Int J Semiot Law (2018) 31:389–395
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-018-9551-3

BOOK REVIEW

Challenges to Living Together, or What Matters? Semioethic Approach to Global-Communicative Problems

Andreas Ventsel[1]

Published online: 11 April 2018
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V., part of Springer Nature 2018

Industrialization and the development of information technology forces us increasingly to face confounding and unsolvable problems, causing Anthony Giddens [10], for example, to speak of a full-blown existential crisis. Zygmunt Bauman has conceptualized the contemporary situation in terms of liquid modernity. Social forms and institutions no longer have enough time to solidify and cannot serve as frames of reference for human action and long-term plans; consequently, individuals have to find other ways to organize their lives [5, 6]. We have moved from a period where we understood ourselves as "pilgrims" in search of deeper meaning to one where we act as "tourists" in search of multiple but fleeting social experiences. Ulrich Beck understands the new social reality as posing to us the problem of how is it possible to prevent, present as innocent, dramatize and channel the risks and dangers produced by the advanced process of modernization. And if these risks and dangers—the "side effects" of modernity—have already emerged, how is it possible to contain and channel them in a way that they would not hinder the modernization process nor surpass the limits of (ecological, medical, psychological, social) tolerance [7]?

Posing such questions signifies a shift in understanding social problems. During the last two decades, social sciences have begun to speak in terms of wicked problems. Wicked problems are not only unavoidable, but essentially unsolvable and indefinable for the social actors affected by them. Thus, their "wickedness" is not so much an "essential" characteristic of given problems as such, but is partly constituted by the ideas and perceptions of the relevant stakeholders, researchers and interest groups in a specific context [11, 12]. Therefore they are often highly politicized, and the attempt to "solve" a problem sometimes exacerbates the situation by creating new and even more serious problems in other spheres of

✉ Andreas Ventsel
andreas.ventsel@ut.ee

[1] Department of Semiotics, Tartu University, Tartu, Estonia

society. When we speak of migration, systemic economic over-production, cultural conflicts and information overload, we are dealing exactly with wicked problems.

1 Semioethical Approach to Global Problems

In 2017, a monograph entitled *Challenges to Living Together. Transculturalism, Migration, Exploitation for a Semioethics of Human Relations* was published under the authorial and editorial guidance of Susan Petrilli. The book's aim is precisely to understand and conceptualize these kinds of wicked problems. Petrilli works as Professor of Philosophy and Theory of Language at the University of Bari in Italy and is among the most prolific semioticians. Her interests entail a large number of wide ranging areas from general semiotics (*Expression and Interpretation in Language*, 2011) to semiotics of translation (*Signifying and Understanding. Reading the Works of Victoria Welby and the Signific Movement*, 2009; *Sign Studies and Semioethics: Communication, Translation and Values*, 2014) and political analyses (*The Self as a Sign, the World, and the Other*, 2014). And these are only a few of her titles…

Challenges to Living Together is a multifaceted book. It is published as part of the "Philosophy" series of Mimesis International—and indeed, the book is not categorizable simply under the discipline of semiotics. Petrilli, along with her regular and prolific co-author Augusto Ponzio, stresses that their approach belongs to the tradition of the so-called critical humanities. As part of this tradition, the authors understand their concepts (such as 'the art of listening' (see also Petrilli [20]), 'the art of caring', 'fear of the other', etc.) on the most fundamentally existential and ontological level of the human experience and human relations—being "for the other *tout court*." "We propose to listen to and care for human relations, or better "interrelations" given the inexorable condition of intercorporeality, "dialogic intercorporeality", interconnecting all life-forms on earth" (2017: 15). Here we find ourselves on the level of semioethics that understands the world "as a possible world, which means to say a world that is subject to confutation, therefore as one among many possible worlds" (2017: 25). The authors do not, then, reduce the world's constitution to economic calculation, theological purpose or to some other essentialist final cause. In large part written by Petrilli herself (and to some extent by Ponzio), the first two parts of the book—respectively, "Identity matters. Ethnicity. Difference. Nation" and "Culture matters. Global Communications and its Mystification"—provide the reader with a critical perspective on problems such as migration, the tension between national identities and universal human values, the possibility of cultural pluralism in the context of the market logic of global communication, etc.

