

Negligence of semiotic theory in the social sciences has been baffling. The semiotic, cultural or linguistic turn, as it has been called, re-invented in the 1980s the idea – already established in the classics Weber, Simmel, Durkheim, Mauss, and many others – that social processes always involve meanings and interpretations. Yet theoretical attempts for divulging the sense underneath what often appears trivial, even nonsensical everyday talk and media material, have been few and mostly limited to very abstract notions bearing on language and cognition, not the concrete stuff that social scientists observe in their data. The word “narrative” became fashionable in text books of qualitative methods for a while, but narrative and discursive semiotics failed to arouse an interest despite its obvious potentialities in social analysis.

Instead, a lot of fruitless debates followed (1) between various types of “constructivisms” and “realisms” (whether the world is “only constructed” in discourses or exists “really out there”, to be represented objectively in social science), and (2) between theorists of structure and action (whether human behavior is determined by external exigencies – programmed / manipulated in Eric Landowski’s terms – or creative and contingent). Divisions concerning research strategies, moralities and even political passions were buried in these oppositions. Realists and structuralists made stronger truth claims than their opponents, accusing their adversaries for relativism and opportunism. Constructivists and action theorists in turn attacked the other side for fallacies of objectivism and hypocritical self-positioning above the society in which they in fact also participate.

These debates were largely side-tracked because social sciences – and this concerns sociology more than any other among them – turned away from their proper object, society, and attempted to compete or merge with behavioral sciences. Action itself became the *explanandum* rather than an ingredient in the constitution of social orders. The confusion is partly understandable. Modern societies in general, and Western societies in particular after the three golden decades after the Second World War, ground their legitimacy on the idea of voluntary co-operation, often transformed into what Landowski calls “l’idéologie dominante dans nos sociétés post-modernes à la fois indéfectiblement ‘démocratiques’ dans leurs principes et de jour en jour plus mercantiles dans les faits”. To be understood by ourselves and by others as actors invested with a will, governed by obligations, powered by abilities, and guided by competences, is a measure of human worth and a condition of participation in the social order, including its inequalities and differences. Agency, in short, is a principle of justification, to use the expression of Boltanski and Thévenot, of the modern and especially the “post-

modern” social order¹. Agency involves narrative elements, thus action and meaning. Hence the confusion.

On the other hand, reference to meaning also opens up the three critical and essential questions that are at the heart of Eric Landowski’s *petit manifesto*. First, if social life is meaningful it must be mutually constructed as such by participants, and social scientists participate in this construction. How grounded are their validity claims for this activity ? Secondly, participation inevitably involves taking a position in the meaning-making, a point of view. Is there a specific and theoretically defensible way that social scientists should position themselves in this web of interaction ? And thirdly, the hypothesis of meaningfulness inevitably leads to a critique of the dominant but absurdly reduced utilitarian understandings of human semiosis. Utilitarianism comes either in the form of calculative rationality or in the form of norms concerning what thoughts and actions are and are not acceptable in a given society. The calculative rationality conception may have some value in Friedmannian models of the monetary economy but even in those cases the fit with the actual functioning of markets is wanting. Meaningfulness reduced to norms goes off the road already at the start, as it does not account for the fact that a class of behavior — like drinking alcoholic beverages — is not necessarily the same social fact in two different contexts, even if all the apparent signifiers (beverages, flasks, glasses, gesticulation, psycho-physiological effects and even ritual framings) are similar. Permission or not “to drink” is a very impoverished way to interpret the situation if other dimensions of meaning are not included.

I fully agree with Landowski that responses to these three issues : grounds for the validity claims, positioning or engagement, and critique of “mercantile” (and normative) utilitarianism are not arbitrary and cannot be voluntarily chosen. They follow from the theory itself, and in this case I mean from semiotic, not social theory, in other words from what we mean by meaning. But before elaborating my position in this, let me first paint the background in the history of social thought with a few broad sweeps.

The semiotic etc. turn was coupled with the turn away from structural models, towards seeing society as action. Action and actors were put in the centre stage by prominent authors as different as Alain Touraine, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Anthony Giddens, Margaret Archer, and many others. Touraine wrote about the self-production of society and proclaimed the *Return of the Actor*². Bourdieu introduced the concept of the *habitus* to allow room for choice and individual variation in class reproduction through style and taste, thus wavering on a tightrope between a theoretical intention “to escape from under the philosophy of the subject without doing away with the agent, as well as from under the philosophy of the structure without forgetting to take into account the effects it wields upon and through the agent”³. Giddens, likewise, theorized about “structuration”, i.e. maintenance and gradual change of class structures through class action⁴. Archer argued that culture

¹ Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *De la justification*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991.

