

## SEMIOTIC SOCIOLOGY

**Outline:** The cultural current that at the turn of the 19th century gave birth to the three basic modern social sciences of economics, political science and sociology that all study 'us' in the deluge called 'modernity' and to anthropology that studies 'them' in the wake of colonialism, the other side of the coin called 'modernity', somehow managed to bypass semiotics. This is a weird thing because one would imagine that in an era that many have for a good reason called the 'time of communication' or the 'time of the sign' there would be great demand for a discipline studying the general patterns of signification. In some sense, this general discipline did emerge because the time gave birth to a great deal of semiotic conceptions, including the Saussurean tradition of semiology and the Peircean tradition of semiotics. Yet semiotics has always been flooded with too many conceptions that have too often been thought to be contradictory, as is often said about the relationship between the structuralist and the pragmaticist tradition. The discipline, therefore, has not managed to be consolidated but has been left into the state of hesitation and *anomie*. This book is an attempt to construct a synthetic conception covering the pragmaticist and the structuralist tradition and extending within social theory to the fields of phenomenological sociology and action theory as well. The core idea is that an equation can be made between the structuralist conception of *articulation*, the pragmaticist conception of *interpretant*, and the phenomenological conception of *prereflective intentional act*. The chapters included can be no more than prolegomena but they form a research programme for a unified semiotic cultural theory and a social theory building on it.

**Rationale:** There are two basic reasons to present a book like this. First, if semiotics wants to consolidate and spread as an academic discipline, it needs to leave behind those balkanized internal wars that have characterized its history thus far. To make this happen, synthetic conceptions are needed, and this book offers itself as one candidate for such a synthetic conception. Second, as the great popularity of cultural studies in all social sciences shows, there is a great need for conceptions capable of analysing signification in the social sciences. It also seems that 'cultural studies' left alone without semiotics will not be capable to come up with an adequate toolbox for that task. The time might therefore be ripe for someone to present a research programme for semiotic sociology. With this book plan, I volunteer.

### Structure:

#### Preface

1. Introduction: toward semiotic sociology and social theory
2. A synthesis of semiology, semiotics and phenomenological sociology
3. Economy and society in semiotic institutionalism
4. Power and signification in neostructuralism
5. Modernity and the intersemiotic condition
6. Modernity, postmodernity and reflexive modernization

7. Modernity and the articulation of the gender system
8. Gender as an institution
9. From Goffman to semiotic sociology
10. Conclusion and the next steps

Rationale for the structure: Chapter 1 opens the book with a project outline and its contextualization within current academia. Chapter 2 presents the culture theoretical basic idea of building mediation between semiology, semiotics and phenomenology (articulation = interpretant = intentional act), thus forming the cultural theoretical base for semiotic social theory and sociology. Chapters 3 and 4 extend the programme to the core of sociology, i.e., to a macrosociological description of society (Chapter 3) and the strategy to study the division of power in society (Chapter 4). The four following chapters then give two examples of the way the programme can be applied, Chapters 5 and 6 in covering the modernity/postmodernity debate and Chapters 7 and 8 by way of presenting an interpretation of the changing gender system. Finally Chapter 9 discusses microsociology. Focusing on Erving Goffman's work, it shows how the semiotic approach can improve analyses of signification also in the field of microsociology. Chapter 10 then closes with a programme for future research in semiotic sociology.

### **Detailed synopsis:**

Chapter 1: *Introduction: toward semiotic sociology and social theory*. This chapter opens the book with a project outline drafted above in sections 'Outline', 'Rationale' and 'Rationale for the structure'.

Chapter 2: *A synthesis of semiology, semiotics and phenomenological sociology*. Departing from the common view according to which structuralist semiology (the Saussurean tradition), pragmatist semiotics (the Peircean tradition) and phenomenological sociology (Husserl, Schutz, Berger and Luckmann, Garfinkel) are seen as mutually exclusive alternatives, the chapter attempts to outline their synthesis. The net result of the synthesis is that a conception emerges wherein action theories (rational choice, Weber, etc.) are based on phenomenological sociology, and phenomenological sociology is based on neo-structuralist semiotics, which is a synthesis of the Saussurean and the Peircian traditions of understanding habits of interpretation and interaction. The core idea in the field of cultural theory providing the base for the rest is that an equation can be made between the structuralist conception of *articulation*, the pragmatist conception of *interpretant*, and phenomenological conception of *prereflective intentional act*.

Chapter 3: *Economy and society in semiotic institutionalism*. The great transformation to modernity made the economy the major organizing factor of the social synthesis, thus bringing forth the issue of the economy/society relationship as the central problem of modern social theory. This chapter deals with two broad approaches to this problem: Parsons's and Habermas's variants of structural-functionalism, on the one hand, and the various currents of (neo)institutionalism on the other. An attempt to synthesize the benefits of these conflicting approaches is made from the point of view of semiotic institutionalism. What emerges is a general theoretical framework, which is better equipped than the original structural functionalist and institutionalist conceptions for the analysis of the economy/society relationship.

Chapter 4: *Power and signification in neostructuralism*. The chapter develops a synthetic

conception of power based on Weber's, Parsons's and Foucault's writings. The aim is, first, to build a bridge between the so-called resource theories of power (Weber, Parsons) and the structural approach (Foucault) and, second, to do this in the form of a conception which would be usable on both macro- and micro-levels at the same time. Four theories are discussed: (1) the distributive approach (Weber); (2) the collective approach (Parsons); (3) the structural approach (Foucault); and (4) the neostructuralist approach developed here. It is argued that these approaches can be ordered on a scale on which the complexity of analysis increases as one moves from (1) to (4), and that the selection of an appropriate level of analysis in an empirical study is a practical issue relative to the aim of the study. The types of analyses characteristic of the more complex levels are illustrated by a discussion of the problem posed by Big Case Comparison in historical sociology (level 3) and everyday conversation (level 4), including a discussion on phenomenological sociology and conversational analysis.

