

The semiotics of the pandemic

BY: Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos
Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou



André Helbo (ed.)

Crise sanitaire et marqueurs sémiotiques. La variation.

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The special issue of *Degrés* devoted to the Covid-19 pandemic is both timely and exciting. It is a pleasure to see a contemporary social issue addressed by semioticians with solid theoretical foundations. The articles are of such quality that they invite us to take up the authors' challenge and, while presenting their contributions, continue the discussion comparatively and critically.

1. Theory and variation

Next to the issue's main title, André Helbo has added the subtitle "variation," a rather broad concept related to different aspects of this special issue. First, it appears in connection with the concept of a *system*. Paul Bouissac's article, focusing almost exclusively on semiotic theory, oscillates between four different kinds of variation: synchronic (such as different regional accents) and diachronic variation, both forms of *transformation*; lexical differences between languages, which in the case of related languages are transformations, but when referring to different language families are *parallel* and non-communicating phenomena; and variation as the moving force of *evolution*, which is his central theme.

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By: Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos
Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou

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In his introduction, Helbo approaches variation from another point of view, passing from the system to its use, i.e., *discourses*: first, its use in the form of texts, whence he points out the mechanism of de- and re-contextualization, that is, transformation through intertextuality, as well as the appearance with the pandemic of *new texts*, those of confinement – on the variation of the texts on the pandemic, see also Fernando Andacht. On a more general level, Eric Landowski studies the variation of categories and classes of discourses. On a more abstract level, Jacques Fontanille discusses various forms of verifactuality, the processes by which truth is established.

Helbo adds the different *situations* in communication, such as those of production or consumption of texts. With Jean-Jacques Boutaud, we have a variation of *practices*. Finally, Helbo, through a reference to Paolo Fabbri, touches yet another aspect of variation, still situational but concerning *theory* instead of texts: the variation of semiotic models, which according to Fabbri should be adapted according to the temporal, geographical, and social situation.

Bouissac focuses on variation from a biological perspective – for Darwin, it is variation in reproduction, while for Lamarck, variation is due to the inheritance of acquired characteristics. He suggests that Darwinian evolution is a hidden assumption of Saussure's theory because Saussure considers time as the essence of language. Bouissac is undoubtedly correct in pointing out that time (in the form of tradition) is a factor that Saussure takes seriously into account because, for Saussure, time indeed acts on *langue*. Time is a factor of its mutability and, in conjunction with society, also explains its immutability. Time "*permettra aux forces sociales s'exerçant sur [la langue] de développer leurs effets*" (Saussure 1971: 113). These "social forces" are at the foundation of semiotics; for the "*phénomène sémiologique*," "*la collectivité sociale et ses lois est un de ses éléments internes et non externes*" (Saussure 2002: 290; on the above, see also Saussure 1971: 104, 107, 108, 111-13). *Sémiologie* follows the laws of *la collectivité sociale* and not natural laws, and the same is true for temporal changes of *langue*. Here, variation is not attached to any kind of evolution but to *social* movement, transformation – one of Lévi-Strauss's key concepts. And, as we know, the radical essence of Saussure's theory is neither diachrony nor parole, but synchrony and the systemic nature of *langue*.

This fundamental position of Saussure offers the real explanation of the quotations from Rudolf Engler that Bouissac uses to support the un-Saussurean position that Saussure believes in the "*autonomie ontologique [of language] par rapport à l'espèce humaine*." From the semiological point of view, *langue* is for Saussure the foundation of thought. Still, from the processual point of view, this foundation is grounded in society by articulating semiotics with social dynamics. We could, then, agree with Bouissac's statement that humans "*sont sous l'emprise des langues*" but to interpret this as an indication of the ontological autonomy of language would lead us to identify *langue* with Lévi-Strauss's a-temporal, a-historical, super-synchronic unconscious matrix, which inspired later

poststructuralist ideas of the dissolution of 'man' through a double regression from the 'I' of an individual or a culture to the 'us-matrix' of humanity and then from 'us' to biology/nature. This continuous regression ends, for Lévi-Strauss, with the integration of life within its physicochemical origins (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 326-28, 347).

