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## Welcome to Semiosistan!

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Massimo Leone

# Welcome to semiosistan!

**Abstract:** The article proposes a thought experiment, the creation of a nation entirely composed by semioticians, and wonders what characteristics its inhabitants should have. Beyond the formal requirements of a robust engagement with semiotics, the article concludes that the most important value in this fictional country would be the commitment to approach the world through language, instead of violence, and to believe in the possibility to cultivate a reasonable community of interpreters. A country for semioticians, therefore, is not needed, since they should, on the opposite, venture into the world and spread their message of trust in the reasonability that underlies the human capacity for language.

**Keywords:** Semiotics, interpretive reasonability, social commitment, violence, unreasonability

Comment voulez-vous gouverner un pays qui a deux cent quarante-six variétés de fromage ? (Charles de Gaulle)

## 1 The birth of a nation

Dystopias often tell the story of an invasion. A multitude of strangers swarms into a space, disrupting its values. In countless US early 20<sup>th</sup>-century novels, Italians, Irish, or Chinese invade America, dispossess the white race, and take control. Toward the end of the century, aliens, monsters, and zombies become the protagonists of catastrophic tales. But in 2017, following the decision to organize a world congress of semiotics in a city like Kaunas, a new dystopia arises: the invasion of semioticians. They were everywhere in the centre of the city: jogging along the Neman river at dawn, sipping coffee in bars in the morning, strolling along the elegant boulevards in the afternoon, purchasing vast amounts of amber and linen at dusk. In the last week, no place in the centre of Kaunas was immune from such overwhelming presence, except, perhaps, some of the deserted parallel sessions of the congress itself.

Disquieting as this image might seem to the lay locals, however, such occupation turns, to the eyes of semioticians, from dystopia to utopia. What if semioticians

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Massimo Leone, University of Turin

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finally take over? What if they federate so as to establish, in 2017 Kaunas, a new country called “Semiosistan”, a country entirely governed by semioticians?

## 2 Choosing a flag

The geopolitical fiction is not entirely fanciful: flicking through the elegant book of abstracts of the congress, one gathers the impression that semioticians can deal with everything, from climate change to terrorism, from vegan food to porn movies. But a number of intriguing questions would immediately arise in Semiosistan. If one looks up a country in Wikipedia, some constant elements characterize it, usually in the right column of the page. The first of them is a flag. How would the flag of Semiosistan look like? Semioticians would fight over the decision: Greimas’ semiotic square on a black background would look a little like the flag of ISIS (International Semiotic Institute State), but also Peirce’s triangle on a white background would look overly minimalist; and what about keeping the giant “S” of the IASS, also in order to convey the idea that Semiosistan is a country of supermen? Choosing the coat of arms, the national hymn, the capital (Paris? Bologna? Tartu? Vilnius?), the official languages, and even the demonym of Semiosistan would entail fierce discussions; yet most of these questions could be settled quite rapidly, during a IASS assembly, for instance.

Two further questions, instead, would stay unsettled, demanding a much longer and deeper reflection on the nature of the new nation. The first question would be: who is a citizen of Semiosistan? In other words, how does one earn the right to name themselves a national of such a utopian country? Would, for instance, marrying a famous semiotician be sufficient to receive a semiotic passport? The second question would be: what are the values of Semiosistan? In other words, what kind of future does Semiosistan depict for itself and strive for?

## 3 Defining citizenship

As regards the first question, some funny tests virally circulate through the web, with such titles as “What Nationality Are You Subconsciously?” or, more preemptorily, “What Should Your Nationality Be?” We all know these tests and have fallen for them at least once: replying to a series of questions, such as “What’s the most important thing in society?” or “How important are tradition

and family?”, one is progressively oriented toward the conclusion that, despite what one’s passport says, one actually is Italian, or French, or German at heart. It is somehow an injustice that such tests never allow one to find out that one is, for instance, Lithuanian at heart. But let’s just imagine, for once, that one of these tests also considers small countries or countries overlooked by Eurocentric history, and even includes such a newly established and tiny country as Semiosistan. Answering what questions, and how, would someone be declared a “semiotician” at heart?

