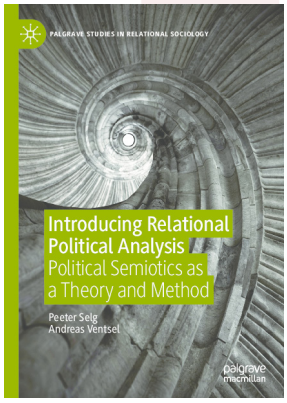
Political Semiotics – Democratic Normativity

BY: **Ulf Hedetoft**



Peeter Selg and Andreas Ventsel

Introducing Relational Political Analysis. Political Semiotics as a Theory and Method

Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 313 pp + Index. ISBN 9783030487799 (HBK), also in PBK, EPUB.

This is a book about wedding semiotics and political analysis in new and refreshing ways. The two authors aptly name it "political semiotics" – an alternative way of approaching and analyzing political processes and political communication. As they remark towards the end of the book, it is "an attempt to outline an approach to the political that would be relational throughout" (313).

In fact, "relations" are crucial to understanding the theory and the method they propose, which, as we know, is also the case in foundational semiotic theories of both the Saussurean and Peircean kind. A sign is a relational entity; for Saussure, a combination of *signifié* and *signifiant*; for Peirce, involving *sign*, *interpretant*, and *object* in an ongoing and, in principle, a process of endless semiosis.

The authors clarify their relationalist perspective by citing Terence Ball's hammer-and-nail image:

> from the[a] hammer is a hammer because it has certain uses or functions, e.g., driving nails. What a hammer is, is defined relationally. Qua physical object or body, a hammer does not even exist. A thing is not a hammer unless and until it is used as a hammer, which is to say, put to human uses (driving nails, building

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> shelters, etc.) by human beings (carpenters). *A hammer is what it is by virtue of its being a constitutive element in an ensemble of relations* and not merely by virtue of its size, shape, weight, or other physical characteristics. (Ball 1978: 105)

The relationship between hammer and nail is constitutive of the meaning of 'hammer.' The link is not causal, and the hammer cannot be seen as a stand-alone and isolated object. As the authors repeat over and over, hammer and nail can be considered separately but not as being separate. Throughout, they make a distinction between self-actionalism, inter-actionalism, and trans-actionalism, clearly privileging the latter. However, the above quote also allows us a glimpse into the possible over-interpretation of their view of the world. "A thing is not a hammer unless and until it is used as a hammer, which is to say, put to human uses" just can't be true. The hammer is, after all, a separate thing that can be (mis)used for some other functions (killing people, destroying property) or just left in the toolbox without being put to any use at all. It is still a hammer.

This stretching of the relational approach becomes even more evident when the authors state that "from the relational perspective, substantialism would be like imagining winds that do not blow" (23) and continue by averring that "[f]rom the relational perspective imagining the As and Bs as existing somehow prior to the relations in which they are constituted, it would be as absurd as imagining a non-blowing wind" (29). That would indeed be absurd, since 'blowing' is not just constitutive of 'wind' but an inherent property of 'wind.' Their imagined 'substantialism' thus builds on a false premise, a misinterpretation, which may be common, but does not match the reality of things, neither in the object world nor in the world of meanings. There is, in other words, a substantial difference between the constitutive relationship of, on the one hand, hammer and nail, and, on the other, wind and blowing. We can hold a hammer and not have access to a nail, but it is impossible to imagine a wind that does not blow. The authors are aware of this; still, they cite it as an example of their approach to social and political reality.

The book consists of nine chapters and a conclusion, taking us from the "relational turn in the social sciences," via "relational approach to the political: power, governance, and democracy," through "three concepts of semiotics," "a framework of political semiotics: political logic and the semiosphere" and "political semiotics and the study of the political: power, governance, and democracy," onwards to a core chapter on abductive methodology: "political semiotics as a constitutive explanation and abductive research logic," while wrapping up with two chapters (8 and 9) on the application of the proposed theory and method on empirical processes: "From methodology to methods and applications: introducing political form analysis" and "application of relational political analysis: political semiotic explanation of

the constitution of digital threats." Finally, the conclusion addresses "the subject and agenda for relational, political analysis." Altogether some 300-odd pages of thorough, detailed, logically structured, and well-referenced exposé, which is ambitious, innovative, even to some extent ground-breaking, and is well-versed in classical and recent sociological and political literature.