If Saussure is Darwinian, Peirce becomes Hegelian. Bouissac relates Peircean theory to three kinds of variation: *tychastic* or *tychism*, *anancastic* or *anancism*, and *agapastic* or *agapism*. Actually, Peirce's philosophical evolutionism, intended to account for the origin and development of the cosmos, is summarised in three classes, each including three types: (a) propositions about modes (here belong the above second terms of Bouissac); (b) modes of evolution (including Bouissac's first terms), about which Peirce knew it is difficult to avoid some overlapping with the actual evolutionary process; and (c) synthesized doctrines of evolution, which include the theorizations of the second class. Bouissac is correct in pointing out that the first class is Darwinian, but relating the second class to Lamarck comes up against Vincent G. Potter's view, who connects Lamarckism to the third class (for the above, see Potter 1997: 177-181, 185).

It is not without interest to point out the close connection of this typology to Peirce's three categories. His modes of evolution follow a precise order, just as the categories, and correspond respectively to Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness (Potter 1997: 182, 186). This correspondence supports Bouissac's view on the (non-) relation between Saussurean and Peircean theory, namely that "*Malgré les efforts déployés parfois pour concilier les deux, leurs approches contrastées sont fondées sur des ontologies et des épistémologies incompatibles.*" Fernando Andacht's article allows us to identify one primary reason for this incompatibility. Following Peirce, Andacht differentiates between the immediate object and the dynamic object. The former is one of the well-known summits of Peirce's structure of the sign (in the broader sense, not that of the *representamen*). Of the latter, Andacht writes that "the dynamic object is the object as it really is regardless of how or what it is represented to be in any given representation of it" (our italics). The immediate object is an incomplete facsimile of the dynamic object, the latter being the *object* that generates a chain of signs. The sign aims to arrive at a full understanding of an object. In other words, the dynamic object is Firstness, the driving force for the production of semiosis. The Peircean theory is grounded in the referent, which is anathema to Saussurean (and Greimasian) theory, despite Eco's attempt to reconcile them (Eco 2000).

Finally, Bouissac (in an appeal to cognitivist theory) suggests that narrativity, and the ability to conceive of others as being similar to oneself, are evolutionary adaptations that developed because they enhance human ability to process and transmit information. He points out, however, that evolutionary adaptations also have potential risks. In the present pandemic situation, a convincing narrative coming from a source perceived as 'one of us' may, irrespective of its factuality, lead to catastrophic changes in individual and collective behavior.

2. The causes of the pandemic

Apart from Bouissac's article, we can distinguish three thematic groups in the *Degrés* articles: (a) a main group dealing with discourses on the pandemic, and two smaller groups on (b) the causes of the pandemic, inevitably raising ecological issues of an extra-semiotic nature, and (c) practices in response to the pandemic. There are also some reflections about another extra-semiotic topic, economics. Since there is a logical course from (b) to (a) to (c), we shall follow this order in our discussion.

Massimo Leone and Eric Landowski pose the question of causes. Leone's paper is an in-depth case study on the face but within a broader theoretical framework. Leone argues that the pandemic has forced us to wear a medical mask, like a muzzle; a muzzle is something we use on animals, which do not have faces in our conception, but humans are animals, and animals also have a face. Thus, the reference of Leone is to fauna and not to life forms such as viruses. He develops his argument along two axes, one linguistic and the other essentially philosophical, which joins semiotics on a high level of abstraction.

Leone analyses the words used in various languages to differentiate between the human and the animal face and argues that they simultaneously create a value hierarchy. The terms for the human face move in a semantic field focused on the eyes and the gaze, while for animals, the corresponding field focuses on the mouth or the nose. He assumes that this distinction is universal, something that we can also deduce from the plethora of examples he cites from dozens of languages, contemporary or ancient. Leone then turns to philosophy, particularly the phenomenology of Emmanuel Lévinas, pointing out that philosophy also sees the face as the essential distinction between humans and animals. While arguing that philosophy does not recognize either the animality of humans or the independent existence of the animal, he elegantly demolishes the anarchist discourse of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and ends with a look at Derrida's encounter with his cat in the essay *L'animal que donc je suis*.

