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Fundamentalism, Anomie, Conspiracy: Umberto Eco's Semiotics Against Interpretive Irrationality

[...] if the sign does not reveal the thing itself, the process of semiosis produces in the long run a socially shared notion of the thing that the community is engaged to take as if it were itself true. The transcendental meaning is not at the origins of the process but must be postulated as a possible and transitory end of every process". (The Limits of Interpretation, 1990: 41).

Eco versus Brown

Umberto Eco, one of the fathers of contemporary semiotics and one of the greatest semioticians of all times, has often dealt with the topic of conspiracy theories. Many of his novels, not to say all of his novels, revolve around this thematic kernel. In certain cases, conspiracy theories constitute the entire plot of the novel, like in *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), arguably, the best piece of fiction ever written on conspiracy theories, their internal dynamics, and social absurdities. Umberto Eco is also renowned as one of the fiercest critics of Dan Brown. Apparently, indeed, the two authors' works resemble: they both draw on historical and cultural erudition in order to design intricate investigative plots. In reality, Eco's and Brown's approaches to mystery and conspiracy could not be more different. Eco narratively represents conspiracy theories so as to ridicule them, and encourage his readers to discard them as mere nonsense. Dan Brown, on the contrary, does not satirize conspiracy theories but fuel them, promoting their wider circulation in society and, what is even more disquieting, enhancing their epistemic status. Cooperative readers of Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* are prompted to laugh at conspiracy theories; followers of Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* are titillated into believing them and spreading their contagion. That is the main reason why Eco has constantly criticized Brown. His critique bears a moral message that is visible not only in Eco's novels but resonates, under a different guise, from his foundational theoretical work.

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The limits of interpretations

If one had to summarize the core of Umberto Eco's philosophical inquiry into one sentence, or slogan, it would be reasonable to argue that most of his work has been devoted to investigate *The Limits of Interpretation* (Eco 1990). This inquiry entails two dimensions: on the one hand, a theoretical line: showing that signs, texts, discourse, and culture in general are not always open to the proliferation of meaning, but produce signification in ways that are regulated by societies through established patterns. These codes of interpretation can be continuously negotiated and renegotiated, but nevertheless hold a central place in the processes through which meaning is created, shared, and circulated in societies. The second dimension, a moral one, intertwines with the first. Patterns of interpretation do not only exist; they must also hold for social communication to be possible. A society that does not share any codes, and does not impose any limits to interpretation, is a disintegrating society, where human beings are progressively deprived of what defines and enables them as social and political animals, that is, language.

Eco's theoretical stance and even more the hermeneutical ethics resulting from it have sometimes been labeled as conservative, or even reactionary. Nothing could be more wrong. Eco has been an outspoken critic, for instance, of the textual hermeneutics of religious fundamentalisms, especially when, adopting literalism, they claim that one, and only one interpretation of a sacred text is possible (Eco 1992). This interpretive attitude only apparently sets rigid limits for the way in which a text, considered as directly emanating from transcendence, can be used for the production and circulation of further meaning (Leone 2012 *The Semiotics*). In reality, denying that alternative interpretations of a text are possible is equally irrational, from Eco's perspective, as affirming that any interpretation of a text is possible. The first claim rejects the idea that a multiplicity of cultural patterns encoding and decoding social meaning might exist; the second admits this multiplicity but see no rational, inter-subjective ways to choose among them, or at least to rank them (Leone 2016). Most of Eco's theoretical work, as well as its fictional counterpart, can be seen as a sophisticate, monumental attempt to conceptually dismantle these positions while showing their burden of heavy moral consequences.

