A Stroll Through the Birthplace of Signs

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1 Introduction

The core insight shared by cultural psychologists is that psychic life can only be understood by describing people's overt behavior in such a way that we can capture why they are performing this specific movement. "That person raising an arm over there is a cop directing transit." "That woman standing next to the river shore holding something in her hands is fishing." "That man standing in a field is a footballer who happens to be offside." Each time one makes this kind of description an overall interpretive framework for that behavior is being laid out. That person raising an arm could be waving or straightening their jacket, among other things. To understand that someone's movement means directing the passing drivers is to provide observed behavior within an interpretative framework defining one's own and other's action possibilities. It also sets expectations about possible events. Such description not only captures someone's behavior, but its meaning. In these descriptions, we are not interested in the musculoskeletal trajectory of the body, but it gives us clues of what a person is actually doing. In short, we are interested in people's movement as *action*, not merely as *behavior*.

Still, it should be noted that framing the meaning or sense of an action is related to a socially accepted background. Whether individual or collective, our actions become meaningful within socially constructed comprehensive frameworks. I understand someone is a cop directing transit because I am acquainted with cities, streets, people, work, human transportation, the state's public force, transit regulation, and so forth. The framework wherein I understand observed action does not come from a made-up personal illusion. It is rather a framework that I share with my

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community, inasmuch I can behave coherently within it and assume that we all fundamentally agree.[1]

Therein lies the cultural and epistemological schism that divides the natural from the human sciences (social sciences playing an awkward intermediary role). Natural sciences assume the existence of a reality that can be neutrally described and objectivated since it holds complete independence in regard to the observer. This assumption corresponds to what Sellars (1956) aptly called "the myth of the given." Human sciences (as in the case of cultural psychology) work under the premise that "the given" can have a sense of reality and objectivity only within certain socially constructed frameworks of meaning, for every perception is experiential; "all seeing is seeing as [...]" (Vesey, 1956, 114). To perceive something is to place it in an intricate bundle of meaning – the *semiosphere* according to Yuri Lotman (2005), which makes it both intelligible for the perceiver and a social object.

A central dimension of meaning is the symbolic. A meaning framework provides sense to objects, events, and movements in the physical and social world. Someone raising his arm in the middle of the street leads me to something distinctive of such behavior: it is a cop directing transit. Meaning grants access to a deeper dimension of exposed reality. The meaning of overt behavior is not exhausted by what I can infer optically; meaning points toward something denser or deeper that I do access in overt behavior. The arm's movement *stands for* a transit sign. The property of *standing for* something else corresponds exactly to the definition of a *sign*. Because of this, it is common that the human sciences refer to their field of study as *the symbolic*, countering natural sciences studying reality as a given.

Another dimension of the meaning framework is experiential. It is scarcely addressed by cultural psychology, which has chosen to emphasize the symbolic dimension of social reality in order to take distance in regard to the tenets of a logical-positivist epistemology. To enter the symbolic world supposes *feeling* it. To perceive a cop directing transit (as opposed to an organism extending one of its upper limbs) *not only* supposes being part of a symbolic frame but feeling aware of my experience. I might feel angry or upset as part of the State's hypocrisy regarding police abuse of power, or relief as social norms are being respected, or an ambivalent mixture of both. Whatever it might be, meaning-making appeals to a felt interiority – a *lived experience*. Throughout the history of human sciences, the acknowledgment and description of the experienced dimension involved in meaning-making has been reprised by the romantic, vitalist, and later phenomenological traditions (Graumann, 1982).

[1] Elsewhere I have argued that this framework of common sense does not work as propositional contents that we *know*. Instead, we take the framework for granted, i.e., we *trust* in people (Cornejo, 2013).

2 Mind the Gap Between Semiology and Semiotics

It is an historical and intellectual oddity that the *science of the sign* was formulated simultaneously and yet apart around the same period of time (toward the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century) in different parts of the world. On the one hand, Ferdinand de Saussure proposes *semiology* as a branch of modern linguistics in Switzerland. On the other hand, Charles S. Peirce advances *semiotics* as a science of the signs in the United States. Despite them sharing its object of study, their definitions of the sign remain radically different. There is literally an ocean separating both approaches. As pointed out by Taylor (2016), there is a clear tension between rationalist (viz., Hobbes, Locke, Condillac) and organicist (brought forth by Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt, among others) approaches to language from the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century.