Leone attributes the causes of the pandemic to this conception of the muzzle that we impose on the animal world, animated by an ideology – a semiotics – of exploitation of the environment served by technology, and assigns to semiotics the call for ecological change, thus participating in what the philosophers call environmental ethics. However, the exclusive focusing on ideological hegemony as the cause of environmental degradation cannot find an ally in Gramsci, as Leone wishes. Leone's discourse appears to be based on the idealist epistemological premise that our ideas shape the world, in total contrast to Gramsci's Marxism. Gramsci recognizes that there is such a thing as intellectual, moral, and political hegemony, but it is not self-generated. It is due to the hegemony of a dominant social class, emerging from the material forces of production (see Gramsci 1971: 12-13, 53, 57, 59, 180-81). In contemporary terms:

the degradation of the environment, which has increased exponentially starting in the mid-20th century, is not due to ideology in general but specifically to *capitalist ideology*, which did not suddenly appear on the scene but is the product of a particular socio-economic system, capitalism.

Even if there is a universal tendency to differentiate the human from the animal face semantically, it does not follow that this necessarily expresses a corresponding value hierarchy. It is not fortuitous that Leone refers to advanced technology, that is, contemporary societies. But in almost all precapitalist societies – by which we mean all Western societies before the Renaissance, both traditional, socially complex non-Western societies and the so-called primitive societies – the human relation to the animal world is far from obeying Leone's hierarchy, quite the opposite. Zoomorphic gods are found in many cultures, and totemism offers a striking example of societies' relation to animals. In his criticism of the concept of totemism in *Le totemisme aujourd'hui*, Lévi-Strauss writes that "*Les animaux du totémisme cessent d'être seulement ou surtout des créatures redoutées, admirées, ou convoitées*", to arrive at the famous formulation that "*les espèces naturelles ne sont pas choisies parce que 'bonnes à manger' mais parce que 'bonnes à penser'*" (Lévi-Strauss 1965: 128). And he opens the book as follows: "*Le totémisme est d'abord la projection hors de notre univers ... d'attitudes mentales incompatibles avec l'exigence d'une discontinuité entre l'homme et la nature, que la pensée chrétienne tenait pour essentielle*" (Lévi-Strauss 1965: 4).

3. The discourses on the pandemic

In his introduction, Helbo poses the question of the various discourses on the pandemic: media discourse, political discourse, scientific discourse, conversational discourse, persuasive, assertive, opacifying. He argues that discourses proliferate: we are swamped by information that we cannot verify. Discourses behave like the virus: messages 'go viral,' texts 'contaminate' each other until the boundaries are blurred between real and fictional, logic and feeling. The pandemic has transformed social media into meeting places. Still, communication on social media tends to be phatic, creating a sense of community rather than making verifiable statements about the world. Helbo concludes that there is a pressing need for semiotics, which as a discipline is concerned with the role of signification in society, to address the fundamental issues raised by the pandemic.

The article by Jacques Fontanille takes a great dive into the semiotic depths to answer the question triggered by the pandemic crisis of "post-truth," the canceling of the difference between true and false. The passage to these depths is carried out through a transition from static structural semiotics to dynamic processual semiotics. Fontanille

starts with the former and the well-known concept of veridiction, expressed in the opposition *being* vs. *seeming*. Here, the second-level semiotic square is constituted by the axis of contraries *secret* vs. *lie* (or, we would add, illusion) and the axis of contradiction by *truth* vs. *falsehood*. Fontanille argues that this structure covers only 'veridiction,' truth-speaking; to find how truths are *made*, we must proceed deeper, beyond enunciation, to the conditions and practices through which subjects conceive of their facts and construct their different worlds. For these processes, he coins the interesting concept of "verifactuality," founded on the practical interactions of a collectivity's "universe of meaning" and anchored in human experience. The construction of a "verifactual referent" is what allows us to assert the existence of a fact and found value judgments on it, enabling us to decide what we will believe and not believe.

To better understand Fontanille's epistemology in this article, we need to go back to his previous writings. For him, the experiential world (the sphere of the ontic horizon, belonging to Hjelmslev's substance and studied by Greimas and Fontanille's semiotics of passions) exists before subjects and objects acquire their identity. More specifically, we can insert Fontanille's view of verifactuality within the broader approach he has developed in an article he wrote with Didier Tsala-Effa (2017). In the latter, we find the proposal of a set of "methodological regimes," that is, levels of semiosis corresponding to different levels of immanence and recessing from signs to texts and objects, to practices and forms of life and, finally, to modes of existence, which comprise the deepest level. Different forms of life give rise to different subjective "worlds."