² Cf. Alain Touraine, *The Self-Production of Society [Production de la Société]*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1973. *Id.*, *Le retour de l'acteur*, Paris, Fayard, 1984.

³ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Oxford, Polity Press, 1992, pp. 121-122.

⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1984.

provides individuals the possibility of genuine choice, predetermined neither by cultural structures nor by objective circumstances, which, nevertheless, are outcomes and conditions of action⁵.

Authors were reacting to what they felt to be either structural or cultural determinism. Structural functionalism had, since the establishment of sociology as a discipline in the first part of the twentieth century, been keen on explaining practices, values, institutions and social hierarchies in terms of their functions in maintaining social order and feeding the process of modernization. Marxism had seen a renaissance in the 1970s in the form of new readings of *Das Kapital*, to connect Marx's critique of political economy with his early humanistic critiques of alienation. The blind forces of capitalism were seen as causes of alienated mass consumption, ideological acquiescence, corrupted lifestyles and social problems. Cultural structuralisms, both the British cultural studies paradigm and the French orientation, with Pierre Bourdieu as its figurehead, purported to understand how cultural practices like youth culture and the media (Pau Willis, Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie, Stuart Hall) ; or visiting art museums, literature, photography and aesthetics of the everyday (Bourdieu) ; help to maintain class divisions, although on the surface they have little to do with social structure and much to do with personal taste. All of these structuralisms operated with models in which participants' own understandings of what they are thinking and doing are marginal. What participants see as their own action is interpreted to be dictated – programmed or manipulated – by the system, which is smart enough to cover up its operations with the illusion of individual creativity, uniqueness and authenticity. The shift of focus to action as meaningful means that the actors and their accounts of what they think and do must be taken seriously. Actors are the producers not only of their own destinies but also of the society in which they live. As Alain Touraine stressed, it is not sufficient to place society in history ; sociologists must put historicity – auto-production of society – right in the heart of the concept of society itself⁶.

The theoretical positions of Archer, Bourdieu, Giddens and Touraine demonstrate a key issue in social theory after the *action cum meaning* turn. Taking the actors seriously leads the theorist into an unstable position ; or to prepare what Bruno Latour once called “a disgusting both-and-soup”. Social reality is *both* action *and* structure, *both* meaningful for the actors *and* making sense only beyond their immediate grasp. The soup is disgusting because it is composed of unrelated and incompatible elements. The logic of both-and is self-affirming : if one explanation does not work, the other does ; and vice versa.

It is here that semiotic theory, both in its classic form and even more in its post-Greimassian state could have been of help. Landowski's interactionist view of meaning (which seems to me to be intuitively accepted today by most social scientists, although they for the most part are not aware of the alternatives and unable to articulate their position) provides us with two important understandings of the dialectic between the actors' and the academic interpreter's points of view⁷. First, meanings and interpretations are a matter of struggle. Landowski is perfectly right when he thinks that interactions about meanings are always risky. We construct images of ourselves as agents, reasonably adapting to

5 Margaret Archer, *Culture and Agency : The Place of Culture in Social Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

6 Cf. Alain Touraine, *The Self-Production of Society*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

7 Eric Landowski, *Les interactions risquées*, Limoges, Pulim, 2005.

circumstances and to others' intentions, but we always bear a risk to be interpreted as victims of manipulation or as programmed subjects. Sometimes the fear of this risk bursts into extreme forms of irrationality, rage and even violence, in circumstances where the actor feels unable to gain recognition and respect as an agent from co-participants. Secondly, the interactionist view establishes a link between the intellectual and the everyday mode of meaning production. The former in general, and social theory in particular, is an index of what Pitirim Sorokin called *congeries of ideas* : wider complexes of societal understandings of the world, including law, philosophy, scientific knowledge, art, music and literature, which also reflect common ideas and values understood and accepted in society. What I have elsewhere called consciousness of the podium and mundane consciousness of the everyday, are in an inevitable dialogue within a shared critical awareness of the present⁸. The reason why social sciences (re)turned their regard to the actor was not an accident but an index of a change in the intellectual climate that was also manifested in political ideologies and mundane everyday thought.

