

## ***Introduction***

### **On Semiotics of Economic Discourse<sup>1</sup>**

*Giorgio Coratelli, Francesco Galofaro, Federico Montanari*

1. Semioticians have rarely discussed, in an explicit way, on economy, beyond the well-noted and important relationship between semiotics and marketing, particularly with a scholar like Jean-Marie Floch. (For a wider review concerning advertising and economy from cultural studies point of view, see McFall, 2004). In history of semiotic theories we find a first critical focus on economy in debates between semiotics and marxist critique of political economy. This is partly an argument for historians of ideas, partly an argument currently studied: Ferruccio Rossi Landi's theory is above all the unique object of study (see Cinzia Bianchi's and Cristina Zorzella's papers). The problem about semiotics in relationship to a marxist, or neo-marxist, approach is indeed related to the question: in which epistemological and theoretical terms is marxism still a valid tool? An answer to this question is really possible only taking in account new forms of economic practices and theories as well as the new forms of economic society from the last forty years of the 20th century.

A second area of research in which semiotic and linguistic tools played an important influence is Jean Baudrillard's and Gilles Deleuze – Felix Guattari's works about the transformations of capitalism. More recently semiotic instrumentation has influenced also the Actor Network Theory (Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, John Law, Donald MacKenzie, above all), which has investigated the “performativity” of the economic practices and theories, especially in the building of financial markets. Semiotic theories, finally, have important and close links with approaches which have studied the new neoliberal conditions of politics and society, such as Michel Foucault's works on biopolitics and governmentality, and the “new spirits of capitalism”, that is the title of a famous Luc Boltanski – Éve Chiapello's research.

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<sup>1</sup> This Introduction, as well as this special Issue, has been conceived and planned together by the three authors. However, concerning the practical writing of this introduction, the first and third paragraph have been written by G. Coratelli, the second and fourth by F. Montanari, and the fifth and sixth by F. Galofaro.

With these notes, we only want to point out some relations between semiotics and other approaches, focusing both on the interdisciplinary vocation of semiotic methods and on “linguistic turn” of economy, which is the subtitle of Christian Marazzi’s essay, *Il posto dei calzini*, published in 1999, one of the most important publications about the relations between economy and communication, within the stream of “post-operaist” thought (with references to important authors such as Toni Negri and Franco Berardi Bifo). We think that the economic discourse is a special field for the semiotic interdisciplinarity analysing historical and specially present economic conditions. There is not currently a systematic and specific work on economic discourse in the semiotic literature. This special issue of Ocula we would like to be a first and pioneering work on semiotic studies and analysis of economy. Our aims are to fill a gap in semiotic literature, to carry out a reconnaissance on this field and to collect semiotic contributions opening to some ways of semiotic investigations on economy.

2. Two questions should be taken in consideration concerning the link between semiotics and economy. The first is about the question of “values”; and the second is about the rhetorics of economic discourse. Concerning the first point, values represent one of the classic categories and concepts in semiotics, deriving from linguistic tradition. As it is universally well known, value represents a keystone concept in Saussure’s foundational moment, as well as in Hjelmslev’s and Greimas’ theoretical building (let us think to the elaboration of the “semiotic square” schema, provided by Greimas in collaboration with Fr. Rastier, as a value mapping diagram for a micro-universe of meaning, and we should remember that one of those basic schemas regarded the “economic values’ square” (see Greimas, 1970)). Value is considered as the basic differential “molecule” in sense making. As we have reported in the call for papers, linguistics, semiotics and economics share, as stressed by Saussure, this common concept. Concerning the historical analogies between linguistic sign and money, Saussure, in elaborating the concept of “value”, was inspired by Austrian School of Economics. We were saying that there are several works about semiotics and marketing, compared to the few theoretical and critical works on economic discourse: beyond classical Rossi Landi’s marxist works, some recent papers (e.g. F. Galofaro, “Semiotica e produzione. Verso un’economia politica del segno”; F. Montanari, “Form of Economic Discourse, the Crisis and Financial Markets”; L. Frattura, “Il governo di sé e degli altri, un caso di studio: Potere e Auto-Controllo del Mercato”); “Carte Semiotiche” special issue on “Semiotica del denaro” (n. 5, 2003); the section “Linguaggio e Moneta” of the 20th Congress of the Society of Philosophy of Language (published on the Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio website <http://www.rifl.unical.it/>); the seminars on “Segni e monete. La semiotica

