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# The Semiotics of Karl Marx

## A Historical and Theoretical Excursus through the Sciences of Signs in Europe

“The only thing I can say is that I am not a Marxist”

(Karl Marx)

**Abstract:** This paper claims that, as a “cryptosemiotician” and a philosopher, Marx practiced semiotics. Thus the paper examines Marx’s semiotics and its historical and theoretical developments in Europe. The relation between semiotics and Marxism is understood in the sense that the study of signs is not secondary with respect to historical-dialectical materialism. Marxism is an “open system” in that the elements that constitute it are related in such a way that modification of one element provokes modification of the others. It is an open system because it is a scientific system; it is subject to the laws of science and thus continuously susceptible to verification and exposed to confutation. I propose a critical reading of so-called Marxist interpretations of Marxian semiotics.

**Keywords:** cryptosemiotics; historical-dialectical materialism; open system

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## 1 Marxian Semiotics and Marxist Semiotics

There is not much point in formulating the relationship Marxism/semiotics in terms of a ‘Marxist approach to semiotics’ or ‘the constitution of a Marxist semiotics’, and even less so in terms of the ‘application of Marxism to semiotics’. Not only are such formulations pointless in determining methods, fields, and objects of scientific research, but they also risk presenting a distorted vision of the problem itself.

‘Marxism’ and ‘Marxist’ are abstractions that in the Marxian sense are hardly at all ‘determinant’. This is true especially when the terms ‘Marxism’ and ‘Marxist’ are reduced to the role of labels and used as directional signals or

arrows indicating a pre-established route. And it seems that Marx himself once said, laughing, “The only thing I can say is that I’m not a Marxist!” (see Enzensberger 1977: 456).

The association between semiotics and Marxism generally gives rise to defensive attitudes that distinguish between ‘science’ (semiotics) and ‘ideology’ (Marxism). In this case the aim is to safeguard the ‘purity of scientific research’ from any ‘ideological’ and ‘political’ element that may corrupt it. The relation of semiotics to ideology is assumed to be a relation to something separate and ‘external’, so that semiotics encounters ideology only when they are completely developed and formulated.

The connection between semiotics and Marxism is often described as the result of a simple ideological alignment; in this case it is fair to denounce the illusory expectation of founding the science of signs on Marxism. Meillet disapproved the fact that an article by N. Ja. Marr on linguistics should have been published in the journal *Unter dem Banner des Marxismus*, rightly claiming that a scientific work “cannot place itself under any banner at all”. Marr was the official Marxist linguist in the Soviet Union until his excommunication in 1950s by Stalin in the journal *Pravda* and in the name of Marxism.

This relation already exists in the semiology of Saussure. The Saussurean sign model – hence semiology which derives from Saussure – conceives the sign in terms of an equal exchange relation between the *signifiant* and the *signifié*. Consequently, it reduces complex linguistic life to the two poles of *parole* and *langue* considered in a state of equilibrium. This sign model is constructed on a model of value adapted from the economic sciences – precisely marginalistic economics as elaborated by Walras and Pareto (School of Lausanne).

We do not here intend to analyze Saussure’s theories nor to compare the official Saussure to Saussure as he has recently emerged from his manuscripts. What we do wish to underline is that the Saussurean model of sign in linguistics and semiotics is influenced by the marginalistic economic theory of the School of Lausanne. Therefore comparison between Marxian criticism and political economy is relevant and in some ways inevitable in the discussion of the concepts of sign and sign value.

In his critique of political economy, Marx focuses on what he calls the ‘language of commodities’ (Marx 1964, vol. I). He interprets commodities as messages and explains the whole process of their functioning not only on the level of exchange, but also on the level of production. By analyzing commodities in the context of communicative and social structures, the fetishistic vision can be overcome. The fetishistic and reifying vision describes commodities as given and natural. It interprets relations among commodities as

relations among things that are regulated by hard and inflexible Market Laws, which are ontological market laws, metaphysical market laws. In contrast, Marx interprets relations among things as communication relations among human beings in a specific production system with its specific social structures, that is, the capitalist system. This system and these structures produce laws that are passively accepted by the individuals belonging to the system.