How would societies in which these two hermeneutic lines predominate look like? A human group dominated by a fundamentalist interpretive ethics would most probably be a repressive one (Leone 2014). Unfortunately, this scenario is not only fictional, but has received many embodiments through history. It is at work even in many contemporary societies. Wherever a sacred text, or a corpus of sacred texts, is institutionally held as the intangible pillar of society, an inter-

pretive bureaucracy develops in order to link power and its control over individuals. Idiosyncrasies that do not align with the enthroned pattern are discarded, repressed, persecuted. Ways of life that do not conform with the rule, considered as straightforwardly descending from transcendence with no human mediation, are outlawed, banned, their bearers forcibly converted or exterminated. A society that adopts a fundamentalist interpretive hermeneutics is one that frustrates the innate human propensity for creativity and construction of infinite alternatives.

However, Eco's work points out with equal if not greater vehemence the risks resulting from a hermeneutical ethics that does not recognize any legitimate method for ranking interpretations. According to this view, not only sacred texts, but also legal codes, not to speak of fictional narratives, are open to any kind of interpretation, with no boundaries being able to set a limit, or at least a range of limits, to such proliferation. As it is known, Eco has identified in a certain interpretation of Derrida's deconstructionism, and mainly in the US, politicized version of it, the main source of such hermeneutic style (Eco 1992). Nietzsche can be considered as its first modern advocate: only interpretations exist, not facts. One might wonder how a society, wherein this perspective predominates, would look like. It would not be a repressive society in the same way as a fundamentalist society would be. No entrenched interpretive pattern would designate insiders and outsiders, rulers and outcasts. On the contrary, one might have the impression that, in a deconstructive society, anything might go, from sexual behaviors to literary taste, from legal interpretations to scientific findings. In this domain, nevertheless, Ronald Dworkin seems to join Eco in expressing a preoccupation about the heavy consequences that such deconstructive utopia might bear on the order of society (Dworkin 1982). A hermeneutics without limits, indeed, would be unable to handle interpretive conflicts. Just imagine, with Dworkin, a judge that, while condemning a convicted to life sentence, would affirm that such sentence results from an interpretation of facts, but that other interpretations are possible. Or imagine a doctor prescribing a cycle of chemotherapy by adopting the same hermeneutic stance. Legal or medical victims of such interpretive attitude would be horrified, asking for juridical or medical redress.

The example indicates that a society in which interpretations are never prioritized is neither a powerless society, nor one in which repression of the weaker magically disappears. On the contrary, it is a model of society in which repression and violence proliferate without a center, depending on irrational contagion (Leone 2015). From a certain point of view, whereas fundamentalist power is relatively easy to detect and contrast, deconstructive power is not, since no specific bureaucracy manages it. Power unbalance and injustice pop out randomly, according to patterns that are difficult to map since they do not respond to a public agenda, but to private, unstructured biases, which are nevertheless

easy prey of manipulation. Eventually, the most powerful agencies triumph in deconstructive societies as well in fundamentalist ones, but they do so more surreptitiously, without an army.

One of the great contributions of Umberto Eco to discussion on this theme consisted in showing that both hermeneutical attitudes could be discarded not only in view of their essentially anti-democratic political consequences (despotic repression / anarchist repression), but also in theoretical, and therefore objective, terms. Charles S. Peirce's model of semiosis as interpreted by Eco offers the conceptual ground for promoting a society in which limits are neither imposed nor deconstructed, but rationally and inter-subjectively negotiated (Eco 1976).

