Magical thinking and discursive contagion during the COVID-19 pandemic

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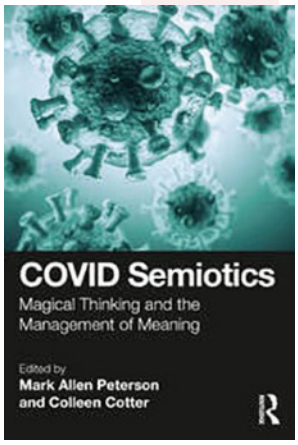

Mark Allen Peterson and Colleen Cotter
COVID Semiotics:
Magical Thinking and the Management of Meaning
New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2024, 188 pp. € 36.54
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The COVID-19 pandemic was, as Eric Landowski (2021:87) accurately described it, a "total crisis of sense," meaning "a general upheaval in knowledge, beliefs, expectations, and value systems." In response to this crisis of sense, from the early months of 2020, scholars from various disciplines concerned with discourse, language, meaning, and social practice began studying the many phenomena linked to the (at the time unfolding) health emergency. These studies demonstrate that, besides being a biological and natural event, the COVID-19 pandemic was above all a sociocultural phenomenon, constructed in and through discourse and on different media supports and platforms.

The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to societies prompted different ways to manage the resulting crisis of sense. As Landowski (2021:89) claimed, "even if, biologically, everyone is dealing with the same microorganism, the way it challenges us, how we experience and respond to it, varies enormously". In a similar line of thought, but more than 20 years earlier, Charles E. Rosenberg (1989:2) wrote in a 1989 paper on epidemics that "just as a playwright chooses a theme and manages plot development, so a particular society constructs its characteristic response to an epidemic.

The book COVID Semiotics: *Magical Thinking and the Management of Meaning*, published by Routledge in 2024, was edited

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by Mark Allen Peterson, Professor of Anthropology and Global and Intercultural Studies at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, US, and Colleen Cotter, Professor of Media Linguistics at Queen Mary University of London, UK. The book is a representative example of the academic work produced since the early months of 2020 that seeks to understand and unveil the processes of sense and meaning-making during the pandemic years. In fact, given the book's broad and somewhat ambiguous title – *COVID Semiotics* –, its subtitle helps indicate its thematic focus and intended readership.

The book comprises an introduction, six analytical chapters, and a conclusion. Its twelve authors are researchers and scholars in linguistics, language studies, and anthropology, based in or affiliated to UK or US institutions. Each chapter centers on a specific case study and addresses some form of magical thinking, which editors define as a sociolinguistic phenomenon consisting of "heterodox or alternative causal explanations that are used instead of orthodox socially sanctioned authoritative rational explanations" (p. 171). Moreover, they claim that magical thinking "allows people to explain the world in ways we believe it should be, or must be, based on our social and culturally shaped subjectivities rather than on rigorous inferences from experimentation and aggregated empirical evidence" (p. 171).

In the Introduction, titled "COVID-19, Semiotics, and Magical Thinking", editors Mark Allen Peterson and Colleen Cotter introduce some of the book's key concepts, such as *semiotics, pandemic, magical thinking,* and *contagion*. These are retaken in a helpful glossary, which is included at the end of the book and aids in understanding some of the concepts shared across the different chapters. Peterson and Cotter indicate that the book focuses on *magical thinking* and hence is "a study of how people create meaning out of science in their everyday lives" (p. 3). Moreover, they explain that the tools that authors use "for exploring, interpreting, and understanding these phenomena are derived from linguistics, pragmatics, and semiotics more generally" (p. 3).

Curiously, for a book called *COVID Semiotics*, the introduction's section on semiotics does not cite or mention a single theoretical reference. The editors define semiotics as "the scientific study of how people communicate through *signs*, things that stand for something else to someone in some context" (p. 3). However, key figures in the field are noticeably absent: C. S. Peirce is mentioned only once, and the work of Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge on images is mentioned in one of the chapters. There are no signs of R. Barthes, U. Eco, A. J. Greimas, or J. Lotman, let alone of more recent semioticians, many of whom have studied the semiotics of the pandemic. A single reference to Ferdinand de Saussure was found upon a detailed search.