nel campo dell'economia" (University of Turin, 2014). What is lacking in this direction is perhaps the capacity of proposing a broader view, exploring the possibility of a wider and deeper connection between economic discourse and a semio-cultural perspective. For instance, it could be possible reopening the investigation and the path proposed about "a new" (cultural) "theory of money", post-marxian, as claimed by Deleuze and Guattari in *Mille Plateaux*, with a possibile extension to social and cultural phenomena. When we think about money we think, for instance, to traditional as well as new forms of exchange – with very different examples, such as, e-markets, to electronic moneys, to the last frontiers of bitcoins, etc., for finishing with the incredibly complicated and esoteric places of virtual and digital finance, with their dangerous poisoning products (such as the "infamous" CDS, Futures, Subordinated bonds).

As stressed by Deleuze and Guattari, today we should consider money as the capacity of building up, in contemporary capitalism, in its different forms, an "Immense channel" of active expression: from taxation to virtual capacity of financial markets of circulating all around the world (and that was also Jean Baudrillard's prophecy and intuition), in a sort of "planetary orbital and virtual bomb". It deals not only, obviously, with crisis, but also with conflicts and wars. From this point of view, researches as those of sociologists and anthropologists of financial markets, such as Knorr Cetina's and others (cfr., Knorr Cetina, Preda, 2005) illuminate the complex mechanisms of money practices of making/destroying. We should remember, quoting again semiotic studies with Greimas and Courtés (in their *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* (1979)) the opposition, inside cultural/semiotic systems, between production axis vs communication and exchange axis. But, perhaps, today, things are becoming more and more complicated and entangled: communication playing the role of production, and production being today strictly connected to goods and products circulation and communication. So, money plays as the active factor inside new capitalist form. According to some scholars (see, Dodd, 2014), payment money and finance money, from Deleuze and Guattari, "are not contradictory" or "mutually exclusive", but are "in a dynamic tension", producing a sort of "unapplied principle of convertibility": that tension could be the real force of capitalism. If this topic goes beyond the aims of this introduction, and of this journal's special issue, here we find further possibile future perspectives and paths of investigation.

The second question we would like to stress is the role played by rhetoric of economic discourse.

As attested by decades of studies on cognitive, euristic and pragmatic functions of rhetorics (from Black to Ortony, to Hesse, Eco, and Lakoff, for arriving to semiotics with Fontanille or Bertrand, but going back to Cicero, too) rhetorical devices are mechanisms concerning mobilization, as well as of

inducting, inducing and instigating capacity of discourse in “making see” something. For this reason, rhetoric of economic discourse is not only, obviously, an adornment, nor a pragmatics (to make someone acting something), but it deals also with a device: a chain of tools, assemblage, connected to economic practices. When we talk about “figures”, and figurative level of economic discourse, we are referring not only to tropes but to a wider and deeper level inside discursive organization. The figurative dimension is described, in structural semiotics, as the part of discursive content in which there is a “correspondence” with the expression and perception of the ordinary world (“monde naturel”); so, for this reason, concerning the inserting in discourse of a perception level, it represents a very relevant part of discourse (either in verbal or in visual language). In sociology of markets the concept of “figuration” is used in a way not so far from that proposed by semiotics. This concept derives, as stressed by Preda (in, Knorr Cetina, Preda, 2005), from thinkers as Bourdieu and Elias, and it is useful to analyze, among others, some “figures”: let us take, for instance, the figure of the “investor” as cultural figure of global capitalism (as well as others figures typical of different moments of capitalism), Or let us think to very different figures such as “a shield against the spread” or, in other contexts, “dark pools”. This kind of analysis is important for Preda (ib., p. 125), because “figuration (quoting Elias), is a process through which individual selves and macrosocial processes are tied each other: it ensures that social facts are created concomitantly on the collective and on the individual level”.

3. Concerning the arguments touched and explored by the different papers of this special issue, we would like here to outline some reading paths in order to facilitate the consultation of the articles, organized in three sections.

The focus of the first section is “on theories”. It contains a paper on the economic signs and two articles about Rossi Landi’s works on relation between semiotics and marxism. These articles seem to ride two complementary roads, the first by a semiotic re-writing of the principal economic concepts, the second, following Rossi Landi, re-writing semiotic and linguistic concepts by marxist categories of the critique of political economy. Both the senses highlight the links between semiotics and economy.