In the present paper, Fontanille uses Jakob von Uexküll's spatial concentric zones of the *Umwelt* as a model to construct these worlds, his "anthroposemiotic topology." This use is metaphorical since he refers to mental spaces while von Uexküll to physical spaces, but it is a legitimate metaphor. Fontanille formulates four verifactual worlds or spheres; in other words, four manners of operating in the truth-falseness domain. (a) The first is the familiar experiential world of "I" (*je*). Beyond this is (b) the world of "us" (*on*), which corresponds to von Uexküll's second zone, "*une extension plus ou moins dissociée de la demeure*" (12), more distant but with links to subjective experience and reciprocal interaction, that is, including both "us" and a more general environment. More distant still is (Ω) the world of "them" (*il*), the impersonal sphere of generalized exchange in which he situates scientific discourses, among other things. It contains various discourses, which the subject-I cannot verify through subjective experience or interaction with trusted others. Finally, there is (I) the world of "it" (*ça*), the "magical" sphere of imaginary, fictional or symbolic interactions, such as conspiracy theories. The process of verifactualisation, of deciding what to accept as true, begins in our own experience and extends beyond that to the reported experience of people we trust. This is why Fontanille defines his spheres in terms of interpersonal interaction: we trust people that we know.

The media diffuse the discourses of the two last worlds. Helbo rightly argues that the present crisis has resulted in a proliferation of various kinds of conflicting discourses, among which he names political discourse and media and scientific discourses. In the third world, we should differentiate between original scientific and political discourses recorded *in* the media and the media's elaboration on them and public opinion.¹

Fontanille's approach is close to symbolic interactionism, based, as it is, on the idea that meaning arises out of the social interactions of a person with other persons in society. The labels used for these spheres have a phenomenological (and hence psychological) hue. However, this must not mislead us because Fontanille's last three worlds refer to collectivities.²

The model leads Fontanille to some interesting observations. He invites us to imagine a "universe of meaning" in which all views are freely expressed and considered equally valid (in other words, something very close to the world of social media today). Such a universe of meaning lends itself to the proliferation of pseudo-knowledge, alternative interpretations, emotional opinions, collective passions, individual impulses, and a proliferation of different verifactual referents and "alternative facts," since it is impossible to agree on how facts are to be established.

For Fontanille, a possible solution to the problem is "the intuition of a sense of solidarity" between facts established in the different worlds of verifactuation (19). For this, he borrows from quantum physics the concept of "entanglement," that is, influence at a distance. The entanglement of the different worlds makes possible "navigation" and communication between them in a collective actant's universe of meaning. Their combination is, for Fontanille, the semiotic definition of the real world. It is also, as he remarks, the foundation of tolerance, as opposed to post-truth and totalitarian views. This is the theoretical framework Fontanille uses to understand the semiotization of Covid-19 and the conspiracy theories he opposes to scientific theories.

Fontanille's original and elaborate topological model seems to be generalizable since, instead of focusing on verifactuality, we may select any other deep semiotic process according to which a concept, such as ethics or aesthetics, is individually produced. The set of (and interaction between) these concepts, a "*credo*" grid, would thus constitute an individual worldview. It is socially improbable that these worldviews will be unique for each individual, and it is reasonable to expect the appearance of socio-semiotic groupings. Fontanille's proposal in this light would not be far from a semiotic theory of ideology, in the sociological sense, though different

¹ Given the above, Fontanille's model appears to be too dense, because such an addition leads to several parallel sub-spheres in the world of 'them.'

² Actually, this is also true for the sphere of "I", since the "I" is the vehicle of a cultural competence.

from a sociological theory of ideology, such as the one by Gramsci, which articulates ideology with and explains it by extra-semiotic factors.

Landowski, unlike Fontanille, is not concerned with the process of production of discourses (at the plane of substance) but focuses on already formed discourses (at the plane of the form) and formulates a very interesting typology of discourses on the pandemic. We note that this typology is not *the* typology of discourses since there are different possible more specific points of view on the pandemic discourses. It is, nevertheless, a strategic point of view since it focuses on the semiotic relation between humans and the virus.