Marxian demystification of bourgeois economy, in particular Marxian analysis of commodities are semiotic analyses and involve investigating commodities as messages: the commodity is studied not only at the level of exchange as in so-called “marketing semiotics” (now very much in vogue), but also on the level of production and consumption. If we deny commodities the character of human communication and separate them from production, political economy is reduced to commodity economics.

From a Marxian perspective economics is a field of semiotics. Semiotics of economics has its starting point in Marxian analysis. Inclusion of economics in semiotics does not confirm semiotics as an imperialistic and all-encompassing science. Instead, on a methodological level it implies a critique of the marginalistic model accepted by Saussurean semiology. Consequently, the Marxian critique of economy in semiotics also implies that in the semiotic analysis of all types of social signs it is necessary to shift from the level of sign exchange and sign market to the level of sign production. In this way, sign structures emerge as the historical structures of human relations. In other words, semiotics must achieve what Marx achieves in his analysis of commodities and capital: it must evidence the presence of social relations in the place of a-historical and unchangeable relations among things.

To use a concept introduced by Thomas A. Sebeok, Karl Marx can doubtlessly be considered as a “cryptosemiotician”. We believe that as a cryptosemiotician and a philosopher Marx practiced semiotics. Let us look at two main reasons for this:

(1) One reason is in the very configuration of the Marxian critique of political economy. The latter, in fact, concentrates on deciphering the ‘language of commodities’ (Marx 1964, vol. I) and explaining the entire process of how commodities function as messages. Therefore, through analysis of communicative social structure, Marxian critique of political economy overcomes the fetishistic view of the world in which merchandise is presented as something natural, while the relation between commodities takes the ghostly form of a relation among things and not what it really is, that is, a specific and historical system of social relations that can be modified. As such Marxian critique is semiotic analysis and cannot be separated from consideration of

commodities as messages, whether at the level of exchange or at the level of production and consumption.

(2) Another reason concerns factual and potential Marxian analysis of different ideological forms and use in this connection of the notion of 'superstructure'. The study of ideologies is inseparable from the study of sign systems and the relations of implication and hierarchical stratification that come to be established among such systems. On the other hand, the notion of superstructure requires specification of its relation to the 'social structure'. This is possible by studying the mediation of sign systems that form the social, from the material base to the highest levels of ideology. Today thanks to publication of Marx's *Mathematical Manuscripts* (1968) we are now familiar with Marx's critical analyses of Newton's and Leibniz's 'mystical' differential calculus, including also D'Alembert's and Euler's rationalistic method, and Lagrange's purely algebraic method. In his critique of Newton's and Leibniz's, etc. differential calculus, Marx evidences the presence of metaphysical notions in their theory and of the use of procedures that contradict the laws of mathematics. In this case too Marx looks for the human operations at the basis of the signs implied in differential calculus. Thanks to such criticism Marx reaches positions formulated by such nineteenth-century mathematicians as Cauchy and Weierstrass, but independently from them. We believe that Marx accomplishes the transition from a simple stage of calculus to a more profound and scientific level.

In the following reflections on semiotics and Marxism we refer particularly to contributions from the Russian scholar Valentin N. Voloshinov (1895-1934, member of the Bakhtin Circle), from the Polish philosopher Adam Schaff (1913-2006) and from the Italian philosopher and semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1920-1985).

## 2 Contributions from Bakhtin's Circle to the Relation between Philosophy of Language and Marxism

Voloshinov belonged to what is known as the "Bakhtin Circle", thus denominated with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). In addition to Bakhtin and Voloshinov another central figure in this Circle is Pavel N. Medvedev (1892-1938). Voloshinov published the books *Freudianism* (1927) and *Marxism ad philosophy of language* (1929, 1930). The Bakhtin circle never used

the term ‘semiotics’ for the general science of signs, but preferred the expression ‘philosophy of language’. This expression is used to designate research which unfolds in adjacent fields and along the boundaries and margins of all disciplines concerned with languages and signs, focusing on points of contact and intersections.

While it is possible to distinguish between philosophy of language and specific areas of semiotic research (including linguistics) viewed as grammars of given sign systems, the distinction between general semiotics and philosophy of language is made more problematic by the fact that general semiotics is necessarily philosophical.