Saussure's intellectual aim is to provide new epistemological grounds to erect "modern linguistics," as he referred to it. Undoubtedly, the scientific study of language is not kickstarted by Saussure. Saussure's unease was raised by the status of linguistics at the time, which unlike other social sciences had not been able to gain independence regarding philology and literary studies (psychology and sociology had already become relatively autonomous from philosophy). To achieve his aim, Saussure defines the discipline's object of study as *langue*; an invariable, static system, prone to objective analysis (*langue* contrasting the more idiosyncratic, idiomatic aspects of *parole*). Deeply influenced by the predominance of positivism in continental Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, Saussure develops a theory that understands language as an abstract, unchanging, complex system that is susceptible to being broken down into more elementary, mechanical parts. The fundamental unit of such a supra-individual system is the *sign*. Similarly, Saussure's concept of sign is a modern lecture of the scholastic definition *aliquid pro aliquo*: a sign is the indivisible totality composed by signifier and signified, the former corresponding to an acoustic image, the latter to a concept. Despite Saussure's understanding of the sign as a psychophysical phenomenon and therefore its need for verification in a speaker's awareness, he affirms that the indivisibility of the two components of the sign is derived from it being part of *langue* as a supra-individual system. The individual mind is simply the stage for a noncontingent association for the individual; it depends on the linguistic community to which the individual belongs. The consequences of a positivistic approach to the sign become more evident: to Saussurean semiology, social meaning is an objective entity that remains independent from the individual's stream of consciousness.

Charles S. Peirce proceeded from a completely different theoretical heritage. Despite his critical stance toward Emerson's transcendentalism – enormously influential in the US nineteenth-century intellectual landscape – Peirce inherited his developmental approach to nature, which in turn is based on German post Kantian *Naturphilosophie*. Consequently, his concept of sign is grounded in a terrain where meaning is a continuous flux and undergoes constant change. Peirce does not present the sphere of meaning as sectioned in discrete, stable parts, and therefore his

notion of sign is dynamic, namely, contextually and personally variable. To Peirce, the sign is a unit comprised of three elements:

> A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen. (Peirce, 1932a, p. 135)

Saussurean semiology and Peircean semiotics share the conception of a sign standing for something else; but in semiotics the sign does not appear *from nowhere* (Nagel, 1986), but "in some respect or capacity." For Peirce, a sign does not stand for its object "in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea [...] the *ground* of the *representamen*." Consequently, every sign expresses its object from a particular standpoint, not from an omniscient view. This position embodies Peirce's version of "all seeing is seeing as"; a doctrine that Peirce posed at an epistemological level and called "fallibilism." Peircean semiotics defines the sign as having a dynamic, continuously expansive character. In this regard, both Peirce and contemporarily William James understand the symbolic as undergoing permanent development in time; the symbolic is "[a]nything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*" (Peirce, 1932b, p. 169; italics in the original). The meaning of a gesture or an expression unfolds in infinite semiosis, where the object referred to by a sign is upheld by a new sign, and so forth. The sense human motion or utterances bear within a hermeneutical framework is semiotically constructed; this is in a continuous flux of triadic signs.

Semiology and semiotics are both involved in the *linguistic turn*, a noticeable movement toward the end of the nineteenth century that will have repercussions on most of twentieth-century philosophy (Rorty, 1967). The linguistic turn is presented as a philosophical method to address key questions paying particular attention to the language that is being used to formulate and answer them. This gives a central role to the definition of sign and becomes a central pursuit in philosophy, logic, and epistemology. To the late nineteenth-century human sciences, an adequate definition of the sign offered a chance to deal with meaning without falling into the dead-ends of early nineteenth-century German idealism. In fact, the will to escape from the kind of abstraction reached by Hegelian idealism is a factor contributing to provide further reach to positivism in the incipient "social sciences" and to the experimental approach in nineteenth-century psychology. A theory of the sign would entail a second chance to build an actual human science, namely, a science able to study meaning – a condition to truly understand human reality. Examining language and other signs seemed like a much more promissory path for human sciences compared to studying abstract entities such as the History (with a capital H). This vantage point would allow human scientists to stick to the object at stake (meaning) while maintaining scientific standards, instead of speculative ones.