Landowski begins by dividing discourses on the pandemic into two categories: discourses of *coincidence* that see the appearance of the virus as accidental, and discourses of *interaction*, perceiving it as the result of human actions. Coincidence is further divided into two classes, between which, according to Landowski, oscillate both the public and the politicians. The first is to prevent the danger through persuasion and/or changing habits (that is, planning), and the second is to accept the risk and change habits as little as possible. On the other hand, interaction implies the conception of the pandemic from a different viewpoint as a set of signifying practices. This conception is, for Landowski, located at the intersection of the natural sciences and ecological thinking. It is also divided into two classes. The first is the quest for understanding, which reveals a meaning, namely the partial responsibility of humans. The second is an adjustment, the inclusion of the virus in our lives, given the conciliation of interdependent forms of life, which for the author implies a radical approach to meaning, but is also the most difficult to implement.

At this point, Landowski meets Leone because conceiving the pandemic as a form of interaction between humans and the virus relates it to an eco-systemic crisis and hence to ecological ethics. Landowski himself oscillates, for a good reason, between the class of adjustment, which is his favorite, and *realpolitik*, admitting that "*le virus reste une puissance létale.*" To state this ambiguity in our own words, in the case of a tsunami or a volcanic eruption, the general recedes before the particular, good intentions before survival.

Landowski states that his model is general, but it can nevertheless illuminate the present crisis. We find this model in his discussion of Greimas's view on the teaching of semiotics, about which he complains that it is limited to the opposition *planning* vs. *accident*. To this category of coincidence, Landowski adds the category of interaction. He considers that his above "meaning regimes" overlap with Fontanille's modes of existence (Landowski 2017: for example 8-9, 27, 28).

On the analytical level, the typology proposed by Landowski is solid and convincing. He operates formally with the isotopy 'coincidence,' forming the relation of

contrariety of his semiotic square: *preventing the danger (planning)* vs. *accepting the risk (accident)*, and connects it, through the relations of contradiction, to the isotopy ‘interaction,’ forming the relation of sub-contraries *manipulation* vs. *adjustment*. These isotopies are combined into a well-formed semiotic square, completed by an equally well-formed second-level square.

However, parallel to the analysis of discourses runs an axiological rhetoric, which is open to critical discussion. Landowski uses dualism for his value judgments. He operates with the oppositional pairs “*La Science*” (“*en toute orthodoxie positiviste*”) vs. *non-positivism* (implied); *epidemiology* vs. *biology*/the *ecosystemic* perspective; *non-systemic* (implied) vs. “*approches systémiques*.” These oppositions cannot be easily supported because biology and the ecosystemic perspective are also positivist, as are all natural sciences; (ecological) epidemiology is indeed the *ecology* of infectious diseases and studies the interactions between hosts and their pathogens, without, of course, denying that ecology is more general and overarching than epidemiology. Epidemiology is equally systemic with general ecology and uses, among others, deterministic models for infectious diseases (Hethcote 1989).

In the class of discourses looking for an understanding of the pandemic, Landowski praises what he considers a scientific minority believing in the protection of the ecosystem, a community he sees as unpopular with politicians and without access to the centers of power. This is a rather odd statement because the concern with ecology goes rather far back in time. It started in the sixties with the first indications of an impending environmental crisis and came forcefully into the foreground with the initiatives of the Club of Rome, the result of the gathering in April 1968 of 30 people from 10 countries, at the instigation of an Italian economist and industrial executive, to discuss the future of humankind. The Club commissioned a particularly ambitious study, the Project on the Predicament of Mankind, which presented a global systemic model of the trajectory of humankind prepared by Professor Jay Forester of MIT, published in 1972 as *The limits to growth*. This study is one of the sources of environmental ethics and the landmark of the broad wave of environmentalism. Following the second report in 1974, environmental strategy became a central concern of both governments and national and international institutions in the eighties, mainly because of the first oil crisis of 1973. After the proposal of *The limits to growth* for ‘zero growth,’ the theoretical and political discussion focused on the key idea of sustainable development. The cornerstone on this matter was the UN Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 (Lagopoulos 1992). Since then, there have been ten international meetings under the auspices of the UN. In Rio, the concluding statement, *Agenda 21*, was signed by 172 governments; chapter 15 of the Agenda is entitled ‘Conservation of biological diversity.’ Sustainable development is today at the core of all European and international legislation, so an unpopular minority of ethical scientists seems to have succeeded after all.

