

# **Semiotics as the Semantic Organizer of Global Human Sciences —Semiotic Theory: Western Philosophy-centered Approach Vs. Global Interdisciplinary Approach**

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**Abstract:** There are two identities of semiotics: reality and ideal. We semioticians should keep the double identity in our mind to get rid of the limitation of the existing professional semiotic operation. Theoretical semiotics should at first more deeply learn from philosophy and secondly further turn to the interdisciplinary theoretical creation. Only a more effective semiotic theoretical basis could make semiotics stronger to guide the epistemological modernization of the global human sciences in the New Century. The postmodernist trends, however, tend to make semiotics be the mere intellectual games leading to losing its original scientific power. Originated by Saussure, Pierce, Husserl, semiotics should defend its traditional rationalism against the scientific-dogmatist and the artistic-commercialized fashions alike. Globalization of semiotics will strongly promote its healthy development along the line of a global multiple-rationalization.

The problems of semiotic theory today should be reconsidered in terms of the entire intellectual situations of the world. Semiotic problems can hardly be solved within the international existing semiotic scholarship as such.

## **1. Theoretical crisis**

Theoretical confusion said in IASS for the past three decades tends to be popularly described as a “theoretical crisis”. In fact it is an effect of the constant incongruity between the great intellectual ambition of founders of modern semiotics and the pragmatic developments of many next followers who have been engaged in the commercialized, compartmentalized academic world in our times. The separation between the epistemological goal of semiotic theory and its technical-artistic sophistication has been obviously displayed for the past

decades. However we do not need to be disappointed at the consequence; it only hints that we are on the verge of another important turning point in our one-hundred-years' semiotic movement; a decisive transformation of the theoretical way of thinking from the traditional philosophical fundamentalism to the contemporary semiotic-rational pluralism. There are dozens of important philosophical systems in human history; each one of them claims to be the singly solid basis for truth inquiry. Many of them naturally do have attracted a number of followers in their pragmatic ways, whereas they are doomed to diverge from and argue against each other all the time. If semiotics is involved in this philosophical tangled-warfare it must necessarily produce a lot of epistemological and methodological confusions. Intellectual freedom would usually indeed produce intellectual divergence. Each important philosophical heritage could contain its own intellectual value and historical influence, but no one is naturally eligible to provide a fundamental basis for constructing or founding all other knowledge. In certain sense we may say that the philosophical discourse today can only be taken as one kind of the material to be further elaborated and reorganized within a more comprehensive intellectual context whose potential has been already much richer and much more complicated than the traditional philosophical scope.

## **2. Non-philosophy-centered semiotic theories**

Accordingly, the theoretical confusion caused by a philosophy-centrist semiotic-theory could be worse than the related philosophical situation, because it is based on certain fixed dogmas of historically authorized philosophers. Then semiotic theoreticians could be merely reduced to the passive followers of some chosen distinguished philosophers and accordingly lose their own theoretical spontaneity or rational originality. If so, what is a semiotic theoretical spontaneity? It should be expressed in its independent inquiry into a more effective procedure for its special scientific operation with reference to the entire scientific world; accordingly it must be somewhat separated from the traditional philosophical trends which are historically traced back to the pre-modern-scientific antiquity. Thus, the philosophical-directed semiotic theories would be easily influenced by the intellectual divergence in philosophy that is shaped by historical process itself. We may find that every theoretical break-through in semiotic history displays a creative distance or diversion from the main track of traditional philosophy. This tendency is evidently exhibited in Saussure; it is the case with Peirce as an eccentric philosopher; and it is also indicated in Husserl as a typical academic philosopher of the twentieth century. For the last one, we should perceive his subtle complicated efforts for distinguishing himself from the classical heritages despite his close links to the philosophical tradition used as his material.