But as previously shown, semiology and semiotics propose two significantly different programs of what a theory of the sign should be. For Saussure, the sign leads

into both an ontological division between signifier and signified – which have a fixed relationship to one another – and language being a set entity with complete independence regarding a similarly fixed reality. Saussure deals with objective semantic links in abstract linguistic communities, hence Voloshinov's (1929/1973) choice to refer to this approach as "abstract objectivism." In this context, the signified exhausts the signifier "in all its respects," using Peirce's phrasing. Since the Saussurean sign is inscribed in the *langue* system, its meaning has no epistemic variability. Briefly put, it is formulated from God's point of view. Contrastingly, for Peirce meaning is a sign that participates in a continuously flowing current and varies according to the context and point of view of someone partaking in semiosis. Hence, semiotics has strived to synthesize the notion of development of *Naturphilosophie* and the critique toward the excesses of German idealism.

3 The Semiotic Psyche

Jaan Valsiner has rescued Charles S. Peirce's semiotics to the benefit of contemporary psychology. Valsiner has contributed to psychology in the same vein Karl-Otto Apel contributed to philosophy or Jürgen Habermas contributed to sociology. From the 1990s onward, Valsiner has been a central proponent of a continuously co-constructed vision of the mind and society (Valsiner, 1987, 1998; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000). With an in-depth knowledge of the polyphonic historical-cultural theory (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994), Valsiner captured the dead-ends Vygotsky himself encountered when attempting to build a historical-materialist theory adapting the Saussurean concept of sign. Vygotsky was profoundly influenced by Saussurean semiology when putting together a genetic theory of consciousness. That is analogous to build a landscape out of photographs; the former being a moving whole, the latter being static and partial. Instead of adopting a convenient, yet uncritical theoretical position,[2] Valsiner found in Peircean semiotics the theoretical toolkit that would allow overcoming the dead-ends semiology leads to when applied to developmental psychology. Peircean semiotics allowed Valsiner to shape what might be his most important legacy to developmental psychology: the notion of development itself.

There is a profound conceptual difference between studying developmental psychology and understanding psychological phenomena from a truly *developmental*

[2] "Followers of any theoretical system are dangerous. They turn their cherished theory into an orthodoxy--to be followed, rather that developed further. As a result what was a tool for thought becomes an object to cherish. The cherishers become proud of their ardent following of the traditions--they claim to be 'Vygotskyan' or 'Piagetian' or 'Skinnerian'--any other variety but being themselves. Some even consider themselves to be 'Valsinerians'--a step that I observe with mild irony and amusement. I certainly refuse to be 'Valsinerian' myself--it would mean that I accept having finished my journey as a traveler in the world of ideas, and become just a follower. The only way I see how to follow Valsiner is not to follow him--and I hope to continue my efforts in *that* kind of following" (Valsiner, 2017, p. 117; italics in the original).

approach (Valsiner, 2000). An actual notion of development prioritizes taking a look at nature, biological organisms, and the mind as undergoing constant change and transformation, so that there is an accuracy to understanding that things and beings *are* not, but continuously *become* something else. Sometimes such developmental processes extend over long periods of chronological time (i.e., geological changes), sometimes in very short periods (i.e., the microgenesis of human understanding (Werner & Kaplan, 1963)). However, independently of chronological time, Valsiner's proposal of development supposes an epistemological turn where *to be* is understood as *being*. To my knowledge, there is no contemporary psychologist that having fully understood what an actual developmental perspective truly involves has consistently unveiled the sense in which contemporary developmental psychology is deeply a-developmental. A stage-like description might be a necessary condition to put forth a sound psychology of human development, but clearly is not enough. As the photo collage is not equivalent to the landscape, a classificatory theory cannot be an actual developmental theory. This insight, again, we owe to Jaan Valsiner.

Relatedly yet distinctively to that idea, Valsiner brings into the light the equally deep insight on the temporality of human awareness. Once the implicit notion of development in Peirce's semiotics is applied to human developmental phenomena, the temporal unfolding of felt experience comes to the fore. However, this is not the chronological, objective time that experimental psychology measures inspired by Fechner's psychophysics. Instead it is felt time, namely, the feeling that experience involves a temporality. Here, Valsiner brings back the Bergsonian notion of *durée*: from a *psychological* standpoint, psychic phenomena take place over a background of felt time – this is what is meant by *temporality*. All the descriptions Valsiner provides of the semiotic dynamics characteristic of human awareness must be understood as the unfolding of a vital feeling of time passing, which he refers to as "the irreversibility of time." Acknowledging the temporality of human experience also leads to recognize its uniqueness and irreplicability. Each psychological phenomenon (perception, insights, communicational and interpretative acts) is unique and irreplicable.