Nor can the problem be solved by simply stating that general semiotics is concerned with all types of signs, while philosophy of language only deals with (natural and special) verbal sign systems and with the disciplines that study them. Apart from a few exceptions (due to contingent needs and temporary restrictions of the field and not to attempts at defining it), philosophy of language also deals with nonverbal signs described from the perspective of semantics, logico-syntactics or pragmatics. Philosophy of language explores external boundaries, protrusions and excesses with respect to the ‘semiotic field’, that is, the field of the science of signs. By analogy with Bakhtin who used the expression ‘metalinguistic’ as a way of emphasizing that his own approach to language transcended the limits of linguistics, we can use the expression ‘metasemiotic’ for a Bakhtinian interpretation of philosophy of language.

With the expression ‘philosophy of language’ the intention was to indicate an approach that transcends the limits of linguistics and sign sciences as officially practiced at the time, and to focus on the utterance, dialogue, dialogism, evaluative orientation of the word, implicit meaning, etc.

Therefore, if we use the term ‘semiotics’ with reference to Peirce’s theory of interpretation according to which the sign is always part of a concrete process of semiosis, the result of the interrelation among interpretants, then clearly there are many points in common with the Bakhtinian conception of sign.

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* as well as in an essay of 1928, “The latest trends in linguistics thought in the West”, Voloshinov criticizes Saussurean linguistics and its influence on Russian linguistics.

*Freudianism: A Critical Sketch*, published in 1927, should be read against the background of the important debate of the time on the relationship between Marxism and psychoanalysis, and of Bakhtin’s interest in psychology and its relation to the sign sciences. His research in psychology led him to Lev S. Vygotsky whose views he mostly shared (Bakhtin dedicated an interesting study to the problem of consciousness in 1925). Moreover, several pages in *Marxism*

*and the Philosophy of Language* are also dedicated to the connection between psychology and the science of signs. In *Freudianism* Voloshinov's interest in Freud and the unconscious is developed as part of his research on the problem of ideology, analyzed in terms of the distinction between 'official' and 'unofficial ideology'. In this context the unconscious is interpreted in terms of social ideology that the subject is unaware of. However, the unconscious is also made of verbal signs. This point is of central importance in Voloshinov's (and Bakhtin's) interpretation of Freud, and to some extent anticipates Jacques Lacan's interpretation of psychoanalysis. On this basis and given the relation of interdependency between language and ideology, any opposition between the unconscious and consciousness is considered to be of an ideological order. As mentioned, *Freudianism* proposes a distinction between official and unofficial ideology, which also plays a central role in Bakhtin's interpretation of Rabelais in his monograph *Rabelais and His World* (1965).

According to Bakhtin and his circle of collaborators sign theory and theory of ideology are part of the human sciences. In addition to *Rabelais and His World* reference here is also to Bakhtin's 1929 monograph on Dostoevsky (new edition 1963) and to Medvedev's 1928 monograph *The Formal Method*. However, the authors of the Bakhtin Circle present the theory of ideology not only as a discipline among others, but also as a perspective that cuts across all other human sciences, including literary theory, the general science of signs or philosophy of language, linguistics, psychology and psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology, ethnology, the study of folklore.

As regards general sign theory, the Bakhtinian position may be characterized in terms of the distinction between signs and signals. On this basis, Bakhtin, Voloshinov and Medvedev like Vygotsky took a stand against reflexology (dominant at the time), on the one hand, and against vulgar behaviorism founded upon the stimulus-response relation, on the other. They also criticized the oversimplifying tendency to interpret signs in terms of identification processes, which in fact only account for signals where the relation between *signifiant* and *signifié* is effectively univocal.

The Bakhtin Circle critiques the reduction of signs to the status of signals (treated by Voloshinov in a chapter of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, in different terminology by Medvedev in *The Formal Method* as well as in many other writings by Bakhtin). This problem cannot be separated from reflection on the relation between 'meaning' and 'theme'.

Meaning refers to the repeatable, reproducible aspects of sign and simply requires an effort of recognition or identification by the interpretant. 'Theme' is relative to context and covers the innovative aspects of sign, it refers to meaning

as it is given in a specific situation, and therefore it requires active or responsive understanding by the interpreter.