The second half of the book consists of the following sections: III. "Whiteness matters. Social justice, human rights, and the other"; IV. "Subject matters. Intercultural dialogue, education, alienation"; and V. "Art matters. Between ethics and aesthetics". The individual texts in these sections are written from very different disciplinary and geographical perspectives (mostly from Australia or Italy, but there is also a text by Noam Chomsky from the USA). The authors are Martha

Augoustinos, Lorelle Burton, Anne Cranny-Francis, Clemence Due, Kathie McDonald, Brian Medlin, Deidre Michell, Giuseppe Mininni, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Pamela M. Petrilli, Glen David Postle, Joseph Pugliese, Mike Rann, Damien W. Riggs, Honni van Rijswijk, Renata Summo O'Connell, Geoffrey Sykes, and Rosa Traversa. Although sections III through V are made up of specific empirical textual analyses that do not articulate the semioethic philosophical-normative approach perhaps as explicitly as the texts of the first half of the book, the framing articles of Petrilli and Ponzio provide a background on which their diversity can be cognized as a whole. The texts gathered together in the book all deal with the problems accompanying practices of meaning making and with the potential consequences of conflicts; all search, from different perspectives, for answers to the question—what matters? In the following, I will concentrate on the fundamental concepts framing the book, that is, on global communication and on the main characteristics of the semioethical perspective such as 'dialogism', 'listening', and 'fear of/for the other'.

2 Global Communication/World Communication

Attempting to explain the challenges posed in and to contemporary societies, Petrilli and Ponzio use the concept of global communication. Global communication is not equivalent to world communication, a concept that refers to communication's ability to encompass the whole world, an ability made possible by the quantitative development of information technologies. In order to capture the core of contemporary issues, it is necessary to enter the qualitative level. Here the authors flirt with the re-conceptualization of the Marxist tradition that leads back to the Italian thinker Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (51), but also recognizably incorporates ideas of the Frankfurt School, Louis Althusser, and others. The relations between communication, exchange value, production and reproduction and, in the end, the human condition emerge as the fundamental problem to be conceptualized.

In Ponzio's words, "not only does the exchange phase involve communication, but production and consumption as well converge with communication. So the whole reproductive cycle is communication. This phase in capitalist reproduction can be characterised as the "communication-production" phase" (Ponzio, 201). Post-industrial capitalism does not, in the formation of social processes, so much rely on the determinant logic of the material base, but rather on the informational and communicative resources. However, Marxism's central thesis is still valid: "anything can be translated into merchandise" (Ponzio, 200). That is, communication is still governed by the logic of profit and rules of the market. And this logic is all the more powerful since its workings are not apparent in plain sight but instead hidden. The individual may or may not be aware that behaviour is organised socially. As Ponzio writes: "Consequently, spontaneous or natural behaviour does not exist in the human world, if not as a mystification. Human behaviour is programmed behaviour." And further: "The social sign systems that regulate individual behaviour are pseudo-totalities which function as pieces in larger totalities" (Ponzio, 201). This process of regulation is mainly retroactive and not at

all unidirectional. In the network society it is governed through dialectical feedback processes, through search engines, etc. This type of regulation, in its turn, brings about "the detriment of the recognition of the rights of others, of difference" (Ponzio, 203). To the author of this review, who does not share any techno-utopian ideals of emancipation or democratic potential of the Internet, this type of determinist perspective seems a bit exaggerated, especially if one is to take into account the fact that thanks to online communication, individuals now possess greater power to undermine dominant discourses or "programs". Even if most achievements of information technologies are developed in light of their profitability, they can nevertheless be utilized to counter institutionalized relations of domination [9, 22: 146]. Furthermore, in the process of designing and governing semiosis, the users' freedom of choice cannot be disregarded. In denying this freedom, we would deny the possibility of the semioethical dialogism as well.