Semiotic-cultural theory triggers a semiotic turn in psychology. It also leads to the emergence of a subfield (cultural psychology) that will study social meaning in semiotic terms. Valsiner thus overcomes the limitations of a static and abstract model of the sign that perpetuates a schism between the individual and the societal level. Instead, Valsiner introduces a dynamic concept that enables to establish a co-constitutive link between the individual and the societal. The existence of the social and its presence in language, customs, and practices configures the personal level. The individual mind cannot be separated from social semiotic processes that configure it. But the individual does exist. The personal is not merely the abstract, ontologically independent loci for hypostatized signifier-signified links. Hence, it is relevant to set forth a *co-constructivism* (Vorderer & Valsiner, 1999) where one accepts both that the mind is socially shaped and that the mind shapes society. Otherwise, either of two antithetical positions will be assumed: whether society, history, or culture are the only ones determining the individual mind (by means of

signs or norms, which are then understood as entailing submissiveness), or there is only an individual mind that leaves society and culture as individual operations. An adequate interpretation of the concept of semiosis allows us to overcome this antinomy, assuming that people perpetuate but also continuously recreate social processes.

4 The Reduction of Semiosis to the Symbolic

There is another difference between semiology and semiotics that needs to be taken into account. The former is a foundational block for a linguistic system theory, while the latter belongs to an overall theory of knowledge. Consequently, semiology in its original Saussurean rendition delimits the realm of signs to that of the linguistic system. Meanwhile, to Peirce a sign is anything, either a linguistic form or not, that stands there for something else in some regard. This distinction is fundamental to understand the discrepancies between both stances concerning the sign. At a first glance, semiology seems to have more modest aims than semiotics, and therefore, its applicability seems restricted to what Saussure called *langue* – namely, the object of modern linguistics. This impression, however, can be misleading when considering that the postructuralist school (heir to Saussurean semiology) extended the concept of linguistic system and ended up covering the "realm of the real." Under Derrida's "everything is a text" slogan, poststructuralism equated language and semiosphere, *langue*, and common sense. This reduction has fatal consequences for any *psychology*, even for cultural psychology. The spreading of language onto any kind of meaning leads to people becoming lost in social systems. Hence social determinism befalls on persons, and the possibility of unique and irreplicable experience is eradicated, for it has been previously fabricated in the *épistémè* of those holding social power.

The semiotic concept of *sign* includes language but it is far from exhausted by it. The linguistic sign corresponds to a *symbol*, a particular kind of sign in the Peirce's threefold typology of signs (Peirce, 1932b). *Icons* stand in some respect for the object they represent by similarity. A photograph or a pictorial representation can be icons of their original model. *Indexes* are signs that show its object by physical or causal contact with it. Smoke can be an index of fire, as an arrow can be a direction for a traveler to follow. Finally, *symbols* represent some aspect of their object by convention or use. This would be the case of linguistic signs, according to Peirce.

Equating meaning to a linguistic system reduces the former to its symbolic dimension and neglects or distorts its felt dimension. The "thickness" of conscious experience, its temporality, and uniqueness become diluted insofar the mind plays the role of a methodological hypothesis that allows social reality to unfold symbolically (or "normatively," in current lingo). But this methodological hypothesis is far from constituting subjectivity properly. Using John Searle's famous thought experiment, if the mind is the passive holder of alien symbols, one could not distinguish between a person who understands Chinese from a person who does not but who

was instructed to rightly proffer specific utterances (that turn to be Chinese symbols) in response to questions written in Chinese. When human psychism is reduced to a canvas wherein social symbols are deployed, the felt sense every speaker has of their own language is lost from sight. People would then become the mere embodiment of social conventions, passively incorporating and reproducing their development. For cultural psychology, the issues brought up by a reduction of the semiotic universe to the symbolic are tangible. On the one hand, social determinism becomes the only possible way to address the individual-social relationship. As Nietzsche announced God's death, Foucault preached the death of the individual. The uniqueness of personal experience is obliterated. On the other hand, access to a *psychological* explanation of semiosis (and of symbolism, more specifically) is banned, insofar as the mind is presented as a mere housing (not the creating and changing force) for external symbols. Intimacy, ipseity, and self-identity are banished from the human sciences as they supposedly bear modern overtones. Yet their roots sink far deeper than modernity.