Media discourses on Covid-19 are the object of Fernando Andacht. He discusses their proliferation regarding television news and talk shows in Uruguay, which were greatly expanded by all private television channels as soon as the government declared a health emergency in March 2020. As his subtitle indicates, he considers that the presentation of the pandemic covered the whole range from extreme cuteness (a TV interview with a 6-year-old schoolboy) to unsettling threat, as well as almost every possible genre from criminal and economical to political and educational. He concludes that the dynamic interpretant emerging from these discourses is the power and deadliness of the virus, demanding the respectful behavior shown by the schoolboy. We suggest that the conclusion's generality does not point to the dynamic interpretant, i.e., the interpretation of a sign by "any mind," which "is different in each from that of the other." Instead, it fits better with the final interpretant, i.e., "the effect the sign would produce in any mind."

Andacht provides an interesting sample of the reactions to the virus in a Latin American country. The way he discusses the data presented implies an axiological tendency towards Landowski's "accepting the danger" or even maybe "adjustment." But this is not the central point of interest for a theoretical discussion. Since Andacht starts his article with Peircean semiotics, we would expect a Peircean analysis to follow. But this is not so. The presentation of the data is empirical, so the Peircean terminology is simply added without any analytical impact.

François Jost's paper is refreshing because it lightens the atmosphere of the epidemic discourses with his turn to one particular type, the humouristic discourse of memes (which, of course, does not imply any light treatment of his topic). His general approach is doubly interesting because his objects are pictorial texts, more specifically memes about Covid-19. His discussion extends to the message's reception (consumption) side, including its encyclopedic, cultural and transcultural context. In this way, he integrates the communication circuit. Of course, this side of the circuit involves the views of real people, whence a multiplicity of readings of the same text. Jost moves in this direction because he understands interpretation as the actors' position concerning his three worlds – real, fictional, and ludic (which we should understand as metalinguistic – see Jost 2011: point 29).

Jost defines memes as a form of decontextualization, picking up, frequently but not always parodically, older texts or images and investing them with a new meaning. Although there are memes with artistic ambitions, he argues that art is not the purpose of memes (a view supported by the fact that they are usually anonymous). They are part of a democratization process: internet sites allow users to produce their memes by adding text phrases to given pictorial templates.

Jost points out that the meme has a binary structure, opposing an image to a caption, though he argues that the memes referring to the pandemic are more complex.

He proposes a typology including memes based on (general and) universal understanding and memes depending on (specific and shared) encyclopedic knowledge. He completes discussing the epidemic with memes that create new and unexpected relationships between cause and effect.

Jost replaces the views of actual addressees, real people, with his analysis, a traditional (and generally accepted) procedure in linguistics and the human sciences that, however, has the drawback of merging the analyst's position as a metalinguistic subject with that of himself as a spontaneous semiotic subject. This is why some of his more general observations (such as the knowledge of painting required to interpret the memes of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*) may well be valid, but, unless empirically tested, conclusions based on the premise of the analyst analyzing his interpretations can only have the nature of a working hypothesis. A sociologically informed approach would consider the variables differentiating the public, such as gender, socio-professional groups, age groups, ethnic origin, etc. The significant number of combinations of these variables shows the various aspects of the actual public.

Jost operates in this paper mainly on the one half of the communication circuit, its reception side. There are some hints of the production side when he observes, on the occasion of the dinosaur meme, that his *séméiologique* – recalling Lévi-Strauss's identification of anthropology with a "*science séméiologique*" – takes account of the image as "symptom," which relates to the process producing the sign. This is part of Jost's general approach to the semiotics of the visual media, cinema, and mainly TV, which focuses on the background of texts. It is conceived in the form of a pragmatics of the production of, for example, the televisual text, including the socio-economic conditions of its production and the general political situation (Jost 2011: for instance, points 1, 9, 15, 17, 30, 32, 34, 40). Jost is critical of immanent analysis and wants to introduce a new paradigm. What differentiates his approach from Fontanille's is that Jost marginalizes immanent analysis in quest of a new and different paradigm. He thus epistemologically splits semiotics into two paradigms – as is also the case, for example, with biosemiotics – while Fontanille aims at a unified semiotics, expressed in the articulation of the processual with the immanent, by using key concepts of the latter for the analysis of the former.