The classical theory of narrative and discursive semiotics could have helped to settle the ambivalences between “reality” and “construction”, and between “structure” and “action”. Doing so, it could also have helped to explain why the critical awareness of the present turned its view on the subject, the “self”. The struggle over meaning is not a chaotic rain of bombs over helpless defenders of their subjectivity. There is structure and organization beneath the apparently contradictory and messy surface of meaning-making in the interactions within the social world. The distinction between figurative surface and thematic structure, elementary as it is, is indispensable for exposing the tacit meanings emitted from participants in social life, including their academic interpreters. A simple example from my own studies may illustrate the point. In the late 1980s I was doing research on the new middle class self-identity, recruiting my subjects from classy bars in the city of Helsinki⁹. Analysing their vernacular I long wondered what on earth could they mean when they kept repeating that they like to meet in their particular places because they always have company there, whereas they do not wish to visit bars “on the other side of the bridge” (working-class areas) because they cannot even read the afternoon paper without somebody intruding and wanting to start a conversation. On the other hand, they appreciated their habitual bars because they could be left alone if they so liked, whereas in the smoky working-class places they never find decent people to talk with. The key to an understanding of these contradictions was the modality of willing : whatever they were talking about was valued if it was described as wanted by them, be it work, family, cultural practices, food and drink, or any other aspect of their everyday life. The self-definition they cherished was to be willing agents ; they abhorred the idea that their thoughts and practices would be interpreted to result from manipulation or programming. The underlying thematic structure of the contradictory and messy figurative surface of their mundane speech was clear and consistent. They were manifesting autonomy and authenticity as the constitutive elements of their self-identity and view of the world. They asserted and defended their entitlement to participate and belong in society as agents constructed on the modality of willing.

8 P. Sulkunen, *The Saturated Society. With a New Foreword*, Helsinki, University of Helsinki, 2016 (London, Sage, 2009).

9 P. Sulkunen, *The European New Middle Class*, Avebury, Aldershot, 1992.

This detail from a small study gained new relevance in a later study on political justifications of deregulating the monetary and financial market, which was under way in the 1980s, the period when the middle class study data were collected¹⁰. Surprisingly, very little economy – growth, equality, fiscal crisis of the state, national competitiveness – was involved in the arguments issued by political leaders at the time. Instead, the justifications were moral : with unregulated credit markets and stable currency, consumers, banks and enterprises can plan their strategies without asking permission from the Central Bank or support from politicians and fiscal authorities. The politicians’ arguments went like this : we provide the instruments (credit and stable currency) ; you decide what to do with them ! Autonomy and authenticity, centred on the modality of will, was again the heart of the discourse. The policy change can justly be considered epochal in that it transformed state-centred post-war capitalism into a neoliberal regime, with banking crises, economic instability and political and institutional changes that soon followed the financial deregulation. The change concerned not only the financial market but also other areas of the welfare state structures. The *volte-face* was easily adopted because the mundane consciousness of autonomy and authenticity of willing agents was already there, waiting for the change to come. The emerging consciousness of the academic podium, the *action cum meaning* turn in the social sciences, was an index of the same shift in the critical awareness of the present towards a new emphasis of agency as the foundation of the contemporary social order.

No contradiction here between “social construction” and “reality”. The rising new middle class in the 1980s was well adapted to the changing structures of global financial capitalism. Its disposition to see the ideal social world as a composition of autonomous and authentic agents welcomed deregulation, starting from the monetary and financial markets, continuing still today in a long series of neo-liberal reforms of welfare state structures, with wide-stretching consequences for peoples’ lives and experiences. This is very hard reality constructed in semiotic structures of the contemporary mind.

No contradiction between action and structure either. The rising European new middle class in the 1980s was dominated by the generation that went to colleges and universities in the years of the anti-authoritarian student movement. Many of the young protesters found themselves on the left side of the political map, but the neo-liberal creed with will as the constituent structure of agency was nevertheless more attractive for them in adult life than state-oriented socialist ideologies. The latter involve a stronger stress on other modalities like obligation (loyalty) and ability (solidarity in helping and getting helped). Today’s neo-populist revolt, again, manifests the frustration of will-based agency and reacts against feelings of being manipulated or programmed rather than commanding the controls over one’s own life. Agency as a principle of justification has become saturated. It is no longer an ideal to be attained, it is an assumption taken for granted, but alas ! so often denied by actual circumstances and so often challenged, if not by facts at least by a suspicion that “they”, the elites and their secret partners, usurp “us” as objects of exploitation.

What about the three issues raised by Landowski’s manifesto ? My answer to the first, concerning the grounds of our validity claims, is already implied in the example above. We have our

10 P. Sulkunen, “The Consumer Society and the Social Bond : the Neoliberal Turn in Norway”, in P. Strandbakken and J. Grownow (eds), *Consumer Culture. Festschrift to Eivind Sto*, Oslo, Akker Publications, 2015. This study was based on auto-biographies written by key politicians and civil servants who had participated in political decisions to deregulate the financial markets in Norway and Finland.

instruments — concepts and research designs — that are inaccessible to participants, and cannot be adequately offered to them. Besides the theory of modalities¹¹ the semiotic toolkit offers a rich selection of concepts that help to deconstruct how agency is constructed in mundane consciousness. The theory of utterance (enunciation) opens a particularly relevant path to its secrets. It enables us to uncover almost unobservable forms of positioning the subject of the utterance. These forms constitute what we have called the speaker (or writer) and addressee images, hidden in the messy surface of the text in everyday talk as well as in academic writing¹². The construction of middle class agency, for example, involved an image of the speakers, “us”, as not only willing but also competent subjects (at least in comparison with the working-class “cap heads”) but nevertheless dominated by “them”, those in power. Their *elitism from below* was an ambivalent way of looking at the social world from a superior as well as inferior perspective. Not a long step towards aggressive neo-populism as we know it today.