The book's principal theoretical ambition is to forge a happy mix of the Essex School of political analysis (building mainly on the theories of Mouffe and Laclau) and the Tartu-Moscow School of semiotic analysis. Although the former never accepted semiotics as a valid approach to political reality – in fact, they rejected it outright – Selg and Ventsel think they did so for the wrong reasons and find a host of common denominators tying the two theories together, which mutually enrich both and give them added interpretive weight. The concepts of 'empty signifier' and 'hegemony,' in particular, derived from the Essex School's discursive approach, are convincingly brought to interact with Roman Jakobson's communication theory and Yuri Lotman's semiosphere. And the Laclauian abstractness as regards empirical analysis benefits from the combination with semiotic and communicative precision, highlighted especially well in Chapter 9, which convincingly analyzes the security risks connected with the widely publicized Estonian ID cards scandal in 2017. Nevertheless, we might consider the possibility that we could have achieved the gains obtained by this strategy of combining two otherwise incompatible theories with less intellectual bravado. Mouffe and Laclau are interesting but not indispensable to the effort of constructing political semiotics, to which the late inclusion and discussion of Critical Discourse Analysis – at least as pertinent – testifies.

Another relevant inspiration, only marginally related to the Essex School (through their mutual Gramscian background), is Bob Jessop's theory of 'metagovernance,' which comes close to Selg and Ventsel's notion of 'transactional governance.' However, where one might have expected that the theory of transactionalism would be seen as a replacement of and improvement to 'self-actional' and 'inter-actional' theories of the state, this is not so. Transactionalism is instead seen as an addition to the well-known theorems of political science:

> Jessop's point, however, is that governance in a narrow sense or inter-active governance is bound to fail too, and what he calls *metagovernance* is a response to governance failure. Of course, we must clarify that the failure he is talking about is basically a failure at governing wicked problems. We unpack this connection below, but here it suffices to recall again that many societal problems are 'tame' rather than 'wicked,' and therefore, both self-active as well as inter-active forms of governance might not necessarily fail in addressing them. (…) Inter-active governance fails to address wicked problems due to various

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> "structural contradictions, strategic dilemmas" (Jessop 2002: 240) inherent in it. But we could even say in a general analytic manner – concerning the nature of social reality as such – that "given the growing structural complexity and opacity of the social world, failure is the most likely outcome of most attempts to govern it' (Jessop 2002: 106)." (69-70)

Thus, Selg and Ventsel distinguish between simple, complex, and 'wicked' problems. Self-actional and inter-actional approaches "might not necessarily fail" when it comes to analyzing 'tame' and 'soluble' problems, but this does not apply to the third group of 'wicked' problems, which they define as follows:

Wicked problems are usually characterized as being undefinable; as having constantly changing background conditions; as being often comprehended retroactively after a particular solution has been implemented; as bringing along other problems (often wicked too) whenever there is an attempt to solve them. (70)

These problems cannot be solved but are instead 'de-problematized' or 'de-politicized' by being displaced to another semiotic sphere – more on this in a moment.

First, however, it is essential to stick with the relativization of the theory of relational transactionalism that seems to emerge from the above quotes. Standard approaches "might not necessarily fail," we learn; on the other hand, the social world is increasingly complex and opaque, so failure is likely to result from most attempts to govern it. In other words, transactionalism would seem to be the most appropriate analytical approach – possibly to every single problem? Moreover, we have been told that the entire world is constitutively 'relational' in all its aspects, modes, and variations. This epistemological uncertainty about the ontological status of Selg and Ventsel's semiotic approach to the political world characterizes the entire *exposé* and could do with some additional conceptual clarification. Are "standard approaches" sufficient for specific problems, or can the whole world be better analyzed using transactional theorems? The authors waver on this core issue, leaving the reader at a loss.