In the Bakhtinian perspective another essential aspect of the sign is its material quality. For a sign to subsist there must be a body, a physical object which does not refer to itself but to something else for which it stands, whether a body or an idea. However, the sign is material not only because of its physical nature, but also because it has a place – even in the case of so-called natural signs – in a historical tradition, a determinate culture, on which basis it objectively assumes a given meaning. Meaning can also be modified in some way, but only as a result of the effort required to modify something already endowed with a material, objective, resistant and autonomous existence of its own: this is what is understood by so-called ‘semiotic materiality’.

In relation to linguistics, Bakhtin evidenced the limits of approaches that are founded on the concept of code and consider the sign reductively in terms of signality. All of Bakhtin’s research is dedicated to demonstrating how linguistic life cannot be contained between the two poles of *langue* or the normative system of language, on the one hand, and *parole* or individual speaking, on the other. Verbal language is a social phenomenon and can only be adequately understood in terms of dialogized semiotic processes which interrelate different historical languages, internal languages forming a single historical language, texts, discourse genres, literary genres, individual discourses, one’s own word to the word of others, the diverse voices constituting one’s own word, internal discourses.

With reference to the social sciences, members of the Bakhtin Circle give an important contribution to theory of ideology, sociology, the culturological sciences and linguistics (see Marcellesi *et alii* 1978). Taking his distances from mechanistic divisions dominating theory in the USSR (see Nikolaj Ja Marr’s language theory), Voloshinov as early as 1929 demonstrated that the relation between structure and superstructure cannot be interpreted dialectically if separated from the mediating role played by signs. Verbal and nonverbal signs mediate between structure and superstructure. In contrast to those conceptions that aim to define language on the basis of the categories of structure and superstructure taken in isolation, Bakhtin and his Circle believed that this Marxian metaphor could only be adequately explained in the light of studies on language and signs in general.

In his “Introduction” to *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* which is omitted from the English Edition (1973) and which, therefore, we quote from a recent French edition by Patrick Sériot (1910: 117), Voloshinov courageously (in Stalin’s Soviet Union and under the dominion of Marr’s Marxism) in 1930 says:

Il n'existe à ce jour aucun ouvrage d'orientation marxiste en philosophie du langage [...] Il faut ajouter que dans tous ces domaines peu ou pas touchés par la main des fondateurs, Marx et Engels, ce sont des catégories mécanistes qui se sont solidement ancrées. Ces domaines se situent encore, en général, au stade pré-dialectique du matérialisme mécanique. On peut observer notamment que, dans tous les aspects de la science des idéologies, c'est la catégorie de la causalité mécaniste qui est jusqu'à présente dominante. On note, en contre, la persistance d'une conception positiviste de l'empirie, un culte du 'fait', compris non pas de façon dialectique, mais comme quelque chose d'immuable et de stable. L'esprit philosophique du marxisme n'a presque pas encore pénétré ces domaines.

### 3 Rossi-Landi's Contribution to the Relation between Semiotics and Marxism

With his remarkable book of 1961, *Meaning, Communication and Common Speech* (in Italian *Significato, comunicazione e parlare comune*), Rossi-Landi placed himself outside the Saussurean perspective, and was therefore free of the reductive dichotomy linguistic system/individual *parole*, as well as of the code-and-message approach, which presupposes previously formed individuals, in favor of semiotics of interpretation where interpretation itself is recognized a major factor in the formation of individuals. This book contains a full-fledged critical discussion of some central notions in analytical or linguistic philosophy. It also made a move toward a socially oriented theory of signs. The general framework derives from Vico, Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Peirce. More exactly, for the first time ever, this book grafts the line of thought that leads from Peirce to Morris – together with elements of Oxonian analytical philosophy, Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, and Ceccato's and Dinglers's operationism – onto the trunk of Continental non-idealistic historicism.