With respect to the relevant relations between philosophy and semiotic

theory, what we talked above about philosophy is mainly referred to the problem of the internal and external philosophical institutions as well as their scholarly systems rather than to its huge useful intelligent sources that can be understood in and applied to different other intellectual contexts, including the semiotic and hermeneutic ones. So a semiotic-theoretical task today lies in reorganizing different intellectual elements produced in history in terms of a new semiotic framework. This task requests us to make creative efforts alongside a more effective rational way beyond the traditional philosophical channel. For example, among contemporary continental philosophies Husserl's phenomenology is obviously semiotic in character. While on the other hand it is also rooted in traditional philosophical systems. How to separate its "semiotic elements" from his "philosophical systems" will become an important task for our present-day phenomenological-semiotic inquiry. The so-called phenomenologists, because of their sticking to the fundamental-philosophical framework, would hardly carry out this revolutionary task regarding epistemological reorganization. In general, as an interdisciplinary scholar, a so-called philosophy-semiotician should first learn from the original philosophical systems seriously and later disorganize it according to a semiotically recombined epistemological procedure. In a word, we semiotic theoreticians must on the one hand continue learning seriously from philosophical knowledge while on the other avoid following blindly its dogmatic logical system. That means, a semiotic theorizing implies a more advanced way of thinking of the new typology of rationality within total human sciences.

For overcoming Western metaphysical fundamentalism, a global-directed semiotician must appeal to a variety of intellectual sources in human history and practice, including all those from the non-Western historical experience. In a sense, we need to avoid the Western deductive-logical dogmatism in terms of both Western and non-Western historical, cultural and ethical experiences and through an enlarged and multiplied type of reason and rationality. As the almost singularly rigorous theoretical system in human history, Western classical philosophy lives and works in its own historically fixed cultural determinations. A cross-cultural semiotic-hermeneutic approach will be helpful to relax the mechanic rigidity of the traditional Western logical dogmatism. But the precaution of the logical dogmatism doesn't mean that we should turn to any other kind of irrationalism; instead, the semioticians are always concerned with some more relevant type of reason and rationality during their ever-increasingly deeper scientific practice. Semiotics, which had learnt very much from traditional philosophy, searches into now a freshly new type of scientific rationality through its creative practice in reorganizing global human sciences.

### 3. Postmodernism for the benefit of the Establishments

Traditional philosophy consists of its both rational and irrational aspects. In some sense the irrational branch is also based on the same deductive reasoning in a reversal way. Why does the postmodern thinker prefer the philosophical to the human-scientific? Because any scientific practice must imply the rational plus the empirical, whereas the philosophical also contains the non-rational part that can be used in different irrational ways. Therefore, the postmodernist thinker purposes to divert from the scientific direction of semiotic theory according to an extremely relativist or nihilist epistemology. Yes, the postmodernist scholars also attack philosophy but in fact what they target is the rational aspect of it. In fact, they make a great use of philosophical discourse while their real target is a super-philosophical catchword: rationality in general. That means, its target is not only a philosophical rationality but also all types of rationality. With respect to reconstructing human sciences the semiotic-scientific theory is oriented to a more effective rational objective while the post-modern semiotic theory attempts to deconstruct any rational effort. The fact is that theoretical semiotics tries to search into a more effective rationality to replace the less effective one represented by traditional philosophy. By contrast, postmodernist criticism of philosophy purposes to destroy the rationality itself with an intention to obstruct the rational development of semiotic theory as well as human sciences. In this sense, we could judge that postmodernism becomes the enemy of reason per se.

As a result, a philosophy-centrism with its both rational and irrational trends could make semiotic theory either maintain a traditional, conservative, less effective rationality, or, intensified by postmodern thought, allure semiotics to give up rationality at all. One extreme type of it is that, semiotics is regarded as a quasi-artistic game enjoyed, tolerated and materially supported by the multiple Establishments of the world. Why? Let me raise a general question to postmodernists here first: why can natural and technical sciences maintain an absolute rationality in their theory and practice whereas human sciences, including semiotics, should divert from its scientific line? May I describe this tendency as a "postmodern trick" in our times? Why did Derrida so much hate the identity of human sciences? Why doesn't he hold the same position to that of natural sciences? This is the very central question raised for the epistemological discussion in our IASS family today. On the other hand, we can see another negative effect of the philosophy-central semiotic theory: alongside a quasi-natural-scientific dogmatism, namely following some simplified scientific patterns that provide semiotics only with less effective rationality for dealing with our highly complicated social and cultural reality. That means, both rational and irrational

philosophical systems rooted in long history cannot be taken in entirety as natural basis for developing the new theoretical model of human sciences in general and semiotics in particular.