Chapter 5: *Modernity and the intersemiotic condition*. The chapter is a semiotic account of the early postmodernity debate. It makes a distinction between modernity as a process of institutional reformulation of the structure of society at large, which is a relatively constant factor once it has emerged, and postmodernism as a cultural style, which is characterized by ambivalence and celebrates it. It also shows that what has been called 'postmodern condition' is not something unique but has been faced many times in history whenever heterogeneous populations have gathered in urban centres and cultural messages from several sources have mixed and brought up 'cultural chiasms'. The chapter proposes the term 'intersemiotic condition' for an analytic term under which the analysis of such cultural phenomena can proceed.

Chapter 6: *Modernity, postmodernity and reflexive modernization*. In the sociological tradition, modernization has usually been understood as increasing differentiation. Theorists as different as Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Parsons all shared the view that modernization meant the opening of new horizons. The publication of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* transformed the discursive universe: contrary to the tradition of differentiation theoretical sociology the pamphlet interpreted modernization as a process in which the plurality of local cultural traditions was destroyed and their various narratives were rearticulated into a unified modern canon under the repressive metanarratives of science, progress and the Enlightenment. At first, sociologists were at odds with this new interpretation until Beck, Giddens and Lash brought up the idea of modernity in two phases in their *Reflexive Modernization* and related publications. According to them, 'traditional modernity' was based on cultural closures, such as unified class-identities, nationalities and fixed gender identities, but it was followed by a 'second' or 'reflexive modernity', where several traditions lived side by side, just as the postmodernists claimed. An intense debate emerged. In addition to describing the debate, the chapter asks: did we learn anything from the debate on reflexive modernization and if so, can the learnt lessons be used fruitfully in the study of contemporary society? The answer seems to be negative for the most part. However, the modernization theoretical approach can still be seen as a useful tool for framing research questions and contributing to the diagnosis of the era. This is how it can still provide a point of departure for research but not deliver all the answers, which is the task of empirical social research rather than abstract theoretical schemes of orientation.

Chapter 7: *Modernity and the articulation of the gender system*. The gender system can be understood as a cultural system rooted in biological differences. Semiotically speaking, it is a binary sign system (male : female) with some variation involved (transsexuals, homosexuals, etc.). In the process of modernity, the biological motivation of the gender system is being loosened by technological innovations such as contraception and mother's milk substitute. At

the same time, the state has replaced family and kin as the organizing structure of society and the cultural ideal of equality has gained a strong position. These and similar changes together have made gender flow in 'post-traditional' societies. The chapter deals with this process in paying attention to the three theoretically possible constellations in the determination of semiotic identities in social process: functional order in the Parsonian sense, formation of struggling parties in the sense of Weber and Bourdieu, and *anomie* in the sense of Durkheim and Berger and Luckmann. It turns out that elements of all of these three theoretical constellations are present in the current transformation of the gender system. This is elaborated with empirical material drawn from the change of the Finnish gender system from the 1950s to the 1990s.

Chapter 8: *Gender as an institution*. The simplest versions of the interpretation of agency rely on biological dispositions, often supplemented with rational choice explanations. The chapter shows that better explanations can be reached if biological and rational choice explanations are supplemented with different forms of institutionalism. These have been distinguished into regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive institutionalism, and later on, the last one of these has been further divided into discursive and habitual institutionalism. The chapter applies the distinction between the above six explanatory strategies to the analysis of gendered agency. Here the interest is, first, to develop a synthetic conception in which explanatory strategies complement each other, and second, to reduce the importance of the nature : culture binarity debate. The third task is to start applying the conception to other mechanisms of differentiation, such as age, ethnicity and class, which again can be linked back to the study of gender along the ideas presented in the debate on intersectionality.

Chapter 9: *From Goffman to semiotic sociology*. Erving Goffman was an influential microsociologist whose work is not easy to classify. The chapter interprets different aspects of Goffman's work in applying his own frame analysis to it and discusses five different ways to frame Goffman. The frames are dramaturgical sociology; micro-revolution and the rise of the study of co-presence in sociology; interaction order and ritual; self as a necessary illusion and the contingency of interaction; and, finally, frame analysis and the problem of presence. It turns out that all these framings reveal important features of Goffman's work and open up fruitful paths for social research. Yet it is also shown that even if Goffman spoke about signs a lot, his understanding of signification was pre-semiotic in the sense that in his analyses the vital question is always the subject's relationship to a present sign. To escape the 'metaphysics of presence', his conceptions should be opened up for analysis of the relationship of present signs, not only of the subject and other signs present, but also of absent signs. Such a change would bring this important predecessor of semiotic sociology genuinely to its ground. That again would make it easier to link the field of microsociology to that of macrosociology, i.e., to make the mediation that Goffman himself was both reluctant and unable to do.

Chapter 10: *Conclusion and the next steps*. The closing chapter makes a conclusion and outlines some of the obvious future research tasks in the field of cultural theory (a more thorough study of the relationship between semiology, semiotics and phenomenology) and social theory (a more thorough study of the relationship between semiotics, phenomenological sociology and action theory as well as further development of semiotic institutionalism). It also emphasizes the role of semiotic empirical social research or social semiotics not discussed much in this book because, even if it is true that phenomena without concepts are blind, it is also true that concepts without phenomena are empty, as Kant put it.

**Implementation:** Most of the chapters are based on articles published in the process of writing my *Society as Semiosis* (Peter Lang 2003) or after it. The book is therefore a supplement and companion of that other book in the endeavour of establishing semiotic sociology. The most probable publication time seems to be year 2022.