In a subsequent phase of his research Rossi-Landi authored the book entitled *Language as Work and Trade* (1968, Eng. trans. 1983) that still today is extraordinarily topical for foresight and analytical capacity. With this book and the following, *Semiotics and Ideology* (1972), *Linguistics and Economics* (1974 and 1977), *Ideology* (1978 and 1982), *Philosophic Methodics and Science of Signs* (1985, in Italian, *Metodica filosofica e scienza dei segni*), Rossi-Landi anticipated problems now centrally important in the present phase of development in the late capitalist system.

This is the global communication phase in the development of social reproduction, where communication is a constitutive factor in production and so-called 'immaterial work' is the principle resource. Communication plays a dominant role not only in the intermediary phase in the productive cycle, the



phase of *circulation* or *exchange* according to market logic, but also in the phases of *production* and *consumption*. This is particularly the case in the contemporary world with the development of technology, therefore of automation and computerization, and of the communication network at large. After realizing that *commodities are messages* and now that *messages are commodities*, it is obvious that *consumption is essentially consumption of communication and production is production of communication*, and vice versa.

Rossi-Landi elaborated such concepts as *linguistic production*, *linguistic work* and *linguistic capital* in *social reproduction*, identifying homological relations with *material production*. As revealed by certain expressions now in use in everyday language such concepts describe factors that are no less than fundamental in today's social reproductive cycle. The expressions we are alluding to include 'immaterial resource', 'immaterial capital' and 'immaterial investment'. These circulate with the awareness of their increasing importance for development and competition in today's *knowledge society* based on education, information and specialized knowledge. Until quite recently material production and linguistic production, in the form of manual work and intellectual work, were conceived to be separate though related homologically at profound genetic and structural levels.

The novelty is that in the world of global communication, linguistic production and material production have at last come together. With the advent of the computer in which *hardware* and *software* come together in a single unit the connection between work and material artifacts, on the one hand, and work and linguistic artifacts, on the other, has been evidenced unequivocally to the point that the superior capacity of linguistic work, which is 'immaterial work', is obvious. In other words, linguistic work leads the processes of production and development.

Claude Lévi-Strauss (cf. 1958) used the categories of linguistics in his studies on the rules of matrimony and kinship systems, offering a truly formidable example of the application to nonverbal communication of conceptual frameworks elaborated in relation to verbal communication. Rossi-Landi attempted the opposite procedure: he applied to verbal language categories that had been elaborated in the study of a nonverbal communicative sign system, that is, the categories of economics in its classical phase of development with David Ricardo and Marx.

Rossi-Landi's homological method pushes beyond the mere identification of analogies or similarities and integrates structural analyses with dynamic analyses. Such an approach amounted to the search for a homology between *homo faber* and *homo loquens*, which led Rossi-Landi to formulate his theory of the homology of production in general, that is, of sign and nonsign production.

The assumption subtending Rossi-Landi's 1968 monograph is that *linguistic production* is a fundamental factor in social life and as such is *homologous* with the production of utensils and artifacts. He developed this assumption more systematically in theoretical terms in subsequent books like *Linguistics and Economics*.

Verbal language is described as a system of artifacts, while other systems of artifacts are conceptualized in terms of *nonverbal sign systems*. This approach led to expanding the concept of linguistic production into *sign production*. In such a framework it is clear that concepts originally developed in different fields from the verbal, such as 'consumption', 'work', 'capital', 'market', 'property', 'exploitation', 'alienation' and 'ideology', may be applied to studies on language.

Likewise concepts developed in relation to studies on verbal language are applied to nonverbal sign systems, such that we may speak of *linguistic consumption*, *linguistic work*, *linguistic capital*, *linguistic alienation*, and so forth. Rossi-Landi's research lays the foundations for an approach to *general semiotics* that includes and unites *linguistics* and *economics* as well as other *social sciences*. His view on human behavior is global and evidences with great foresight that separatism among the sciences in globalized communication-production society is untenable, indeed truly anachronistic.

In *Language as Work and Trade* Rossi-Landi develops his critique of the dichotomy between collective language (*langue*) and individual speech (*parole*). He maintains that the bipartition between language and speech must be replaced by a tripartition between collective or common speech (now, collective linguistic work), collective language (necessarily founded on common speech), and individual speech (performed in relation to collective languages as it uses the assemblage of social techniques which form common speech).