#### **4. Semiotics lives in Human Sciences in our globalization times**

As I repeatedly emphasize, semiotics is one of human sciences that have historically suffered from their conceptual ambiguity. Semiotics is on one hand the result of the part of rational development of natural and social sciences across history, it is on the other hand the semantic reformer of all the humanities. Semiotics' task lies in a relevant cooperation with all kinds of sciences in order to firstly re-chart the semantic topography in human sciences. We may just say that human sciences are waiting for semiotics to improve and reform their semantic and inferential constitutions. So semiotics must stand by the side of science. A reasonable identity of human sciences becomes more and more justified when they become more and more global today. We may call the main body of all non-European academic traditions somewhat as the humanities. Regarding the traditional Chinese humanities that are parallel to the Western ones with respect to its cultural-intellectual range and academic richness in history, they have been under steady modernization over past century. How and why we Chinese scholars found out semiotics immediately after the end of "Cultural Revolution" which had been so much misinterpreted by many contemporary Western thinkers? Because it seemingly provided a possibility for leading a double modernization of the humanities; that in the west as well as that in the non-west. Semiotics has been firstly a locomotive of modernization of the Western humanities and secondly a guiding force for reorganizing traditional Chinese humanities. As regard the both tasks semiotics should be scientific and rational in nature. That's why we have a reason to take some Western postmodern nihilism as the main obstacle for intellectual and academic progress of Chinese humanities in our globalization era. Rejecting the intellectual progress amounts to rejecting the task of modernizing traditional humanities. This is one reason why the non-Western semiotics should not blindly follow some Western irrational semiotic fashions, including the postmodern one.

#### **5. Philosophy-institutional determinations and free semiotic inquiry**

Besides the philosophy-central and postmodern semiotic trends the present-day European-American semiotic theories also display a more stable tendency that they are widely and deeply rooted in the academic institutions and social marketing which are determined by the social, technical and commercial framework of our times. This comprehensive academic institutionalization arranges semiotic operations within a fixed academic system that determines the

way and orientation of western semiotics. As the global semiotics becomes more developed, the theoretical and practical problems facing the non-Western semiotics are more widely confronted with. Living in different social and historical institutions, for example, Chinese semiotics has to reconsider the more suitable relations between the different academic institutional determinations. This is a more basic reason why semiotic globalization urges us to reflect the academic and intellectual confrontation of different directions of semiotic practice. This multiple-institutional difference even makes us to reconsider the entire problematic regarding semiotics and its institutional backgrounds. Therefore the present western theoretical orientation based on the Western social-academic institutions would not naturally be regarded as the available guidance for the non-Western semiotics. Accordingly, the interrelation among semiotics, the humanities and socio-historical institutions should become one of the main topics of semiotic epistemology in our global era today. In some sense, the apparent contrast of the European-American semiotic practice and the Chinese one should be replaced by that of semiotic practice as the reorganizer of the collected scientific material and the existing social-academic institutional conditions. We semioticians as the true originators inspired by an academically revolutionary ideal should firstly examine this predominant Western-fashioned social-academic-institutional conditions in order to more productively promote our global semiotic devotion. The so-called contrast between the Western and non-Western semiotic ways in fact involves a trans-cultural task: how to rationalize or improve our working conditions for pushing forward our global semiotic mission?

## **6. Semiotics in defense of rationalism**

Nobody today dares or is able to oppose the rational orientation of natural and social sciences because the objective worlds of the both are logically empirical and positive in nature. The semantic ambiguity of psychological, spiritual and axiological manifestations in human sciences indeed provide some people with certain excuse for their irrational imagination and unscientific tendency. Regarding this we have to elaborate our thinking about the multiple constitution of scientific practice. In a general term all kinds of rational efforts could be called scientific, but there is the distinction in connection with the object, goal, method and motivation with respect to different scientific projects. Until now the rational tendency of natural sciences has been permanently established yet, whereas human sciences have been just on the verge of their rational and scientific progress first time in history. By contrast, at the very moment, some postmodernists attempt to obstruct the rational progress of human sciences in order to lead human thinking more confused. The results can only be conducive to making human sciences more and more ineffective in dealing with problems

facing human existence. In view with this risk, the semiotic practice is determined to support the function of human sciences. Without being a mere branch in the latter's system, semiotics is an organizing agent living and activating within global human sciences in totality.

There are three aspects or stages of semiotic interdisciplinary rationality: the semantic elaboration within single discipline, the interdisciplinary operation based on a single discipline, and the interdisciplinary operation among different disciplines. The three semiotic aspects or stages represent different levels and aspects of rational operation in human sciences. Therefore the rational development of human sciences depends on the advance of semiotic rationality per se. As the author emphasizes frequently in different situations, the social and intellectual improvements of humankind absolutely rely on the rational progress of human sciences, while the latter in turn logically relies on the more effective rational methodology applied in semiotic theory in its present global context.