Regarding the papers of this special issue, the article “Les signes de l’économie politique” by François Lamizet corresponds to the first path. Starting from the point that the economy is a system of representation, in the large sense of practices, strategies, opinions, theories, Lamizet notes that the value is the fundamental category of both semiotics and economy. It is the main way to build a semiotic perspective on economy showing the

connections between economy and politics. This last point firstly emerges considering the “capital” as appropriation and accumulation: in this sense, “capitalism” is the economic form in which “capital” is the dominant element: a perspicacious point of view for analysis of the present financial capitalism. Secondly, the economic power consists in the determination of value. In semiotic terms, this point shows the asymmetry in the power relations between forces, which determine the value, and resistances, for example in the case of Greece's public debt or in the case of the imposition of political economy of austerity.

Cristina Zorzella's and Cinzia Bianchi's articles are dedicated to Rossi Landi's works. They correspond to the second path and aim at rethinking the critical approach both of semiotics and of economy. The focus of the article “Sistemi linguistici e sistemi economici: analisi di un'omologia” by Zorzella is the Rossi Landi's theory of structural and genetic homology between linguistics and economics. Rossi Landi understood the close links between communication and production, showing in particular that communication is an element of economic production and interpreting goods as messages and messages as goods. Zorzella examines the homological scheme, by which Rossi Landi noted the double character of production, of material goods as well as of linguistic messages. In this sense, Rossi Landi could be considered a pioneer of the studies on immaterial economy of goods and jobs. The homology indeed highlights the relations between productive work and communicative work: this is the constitutive factor of the social life. For this reason, as Zorzella writes, the Rossi Landi's interdisciplinary approach is a good tool to study the economic paradoxes of contemporary societies.

The article “Ferruccio Rossi-Landi: language, society and semiotics” by Bianchi is a systematic presentation of Rossi Landi's works, from the first interests in Charles Morris' semiotics and the meaning in common speech, to the “marxist turn” and the theory of homology seen above, until the works on social reproduction and on ideology. In this last phase, Bianchi focuses on Rossi Landi's intervention in the two marxist traditional models of social reproduction. The first marxist model separates three spheres, production, exchange and consumption: Rossi Landi divides the exchange sphere in material exchange and sign exchange in which he replies the triad of production, exchange and consumption in relation to sign. The second model is the opposition between structure (production of goods) and superstructure (reproduction or production of ideology): Bianchi notes that the introduction of sign system in the first model is an important intermediary between these two levels in either direction. This is an enlarged analytical tool of the previous homological scheme of linguistic and economic productions for analysis of contemporary societies.

4. The focus of the second section is on “language and money”: it tries to show the power of semiotics in analyzing discursive and rhetorical devices in connection with social phenomena. De Oliveira’s paper works specifically on emotional effects concerning the 2008 financial crisis, showing how important are elements of socio-economic horizon before the crisis and to identify the main semiotic structures. This allows to show the global mechanisms of functioning of the economic system, but also to identify certain specific figures of the process that led to the outbreak of this crisis. More specifically, de Oliveira identifies the figure of “stockholders” as typically in the spotlight on the crisis. But who is a “stockholder” within our society? What is his role and what is his status? Economically, the stockholder is an individual as a partner in a business. He is one of financial partners and promotes its development through the provision of capital. This financial risk taking is compensated by dividends regularly paid by the company. But, what is the semiotic role of this actor? De Oliveira tries to sketch this figure from narrative point of view as well as its anthropological and discursive counterparts.

The second article (Benedetti and Castagnaro) of this section proposes an analysis of media coverage of Italy’s official economic statistics between 2005 and 2015, focused on newspaper articles containing information considered dissimilar or only partially responsive to data released by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). The paper proposes an examination of this body as “problematic”, showing how the distorted informations identified in the articles are not only related to material errors in dealing with journalistic interpretation of statistics, but also in search of sensationalism built by discursive practices that can be described in a semiotic perspective. The third article of this section (Pellerey) offers a critical discussion about the same statute of economic system, starting from proposals of recent anti-consumerist and responsible producer movements as well as from classical historical and anthropological studies of non western economic models. The papers discusses and criticizes, by studying discursive and semiotic devices, the “universal” role of money, as capacity of “redefining the economy as a system of supply of material goods”, and “showing how the market system is only a recent form of organization of the economy”. Today critical movements, associations for the “degrowth” and fair economy, examine the nature of money in economic history, resuming the famous analysis of M. Mauss on gift, and K. Polanyi on ancient trades and traditional exchange systems and instruments used in ancient societies, in order to change the concept of universalistic functions of money, and in an overall plan for de-commodification of society. This project is implemented by different kinds of organizations and associations, representing the embryo of a new political paradigm and cultural change, which are experimenting new forms of production, distribution, remuneration, and

relationship between producers and buyers, in the context of food sovereignty. The author, quoting some practical examples (such as, Gas, Des, CSA, Campi Aperti, Amap, Genuino Clandestino...) seems to confirm the strategic awareness of these movements and of their concrete semiotic operations.