Oscillation also characterizes their use of abduction: "We argue that constitutive explanation entails abductive research logic that cannot be reduced to deductive hypotheses testing or inductive generalizations (…) it is in that sense that semiotics can be considered explanatory research. (…) abductive reasoning views theory and observations as interdependent rather than dependent or independent as do deductive and inductive forms of reasoning or logic" (216 and 228). However, they admit that "abduction can be used to put forth causal explanation too" (234), and while there is no reason to argue with their use of abduction as a methodology with which to open the semiotic Pandora's Box, their unflinching nexus between theory and method is more baffling. The abductive structure they use is the well-known Peircean

triad: the surprising fact C is observed; but if A were true, C would be a matter of course; hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true (p. 230). However, as many philosophers and semioticians have pointed out, this is, at best, the beginning of the research process. First, how do we come to think of A at all? Second, A might just be one possible explanation out of many, so there is no reason to believe that A is true. Third, step two is itself a deductive approach. Fourth, to verify or falsify this hypothesis, we need inductively sampled evidence.

And finally, fifth, it is doubtful that science can or should be reduced to a question of seeing the world as a "matter of course." Semiotic webs of signification and Peirce's view of semiotics as infinite semiosis support this. Karl Marx rightly noted that all science would be superfluous if the surface and the essence of things coincided; in other words, if the actual composition of the world were immediately visible. Unfortunately, scholarship requires hard work and deep thinking, whether we use inductive, abductive, or deductive methods – or better, all of them together.

This is, fortunately, what the authors do when analyzing actual political problems (chapters 8 and 9), as the Estonian Bronze Night affair of 2007 (see 250 ff.), the Migrant Crisis of 2015 (see 256 ff.), or the ID card scandal of 2017 in Estonia (chapter 9). This they do while stressing that their investigations focus on political form analysis centered around the problematization and de-problematization of 'wicked' issues and on 'democratic'/metonymic versus totalitarian/metaphoric forms of communication. The first is replete with inductive facts, the second with deductive hypotheses, while the third contains all three approaches – spiced with securitization theory and CDA. Let's take a closer look at this third and most thorough analysis, pivoting around the public communication and the ensuing public image of the Estonian ID card and e-threat scandal.

> At the beginning of September 2017, the Estonian public was notified that the almost 760,000 identity cards of the new type (i.e., issued from October 2014 until October 2017), produced by Gemalto, have been identified as having a theoretical vulnerability in their software. (280)

Thus starts the chronological account of the scandal, which developed over November and December 2017. The private company responsible for producing the cards and state institutions (government, police, security forces) mutually blamed each other for the security lapse, more and more harshly as the case unfolded. After a thorough account of the events, Selg and Ventsel acutely note the following:

> Metalingual problematization was dominant regarding the journalistic language used for mediating the crisis. (…) An important aspect in representing

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> e-threats is the expression of their urgency, or in other words, the way they are depicted as in need of a fast and forceful reaction. This, in turn, presupposes the outlining of terrifying future scenarios which illustrate the realization of threats (Hansen and Nissenbaum 2009, p. 1164). Another significant rhetorical device in representing the potential consequences of cyber threats is the construction of analogies to tragic historical events, for example, 9/11, Pearl Harbor, or natural disasters (Jarvis et al. 2016, p. 620). A third discursive strategy with which to emphasize the unavoidability of threats is based on charging utterances with emotions. Especially negative emotions attract the public's attention and intensify the sense of fear. This strategy is present, for example, in expressions of concern or in condemnations of certain developments, in the usage of value judgments (e.g., *terrible, dreadful, dangerous*), or the employment of vocabulary with negative tones (e.g., *problem, conflict, damage*). (290)

Now, having thus framed the problem in emotive language, the two authors ask what for them is the crucial question, i.e., that public communication did not pivot around "referential/deliberative communication since containing e-threats can only work successfully if the e-threats are somehow defined" (294), and, true to their abductive thinking, set out to unearth "what would make such a situation an unsurprising fact or a matter of course." In other words, why did emotive, conative, metaphorical language dominate the public discourse rather than down-to-earth, technical, metonymic explanations?

They answer that if we look at it from the point of view of the Estonian cultural context rather than as an isolated e-problem, the issue becomes a "matter of course." Following independence, Estonian national identity has to a significant extent been constructed around the country's reputation as an advanced e-country and "e-Estonia, as an essential anchor of Estonians' identity, is subverted as a whole through the reputation damage stemming from the media coverage of the ID-card crisis and replaced by national identity as a securitized reference object" (302). Reputation damage becomes an 'empty signifier,' and the 'problem' is apparently 'de-problematized.'