Despite the fact that contemporary communication works more and more through the creation of differences and thus potentially as enabling the communication between differences, one of the main consequences of global communication seems to be the increasing enclosure of society and withdrawal from dialogue. How come? Petrilli and Ponzio here rely on the Russian linguist and communication scientist Mikhail Bakhtin and his idea of dialogism. According to Bakhtin, dialogue is not limited to the formal description of the "I–you" communication, it is characteristic of human thought and semiosis as a whole. Bakhtin emphasizes that dialogue is led by the potential answer, by the principle of activation that creates a basis for an active response [3: 282]. The addressee is never just a passive receiver but the active constructor of the utterance of the addresser, i.e. they mutually constitute each other. Synthesizing Bakhtin's ideas with Peirce's theories of the sign, we can say that the nature of the sign—and thus, of semiosis—is dialogic, that it is a dialogue between the sign, the object, and the interpretant (Ponzio, Petrilli, part II). Capitalist logic, however, does not enable constitutive dialogue. It instead promotes strict differences encouraging the exchange process. These differences are governed by monologic market laws that are describable through the concepts of Self-identity, Subjectivity, Individuality, Difference–Indifference, Belonging. "This is a paradigm that capitalism has always exploited and exasperated, and continues to do so" (43).

Withdrawal from dialogic communication and falling into the trap of a strictly delimited identity leads society to enclosure, and consequently relations of reciprocal influence and hospitality among cultures and their languages that are constituted in signs oriented by the logic of otherness are disregarded. A "closed society" is characterized first and foremost by "fear of the other". ""Open society" is grounded in the logic of otherness, therefore in "fear for the other", that is, responsibility for the other, concern for the other's freedom and well-being […]. The open society is made of open selves whose vocation is dialogue" (54). Dialogue is based on listening to the other, a process of "responsive understanding (or answering comprehension)" that "produces new signifiers and interpretants without ever fixing sense" (25).

3 Fear as an Epiphenomenon of Network Society

Petrilli and Ponzio are, of course, not the first to conceptualize communication in the framework of fear. Both Bauman's [4] liquid modernity and Ulrich Beck's risk society are characterized by uncertainty, insecurity and fear. According to Bauman, this is due to the fact that traditional representational politics have failed and fear has become an effective mobilizing emotion used by politicians to evoke security in evidently insecure situations. According to Beck [7], the solidarity of human beings is created by the fear for security—everyone desires to stay clear of the dangers posed by the environment or technology. This type of solidarity, however, paves the way for dangers pointed to by Bauman. Consequently, we can agree with Castells [8: 417] who says that contemporary communication is characterized by fear, and that the mediatized socialization of fear is a sign of contemporary globalization governed by communication. One of the consequences of this is the emergence of undeliberated and affective processes of judgment. The situation is all the more paradoxical since the general tendency to reduce everything to fear blurs the boundaries of clearly differentiated fears, fears that are founded upon economic, racial, geographical and gender-specific asymmetries [13: 44]. I am not convinced, however, that the origins of this generalized fear are to be sought in the economic logic behind communication, a logic dependent on the creation of differences. This type of approach does away with the autonomy of communication and tends to forget other essential functions of communication, such as the phatic function necessary to constitute a community—a function expressing human beings' desire to be recognized and to belong to a secure (informational) environment [23]. This desire might well lead to the abandonment of dialogue, the formation of echo chambers, the autocommunicative enclosure of interaction which leads to the constant reinforcement of group identity (even to the point of creating a figure of the common enemy (see [15, 16]), but it would be too simplistic to conceptualize it as a deviation or a mere epiphenomenon of capitalist logic. In the context of information overload, communication produces fears according to its own nature.

4 The Subject of Semioethics and Absolute Otherness

As it stresses the importance of interpersonal dialogism, semioethics offers us a fresh perspective on the conceptualization of the subject. Petrilli writes: "The unique single individual is outside the Subject, *sui generis*, has value on its own account, without belonging, without referring to a community, without communion, without brotherhood or sisterhood, without Us" (43). Underscoring absolute otherness and recalling the sign's original vocation for the other (190), Petrilli moves along the current that has been called, in the tradition of political thought, non-identificational politics or radical political ontology. Instead of identity that separates, inclusive equality should set the agenda of progressive political movements, always keeping in mind, in any case, that no universalist stance can ever be completely realized in a self-enclosed social totality: lack and openness are

and will always remain constitutive aspects of society and politics [17]. This does not lead radical thinkers like Agamben [1], Badiou [2], Rancière [21], or Laclau [14] to give up the idea of emancipation. It is exactly when the lacking part (the excluded) of a given historical situation advocates and enacts the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone that politics as a source of radical and liberating change may emerge [18, 19]. Such politics calls into question given identities, consolidated social positions and separations in the name of equality.