The connection between Marx's critique of political economy, on the one hand, and semiotics and the philosophy of language, on the other, helps evidence social relations among human beings where it seemed that there only existed relations among things and reified relations among signs. This association also evidences the relation of mutual implication between ideology and signs at the level of the theory that studies them. We know that the verbal sign is not only the means and instrument through which ideologies are transmitted, but also the place itself where ideologies are produced, the material out of which they are made. Ideological reality is sign reality: where we have human social signs, we also have ideologies to varying degrees, and, vice versa, that which is ideological is endowed with sign value.

Contrary to the mechanistic interpretation of the relationship between base and superstructure in terms of unilinear causality, semiotics and philosophy of

language today, in conjunction with historical-dialectic materialism have taught us that individual consciousness is social consciousness; and that social reality in general – from the level of the social relations of production to the level of the production of ideologies and knowledge –, is sign reality. Indeed, the acquisition of knowledge and language is only possible in a specific sign-ideological context; that is to say, in the sign-mediated dialogical and dialectical relation among base, superstructure, and ideologies that characterize and constitute social communication.

In today's capitalist and global social reproduction system, the cultural system is intimately connected to the development of the capitalist system itself, indeed to the very point of identifying with it. This ensues in a series of important consequences.

The first is the difficulty of separating ideological interests from objective and material interests in the development of capital. Ideology becomes an integral part of production processes and contributes to the production of profit.

Secondly, given that culture is made of signs and that ideologies cannot be conveyed without signs, indeed cannot be produced without signs, interrelation between the cultural system and the capitalist system involves work that ensues in the production of nonverbal and verbal signs whose role is ever more important in social reproduction today.

The expression 'cultural capital' is not just a rhetorical device, but rather it responds to present-day reality. Linguistic and nonlinguistic work produces and develops cultural capital, and similarly to all processes that produce capital, surplus labor produces surplus value in a cycle that in turn augments cultural capital. Not only does all this take place without the subject necessarily being aware of the finalities of the work he carries out, but more significantly still the subject may not even be aware that what it is doing may be classified as work. In these cases *work is differentiated from activity as the execution of programs that are indifferently conscious or unconscious.*

An immediate consequence of this state of affairs as we are describing it is that ideology functional to the development of capital is *invisible*, and exploitation as it is disseminated throughout most of our behavior is mostly *imperceptible*. The present age, that is, the era of globalization, is one of the most difficult ever for the critique of ideology and, therefore, for the analysis of social alienation. From this point of view, a significant issue connected with mass-medial communication concerns the problem of censorship, subtle (and not so subtle) forms of which pervade the communication network unnoticed and uncontested, contributing to the formation processes of the alienated subject.

Global communication tends to present us with a monolithic and monological block which renders critical thinking very difficult if not altogether impossible, by contrast with a polylogical system oriented by the logic of otherness and therefore of unindifferent differences.

The subject of mass medial technology tends to be rendered functional to the needs of the sign market, consequently the subject's otherness, its uniqueness, is sacrificed to the logic of identity. By contrast to the illusion of freedom provoked by access to the communication network, the subject in fact undergoes imperceptible forms of exploitation and oppression in the free flow of signs and messages abounding on the market. The interests of multimedial capital extensively regulate cultural reality. However, by proclaiming the 'crisis' or even the 'end' of ideology and by judging such expressions as 'alienation', 'class interest' and 'social exploitation' to be outdated, such issues as these are successfully ignored. Instead, a critique of present-day cultural systems calls for study of cultural capital reproduction circuits with a focus on the role carried out by signs, ideology and general social planning.

With the increased implication of signs and ideology in the reproduction processes of capital, the individual has assumed a new role in this process that now requires re-examination. The expression 'alienated subject' is not adequate to fully account for the subject's unconscious integration into a process whose goals and ends are unknown to that subject. The expression 'alienated subject' takes the concept of subject for granted, whilst it should be interrogated given its specific ideological character. The subject is not only ignored in the case of 'visible alienation' denounced and relegated by society as abnormal, pathological, as 'mental alienation' non functional to the system; but also in the case of 'invisible alienation', alienation in the Marxian sense, which nowadays not only concerns life in the factory but extends to most, if not all, spaces of social life. Unlike 'visible alienation', invisible alienation is functional to the system. Therefore, as regards the 'speaking' subject we have at least two different kinds of linguistic alienation: the psychopathological corresponding to that which has been identified as 'visible alienation'; and alienation in a Marxian sense which puts the alienated speaker on a par with the alienated worker in capitalist society.