Nevertheless, in an odd case of cognitive epistemopathology (Koch, 1981), a sizable part of cultural psychologists has enthusiastically embraced post-structuralist theories in hopes to find refuge from the banishing of the symbolic world in mainstream psychology. But they seem to be unaware that the reduction of meaning to symbolic social convention supposes to deny human qualities like agency and subjectivity. A worrying number of cultural psychologists show a quasi-religious adherence to a theoretical paradigm that ultimately denies personal faculties such as freedom and moral pondering, which are necessary to appraise scientific theories, among other things. This is a conspicuous case of performative self-contradiction. Could this be considered as a case of Stockholm syndrome brought to the scientific arena?

Still, contemporary semiotic approaches tend to narrow down Peirce's constellation of signs to *symbols*, neglecting *icons* and *indexes*. This omission is vastly relevant. Once personal life becomes reduced to social conventions, psychological phenomena outside the reach of language turn out to be *semiotically* inexistent: in C.S. Peirce's terms, they would be pragmatically inconsequential. This assertion overtly contradicts everyday empirical evidence. People experience themselves in temporal continuity; people have feelings and make decisions, relevant or trivial; they consider their effects; and so on. Peirce himself acknowledges the unique and non-conventional quality feelings as part of the infinite semiosis:

> In all cases [the Interpretant] includes feelings; for there must, at least, be a sense of comprehending the meaning of the sign. If it includes more than mere feeling, it must evoke some kind of effort. It may include something besides, which, for the present, may be vaguely called "thought". I term these three kinds of interpretant the "emotional", the "energetic", and the "logical" interpretants. (Peirce, 1998, p. 409)

Along these very lines, Peirce unequivocally distinguishes semantic aspects of signs from their emotional and energetic aspects. *Interpretants* – those signs that indicate in which sense a *sign* stands for its *object* – include "feelings" and "some kind of effort" that Peirce calls "energy." Including "feelings" as a kind of interpretant is

justified since there is *a sense of comprehending the meaning of the sign*. This statement is extremely relevant, since it entails including sentience *in* semiotics. This dimension of the semiotic universe acknowledges that personal experiences have a felt (and not only reflexive) depth, which is already excluded in semiology or in semiotics when the latter is narrowed down to its symbolic dimension. Furthermore, Peirce includes effort-like "energies" among the possible interpretants. This component keeps pointing toward an experiential (phenomenological) dimension that ends up being negated (or distorted as discourse or text) in variants of social science (and cultural psychology) that restrict the semiotic universe to the ensemble of linguistic signs that Peirce calls *symbols*. Our perception of the world produces a myriad of reactions in our entire being. We do not only reflect upon what it means for someone to be at a crossroads raising their hand. We see them wearing a uniform. The uniform brings repulsion or fear, calmness, or anxiety. The totality of our body, our muscles tense up or relax accordingly. There is no neutrality in such science; it is loaded with valuations that we access semiotically, even without inner speech. All our world encounters are primarily semiotic while remaining non-symbolic (Lassègue, Rosenthal & Visetti, 2009; Rojas, 2021).

The distinction between semiosis and symbolism reveals affective and dispositional phases that precede symbolic phases both ontogenetically and microgenetically (Rosenthal, 2004). Their acknowledgment is fundamental to bring back a personal level that is constituted alongside the social. Differently put, a disregard for proto-symbolic semiosis leads to the impossibility for an actual cultural *psychology* – we are just left with an expanding sociology that colonizes the personal. It is in this sense that Jaan Valsiner's theoretical approach is *semiotic*: semiosis makes meaning tangible, but only if it rejects the premises for social determinism. To achieve this, both the social *and* personal experiences need to be understood semiotically. Peirce wrote "Man is a sign," not "Man is a symbol."

The emphasis that a large portion of contemporary cultural psychology puts on the social character of the mind risks overlooking the proto-symbolic dimension of human experience. Symbols offer a conventional representation of reality; they *re*present an object via convention. Think of the wooden artifact to smoke that we refer to in English with the word "pipe." We can say that the English word "pipe" represents the corresponding object, as the German *Pfeife* and the Italian *pipa*. I can even write these words down, so any literate person can read from these ink marks "pipe." In this case, the written word "pipe" also represents the object. Besides we can draw the object. In this case, we have another *representation* of it. I can also learn variations of sign language and discover that they all have a hand gesture to refer to a pipe. Moreover, ever since Locke's notion about the "internal perception" was made available, many psychologists and philosophers are prone to affirm that our perception of the object called "pipe" is already a representation of it. Despite the remarkable differences between all these cases, we use one single word to embrace them, namely, "representation." Thus, "representation" indicates a kind of formal relationship between something that stands for another thing. It is a *formal connection* because the word "representation" in itself is not a queue to discriminate between the varieties of "stand for" relationships.