Depending on how the test is designed, it could be surprising in both ways: on the one hand, someone who has believed to be a historian, or a sociologist, or a musicologist all her or his life, would be suddenly put in front of the sheer truth: you are a semiotician at heart my friend, please accept it and learn the new hymn (composed by Eero Tarasti of course). On the other hand, however, the test would also reorient toward a new spiritual country those researchers who, despite calling themselves semioticians, teaching semiotics, participating in semiotic congresses, and even wearing semiotic t-shirts, actually are sociologists, or psychologists, or historians at heart, or even belong to the stateless community of cultural studies, or to the displaced community of philosophy. What questions, then, would unmask both the crypto-semiotician and the pseudo-semiotician?

Some of them would detect immediate signs of national belonging, like the one hundred questions that the US Government used to print on the back of yellow pages so as to help prospective applicants for citizenship to become good nationals. As a mild provocation, I shall now dare to formulate some of the hundred questions for obtaining the citizenship of Semiosistan. The first question would read as follows: “Dear participant of the 2017 IASS Congress, please reread the text of your paper; does it explicitly mention the word “semiotics” or its derivatives at least once? If not, then I’m sorry, but you are maybe at the wrong congress. Second: please reread the footnotes and bibliography of your paper; do they contain references to the names of some of the founding fathers of the discipline, for instance Saussure, Greimas, Barthes, Peirce, Eco, Lotman, etc.? If not, then I’m sorry, but you are maybe at the wrong congress again. Third: does your paper substantially mention some specifically semiotic concepts, such as semiosis, signifier, signified, connotation, denotation, semiosphere, semiotic square, interpretant, object etc.? If not, I’m sorry for the third time, but your paper should have been presented at another congress. Fourth: when you come across another congress participant, do you obsessively engage a conversation on the destiny of semiotics? If not, you should leave Semiosistan immediately”.

## 4 The values of a nation

Besides these immediate signs of recognition, however, the citizenship of Semiosistan should depend on something much deeper and difficult to pinpoint: that is, one's adhesion to the values of the nation. Indeed, it would be possible for someone to never mention the word "semiotics", never quote its masters, never fidget with its concepts, and never ponder its fate, and still deserve full citizenship, exactly by virtue of one's adhesion to the central values of the nation. What values, then, earn one honorary citizenship in Semiosistan? What brings us together, fellow semioticians and Semiosistanians, despite our differences of origin, language, semiotic faith, and, increasingly, dietary restrictions (by the way, Dario Martinelli and I are currently writing a book entitled *How to Travel with a Gigantic Piece of Seitan*)?

I shall now conclude the slightly tongue-in-cheek section of this paper by reminding you that, some years ago, at a lengthy symposium, I tried to wake up myself and the audience through proposing a Decalogue on "How to Become a Semiotician"; here it goes, written on digital stones:

1. You shall study semiotics; choosing a good university course with a good teacher; reading books, articles, essays; going back to the classics, avoiding compendiums, readers, and also most online materials: they are not good (for the moment);
2. You shall practice semiotics; initially through purposeless analysis; through interpretation for the sake of interpretation; annoy your friends with semiotics;
3. You shall befriend other semioticians; meeting them regularly not only on the web, but also in congresses, symposia, colloquia; remember to celebrate semio-festivities;
4. You shall not turn semiotics into a rhetoric; semiotics' purpose is to help other people to understand meaning, not to convince them that you understand it better than them;
5. You shall not turn semiotics into magic; semiotics is a discipline, one should be disciplined in learning and in practicing it;
6. You shall not turn semiotics into religion; semiotics is only one out of a multitude of options; respect other disciplines and ask respect from them;
7. You shall not turn semiotics into science; let's face it: semiotics is part of the humanities; thank god meaning will never be ruled by the laws of necessity;
8. You shall not turn semiotics into mystery; if nobody understands you but other semioticians, you are a failure;
9. You shall not turn semiotics into bar conversation; if everybody appreciates you except other semioticians, you are a failure too;

10. You shall not be worried that your mother doesn't understand what you do; most people who do new things have skeptical mothers.