Nor are special issues of semiotics journals cited, such as *Punctum* 7(1), "Semiotics of contagion: Models and media in a synergistic epidemic" (edited by Gary Genosco, 2021); *Degrés* 182-183, "Crise sanitaire et marqueurs sémiotiques. La variation" (edited by André Helbo, 2020), or the dossier "La pandémie: hassard ou signification?" (edited by Eric Landowski, in 2020, and included in the first issue of *Acta Semiotica*).

This raises questions about the editors' understanding of "COVID Semiotics", the name they chose for the book's title. Perhaps "magical thinking" and "contagion" would have been more helpful choices for the title to guide readers on the book's content and approach. While the studies included do address sense and meaning-making, and are therefore of interest to semioticians, they are not approached from the discipline we could call *Semiotics*, with a capital S, with its specific concepts, theories, models, and analytical instruments, but rather from other language-based approaches to discourse, sense, and meaning. This reflects the existing challenges of delineating what Semiotics consists of and does as a specific discipline, even if it is clear what the semiotic dimension of social phenomena is.

Despite this issue, the six chapters are insightful, well-written, and well-documented contributions to understanding the sense and meaning-making dynamics and practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on magical thinking and discursive contagion. As the editors write in the introduction, "the case studies described in this book offer concrete descriptions and analyses through which to think about these issues, and to consider the place of science, magic, and meaning in modern life" (p. 13). They conceive magical thinking as "a semiotic and sociopragmatic operation, which involves the deliberate, although perhaps not fully intentional, effort to maintain ideologies that obscure or erase orthodox or accepted notions of facts- on- the- ground while presenting participants in the discourse with a seductive illusion of safety and control, an inhabitable stance from which to view a pandemic or other dangerous circumstances with relative equanimity" (p. 9).

In Chapter 1, titled "'Culling the Herd': Discourses of COVID-19 Denial among the Irish at Home and Abroad", linguistic anthropologist E. Moore Quinn presents fieldwork conducted in Massachusetts, USA, and Irish towns. Through everyday conversations with Irish and Irish American men in a variety of settings, Quinn explores parallels between their views about the pandemic and the denialist rhetoric of Donald Trump, expressed in statements such as that it would "disappear like a miracle" and would eventually "go away". Quinn concludes that "the language of COVID-19 hesitancy, denial, and refusal was echoed and publicly reiterated" (p. 33).

Chapter 2, "'Crown Jesus, Not the Virus': COVID-19 Denial, Catholic Conspiracist Thinking, and Rightwing Nationalist Populism in Poland", written by Dominika Baran, Associate Professor of English and Linguistics at Duke University, examines conspiracy discourse and magical thinking around COVID-19 in Poland, with a focus on the Catholic Church and ultraconservatives within it. Baran demonstrates that this type of conspiracist narratives aligns with Polish right-wing politics and integrates "ideas from globally circulating COVID-denying and anti-vaccine discourses […], as well as other seemingly unrelated ultraconservative discourses including anti- genderism and anti-ecologism" (p. 41). Her departure point is the YouTube series created by ultraconservative Salesian priest Reverend Dominik Chmielewski, where the slogan "Crown Jesus, not the virus" used in the chapter's title originates. Baran

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concludes that "the COVID-19 pandemic presented a new opportunity for Poland's Catholic Church to position itself as the defender of the Polish nation, and to reinvigorate nationalist sentiments around Polish identity as inherently Catholic" (p. 59).