It is still crucial to distinguish at least between general forms of semiosis and specifically *human* semiosis.[3] Peirce does it by expanding semiosis beyond symbols to include feelings and bodily dispositions. More specifically, Susanne K. Langer (1942) introduces the distinction between representational and presentational modes of what she calls "symbolism" (tantamount to what I have treated as *semiosis* so far):

> Language in the strict sense is essentially discursive [...]. The meanings given through language are successively understood, and gathered into a whole by the process called discourse; the meanings of all other symbolic elements that compose a larger, articulate symbol are understood only through the meaning of the whole, through their relations within the total structure. Their very functioning as symbols depends on the fact that they are involved in a simultaneous, integral presentation. This kind of semantic may be called 'presentational symbolism,' to characterize its essential distinction from discursive symbolism, or 'language' proper. (Langer, 1942, pp. 96f.)

This distinction plays a fundamental role in identifying the psychological varieties of semiosis. Alongside discursive symbolism provided by social language, there is a rich semiotic field that sustains meaning as a *gestalt*, "through their relations within the total structure." People are not only symbol carriers; they have a qualitative participation in their *Umwelt*, where feelings, impressions, physiognomic perceptions, and corporal dispositions play a key role. These proto-symbolic aspects of human life are also part of human understanding, and, consequently, they belong in a semiotic approach to human life.

The distinction between symbolic and proto-symbolic semiosis comes to the fore when we realize that human meaning corresponds to *lived experience*. Semiosis is motion, as James's notion of "stream of thought," Bergson's "duration," and Valsiner's "irreversibility of time" show. Consequently, an adequate semiotic account of meaning should focus on the genesis and life of symbols, rather than assuming their external determination by social norms as if they would somehow precede their expression. Instead of putting symbols inside the individual mind as if they were external pieces of meaning to be decoded, a semiotic inspired cultural *psychology* should bring to the foreground the fact that semiosis is a genetic process. This leads us into the inquiry for the birthplace of signs.

5 Searching for the Origin of Signs

The question about the origin of signs is approached in radically different ways depending on whether we choose to understand language as a pre-given system or as part of organic development. In the former case, the inquiry translates into addressing the question of child language acquisition (or better yet, addressing the development of the symbolic function). In this framework, language is conceived

[3] Although it would be a digression from the main issue here, it is still important to note the some of the work done on animal semiosis in general, which includes but is not limited to the human species (Portmann, 1953; von Uexküll, 1957; Buytendijk, 1958).

from the very outset as a system that exists separately from the individual, designed to communicate ideas. This approach follows from *the reduction of language to symbols*. When the question about the origins of language is replaced with the question concerning the moment people are able to handle symbols successfully, the realm of signs is again reduced to symbols (albeit they might be the most complex ones), and the role of earlier phases in semiosis – manifest in feelings and dispositions – is downplayed.

A genuinely developmental approach on the origins of semiosis seeks for the situations and conditions under which signs are gestated. Meaning has never been a static entity floating somewhere in a Platonic parallel domain, ready to be learned, absorbed or internalized by children. Instead, the locus of language is human interaction. Meaning emerges and is constructed, reconstructed, and modified in real face to face interactions. Any other kind of human interaction (from written communications to virtual videoconferences) is derivative regarding the anthropological basic *I-You-It* relationship, enabling us to share experiences in a common world. An indication for those looking for the birthplace of signs is to turn toward the minimal social encounter instead of staying at the abstract domain of social conventions. Signs dwell in real interactions between people and far from being merely activated or manifested; they are *recreated* and *modified* in concrete social encounters.

As Bühler (1934/2011) and Werner and Kaplan (1963) described, this minimal social encounter involves three vertices: the speaker, the addressee, and the referential object. Speech acquires its meaning within this interactional space. Notice, however, that if we do not overcome semiology's communication model (and its heir, information theory), the description of the triadic minimal social situation will be of little help. *From a developmental standpoint, the original function of speech – both ontogenetically and phylogenetically – is not communication but sharing lived experience*. Utterances proffered in social interaction are not intended to be "message transmitters." The *communication* metaphor implies that there is an unbridgeable gap between two people, although they might be chatting next to each other. But to send messages that should be decoded by a counterpart is quite different from attempting that my partner grasps the way I feel concerning this or that matter in particular and, consequently, that she *sees* the way I see it. When we do not impose the communication framework on the minimal social situation and instead remain open to observe what goes on, people's organismic involvement comes to the fore, manifested, for instance, in gesturing and prosodic singing. In short, the observation of this primordial interactive situation shows their engagement in sharing lived experience.