In this sense, the semiotic study of ideologies transcends the limit usually found in research on social communication (Rossi-Landi, in those years had in mind positions such as those of the psychiatrist Albert E. Scheflen and the semiotician Edward T. Hall). It is a prime requirement of the semiotic study of the programs of social communication to pose the problem of the interests governing the integration of sign systems in a given social organization, the problem of the conditions of power. Such a study assumes each sign system as a

totality whose functioning does not only depend on ‘the play of its parts, but on the play of the totality as a part’, so that each program would result controlled by a higher social level. This is the problem of ideologies that, in so far as they are ideologies of the dominant class, signify and organize behavior in a certain manner. In the light of this premise, Rossi-Landi (1972) defined the dominant class as the class that owns the control of the emission and circulation of verbal and nonverbal messages constituting a given community.

Semiotics recognizes the existence of non-ideological spaces of social reality. By unmasking the ideology that subtends – both in the realm of common behavior and in the scientific or literary realm – what is presented as ‘natural’, ‘spontaneous’, as ‘a given’, as ‘realistic’, semiotics shows the inescapable placement of every behavior either in the program of the maintenance and reproduction of the classist society, or in the program of its critique and of its undoing. And thus it becomes disalienating, revolutionary praxis.

## 4 Adam Schaff’s Contribution to the Criticism of Sign Fetishism

Works by Adam Schaff concern epistemology, logic and philosophy of language, the problem of the relation between Marxism and humanism, Marxism and structuralism, the problems of ideology and the critique of today global communication analyzing such issues as structural unemployment, migration, and the end of work understood as work-merchandise:

Schaff considers language both as a social product and a genetic phenomenon. Consequently, he criticizes what he considers as the reductive innatist and biologicistic interpretation of language as proposed by linguist Noam Chomsky and biologist Eric H. Lenneberg.

According to Schaff, in his use of verbal language and signs in general we must get free of what he calls the “fetishism of signs” echoing Marx’s “fetishism of commodities”. Sign fetishism is reflected in the reified conception of the relation among signs and of the relation between signifier and signified. Instead, sign relations should be considered as relations among human beings who use and produce signs in specific social conditions.

In order to get free of “sign fetishism”, as Schaff says referring to the Marxist concept of the “fetishism of goods”, signs and sign typologies must be connected to the human individual and social relations. A critique of the reified conception of the relation among signs and of the relation between signifier and

signified must take the social process of communication as the starting point of analysis and consider the sign relation as a relation among human beings who use and produce signs in specific social conditions. All analyses should start from the “social condition of the individual” and from the notion of the individual as a social product.

This approach is pivotal in linguistic analysis. In fact linguistic analysis is particularly useful in the study of the historical social structure of the human individual, given that it is especially through language that the historical and social conditioning inherent in the shaping of the individual is made possible. Language is a social fact and constitutes the social background to thought and consciousness. Language is a social product as well as being a genetic phenomenon and is functional to human praxis. This approach subtends the historical-materialistic and dialectic character of the “active role” of the subject both at the level of cognitive processes and of practical action. The individual is able to act upon the historical social situation that is pre-existent to him and conditions him from the outset through language (it too a social product). Language is not only an instrument for the expression of meanings, but it is also the material that forms meaning, without which meaning cannot exist. Consequently, the so-called “subjective” does not imply the abstractly individual or absolutely autonomous, but rather is the concrete and conditioned individual, that is, the individual considered as a social product with a social function: the “subjective has an objective and social-historical character”.

