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A New Path to Postmodernity

Abstract: This article discusses John Deely's original proposal for a reconsideration of the history of modern and postmodern philosophy when semiotic thought enters the scene of the historical narrative of philosophy. This semiotic emergency had its origins in the Middle Ages, a thought that was overlooked by Descartes, which determined its forgetfulness until the rebirth of a powerful semiotic thought in the nineteenth century marking the advent of a postmodern philosophy.

Keywords: history of philosophy; modern philosophy; postmodern philosophy; semiotics

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With the reader's permission, I would like to begin with a few biographical remarks. I chose to comment on Deely's *New Beginnings: Early Modern Philosophy and Postmodern Thought* (1994) because of past events of which I have vivid memories. I met John Deely in the summer of 1983, when he gave a course on medieval semiotics in partnership with Umberto Eco, during one of the legendary summer seminars promoted by the Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies, under the expert baton of Thomas Sebeok on the lovely campus of Indiana University, Bloomington. It was also during this summer that I had the opportunity to attend the course taught by Joseph Ransdell, undoubtedly one of the most extraordinarily competent interpreters of the work of Peirce. Deely also attended this course. Our meeting was inevitable and since then we have become intellectually very close to Ransdell, united in admiration devoted equally to the human and intellectual greatness of this celebrated late Peirce scholar.

We met several times again, Deely and I, in other seminars and conferences, but the contact became more intensive when Deely was a researcher and

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professor at the Federal University of Minas Gerais-BR, under the auspices of the Fulbright Program. During this period, Deely was invited more than once to give seminars in the graduate program in Communication and Semiotics at the Catholic University of São Paulo, a course for which I occupied the function of director. We became friends, as close as was allowed by the huge geographical distance that separated us. On many occasions, Deely and Brooke Williams, his dear wife, urged me to spend a few days with them, in Dubuque, Iowa, where Deely was professor of philosophy and semiotics. That time arrived.

We were there in the winter of 1994. Before going for a research sojourn in Bloomington, I stopped for 10 days with the Deelys. In fact, this research sojourn resulted in the writing of a book to which I gave the title of *Estética. de Platão a Peirce* (Santaella 1994a), a book that has an affectionate dedication to John Deely and Brooke Williams for the unforgettable days we spent together. That year, the winter was intense. Dubuque reached the temperature of 36 Fahrenheit below zero. This did not prevent Deely from taking me for walks in the woods with Chorro, their dog with a Brazilian name. During these walks we had the opportunity to conduct long conversations on intellectual matters that interested us and about which most of the time we were in tune. Coincidentally, at the same point where I was beginning the first lines of my book, Deely was in the final stages of writing of his book, *New Beginnings*. My daily reading of the manuscript of this book was then accompanied, in the frigid walks through the woods, by endless conversations about the book's content and its context. The dialogue was so intense that it helped to warm us from the cold weather, especially me, a resident of the tropics visiting a place of snow that reached up to my knees.

In the years 1980–1990, the departments of humanities in the United States and other countries of the world were plunged into controversial debates on the postmodern and postmodernity. Since 1985, when I had the occasion to attend a course taught by Donald Preziosi on postmodernity, in Bloomington, I wrote on the subject, including several later publications on the topic (Santaella, 1996). In 1994, the year Deely finished his book, the debate on postmodernity still raged, especially because it had become the focus of controversy among philosophers since the pronouncements by Habermas (1983), which were not always peacefully accepted.

Today, the debate is not as heated and a synthesis regarding the cultural significance of postmodernity has become possible. New modernity, second modernity, super modernity, reflexive modernity and liquid modernity are expressions that have been used by various authors to replace or complement the original ideas of postmodernity. What unites all these designations is the search for a characterization of the changes, since the second half of the

twentieth century, which are taking place in post-industrial societies or societies of late capitalism, of turbo-capitalism, etc.

The roots of modern Western societies are in the Enlightenment, which coincided with the advent of industrialization and brought out a wide range of dimensions, including the structures and social values enhanced by economic and political powers, the population explosion, urban growth, and mobility. One of the striking features of studies of postmodernity is their controversial perspective ranging from the deepest aversion to the betrayal by the current times to the ideals of the Enlightenment to the most devastating critique of these ideals. The only point on which the diverse fringe of interpretations converge is the fact that something new and very different sprouted from the moment in which modernity entered its twilight.

However, in 1994, such a synthesis had not yet been established and the debates fulminated especially because the postmodern had entered all the styles in the arts, in music, films, design and in the whole of cultural issues. To draw, even if briefly, this context of that time is crucial to understand the originality of the proposal launched by Deely in his book *New Beginnings*; a proposal, by the way, that guides and unifies the arguments developed by the author over the parts and chapters of which the book is composed. It was for this originality that I emphatically called Deely's attention in our conversations about the book's contents and which led me to sign the book's preface (Santaella, 1994).