However, I allow myself to question whether 'de-problematization' captures the actual process, which seems to be one of problem-shifting rather than de-problematization. Rather than solving the most immediate problem, this is displaced to another arena and crops up as another much more serious (existential) issue.

Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that the authors have produced a convincing analysis and explanation of the e-threat events and their treatment by journalists, spin doctors, and political actors. However, whether the issue of 'reputation damage' is a simple 'matter of course' is more doubtful. It rests on insights into the relationship between small and more powerful states, on knowledge about national identity and its basically

affective constitution, the semiotic interaction between (signs of) people and (signs of) state within a given social and historical structure, and hence the crucial interdependence of material and ideal constituents in the construction of national identities.

On the other hand, perhaps it is not surprising that the authors see it as a matter of course, for they generally tend to overlook the materiality of the problems they analyze. They approvingly cite Alexander Wendt for arguing that "money, the state, and international society are made largely of ideas," just like "social things or kinds" (225) – in other words, the human world in its entirety – and R. A. W. Rhodes for contending that "symbols do not simply 'represent' or reflect political 'reality,' they actively constitute that reality" (224). As the authors programmatically state: "This is why the political, which we propose to analyze as hegemony with its dimensions of power, governance, and democracy is first and foremost for us an issue of different rhetorical translation strategies that are realized in communication (*public* communication as we specify below)" (174).

Selg and Ventsel's semiotic universe is not just interpretive, but thoroughly idealistic and normative at the same time, its own overriding 'empty signifier' consisting of an idealized vision of (metonymic, deliberative) *democracy*, in Laclau's words, the "universal representative of the signifying system as a whole" (151). Democratic communication would seem to be entirely rational, deliberative, and non-emotional, in contrast to the poetic, symbolic displacement of wicked problems in forms of communication that tend to be either populist or downright totalitarian. Their semiotics has a decidedly Habermasian twinge. Whether one sympathizes with this tendency is a matter of taste. Personally, I am somewhat skeptical.

For a book based mainly on theories of linguistic sign (though applied to the domain of politics), it is, unfortunately, linguistically uneven. It is replete with linguistic omissions, prepositional repetitions, awkward expressions, misprints, and erroneous English. A few examples, chosen at random. "All this enabled to subvert" (123); "…lets itself perceived as meaningful" (124); "opposes to…" (125); "insist a certain trajectory" (127); "semiotics is primary the study of…"; "by putting put forth" (173); "with which we already got acquainted with…" (175); "…and tend trans-act and constitute new combinations" (178); "Camping slogan" (for 'campaigning') (187); "Schumpter" (for 'Schumpeter'); "that the latter ought discern" (192); "In this chapter, we want to bring to the prominence…" (267); "an hyper-securitizing style…" (292); "Our journey continued in Chapter 4 with an excursus to the neglection of semiotics" (311), etc. Some passages are fine, but these examples of sloppiness, oversight, or awkwardness are a real nuisance and leave the reader with an impression of a work that lacks the final finishing touches. I do not blame the authors for possibly not having a perfect command of the English language – and, incidentally, the errors do not interfere with the basic understanding of the points the authors want to offer – but the publisher should have paid more attention to detail in the language editing process.

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I have noted some critical comments on this volume. Nevertheless, it can be recommended, both for its laudable ambition to demarcate the route towards political semiotics proper and for its logical and meticulous way of structuring the *exposé*. We should add the comprehensive and thoughtful insights into the literature on semiotics, particularly and social and political theory, secondarily. The authors realize that, in a sense, this is a work in progress: "The journey in the pages of this book is, of course, a beginning (…). As an introduction, it is also an invitation to discussion and a call for criticism and further development in all its aspects – conceptual and empirical" (313). We should appreciate the intellectual contribution of the authors and, as I have done in this review, accept their invitation to discuss and further their path-breaking semiotic undertaking.

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AUTHOR

Ulf Hedetoft Professor of International Studies at the SAXO Institute, Faculty of Humanities, University of Copenhagen, Denmark.