#### **7. The global task of IASS and the double-role of the semiotician**

In terms of the above explanations, global semiotics will enlarge the scope of both material and methods, presenting a more comprehensive and constructive perspective for the IASS movement. IASS should be not limited by its traditional European-American trends but rather become a truly international movement. Accordingly, any single semiotician will play a double role: as the expert in his own special discipline and as a co-organizer of some related interdisciplinary projects. This understanding will help promoting the semiotician to function beyond his narrower special field and more effectively promoting the development of the semiotic movement. On the other hand, the interdisciplinary direction of semiotic practice also means to liberate all kinds of disciplinary knowledge from the scholarly monopoly or control of disciplinary authorities. We should know that any disciplinary achievements have a double meaning: the disciplinary-central one and the interdisciplinary one. The twofold meaning of the disciplinary achievements is determined through different contextual conditions. In terms of the former an expert is certainly more profound in his specialty, while according to the latter the same expert needs to learn a lot from other disciplines regarding the same material as well to expand his understanding of his own achievements. Therefore every specialist needs to learn from many other disciplines' specialists according to different epistemological assignments in his chosen projects. So, the semiotician is an all-round trans-boundary agent against any improper disciplinary restrictions. On one hand the related scholars, including theoretical semioticians, should deepen a "first discipline-based meaning" established by specialists and on the other hand, they should pay attention to the "second interdisciplinary-explored meaning" created by theoretical semioticians as a

general guide for multiple coordination. As an interdisciplinary boundary-breaker the semiotician even has a duty to be more actively involved into the intellectual competition for the “interpretation right” of “second meaning” with other disciplines’ specialists. In other words, we shouldn’t allow disciplinary specialists to dogmatically monopoly their interpretation concerning their first meaning; we should always keep a hermeneutic balance between the first disciplinary meaning and the second interdisciplinary meaning. This more active theoretical attitude of the semiotician towards the interdisciplinary practice means also that he or she needs to be more actively and more creatively involved into both the disciplinary depth and interdisciplinary width. The semiotician should be both the scientific specialist of one kind as well as the hermeneutic interpreter based on multiple cross-boundary practices. In this sense, a desirable ethical bravery of the semiotician is related to his will-power to keep getting rid of the predominant academic-institutional compartmentalization.

#### **8. The units used in semiotic operations; elements vs. persons**

This interdisciplinary approach is basically a transformation of perspective from the person-unit to the element-unit; or, from the historical entity to the structural entity. The semiotician will not take individual works produced in history as the fixed intellectual unity but rather as various compounds of useful scientific elements. In other word, every important historical figure is regarded as only the source of elements to be used in all related scientific practices. Therefore, the relevant material-units for semiotic operations are the trans-historical elements rather than the entire works of individual scholars realized in history. The same can be said with the units regarding schools and trends historically existing as various intellectual unities. In essence the operative style of semiotics is quite different from that of philosophy consisting of different scholarships of individual figures as mental totalities. Even the semioticians themselves should be treated this way. Therefore, a semiotician will no longer appeal to or rely on the habitual merits of entire works of historical figures; instead he must be a reorganizer of different historical material by dint of some new methods designed by him. So the semiotic-interdisciplinary approach always implies a kind of epistemological revolution or invention; he tends to firstly disorganize various historical-intellectual individualities and secondly reorganize or recombine their constitutive elements in other intellectual contexts and projects.

But how does the semiotician reorganize his traditional material actually fixed in the customary thinking unities based on individual persons, including philosophers’ individual systems? What principles and frameworks he should follow? In terms of the scientific direction the semiotician must adopt rationalism in general and explore more suitable structure and constitution of rational operation

in particular. The semiotician is the designer and organizer of rational projects beyond the traditional channels, especially the philosophical ones. The traditional philosophical forms of rationalism are connected with their special backgrounds that are conditioned by a variety of occasional historical factors. The semiotician is therefore always faced with the task to reformulate the constitution of rational operations in his semiotic projects. Instead of being caught in the historically concretized forms of rationality embodied in traditional theories, semiotics attempts to set up new operative perspective and approaches. In this sense we can stress that semiotic theory, including its cross-cultural forms, is in contrast with the Western philosophical schools that remain to be the main theoretical modes in humanity and the main source of the present-day Western semiotic theories.