Semioethical "absolute otherness" "is otherness that cannot be restricted to roles and identities and is connected with the condition of unlimited responsibility, which does not admit of indifference. Human life, properly human life, is the right to otherness, unindifferent difference, nonfunctionality, excess with respect to a world sanctioned by the official order and by convention" (215). Semioethics is a critique of stereotypes, norms and ideology and, consequently, of the different types of value (191). The review's author feels that the potential of semioethics could be better realized by conceptualizing it in the framework of political philosophy. As Petrilli and Ponzio write, "Semioethics does not have a programme to propose with intended aims and practices, a decalogue, a formula to see through more or less sincerely, more or less hypocritically" (191). Nevertheless it opens up a possibility of dialogue with other disciplines. This is exactly why *Challenges to Living Together* provides a unique opportunity to think through how semiotics could help us understand and solve contemporary problems. In the end, this is what matters.

Acknowledgements Funding was provided by IUT 2–44.

References

1. Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
2. Badiou, Alain. 2005. *Metapolitics*. London: Verso.
3. Bahtin, Mihhail. 2001. The Dialogic Imagination. In *Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
4. Bauman, Zygmunt. 2006. *Liquid Fear*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
5. Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
6. Bauman, Zygmunt. 2007. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty. Book Description*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
7. Beck, Ulrich. 1999. *World Risk Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
8. Castells, Manuel. 2009. *Communication Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
9. Dahlberg, Lincoln. 2011. Re-constructing Digital Democracy: An Outline of Four 'Positions'. *New Media and Society* 13(6): 855–872. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810389569.
10. Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
11. Grint, Keith. 2010. Wicked Problems and Clumsy Solutions: The Role of Leadership. In *The New Public Leadership Challenge*, ed. Stephen Brookes and Keith Grint, 169–186. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
12. Head, Brian W., and John Alford. 2015. Wicked Problems: Implications for Public Policy and Management. *Administration and Society* 47(6): 711–736.
13. Jeffries, Fiona. 2012. Mediating Fear. *Global Media and Communication* 9(1): 37–52.
14. Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
15. Madisson, Mari-Liis, and Andreas Ventsel. 2016. Autocommunicative Meaning-Making in Online-Communication of Estonian Extreme Right. *Sign Systems Studies* 44(3): 326–354.

16. Madisson, Mari-Liis, and Andreas Ventsel. 2018. Groupuscular Identity-Creation in Online-Communication of Estonian Extreme Right. *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2016-0077.
17. Marchart, Oliver. 2007. *Post-foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
18. Monticelli, Daniele. 2008. *Wholeness and Its Remainders: Theoretical Procedures of Totalization and Detotalization in Semiotics, Philosophy and Politics*. Tartu: Tartu University Press.
19. Monticelli, Daniele. 2014. *Occupation Revisited: Contemporary Radical Politics in Practice and Theory*. Tallinn: The project applied to Estonian Science Foundation.
20. Petrilli, Susan, ed. 2007. *Philosophy of Language as the Art of Listening*. Bari, Edizioni dal Sud.
21. Rancière, Jacques. 1991. *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
22. Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2006. *Avatars of Story*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
23. Ventsel, Andreas. 2017. Viral Communication and the Formation of Counter–Publics. *Lexia* 25–26: 365–380.