4. The practices of the pandemic

Two articles focus on the practices introduced by the pandemic. Jean-Jacques Boutaud focuses on dietary practices. He argues that, due to the limitations imposed on movement, the pandemic radically upset both habits and significations related to eating, offering new possibilities to rethink our relation to food. Boutaud associates alimentary

practices with changes in a deep underlying system of values. He defines two pairs of opposition: *health* (nutritional well-being) vs. *conviviality* (new – negative – conditions due to confinement) and responsibility (carefully considered nutritional choices) vs. *proximity* (to the actors of food services and valorization of the local), which he attempts to project on a semiotic square. Boutaud thus attempts a typology of pandemic discourses from a different point of view from Landowski.

Boutaud projects these two pairs onto a semiotic square, but the square is not entirely coherent. Proximity and the local are not in a relation of contradiction to health, nor do they stand in a relation of implication to conviviality or make a satisfactory set of subcontraries with responsibility.

Considering this structure as the abstract background, Boutaud then turns to its actualization on the level of practices, his “figurative” plane. Using (through Jean-Marie Floch) the distinction in the *Dictionnaire* of Greimas and Courtés, he argues that the study of dietary variations in the new conditions of confinement has to go beyond the axiological system, even if this gives us a glimpse of the implied ideologies, and focus on practices. He attempts to relate his procedure with Fontanille’s model discussed above, admitting some liberty in his interpretation. He thus identifies the modalities of alimentary practices with different forms of living. But this interpretation goes too far because Fontanille’s forms of living are situated at a causal depth *before* the emergence of the formal level of axiologies – as we saw with verifactuality – while Boutaud’s practices are a *consequence* of the axiological grid produced by this depth.

Boutaud’s point is the conversion of values to practices. He creates a very interesting gradation of scale in respect to consumption, from the micro-scale dietary practices of small groups (families) to the mesoscale systems of action to the macro-scale practices of whole social groups – related to the sociological variables differentiating the public that we referred to above – adding a ‘meta’ factor of symbolic forms. He argues that new dietary practices have emerged from the pandemic. For example, the value ‘responsibility’ is expressed in the reappropriation of dietary practice and sharing. The value ‘health’ implies better nutritional choices at the micro-scale, the gathering of more targeted information on good nutrition at the mesoscale, greater attention to positive developments in the dietary system at the macro-scale, plus the symbolic profits attributed to beliefs concerning the relation of healthy nutrition to the project of living.

There are interesting parallels to, but also divergences from, a very different tradition, Anglo-Saxon critical discourse analysis. Thus, Norman Fairclough, in his semi-otic-Marxist approach, borrows the Foucauldian concept of ‘order of discourse’ as an umbrella term for the ‘discourse types’ present in society. So far, this fits with Boutaud,

as well as Fontanille and Landowski. A specific text is, for Fairclough, a “discursive practice.” Then, Fairclough integrates this text within a communication circuit of production and consumption (Jost’s preoccupation) that he calls “social practice.” Finally, he connects practice to the existing order of discourse, but also –, and this is a further step rarely taken by sociosemiotics, but included by Jost in his approach – more broadly to partly non-discursive social conditions, such as economic or institutional. Thus, discourse analysis is supplemented by the study of broader material, social processes (Phillips and Jørgensen: 2002: 64–71, 81–89).

Boutaud argues that the impact of the new dietary practices stemming from confinement, such as the pursuit of fresh and local produce, home cooking, and the recent reconfigurations of the supply chain, could shake the alimentary sector. In this manner, we pass to a second extra-semiotic factor in addition to ecology, that is, economics, something we shall return to below.

Gianfranco Marrone’s article is based on a personal journal that he kept during the quarantine. He observes that for the media, the pandemic has been a windfall; the public’s thirst for information transformed *bad news* into *good news*. In pertinent parallelism with traditional societies, he notes that the new conditions led to a quest for signification (one of Landowski’s categories of discourse). His journal is organized along semiotic axes: meditations on proxemics, nutrition and confinement, the body, and behavior. Like Boutaud, Marrone argues that the pandemic has focused greater attention on food culture and that nutrition acquired a central position, invested with a meaning beyond subsistence as lived experience.

Marrone also points out that the pandemic has caused a change in spatial relations and a weakening of physical contacts, such as handshakes and hugs. He makes an anthropological excursion to various forms of greeting and the surreptitious links of power that they hide and reproduce, pointing out that proxemic changes have led to new semantisations and expressing an optimistic hope– a welcome change, just as Jost’s, in today’s gloom – that we could benefit from a time of imposed critical reflection.