First of all it should be noted that Deely's argument introduces semiotics as a plausible and necessary way to rethink the accepted history of modern philosophy. Thereby, without adhering to any of the intellectual fashions of the time, such as deconstruction, anti-foundationalism, relativism, etc., Deely challenges the common understanding of the oppositions, continuities, and complementarities between modernity and postmodernity.

The line of Deely's argument professes that there is a coherent and voluminous source of semiotic theory and rich speculative material that was produced in the late Latin Age, most especially in John Poinsett's (João de Santo Thomas) *Tractatus de Signis* (1985), which provides a comprehensive speculative synthesis of the semiotic foundations that Poinsett inherited. This would have been the first source of modern philosophy if the work of René Descartes had not been so successful in marking the course of Western philosophy over the centuries. Unfortunately Descartes, as is well known, did not take into consideration any of the Latin sources. Hence the direction that modern philosophy took did not make use of those resources that were available in the period of its early course setting.

To give continuity to his argument, Deely relies on a Heideggerian strategy: we can only determine what should be thought of when we turn to the past to look for what has been forgotten. Well, the resurgence of a powerful semiotic thought in the nineteenth century works as a trigger for the use of Heidegger's strategy. If the work of Descartes gave rise to modern philosophy, the advent of a semiotic thought, in its recovery of the original Latin sources, gave birth to postmodern philosophy from which semiotics is inseparable. This should act as a standing point, or better, an invitation for philosophers and historians of philosophy to rethink their conventional narratives in a new light.

Deely's book is organized into two parts and eight chapters. The first chapter discusses the exhaustion of the classical modern paradigm. To understand this exhaustion it is necessary to go back to the Latin origins that modernity attempted to confine to oblivion. In the second and third chapters, Deely presents a reading of the Latin age extracted from his own hand. The next two chapters are dedicated to the discussion of Poincaré in comparison to the philosophers that inhabit the classical books of the history of philosophy such as Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, who are often placed in contrast with Descartes. The remaining chapters of the second part are dedicated to themes concerning signs, when modern semiotics enters the scene.

Since the 1990s, the more obvious correlations of semiotics with poststructuralism were common in issues that closely touched the poststructuralist relationship with postmodernity. In fact, there were many studies related to topics of postmodernity and semiotics. To cite an example, issue 183 of the journal *Semiotica* (2011) is fully dedicated to that subject and each author who contributed to the issue raises one specific sub-topic for discussion. Other than trying to cover as many areas as possible, the editor of the volume and author of the introduction declares that in accordance with the other editor, they "decided not to assign specific topics to the contributors curious to see just how diversified the interests in semiotics were in our so-called era of postmodernity". Even so, common elements appear in the volume, such as, "the paradigms of subjectivism and objectivism, past and present, self-reflexivity and intertextuality, connotation and denotation, as well as hybridism, the dynamics of interrelationships, contextualization, the need to classify, and semiotics as a social and cognitive science". Many of the articles emphasize the fact that, in the move from semiology to semiotics, binary systems are insufficient, especially in the era of postmodernism (Capozzi, 2011: 3-4).

Deely (2011) is also the author of one of the articles in the volume. Under the title of "Postmodernity as the unmasking of objectivity: Identifying the positive essence of postmodernity as a distinct new era in the history of philosophy" he advances the arguments that he defended in his previous book on the subject.

For him, the epistemology of modern philosophy is solipsistic in the sense that, as a result of a semiotic obscurantism, it has not come to recognize that in “the expression ‘object signified’ the qualification ‘signified’ is redundant, for an object is nothing other than something signified!” This criticism follows the same argument that was developed in detail in chapter 8 of *New Beginnings* where Deely carefully developed “the relation of all relations which is specifically a relation of signification ‘renvoi’, after the suggestion of Roman Jakobson” (Deely, 1994: 201).

In sum, for Deely, modernity in philosophy began with Descartes’ and Locke’s rationalist and empiricist systems respectively, which were a consequence of:

Ockham’s denial of the reality of relation as a mode of mind independent being which entails that what is within the mind stays within the mind, and what is outside the mind (if there is an outside, as Berkeley noted) stays outside. (Deely, 2011: 44)

The decline of modern philosophy began “when an American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce, re-discovered the ontological character singular to relations according to which their being transcends all differences between $\phi\nu\sigma\iota\varsigma$ and $\nu\omicron\mu\omicron\varsigma$, *ens reale* and *ens rationis*, inner and outer” (Deely, 2011: 44–45). If we take this argument seriously, it is possible to recognize that the postmodernist trends, which reduced all to relativity, amounted to a false start. While they thought they were transcending Rationalism and Empiricism, they were in fact re-introducing

only mind-dependent relations without any realization at all that mind-dependent relations become mind-independent relations under the right circumstances, and that relations become independently of the finite mind according to circumstances that can obtain even before there are any finite minds in the universe. (Deely, 2011: 45)

In their different versions, either the scientific or the sophistic one, solipsism “remains a prisoner to modern epistemology” (ibid.). That is why Deely’s *New Beginnings* provides a fresh approach to a postmodern ontology and epistemology, which necessarily include semiotics in their agenda.

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Bionote

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