An utterance is always set in a context shared by speaker and addressee. But an utterance is only a small (consonant or dissonant) part of a wide array of feelings and dispositions they have experienced and upon which they can draw by virtue of sharing *some common ground*. To understand what someone means, the addressee will draw on various kinds of tacit clues: poignant features in the environment, her facial expression, gaze direction, vocal pitches and inflections, muscular tension, and so forth. Of course, the addressee will also draw on someone's words, but understanding her utterances considerably exceeds the conventional semantic

meaning she provided. The addressee can "see what she means" despite the "incorrect" use of some of her words or despite not knowing the precise meaning of a particular word she used (and what was understood might only come to the for later, when pointed out specifically by a third party).

This means that symbolic content is just one dimension of semiotic processes, and not the deepest one. In the *I-You-It* situation, it is pristine that symbol formation is motivated by a proto-symbolic, sentient dimension. Following the semiotic terminology proposed by Peirce, human encounters do not rely exclusively on symbols, but suppose the permanent participation of icons and indexes. Peirce explicitly correlates the character of signs to feelings and (bodily) dispositions. Susanne K. Langer proposed a finer description for these deeper layers of human meaning by introducing the distinction between *representation* and *presentation*. We can now add that the presentational is *expressive*: in this semiotic sphere, we already know what the world is like by feeling into it. Our spontaneous encounter with the world is *expressive* from the start in the sense that we perceive it directly as affectively colored. Langer (1942) acknowledges this expressive sphere of meaning as preceding symbolic meaning. Moreover, the expressive sphere shows its anchoring role for understanding in its absence; causing a feeling of estrangement and alienation observed in certain types of aphasia (Goldstein, 1948). Signs are *felt* just as much as they are thought.

While the expressive sphere unveils a phenomenological dimension in social interaction (Cornejo, 2008), the skeptic's question might arise: If both speaker and the addressee are able to *experience* and *feel* their own perceived world, what are the reasons to propose a *common experience* at the origin of signs? The background of this question assumes that people are condemned to perpetual isolation, since no true understanding is possible. This image of personhood has its roots in Hobbes' formulation "man is an arrant wolf" as a cornerstone for modern anthropology, extended in Rousseau's vision for the social contract as a solution to people's hopeless, vicious condition. I grant that there are situations wherein distrust might be the most natural and adaptive attitude. Contemporary society offers manifold instances where Hobbes' might be the best description of interaction. But our delimitation of the minimal social encounter excludes such kinds of "strategic" (Habermas, 1984) social encounters. Not every social exchange can be qualified without further ado as a minimal social encounter. The fact that two people exchange speech is not a necessary nor sufficient condition for them to genuinely share experiences. A formal conversation between a boss and her subordinate often fails to fall under what a minimal social encounter is, just as a chat between Robinson Crusoe and Friday – at least back when they were not friends.

Werner and Kaplan (1963) proposed the mother-child-object relationship as a paradigm for genuine social encounters. They called it the "primordial 'sharing' situation" (Werner and Kaplan, 1963, p. 42). No other human interaction is less distorted by distancing attitudes promoted by acquired social roles. Mother-child relationships clearly evidence human tendencies to share experience so, when a bird rapidly flies in front of them, or a sudden noise is heard in the background, they both dwell in expression and co-feeling occurs. In this proto-symbolic sphere, mother

and child's utterances condense a unitary meaning, configuring the first words. Unsurprisingly, children's first words are often holophrastic: they do not refer to a specific object, but rather global situations where those words have been previously used (Shanon, 1993).

Our overall thesis is that episodes of true shared experience happen all the time and are not restricted to mother-children relationships. Of course, they are more likely to take place where these affiliative links are strong (i.e., friendship, family). Adult relationships are complex and defy the possibility of fitting into a particular type while being described as a whole. During the course of a typical conversation between adults, mutual attitudes can oscillate and move. Sometimes the *I* flows with the *You* – I simply follow your thoughts; while sometimes, even during the same conversation I wonder if she did the right thing, or she might look tired to me, or I feel I need to put an end to our conversation because I am late for that thing. Nothing similar to this appears in the "primordial sharing situation" described by Werner and Kaplan (1963). But our point still remains valid: episodes of genuine co-phenomenology do occur in most (though perhaps not all) social interaction.