***Challenges to Living Together. Transculturalism, Migration, Exploitation*, introduction, pp. 15-31, by Susan Petrilli, [with M. Augoustinos, L. J. Burton, N. Chomsky, A. Cranny Francis, K. McDonald, C. Due, P. Gale, Brian Medlin, D. Michell, G. Mininni, A. Moreton-Robinson, P. M. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, G. D. Postle, J. Pugliese, M. Rann, D. W. Riggs, H. Rijswijk, G. Sykes, R. Summo O'Connell, R. Traversa], [Philosophy 20], Milan, Mimesis International, Mimesis, 2017, 490 pp. ISBN 9788869770937**

Extending the gaze to all signs of life, semiotics as global semiotics evidences the condition of interrelatedness and interdependency not only among the sign systems forming the anthroposphere, but also between the latter and those forming the biosphere, ultimately between nature and culture. As "the art of listening", "of caring", semiotics practiced as semioethics shows how the relation with the other, whether the other of self or the other from self, is inevitable and cannot be escaped. The vocation of the sign, of life, of communication, verbal and nonverbal, is the other. The other is a constitutive part of the world inhabited by all living beings. Challenges to human and nonhuman life in today's world are numerous and appear unsurmountable. In reality, these are challenges to living together, but living together is possible. Semiotics as global semiotics and semioethics tells us as much.

This book designs a common vision from different perspectives all essentially oriented by the belief that living together can only be fully achieved when the business of living expouses diversity and care for the other as the principle of unity, when the unifying principle is difference.

Susan Petrilli: – It would seem that you have dedicated your life to testifying to the importance of hope deriving from socio-political and ethical engagement. As much as it seems unreasonable if not impossible, is hope for a better world justified? From this point of view, how significant do you think are such expressions as "anti-global movements", "peace movements", the "World Social Forum"?–.

Noam Chomsky – They are extremely important. In fact, they are the hope for the future. I would not use the term "anti-globalisation", however. The World Social Forum, for example, illustrates globalisation in a far richer and more extensive way than the World Economic Forum, which meets at the same time. The WSF brings together people from all over the world, from all walks of life, committed to further international integration, but for the interests of people, not concentrated economic and state power. Therefore, the expression "anti-globalisation" in the doctrinal system refers to that which is shaped by concentrated power, in this respect as in others –
(From the interview with Noam Chomsky).

Susan Petrilli (bn. Adelaide, Australia), 7th Thomas A. Sebeok Fellow of the Semiotic Society of America, is Professor of Philosophy and Theory of Languages at the University of Bari "Aldo Moro", Italy, where she teaches Semiotics and Semiotics of Translation, and Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide, South Australia.

At the University of Bari, she is Director of the PhD program in Language Theory and Sign Sciences and coordinates Erasmus exchange relations with over twenty universities across Europe. She is Academic adviser of the Institute of Semiotics and Media Studies (ISMS), Sichuan University, China. She lectures regularly at various universities worldwide: Australia, China, Brazil, USA, Canada, South Africa, and across Europe. Her principal research areas include Philosophy of Language, Semiotics, General Linguistics, Translation Theory, Communication Studies.

She sits on the advisory board of numerous international journals and directs several book series in Italy. In 2016 she co-founded with Augusto Ponzio the new Peter Lang book series "Reflections on Signs and Language". As editor and translator she has conributed to spreading the works of Victoria Lady Welby, Charles Peirce, Emmanuel Levinas, Mikhail Bakhtin, Charles Morris, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, Giorgio Fano, Thomas Szasz, Thomas Sebeok.

She publishes books and essays regularly in English and Italian. Her writings are also available in Chinese, Spanish, French, Portuguese and the Slav language. Her publications in include: *Sign Crossroads in Global Perspective* (Transactions, 2010), *Expression and Interpretation in Language* (Transaction, 2012), *Em outro lugar e de outro modo* (2013), *The Self as a Sign, the World and the Other* (Transaction, 2013), *Sign Studies and Semioethics. Communication, Translation and Values* (Mouton De Gruyter, 2014), *Riflessioni sulla teoria del linguaggio e dei segni* (2014), (in collab. with A. Ponzio) *Semioetica e comunicazione globale* (2014), *Victoria Welby and the Science of Signs* (2015), *Nella vita dei segni* (2015), (in collab. with A. Ponzio) *Lineamenti di semiotica e di filosofia del linguaggio* (2016), *The Global World and Its Manifold Faces. Otherness as the Basis of Communication* (Peter Lang, 2016), *Challenges to Living Together* (2017), *Digressioni nella storia* (2017), *Pace, pacificazione e pacificismo e i loro linguaggi* (ed. 2017).