I still believe in this Decalogue, although compendiums of semiotics have considerably improved in the meantime, as well as attempts at making it closer to natural sciences. Articulate as it might read, however, such list of commandments would still not fully grasp the deep values of Semiosistan; the injunctions of the Decalogue, indeed, would probably work for all humanities. What is it, then, in the rarefied sphere of academic values, that sets semiotics apart?

## 5 Why Greimas matters

At this Semiotics World Congress, in Kaunas 2017, I was invited to participate in a roundtable to commemorate Algirdas J. Greimas and to propose my ideas on the current relation between semiotics and society. I am, I must confess, deeply humbled to have enjoyed this plenary space, meaning that my audience has no alternative but to listen to me or play with a smartphone. Moreover, I am even more humbled to share this plenary roundtable with such distinguished colleagues as Jacques Fontanille and Eric Landowski. Despite having met them personally a number of times, including at breakfast, these two names still mainly sound not as names of colleagues but as names of central semiotic authors. Fontanille, to me, is not as much a person I come across at breakfast time in my hotel as a recurring item in my bibliographies. Yet, something fundamental sets us apart in this task of both commemoration and reflection. Unlike them, I never met Greimas as a person. I met him, instead, as an author, when my mentor Omar Calabrese first suggested to me, then a young student at the University of Siena, to read *Du sens*. Therein I was shocked to discover Greimas' (1970: 7) most famous sentence: "Il est extrêmement difficile de parler du sens et d'en dire quelque chose de sensé" ("it is extremely difficult to talk about meaning and to say something meaningful about it"). The English translation does not fully capture the semantics of the original French, but gives at least an idea of why Greimas is, still nowadays, a fundamental author whom we should all read, and have our students read, independently from our semiotic denomination.

The importance of Greimas, as well as the importance of semiotics, stands out especially if one plays with the most famous sentence of the Lithuanian (or Franco-Lithuanian) scholar in a structural way, for instance, through exploring its antonyms. The main problem of our times, indeed, is not that saying something

meaningful about meaning is difficult, but that saying something meaningless about meaning is becoming increasingly easy. In 2015, I had the great honour to bestow an honorary degree on Umberto Eco; it was certainly more an honour for me than for him, for whom it was honorary degree number forty-two. At the end of the ceremony, there was a press conference and, on that occasion, Eco pronounced a sentence that then created turmoil in the media (e.g. Nicoletti 2015) for weeks and still remains a sort of a motto of that Turin celebration: “I social media danno diritto di parola a legioni di imbecilli”; “the social media give the right to speak to legions of imbeciles”. Many young bloggers attacked Eco as though he were a senile academic at the end of his career, hammering the new media of his time out of nostalgia. The founding father of Italian semiotics, however, was bashing social media not from the point of view of a reactionary intellectual, but from that of a progressive thinker. Eco, it is well known, has extolled the value of low-brow culture during all his life, continuously mixing it with elite and highbrow culture in his works. In bashing the imbeciles of social media, Eco was actually trying to defend the intellectual value of mass culture.

## 6 On imbecility

Who is, indeed, an imbecile? How do you say imbecile in the languages of the IASS? *Imbécile*, *imbécil*, *schwachsinnig*, *imbecille*: in the traditional etymology of the word, an imbecile is someone who is “*sine baculo*”, that is, “without a staff” or “without a stick”, i.e. someone who cannot support him- or herself. Social media have extended, to a mass of imbeciles, the possibility to speak publicly because many, if not most, speakers in the social media have no arguments to support what they say but also, more pathetically, because they possess no other weapon than their unfounded imbecilities. As a consequence, today, it is extremely easy to talk about meaning and to say something meaningless. That is so because it is increasingly hard to single out, pinpoint, and debunk meaninglessness. I see it clearly in the domain that I study the most, that of religious fundamentalism and its digital expressions. While I, the semiotician, am painfully striving to demonstrate, for instance, through the application of the Greimassian method, that a radically violent interpretation of a ‘sacred’ text is unfounded, the fundamentalist imbeciles will have already polluted the web with their unsupported interpretations, often generating millions of copycats: the word “bacillus”, too, comes from the Latin “baculus”, “stick” or “staff”: the stick of imbecility frequently goes viral.

One of the primary values of Semiosistan should therefore be, beyond any difference of semiotic affiliation, that of resisting, exposing, and banning imbeciles. What does that mean, in semiotic terms?