This optimism, however, does not accompany what we could consider as a kind of phenomenological proxemics referring to the body. Marrone distinguishes between two different ways of conceiving the body: the external physical body, presently the focus of attention, and the subjectivity of the experiential, phenomenological body. To explain this second dimension of the body, Marrone uses the concept of “intercorporeity,” taken from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and meaning the sphere in which corporeity and alterity are bound together. Marrone observes that, on the contrary, the pandemic has led to a distancing of bodies; he locates the experience of confinement between the above two corporal dimensions.

Beyond semiotics, Marrone is concerned with the economic impact of the pandemic. He argues that we face severe problems with agricultural production, commerce and tourism, the stock exchange, and air transports. It is the same concern we found in Boutaud and Landowski, who see a collapse of employment and paralysis of the economy. There is no doubt that there is a global economic depression, but to what degree? And what are the prospects of economic recovery? These matters are not for the semiotician to answer but the economist. Whatever the case, allow us to briefly offer some data, which unfortunately support the pessimism of these authors, but maybe also send a different message for our immediate future.

The fall in GDP due to the pandemic allows comparison to other economic crises, and we shall start with them. We owe an in-depth analysis of capitalist crises to David Harvey (1989). According to him, the central process of capitalism is the accumulation of capital; capitalism is subject to periodic crises due to the over-accumulation of capital, resulting in an inability to realize the expected rate of profit. Harvey identifies the first crisis of over-accumulation in the mid-nineteenth century. He argues that these crises upset the organization of society and simultaneously – something that is of particular interest to semioticians – lead to radical transformations of philosophical thought, systems of representation, and cultural formations.³ In this framework, he considers that the oil crisis, starting in the late 1960s and reaching its peak in 1973, led to a new regime of capitalist accumulation, which opened the era of postmodernity.

The present economic crisis is not one of the periodic crises of capitalism since it has a different cause. Still, it is expected to have a severe negative impact on the global economy and is thus directly comparable to them. The European Union Commissioner for Economy, Paolo Gentiloni (2019-), considered the present crisis “an economic shock without precedent since the Great Depression” of 1929-1939. It has also been compared to the US Great Recession of 2007-2009 – the subprime mortgage crisis, then the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression – during which GDP fell by -4.3%, the deepest recession since WWII. In the EU, the same decline appeared in 2009. The present situation has also been compared to the Spanish flu pandemic, which infected 500 million people, about 30% of the world’s population, and drove down GDP by -6.0% over the period 1918-1920.

Fortunately, this is probably too pessimistic. The forecast in an amplified pandemic scenario for 2020 Europe, verified by the International Monetary Fund, is a decline in GDP equal to -4,0% (much less than the prediction of the European Commission’s Spring 2020 Economic Forecast, which was -7.4%). Of course, this is only an average; regional disparities are marked.

¹ By culture, Harvey means the “complex of signs and significations (including language) that mesh into codes of transmission of social values and meanings” (Harvey 1989: 299).

To give us a chance to catch our breath, and even though the economic forecasts depend on the extent of the pandemic and the success of the vaccination campaigns, a recovery is expected. The EU Winter 2021 Economic Forecast projects 3.7% and 3.9% GDP growth for 2021 and 2022, respectively.

5. To conclude

This issue of *Degrés* is a pleasant exception to the kinds of discourses that have surrounded us for the last one and a half years. The scientific discourses of the epidemiologists are rigorous; governments take them as their point of reference, but their decisions are made in the context of their political agendas (which tend to be remarkably similar for most countries and all political parties); the media incorporate both scientific and political discourses according to their priorities, and conspiracy discourses abound. But the articles in this issue are a rare exception. They offer a metalinguistic and many-faceted approach to the pandemic by highly qualified researchers with solid theoretical backgrounds. The issue displays the theoretical power of semiotics emphatically and brings it close – and this is, unfortunately, an exception – to the actual social arena. It is refreshing, revealing, and *unicum*.

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AUTHOR

Alexandros Lagopoulos Professor Emeritus, School of Architecture, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, Corresponding Member, Academy of Athens.

**AUTHOR**

Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou Professor Emeritus, School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