The semiotic foundations of interpretive rationality

Peirce's modeling of signification and meaning gives credit to two quintessential features of human cognition. On the one hand, human beings are innately inclined to the proliferation of meaning (Leone 2011). The diagram through which Peirce sought to capture this tendency is an open one. It is open to infinity: each sign points to a further sign, and so on and so forth without possible halt. On the other hand, humans equally strive for stability: they crystallize semiosis into habits that guide human cognitions, emotions, and actions. The problem of the two interpretive lines exposed above is that they miss the dialectic between these two equally essential cognitive features and endorse only one of them. In fundamentalist hermeneutics, only one habit is selected as dominant. Semiosis is locked into a rigidly codified interpretant that is imagined as totally conforming with the inner structure of a sacred text. Any attempt at reactivating the engine of semiosis by introducing alternative interpretants is quashed through – often violent – hermeneutical bureaucracy. Human beings that live under the rule of a single, canonized set of habits experience deep alienation. They are pushed to turn into machines, to which no alternatives are conceivable (Leone 2012b). However, also the deconstructionist society misses the dialectic between semiosis and habits, although in this case only the former is emphasized, while the latter is discarded. For the political deconstructionist, any habit is a foe to be rejected through the exercise of further semiosis. The beautiful creativity that humans express in contemporary poetry incarnates the utopia of a self-ruled society, in which continuously proliferating differences magically compose into multifarious, iridescent harmony. This ethical and political stance, though, while praiseworthy reacting to conservatism and autocratic repression, neglects that poetry

too has its rules and codes, and that humans tend to rank their poets as well as they rank their legal principles or economic recipes. But the worse consequence of adopting a deconstructive hermeneutic is not so much literary anarchy – which some could even find amusing – as cognitive instability. A life with no habits is an unbearable chaos. A society with no interpretive patterns is one where conflict is likely to emerge at every step, and at every step is likely to stay unresolved.

Between a hermeneutic model that imposes a habit and thwarts any semiosis and a hermeneutic model that imposes semiosis and thwarts any habit, Eco's semiotics promises a third way: developing a method that is able to dissect interpretations and rank their qualities. From this point of view, interpretive semiotics meets the philosophical needs of anti-Nietzschean new realism since it provides its philosophical claim with a methodology. According to new realism, it is not true, as Nietzsche and his deconstructive interpreters would claim that facts do not exist, and that only interpretations rule. The new realist philosopher stresses the relevance of reality, and therefore of facts, in guiding the moves of social life (Ferraris 2012). The interpretive semiotician is not primarily concerned with facts, since per definition and disciplinary tradition semiotics focuses on semiosis, not on the ontology supposedly behind it (Eco 1997). However, truthful interpretations are the facts of semiotics. The reality that new realist philosophers call for is nothing else, from the semiotic point of view, *than the network of interpretive habits that a community inter-subjectively and rationally accepts as guiding patterns at a certain stage of its historical and cultural evolution*. One could even claim that the advantage of Eco's semiotics over new realist philosophy is that the former better than the latter escapes any temptation of embracing a fundamentalist model as ruling habit. That is the case because that which new realist philosophers call "reality" is, for semioticians, a particularly established pattern of interpretation. Semiotics therefore does not indiscriminately reject Nietzsche's affirmation, but qualifies it by insisting that interpretations can be ranked, and that, as Peirce first intuited, ranking of interpretations is exactly that which results into a feeling of reality. Two major issues are therefore at stake. First: what is the position of conspiracy theories and their supporters in relation to the different hermeneutical attitudes exposed thus far; second, what is the specific contribution of semiotics in countering the risks of founding a society on the idea of conspiracy?

The enemies of rational interpretation

The remarkable success of conspiracy theory in present-day societies cannot be explained in relation to socio-political and economic reasons only. A feature of

conspiracy theories that has frequently been overlooked is that they are able to give a certain aesthetic pleasure. Similarly to gossip or metropolitan legends, conspiracy theories also thrive on boredom. Those who receive formulations of these theories are snapped from the calm rationality of the mainstream media discourse and instantaneously transported into a new scenario, which resembles a crime novel or a spy movie. Confronted with a new conspiracy theory, the audience is led to embrace the belief that nothing is how it seems. There is always a deeper truth to be discovered under the surface of history. The aesthetic pleasure of this belief derives from a sort of micro-empowerment. Psychologists know very well that the success of secrets, and the paradoxical impossibility of keeping them that results from it, stems from the pleasure that people feel when they are communicated something that is not of public domain. From gossip among friends to scoop magazines, such pleasure ultimately derives from the illusory idea of an inclusion, which also entails a corresponding exclusion. The communication of a secret immediately determines a separation between insiders and outsiders, between those who know about what really is going on and those who, on the contrary, keep living in blissed ignorance of reality (Quill 2014). A corollary of this mechanism is that conspiracy theories, in order to be effective, must not be communicated through mainstream channels. They work insofar as those who receive and absorb them can cultivate the illusion that only they, and a small number of other adepts, are depositary of the truth.