### **9. Semiotics' ethical character as the academic reorganizer**

Consequently, we semioticians are the operators with all kinds of cultural material and methodologies, naturally tending to disorganize the authoritative monopoly of all disciplinary theories. On the other hand, the semiotic way can help disciplinary scholars to explore the multiple meaning of their subjects beyond their disciplinary frameworks. That means, semiotics help pluralize theoretical practice in all disciplines and make their scientific results more applicable in various academic and cultural circumstances. Thus, the interdisciplinary-semiotic operation and the disciplinary-central semiotic operation are complementary with each other too. The similar can be said with the cross-cultural semiotic operation and the Western disciplinary-centered operation.

Traditionally, despite its keeping multiple intellectual objectives in history, philosophy's key essence would be said to be ethical; the essence of semiotics or general semiotics could be also grasped as the ethical in the following three senses. First, because the goal of semiotics is the same like that of human sciences, we may say semiotics is eventually directed toward a new ethics, namely a non-philosophy-central ethics to be reorganized in global human sciences as a new intelligent totality. Second, traditionally ethical thinking has been closely connected with the goal to directly improve social morality, namely the theoretical practice is directly tied with the social-practical life; a modern semiotic-defined ethics instead will remain at the purely academic level with the ethical components of human and social sciences as its direct objects. That means a semiotic-designed ethics will be not directly linked to any social activity. This strategic shift of ethical operation has nothing to do with the basic social-cultural concern of semiotics but rather be linked to the stratification of its theoretical strategy. Semiotic-directed ethics is multi-constitutional in its practice. Accordingly, ethics will never be a simple result of philosophical inference or

metaphysical speculation; it depends on the progress of entire human sciences. Therefore, semiotic ethics must definitely be a rational and scientific practice. Finally, the above-mentioned double-role of the semiotician means that he or she should be more ethically intentional with a stronger consciousness of the general objective of semiotics beyond his or her specialized interest. Without this collective consciousness about the common goal for truth semioticians will even hardly attain their semiotic-theoretical aim. Semiotic practice is by nature collectively organized, oriented and practiced; it is today evidently a collaborative enterprise, just like human sciences become more and more a collective practice in our times. Without this collective consciousness in their practice IASS can hardly make a progress in future. That is why we should overcome all kinds of self-interest-mentality rooted in the present-day commercialized compartmentalization that makes the scholar sometime behave as a mere businessman. So, global semiotics today calls for an ethical consciousness or a sincere attitude for truth inquiry. The double role of the semiotician means that a semiotic scholar should go beyond his professional and national bounds in order to obtain a more comprehensive intellectual horizon. The ethical consciousness will not only help semioticians get rid of academic institutional restrictions but also help them overcome the commercial way of competition with others. The commercial way of competition is naturally contrary to the scientific cooperation requested by semiotic science. Any commercial competition is based on some technical specialty in discipline, making scholars tend to make much use of disciplinary autonomy technically formed, while semiotics requests its agents to cherish a willingness to join interdisciplinary cooperation. If the former is an interest-directed practice, the latter is rather a truth-directed one. Our semiotic progress would be dependent on the solution of this contradiction between the motive for self-interest and the motive for collective-truth at both subjective and organizational levels. With respect to their intellectual adventure semioticians are doomed to be involved in constant confrontation with the predominant multi-institutional power. In a deeper sense the semiotician should be more courageous than all other kinds of scholars in confrontation with the institutional pressure. So the semiotician should be an academic fighter with a firm ethical devotion. Consequently, a semiotician should be inclined to more originally think about his subjects and methods than to blindly follow the fixed authoritative norms and rules determined by various academic institutions. For the latter, the technical rigor is frequently used to replace the genuine intellectual productivity.

Until today semiotic activities remain to be organized and performed at the national level. Global semiotics will lead to a more academic-holistic and social-international perspective. No any other international academic association could be able to hold the same grandiose ambition in the world. If the ideal of IASS has

not yet substantially realized in its reality, it must have been cherished by its founders in the 60's or exactly embodied in the structural trends of that times. At the moment of the IASS movement's turning towards its global expansion, its agents can hopefully take the occasion to more seriously reorganize its theoretical and practical strategy with a purpose to refresh its original academic idealism.