In Chapter 3, "COVID-19 and the Middle East: Social Media Analysis", Camelia Suleiman, Ayman Mohamed, and Amr Madi present a comparative analysis of discourse related to the pandemic in three Facebook groups from Egypt, Jordan, and East Jerusalem. Their study demonstrates that "Facebook content reflects users' social and political imaginaries, reflecting contextual realities of their lived experience under different political regimes" (p. 62). Moreover, they conclude that "the different localities and political cultures allow for variations in how the memes express public discourse of COVID-19" (p. 84).

Chapter 4, "The Use of Memes in Communication about COVID-19 in a Chinese Online Community", by Songyan Du and Adrian Yip, draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar to study meme creation and circulation on Zhihu, a Chinese platform, which "facilitates knowledge sharing by encouraging anyone, including subject matter experts, to provide high-quality answers to user- generated questions" (p. 91). The authors focus on the sense-making dynamics of entextualization and resemiotization on the platform and propose a model for decoding how visual and textual resources are mobilized by Chinese "netizens" in meme production and reproduction. They conclude that "meme producers have the social power to legitimately and competently reuse and recycle semiotic resources in their creative work" (p. 104).

In Chapter 5, "My Body My Choice: Magical Thinking and Discourses of Bodily Autonomy in Anti-Mask Rhetoric", Louis Strange – Lecturer in Sociolinguistics in English Language and Linguistics at the University of Glasgow – draws on the concept of discursive grafting to study how anti-mask rhetorics appropriate pro-choice slogans and discourse. Strange claims that "anti-mask advocates appropriate the bodily autonomy discourse" (p. 110) and examines how the slogan "My Body My Choice", closely identified with pro-choice and abortion rights campaigners, was used by the anti-mask political right to produce sense. This supposes a contradiction, considering that they often oppose abortion rights. In her analysis, Strange draws on the distinction between progressive and reactionary strains of neoliberalism to contextualize and explain this discursive move.

In chapter 6, "Social Signage: Collective Responsibility in Public Retail Space", Colleen Cotter and Matilda Vokes study social signage practices during the pandemic in a selection of shops from East London to demonstrate "how commerce and public-health messaging intertwined during the pandemic and affected everyday actions in one corner of the UK" (p. 126). Their comparative study shows different strategies sustaining social signage, making of this semiotic practice "a point of comparison to understand how action, reaction, solidarity, and some 'magical thinking' about what is safe […] can be differently realized and mean different things across different contexts" (p. 126). As the authors demonstrate, these practices evidence the interplay between "a

consumer-capitalist-business economic frame" and that of the pandemic (p. 154), and hence reflect varying cultural logics and degrees of magical thinking about risk.

The book concludes with a chapter titled "Semiotics in the Classroom and Beyond", co-authored by editor Mark Allen Peterson and Judith M. S. Pine. In the chapter, the authors share and reflect on some anecdotes related to mask-wearing in classrooms and other spaces, invitations to get vaccinated, and the use of signs in online media. Drawing on these examples, they argue that "semiotics offers a powerful set of tools that can be used to analyze one's own life and situation", and that it can "be employed to better understand social and cultural change" (p. 162). Peterson and Pine claim that magical thinking can be harmful and toxic and argue that "it becomes vital that we reflect carefully on what happens to meanings and contexts in conditions of crisis" (p. 166). This evidences their critical stance towards their object of study: these structures can be recognized, "disrupted and disassembled, aided by a clear-eyed, theoretically informed, semiotic gaze making space for hope and possibility" (p. 166).

To sum up, COVID Semiotics: *Magical Thinking and the Management of Meaning* is a valuable and timely contribution, particularly thanks to its general approach to sense and meaning-making, and most notably to the diversity of case studies it presents. These are informative and rich empirical materials for scholars interested in the dynamics of sense and discourse of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, this reviewer wishes the book had been available when working on his semiotic study of the pandemic (Moreno, 2024), as its insights would have been highly valuable and relevant to that research. While the book might interest linguists, discourse analysts, and anthropologists, scholars trained in Semiotics, understood as a discipline with well-established theoretical foundations, concepts, and analytical instruments, may find its scope and grounds somewhat limited.

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