Most conspiracy theories, such as those claiming that there is a global lobby trying to enslave the human kind through chemicals released by planes (chemtrails conspiracy theory) are so unsupported by any scientific evidence that they are often easily ridiculed by the mainstream scientific and media discourse. However, such derision actually empowers conspiracy theories instead of denigrating them. For supporters of these theories, indeed, being ridiculed by the 'ignorant mass' is further proof of belonging to an illuminated elite, to the group of the few who really know where the truth lies. The aesthetic pleasure at the core of conspiracy theories is therefore that of a diversion from mainstream thought, which creates ipso facto a community of saved ones, entrusted with the mission of communicating truth to those enslaved by power and living in ignorance. This aesthetic effect is the result of a semiotic mechanism. Abstractedly speaking, it can be described as a particular version of deconstructive hermeneutics. As the hermeneutics of deconstruction rejects any interpretive habit, claims that every habit is an imposition of power, and operates for its dismantlement, so conspiracy theories insinuate that mainstream social and political beliefs are nothing but poisonous habits that powerful lobbies instill in citizens. Moreover, as deconstruction, so conspiracy thought aims at the reactivation of semiosis, mainly through denigration of mainstream truths as public lies.

Nevertheless, one should underline, to the credit of deconstructionism, that an importance nuance differentiates this theoretical frame from the usual enfold- ing of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are never poetic. They do not claim that every habit can be shattered through the continuous reactivation of unlimited semiosis, as Derrida's poetics typically would suggest (Derrida 1967). On the opposite, conspiracy theories more trivially replace a mainstream habit, supported by the scientific and socio-political community, with a minority habit, which titillates the minority's feeling of exclusivity. At the same time, conspiracy theories borrow from deconstruction the idea that any counter-argument can be dismantled by a further declination of the conspiracy theory itself, following a cyclical pattern.

In conclusion, the answer to the first question above (what is the main her- meneutical attitude of conspiracy theorists?) is that conspiracy theories embrace a trivialized deconstructive attitude toward interpretive habits. They deconstruct mainstream beliefs, *but only in order to merely replace them with cliquish alter- native visions*. Before dealing with the second issue, that is, the role of semi- otics vis-à-vis conspiracy theories, the question should be raised of the reasons for which the aesthetic thrill attached to such alternative social thought is not equally distributed throughout history, but emerges with increased salience in certain specific social and cultural contexts. In other words: if secrets, rumors, and conspiracy ideas intrinsically give aesthetic pleasure, since they empower through the feeling of belonging to a privileged minority of saved ones, why do conspiracy theories thrive only in certain periods of history? Answering this ques- tion is tantamount to formulating hypotheses explaining the success of decon- structive attitudes in history. Several orders of explanations are possible. Societal fragmentation is definitely an important element. The more the members of a society perceive themselves as isolated individuals, belonging to no socio- cul- tural group in particular, adhering to no political organization, and deprived of any strong interpretive habits, the more they will be prey to conspiracy theorists who designate them as their new constituency, as members of an enlightened minority that must struggle to endure the ignorant subjugation of mainstream thought. In the present-day European context, for instance, where the last decade has seen an inexorable decline of the framing power of traditional political for- mations such as parties or unions, new leaders were easily able to emerge and shape their constituency through the creation or circulation of conspiracy the- ories. In certain cases, the designation of a culprit enhances the individuation potential of these theories, since they federate a group against a narrative foe. However, a key element of success of contemporary conspiracy theories, which somehow sets them apart from their modern and pre-modern version, is that they do not need a culprit anymore. One could rather claim that the real culprit of pres-

ent-day conspiracy theorists is majority itself, the mainstream, and all the habits that crystallize a consensus in society.