## 7 The potential of semiotics

Greimas' famous sentence is intrinsically optimistic. It states, as recalled earlier, that it is "extremely difficult to say something meaningful about meaning"; but that implicitly entails that it is, indeed, *possible* to say something meaningful about meaning. It entails, that is, that the field of human experience that we call "meaning", and that seems to represent a large part if not the totality of it, is not subject to chaotic, capricious, and unpredictable forces. On the contrary, it is characterized by patterns endowed with regularity. Observed, described, and analyzed through a specific method, these patterns allow the semiotician to say something meaningful about them. That which matters the most, however, is not the content of what is said. That which matters the most is the possibility of saying it. Throughout the history of semiotics, several methods for grasping and pinpointing signification have been devised. Greimas' generative semiotics is certainly one of the most articulate among them, but it cannot certainly claim with certainty to be neither the best, nor the only one. As a consequence, so as to belong to Semiosistan, one should be required not to swear allegiance to such or such a method, but to the fact itself that a method exists, that is, that human beings are able to develop a meta-discursive framework in which they can reasonably argue about meaning and hopefully reach a peaceful conclusion. In other words, a citizen of Semiosistan must believe that, despite all oddities, idiosyncrasies, and tragedies, the human predicament essentially is language, that is, a domain in which and about which we human beings can emerge from our existential solitude and share a common symbolical ground.

## 8 Looking for aliens

Worried, like most of my colleagues, about the viability of semiotics, I am always extremely pleased when present-day popular culture hints at this arcane discipline. In a 2016 movie by Denis Villeneuve, *Arrival*, a linguist is contracted by the army for the purpose of deciphering the mysterious language of some monstrous aliens that have just landed on planet Earth. Since the aliens seem to express themselves through secreting a black substance, similar to ink, into bizarre and



irregular circles, the linguist realizes that she has to turn into a semiotician if she wants to interpret the language. The most relevant aspect of this decoding, however, is not the deciphering itself, but the assumption that these black circles can indeed be decoded and associated with meaning through a reasonable procedure of interpretation. Such an assumption is even more relevant when the movie's spectator realizes that the strange aliens and their mysterious language are nothing but a sci-fi metaphor concerning the past, memory, and trauma. There is a way to attach a reasonable meaning to the memory of existential pain, the movie subtly suggests.

When we, the semioticians, commemorate and celebrate the lives and scholarly efforts of deceased colleagues such as Greimas or Eco, we should, therefore, invoke their example as an antidote against those socio-cultural forces that, on the contrary, push human beings to semiotic nihilism. Confronted with the alien, the citizen of Semiosistan seeks to understand it – for it assumes that even the alien, in its need to interact with other aliens and with the environment, exudes meaning. When the imbecile, whose impotent ignorance threatens Semiosistan, is confronted with the alien s/he does not seek to understand. The imbecile shoots. Imbeciles shoot whenever they encounter something that exceeds their meagre capacity for spotting and articulating patterns and regularities in the environment. They shoot and are prey to shooting propaganda – for imbeciles are exactly that: human beings that, for one reason or another, have abdicated the human inclination to exist in language, to reasonably seek a regular correspondence between a sign and its object.

## 9 Expats forever

After all, it might not be such a good idea to establish the new nation of Semiosistan. I wouldn't like to live in a country where fellow citizens constantly analyze the meaning of my tie. But establishing the new country would not be such a good idea especially because it would represent a slightly cowardly move. Semioticians today do not need to venture into a new world but they need to adventure in the old one. They need to take their sophisticated toolboxes and face the unpleasant feeling of exploring a social reality that increasingly rejects semiotics because it increasingly rejects the idea of a reasonable community of interpreters. We need to face the fundamentalists, the trolls, and the conspiracy theorists of this world. We need to go out there to find our own aliens. It is a risky task, of course. While we strive to interpret the alien, the alien will seek to shoot at us. But if we endure, and above all if we stay united, as in our fantastic

congresses, we might one day leave the world with the hope that, like our prestigious predecessors Greimas, Eco, Peirce, etc., we somehow contributed to make it a more intelligible, and therefore a more livable place.

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