5. Finally, reversing Saussure's comparison, can we consider economics as a language? Can we get rid of every ideological claim on the scientific nature of economics, to consider it only a complex set of arbitrary social conventions, coherent by construction? Certainly, this would not be the point of view of a scholar in economics: economics is real. It expresses a historic, anthropologic condition without which society seems not possible. Given that, even a scholar in economics could agree on its conventional side, reflecting on its deontic logic. Laws, and not "Trust", create the market as a juridical space, regulating contracts, financial products, credit. An assumption of economic science such as the "perfect competition" is just fiction: it is not guaranteed by the invisible hand of market, but by the visible hammer of anti-trust laws. In this sense, the economic sphere is a universe of meaning which is arbitrarily issued by conventional laws.

On the other hand, there is an epistemic side of economics too. Economics is a form of knowledge about a game in which players can design their own tactics and strategies. Economic knowledge can be taught, and is diffused among the population. Economics links these two modal systems: deontic (what I can do; what I have to do); and epistemic (what I know how to do) fixing the boundaries of the player's freedom (what I want to do). Thus the economic notion of value, which definition has always been problematic, can be reduced to semiotic modal values. Economics is a modal device, linking knowledge, duty, power, and will. This definition merges Greimas and Fontanille's (1991) notion of device with Foucault's (1997) one. The discursive formations on economics represents its mythical side: they map the ideal rationality of the liberal man onto the real economic universe. Books, scientific papers, articles, represent the manifestation of the effort to impose a series of immanent economic categories to the public, to train it: this is the necessary premise to the effectiveness of economic discourse, to its rhetoric agency.

If liberal economics is a convention, then it is not "true". Truth is simply not relevant because economics is not a science: it is a technique to ensure the systemic governmentality. Otherwise, how could economics have survived to the different economic crisis that its knowledge provoked, or did not avoid, and could not resolve? Independently from its credibility, Economics regulates social life independently from the government and much more pervasively than every possible government. It is not a case if

Foucault (2004) notices that the “invisible hand” can be opposed to the theories of the sovereign.

6. This is the frame (and the third section of this special Issue) into which it is possible to reconstruct some local narrative structures which define the behavior of the players. In her paper Tiziana Barone suggests how the brands try to be in disjunction with the crisis operating tactics: some of them close shops and fire people; some of them open temporary or pop-up stores, which are the object of an interesting analysis on the relation between economic discourse and space. Thus, semiotics can be useful to analyze the economic discourses from the brand’s point of view, a narration in which the workforce seems absent; or, on the contrary, it can assume a critical point of view to deconstruct liberal ideology. In Sorrentino’s paper we find an interesting reconstruction of Foucault’s point of view on liberal economics. In particular, Foucault shows how liberal discourses avoid the question about the nature of the workforce, to focus on the fact that workforce produces an income, so it is a capital. This eliminates in principle Marx’s distinction between capital and work and the forced conclusion of class conflict. The worker is described as a “positive” automaton: she (or he) is not an alienating woman or man, but a competent machine. The human capital becomes the object of the Chicago School of economics. This definition is compared by Sorrentino to Foucault’s reconstruction of the technologies applied to the bodies and aimed to the production and to the disciplinary apparatus. Starting from this point the author turns his attention to the new technological instruments and softwares which are used to optimize human resources. These instruments deepen the disciplinary technology of the “examination”, thus conflicting with the principal ideological assumption of liberal economics, which is freedom. Moving from similar premises – the promise of a secular salvation through the market, and the optimization of collective and private interest, Vander Casaqui analyzes the paradoxes of social entrepreneurship with reference to such authors as Boltanski and Beck. Vander Casaqui reconstructs the basis of social entrepreneurship’s ideology (disruptive innovation, progress and marketing) which seems to become hegemonic in the future of Brazil.



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