Umberto Eco's semio-ethical legacy

Semiotics is not a political tool. Semioticians are not supposed to engage in favor or against cultural and social attitudes. However, semioticians who analyze their societies cannot close their eyes either. On the contrary, they must put their methodology at the service of public awareness. At the moment, such public awareness also includes the role of conspiracy theories in the development of society. What kind of society is one in which conspiracy theories proliferate and their creators thrive, accumulating symbolical and political leadership? The consequences of the prevalence of a deconstructive hermeneutics in society have already been pointed out: a collectivity that does not provide itself with inter-subjective, rational patterns for the consolidation of interpretive habits is inevitably a chaotic society, one in which conflicts constantly arise and are never recomposed.

As it was underlined earlier, though, conspiracy thought and deconstruction are not the same. The former is a grotesque version of the latter, leading to a sort of demagogic despotism. A society dominated by conspiracy theories, indeed, is not only a conflictive society, where mainstream thought is continuously threatened by conspiracy alternatives. More dangerously, a conspiracy society is one in which the questioning power of deconstruction is systematically defused. Indeed, a society in which mainstream thought is never challenged by any alternative visions, dismantling interpretive habits and reactivating semiosis, is an essentially despotic one. Critics, and semioticians among them, have a duty to challenge mainstream thought and beliefs. When that does not happen, society dangerously drifts toward fundamentalist hermeneutics. However, the problem of most popular conspiracy theories is that they challenge mainstream thought by imposing new interpretive habits whose construction, though, is supposed to never lead to a mainstream constituency. In other words, conspiracy theories are alternative versions of reality whose purpose is not that of introducing a new shared interpretive habit, but to have a conspiracy theory parasitically thrive on the back of mainstream thought. Conspiracy theorists do not want to supplant mainstream opinion leaders, for this replacement would eliminate the key element of their force, which is the capacity of titillating the public opinion with the prospect of secrecy. The first potential danger of conspiracy theories is therefore the tendency to disempower any sort of alternative vision of reality. Conspiracy theories apparently introduce more free thinking in society, but in reality

they do so by rejecting a common communicative, inter-subjective, and rational framework, entrenching themselves in a position of self-indulgent minority. They therefore actually contribute to the unshakable nature of mainstream versions of realities. For instance, it is very probable that the CIA resorted to unconventional, debatable, and sometimes illegal methods of action throughout history; however, conspiracy theories that target the CIA do not actually threaten its operative grasp; on the contrary, they contribute to its unquestionable status. The worst consequence that stems from this attitude is that culprits of conspiracy theories cannot be rationally defended, since they are accused by arguments that typically escape any rational scrutiny. That is particularly worrisome when culprits are not identified in the powerful agencies of society (the government, the secret services, the police), but in quantitative or qualitative minorities (the Jews, the Arabs, the migrants).

Hence, the issue of determining the role and effect of conspiracy theories in society comes down to the need of differentiating between critical and conspiracy theories, between deconstructive and conspiracy hermeneutics. Nevertheless, such distinction cannot be made in terms of contents. It must be made in terms of argumentative patterns. Conspiracy theories, that is, do not show their nature in what they say, but in how they say it, in the specific rhetoric that they adopt in order to communicate an aura of secrecy, create a symbolical elite, and reproduce the separation between insiders and outsiders, which is instrumental to the parasitic existence of conspiracy leaders themselves.

Here lies the main role of semiotics: singling out the rhetorical and argumentative lines through which conspiracy theories are created and maintained in the social imaginaire. No semiotician more than Umberto Eco has provided cultural analysts with sophisticated, powerful theoretical tools to carry on such urgent task.