The second issue, engagement, is a more complicated one. If meaning-making is conceived as a multi-layered knotted process with many nodes interacting simultaneously and in time, with a messy figurative surface and more organized thematic structures underneath, the answer is clear : we are always in the middle of it, never at the end. Bruno Latour’s notion of translation is an appealing metaphor¹³. Technological ideas, objects and practices are translations of participants’ interests, knowledges and resources. Translations are not perfect, like translations from one language to another cannot be exact, but they are not arbitrary either. In the same way, the messy surfaces of mundane consciousness as well as the more organized surfaces of the consciousness of the podium, are translations of underlying interests, knowledges and resources that the participants have at their disposal to construct themselves as agents. What we as social scientists do is to translate these surfaces back, uncovering the ingredients of which they are constructed. The operation, again, is not perfect ; there is always a residue, a *difference* that results from the interpreter’s point of view. The distance is important : translating back is never only description. It constitutes an intervention to social processes, not commitment to points of view already existing. It is especially important in conditions like ours today, where underlying interests tend to get translated into symbolic forms that are disconnected from their source, like hate speech articulated in purely imaginary figurative surfaces of race, religion, gender and other similar distinctions.

The third issue raised in Landowski’s manifesto, that of taking a position in defence of the regime of adjustment as opposed to regimes of accidents, programmation and manipulation, should be seen in the context of justification of the modern social order. Here semiotic theory alone, although necessary, might not be sufficient. Since the Enlightenment critiques of Hobbesian utilitarianism,

11 Cf. P. Sulkunen and J. Törrönen, “The production of values : The concept of modality in textual discourse analysis”, *Semiotica*, 113, 1/2, 1997.

12 Cf. Cf. P. Sulkunen and J. Törrönen, “Constructing speaker images. The problem of enunciation in discourse analysis”, *Semiotica*, 115, 1/2, 1997, pp. 121-146. The key concept introduced in this article is that of “projection”. It refers to the positioning of the speaker / writer, and addressee of the narrative, within the narrative itself. The discourse is strategically constructed in such a way as to let its enunciator appear as a truth-seeking hero, opposed to anti-subjects responsible for errors or deceit. Such a discursive strategy is to be found both in the media and academic literature. See A.J Greimas and E. Landowski (eds.), *Introduction à l’analyse du discours en sciences sociales*, Paris, Hachette, 1979. It has also been analysed in the domain of forensic discourse : cf. B.S. Jackson, *Making Sense in Jurisprudence*, Liverpool, Deborah Charles Publications, 1996.

13 Cf. B. Latour, “Ethnography of hightec : about the Aramis case”, in P. Lemonnier (ed), *Technological Choices : Transformation in Material Cultures since the Neolithic*, New York, Routledge, 1993.

every generation of social scientists have attacked the model of calculative rationality that governs the regimes of programming and manipulation. The *meaning cum action* turn in social theory and intellectual life in general in the 1980s was an index of a crisis in the critical awareness of the present in that period. Agency based on willing had ceased to be only a justifying ideal of the social order. Decades over the two hundred years since the French Revolution had been spent driving towards a social order based on voluntary co-operation between willing subjects. The state with its political structures and institutions, which had especially in Western Europe been an instrument in this process, now came to be seen as a constraint to it. Claims for agency based on will – its autonomy and authenticity – turned easily into neo-liberal political projects, of which we today see the consequences.

The question now is, do these claims need our support? Are they not in themselves strong enough to resist programming and manipulation by the system, or by whoever has the resources to control the regimes of action and the semiosis governing them?

My answer is that Eric Landowski is right more than ever. Agency needs defence, but not against external threats. It needs to be defended against itself, against turning away from its emancipatory mission to a frustrated call for an Actor on behalf of “us”, a symbolized figurative surface constituted by imaginary oppositions, conspiracies and secret alliances, seducing actors with illusionary promises of defending their autonomy and authenticity as willing agents. In these interventions, neither semiotic theory nor social science can be efficient without each other.

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