6 Conclusions

Cultural psychology's central aim is to account for the development of psychism and its relation to sociocultural processes. Such aim can only be attained by acknowledging that people do not partake in reality as an ensemble of detached atoms and events or senseless stimuli and conducts. A fully formulated psychological theory should start from the tenet that our psychic life unfolds in a meaningful reality from the start: we perceive trees, people, music, and so on. However, its meaningfulness is not a personal creation, but a social instance. In fact, it makes me part of a community that acts accordingly: we water trees, talk to people, and make music. Herein one of the great paradoxes that cultural psychology must confront: How can such an intimate, personal process as meaning-making be social? This is none other than the "micro-macro problem" in psychology (Vorderer & Valsiner, 1999): Is society forming a sense of self, or are people configuring social meaning?

A way to grasp meaning as involved in these questions is through the concept of *sign*: human reality is not comprehended by mere representation, but critically involves presentational layers. However, not any use of sign can satisfactorily solve the micro-macro problem. Throughout this chapter, I have presented two historically informed approaches to understand the sign, Saussurean semiology and Peircean semiotics, each one presenting a different answer to the aforementioned problem. While semiology perpetuates a schism between person and society, semiotics offers a potentially crucial concept of sign. In order for semiotics to play this role, it must go back to its roots and include all kinds of signs. The tendency to reduce semiotics to symbolism can inadvertently lead into accepting semiology's tenets, which are manifest in poststructuralist approaches.

Why is it that a symbolic theory cannot address the micro-macro gap? The answer is as concise as it is profound: because the *symbol* is typically understood as a non-developmental unit. This is also what motivates an interest to study the *origin* of signs.

We owe the possibility to adequately address the micro-macro problem to three of Jaan Valsiner's key insights. Firstly, the systematic introduction of C.S. Peirce's semiotic theory in developmental psychology allows to overcome the limitations of L. S. Vygotsky's tacitly semiological approach. In this sense, the historical relevance of Valsiner's thought to psychology is tantamount to Habermas' to sociology. Secondly, using Peirce's semiotics, Valsiner is able to revitalize the notion of development advanced by the *Naturphilosophie*. He is the most notable representative of the idea of the impermanence of being in psychology. Perhaps paradoxically, this idea reveals how profoundly a-developmental current developmental psychology is. And thirdly, by means of this notion of development, Valsiner redeems a forgotten psychological endeavor: studying the temporality of human consciousness. The impermanence of all beings is manifested in Valsiner's "irreversibility of time," bridging his thought to James, Baldwin, and Bergson's.

Following Valsiner's ideas, we need a truly developmental approach to signs. When we address the question concerning the origin of signs, we find a stance where words are filled with communal meaning. Such stance is not an abstraction, but the tangible place where social interaction occurs: the minimal social encounter. This place shows speakers sharing their experience concerning the world to an addressee. Meaning configured in interaction is not purely symbolic but becomes symbolic language in vitality. Representational symbolism finds its roots in proto-symbolic semiotics, following Peirce's original inclusion of feelings and dispositions as part of the semiotic flux. In this sense, an experiential aspect emphatically underscored by Peirce has been postponed until now. Only when we acknowledge that social symbolic life cannot be fully rendered if it is separated from the vitality of human experience, we will reach an integration of what now stands separated as sociocultural and psychical processes.

The recognition of these deeper spheres of semiotic life is essential to deploy an actual cultural *psychology*. *Ganzheitspsychologie* – which Valsiner (2005) has importantly contributed to reassess – has taught us that the proto-symbolic are not simply nuances to a symbol that still reigns over meaning; it is rather them that infuse sense and vitality to symbolic language. Differently put, it is the primordial substance of all semiosis. To the extent we acknowledge the affective quality of the world we dwell in, we can also acknowledge the different valuations that populate it (Rojas, 2021). It is not surprising that the later efforts of Jaan Valsiner aim precisely at pondering the importance of the aesthetic dimension of our meaningful reality (Valsiner, 2019, 2020). Thus, the rediscovery of affectivity and vitality makes cultural psychology closer to aesthetics. Let us see what the next steps toward a new synthesis might bring along.

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