the encounter between Orthodox Christians and Bolsheviks, who were explicitly atheist (see Greene 2010; and discussion in Keane 2014). During the early years after the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks launched a campaign to discredit the church and persuade the faithful that they had been hoodwinked. Although they made use of the usual tactics of pedagogy and propaganda, they also performed demonstrations meant to reveal the true nature of sign vehicles and their objects. To that end the Bolsheviks established a commission to exhume the graves of more than 70 saints whose remains were considered to be holy relics. The goal was to reveal that the supposedly incorruptible bodies had in fact decayed and were thus mere mortal flesh. They assumed that anyone at all would be convinced by the direct experience of the rotten body. The Bolsheviks' expectation was that once the ordinary materiality of saintly flesh was exposed, the simple believers would come to their senses (or perhaps more accurately, the evidence of their senses would bring their minds around) and become disillusioned. The body's decay would be an indexical icon of its possessor's mortality and thus demonstrate the nonexistence of its object, the real presence of a particular saint, and, by extension, of sanctity in general.

An Orthodox bishop disputed the semiotic ideology underwriting the Bolsheviks' actions. He pointed out that, since the seventeenth century, church doctrine had maintained that the proof of relics was the performance of miracles, not corporeal incorruptibility (Greene 2010, 19–20). Here the object (sainthood) might remain the same, but its sign vehicle and ground (say, a

healing taken to be indexical of saintly powers) are quite different from that presumed by the Bolsheviks (an incorruptible body iconic of purity and immortality). Moreover, as the church became more self-consciously modern, it rejected even that degree of indexicality and adopted a representational stance. In this light, the relic is best understood to be the expression of an idea, a reminder of doctrine; it should not bring about any material effects at all. At this point the relic as sign of sanctity is neither iconic (the physical state of the saint's body now irrelevant) nor indexical (the body should not bring about material effects). Rather, the ground is (primarily) symbolic, one token of the general type. As one priest had written in 1896, "by their silence, [they] are the most eloquent preachers of the truth and the life-giving nature of our holy Orthodox faith" (Greene 2010, 34). Atheist commissar, miracle-seeking peasant, and learned priest are each responding to the affordances of the saint's corpse to serve as a sign vehicle. How they take that corpse to signify, what can or should follow from that, and the ethical and political consequences are all guided by their respective semiotic ideologies.

To be able to take signs in different ways is, among other things, to take the palpable features of sign vehicles as affordances—as possibilities latent in real features of the world that nonetheless determine nothing in advance (Gibson 1977; Keane 2008, 2016). Diverse semiotic ideologies are different ways of taking up the affordances of a sign vehicle. These differences are matters not just of alternative interpretants but also of different possible objects of the sign vehicle. Ball says that dicentization takes icons as actually being indexes. In this way, an image of a god can be taken to be the presence of the god (2014, 156). But historically the reverse also happens: altars can be turned into artworks, which themselves may have transcendent or mundane objects. In each case, the sign vehicle remains the same: it is the object that changes. The sheer physicality of a painting that makes the god actually present in one semiotic ideology may take backseat to its iconic capacity to depict an otherwise absent god in another. Both may in turn be taken to do no more than support the viewer's memory of abstract doctrine in a third semiotic ideology, or manifest the painter's genius in yet a fourth.

Conclusion

Given everything the Bolsheviks had to fight against, and the various means at their disposal to do so, why take time and effort for a battle of semiotic ideologies? Why should people clash over the nature of divine signs, rather than concentrating on struggles over laws, institutions, followers, territory, or property?

Disputes over semiotic ideology, over the very status of signs, have consequences for actions. But those consequences are not merely matters of social function (such as unifying ethnic groups or rallying imagined communities). They are just as likely to be matters of ethical values, of how one should live. This holds equally for the political disputes in revolutionary Russia and class distinctions in midcentury France. To take a sign a certain way is to take seriously the world it presupposes and the life that world recommends. It is perhaps above all for pragmatic questions, more than any epistemological or metaphysical ones, that semiotic ideologies matter.

The historicity of semiotic ideologies is most apparent when they clash, as in the Bolshevik Revolution, the Protestant Reformation, or the colonial encounter. The concept draws our attention to the social and political processes by which these clashes come about, the ethical weight they receive, the politics they make possible, and the histories they eventuate. The point is that it is not just signs' interpretants that clash but also their grounds and the objects those grounds presuppose. For semiotic ideology implies that there is in principle no determinant ground of a sign. To say this is not to give up on the serious tasks of observation and analysis nor to cast doubt on the real knowledge to which they lead. Rather, it is to situate our knowledge within particular communities of inquiry and their asymptotic approach to something like conviction and what Peirce calls the real. But it does so while still accepting that signs in human worlds are inherently contestable and subject to historical transformation. If we speak of dicentization, rhematization, and conventionalization, we should bear in mind that these processes are not merely flaws, lay folks' misunderstanding. For these processes are ineluctable features of semiotic mediation, as it functions within social projects and practices.

Semiotic ideologies are kinds of abduction, and abduction is the fundamental epistemological mode of social life. In Peirce's account, abductions cannot in principle have the same certainty and stability as deductions and inductions. They are probabilistic because signs are open and grow. They do so at multiple temporal scales (see Carr and Lempert 2016), ranging from the fluctuations of face-to-face interaction to gradual changes working their way across entire societies—from, say, the fleeting perception of amusement in your interlocutor's eyes to the seemingly fixed terms of racial identity. For all their participants' proclivities for mind reading and all the repairs and clarifications by which they work at convergence, in the end people's interactions with one another neither start from nor arrive at certainties—although people must proceed, much of the time, as if they do. But the same principle holds at any scale: social worlds

are constantly changing not just for reasons technological, demographic, economic, and so on, but because semiotic processes are in constant motion (Urban 2001). The apparent stability of the monologic (Bakhtin 1981) is the brittle, and ultimately ephemeral, result of hard political effort.

The realism of abductions derives from their grasp of the affordances that semiosis makes available. This is consistent with Silverstein's characterization of ideology with which this essay started, that "we should not make our own analytical claims on the basis of "some independent and absolute universe of Truth." To take ideology in this sense follows from the encompassing vision of semiotics that he articulates elsewhere, that "semiotic realism, which is a positively constructive enterprise, would have us, then, accept the inherently reflexive, sociocentric component of coming to conceptual grips with the universe of even 'objective things,' . . . Thus might we become comfortable with the fact that the 'Science of Humanity,' anthropology, is itself endeavoring to conceptualize an aspect of that universe very much from within" (Silverstein 2004, 651). We should take seriously the productive nature of this task, as well as the view "from within." For in these words we may hear him speak as the erstwhile student of Willard Quine (1960, 3), who invoked Neurath's boat: we sailors have no option but to continue constructing the very craft on which we float—far from any port, to be sure, but nonetheless really afloat on a real sea.

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