A Marxist approach associated to linguistic analysis and sociology of knowledge contributes to demonstrating the social character of thought, therefore its social and ideological nature. The verbal sign is not only connected to concept, but also to what Schaff calls the *stereotype*. The verbal sign involves beliefs, established opinion, emotional tendencies, group and class interests, and so forth. The stereotype is a specific reflection of reality connected with specific linguistic signs; but since it involves emotional, volitive, and valuational elements, not only does it play a special role in cognitive processes, but also in praxis. The stereotype is not only a category of logical thought, but also a pragmatic category. From language we receive concepts as the product of a given society in the course of history; in the same way we receive stereotypes that carry specific tendencies, behavior patterns and reactions. The implication is that language is always more or less ideological since it is connected to social praxis.

According to Schaff stereotypes are characterized by a high degree of “intrusion of the subjective factor” in the form of emotional, volitive and valuational elements. This “subjective factor”, however, is social and not individual in nature, it is linked to interests of social groups (social classes,

ethnic groups which speak the same language and so forth). Seen in these terms, the "subjective factor" is present in any form of reflection on reality as much as in scientific knowledge. As Schaff says in *Essays in the Philosophy of Language*, science and ideology are closely interconnected, indeed genetically so, in spite of the pedants who want them separate, given that the social praxis that produces and promotes the development of language is the common basis for both a relatively objective knowledge of the world and for evaluation.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

In the light of Voloshinov, Rossi-Landi, and Schaff's approach we can consider the Marxian analysis of capitalist economic relations both as crypto-semiotic and "protostructuralist".

Focusing on the relation between structuralism and Marxism, we do not refer to French Marxist structuralism (Louis Althusser, Lucien Godelier – the Marxist structuralism of Lucien Sebag, follower of Lévi-Strauss, is a "discours à part"), but directly to Marx given that his approach is typically semiotic, or better "cryptosemiotic".

The study of communication is pivotal in the Marxian critique of political economy. Marx analyzes commodities as messages and concentrates on explaining the "language of commodities" and the "commodity's arcanum" (Marx, *Capital*, I). As a result of this approach, his critique of political economy overcomes the fetishistic view of things according to which the relation among commodities appears as a natural relation among things and not for what it really is, that is, a specific type of relation among human beings. As such Marxian critique is effectively a semiotic analysis that studies the structure of goods described as messages not only at the level of exchange but also of production. A commodity is a commodity not when a product is produced and consumed in its use-value but when it is produced and consumed as an exchange-value, that is, as a message. All this makes economics a sector of semiotics.

The structure of the market emerges as a structure of human relations – precisely the human relations of social production. From this point of view, the Marxian approach to structure is exemplary for semiotics. It indicates that what Marx achieved in his analysis of commodities and capital must also be achieved in anthroposemiotics: relations among human individuals must be identified instead of mere relations among things and individuals reduced to the status of things. Vice versa, the semiotic approach allows for an appropriate use of the

notions of structure and superstructure in a Marxist framework. Difficulties that recur in the study of relations between structure and superstructure derive from the lack of a mediating element. This mediating element is provided by the totality of sign systems, verbal and non-verbal, operative in all human communities. The pieces in the game are not two, but three: to the mode of production and to the ideological elaboration of the superstructure must be added *sign systems*.

The continuation of this trend, in which sign analysis is a sort of symptomatology because it studies social symptoms and investigates the causes of social *malaise* to the end of improving the quality of life, is what with Susan Petrilli we have denominated “Semioethics”. But this is another story.

**Acknowledgment:** First of all I wish to thank the organizers of this Congress, then congratulate the President, Eero Tarasti, and all those who with their participation have contributed to the success of this great event in China. To talk about Karl Marx is now no longer fashionable in Europe. But at a congress on semiotics, and in China, I think it very relevant to consider “the semiotics” of Karl Marx, or, if you prefer, his “cryptosemiotics” – and together the semiotics of scholars like Mikhail Bakhtin and his Circle in Russia, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi in Italy, and Adam Schaff in Poland, above all because they are not Marxists in precisely the same sense intended by Marx when he said that he was not Marxist. I wish to remember that Thomas A. Sebeok in the 1990s commissioned me to write an essay on Marx (and on the other authors mentioned above) for a volume in his book series “The Semiotic Web”, an essay I was very happy to produce for him. And Sebeok was absolutely not a Marxist.

**Note:** English translation from Italian by Susan Petrilli.

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