

Materialist Semiotics

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Inspired mainly by Karl Marx's philosophy, materialist semiotics comprises a set of theoretical approaches to signs production and communication. The Marxist emphasis on material conditions stands in contrast to those semiotic approaches concerned with "apparently" intangible structures that cannot be observed directly such as language and consciousness, and tend to construct formalistic abstractions for which historical contexts are irrelevant. Orthodox Marxists criticize such work as idealist, ahistorical, and subjectivist. By contrast, materialist semiotics insists on putting socioeconomic contexts back into the picture. Signs and codes are not seen as standing outside of time, place, and socioeconomic relationships. Rather, materialist semioticians explicitly examine the ways in which sign systems and socioeconomic systems interpenetrate and influence each other.

Marxist studies of communication, and by extension materialist semiotics, make the relationship between text and context explicit. Within the American pragmatic tradition, the Peircean model of semiosis implies that the historical context of a community is instrumental in molding the milieu within which social discourse takes place, although exponents of materialist semiotics seem to have paid little explicit attention to Charles Sanders Peirce's work. But Valentin Voloshinov appears to have been aware of Peircean pragmatism, and Ferruccio Rossi-Landi showed an early interest in the work of Charles Morris, a disciple of Peirce.

Voloshinov was part of the Leningrad School of Soviet semioticians, which formed around Mikhail Bakhtin during the late 1920s and early 1930s. There is some disagreement over whether Voloshinov was in fact a mask used by Bakhtin in publicizing work he believed would be unacceptable to the Stalinists. At any rate, Voloshinov disappeared during the purges of the 1930s, and his work was consigned to oblivion in Soviet academic circles. Voloshinov attempted to merge the semiotic concern with subjective structures and the Marxist concern with historical materialism's objective structures. He developed an approach to semiosis premised upon a subject-object totality. Although Voloshinov's concern was with language and subjectivity, he managed to stay clear of subjectivism, in which the "material" is forgotten. Voloshinov's approach shares with the wider materialist tradition a rejection of methodologies that claim the existence of purely autonomous subjectivities. His study of language sees signs as the sites where subjects and objects meet or interpenetrate each other. So the sign is where the social world and the psyche (consciousness and the subjective) intersect, but the sign is also objective. Hence, for Voloshinov, semiotics becomes a site from which to study the subjective from a materialist perspective. Through studying the sign, it becomes possible to initiate a materialist study of ideology. Voloshinov's

semiotics does not locate ideology purely in consciousness, nor does he define ideology as the mere subjective reflection of the economic base. Rather, ideology is interpreted as the way in which society enters the mind through signs within a particular context. Voloshinov's understanding of "ideology as semiosis" is historically and materially grounded. It is a neo-Marxist semiotics: consequently, it is not a semiotics that seeks universals but one that investigates the context-bound nature of semiosis.

This is a significant modification of the traditional Marxist understanding of ideology because, for Voloshinov, language communities do not coincide with class categories. There is no Marxist reductionism in terms of which language and sign systems in general are comprehended in only one-on-one relationships with class. Rather, different classes use the same language or sign system. Hence, language and signs become sites of struggle. In this sense, signs and meaning are dynamic and may even be contradictory. Voloshinov builds the notion of dialectic into his understanding of sign systems, but it is not a materially driven dialectic in the strictly Marxist sense. For Voloshinov, class struggle does not determine language use, as it does in the orthodox Marxist concept of ideology; instead, class struggle takes place within a shared sign system used by a single community of users. In fact, the sign itself becomes a site of class struggle. Social contradictions can manifest themselves in sign systems as surely as they can in the economic system.

Voloshinov's semiotics, then, unlike Saussurean semiology, is a dialectical structuralism that is concerned with both material and subjective structures: there can be no generalized "given" sign. Rather, each sign is historically and materially conditioned and actively "struggled over" within the totality of its social context. The sign dialectically "connects" the "interface" of the subject-object totality—the individual psyche and the social context—within class struggle. Ideology is seen to emerge within this dialectical totality of subject and object. Voloshinov, however, recognizes that the "dominant ideology" as a sign system in a given context will try to stabilize itself, though he allows space for active human minds and praxis within his nondeterministic subject-object structuralism. Human beings are seen as active cocreators of meaning as they use, make, modify, and struggle over signs.

There is an alternative, more orthodox, Marxist conception of language and semiosis to the one formulated by Voloshinov. In this rival approach, a direct relationship is drawn between language and other sign systems and class-based ideology, and language becomes a means of class rule in which reality is disguised. This approach is derived ultimately from György Lukács's notions of reification and alienation as developed in *History and Class Consciousness* (1971). For Lukács, capitalism has destroyed the subject-object "totality" of a humanized world. Under capitalism, people (subjects) can be treated as things or commodities—that is, they are "objectified." The result is alienation. Thus, Marxist semiotics derived from the Lukácian view of ideology is concerned with subjective "linguistic alienation."

A key exponent of this form of Marxist semiotics has been Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, for whom humans are social beings and hence need to exchange ideas and actions via signs within code systems. The control of sign systems translates into the control of people. For Rossi-Landi, capitalists control

economic relations of production and thus control linguistic exchange and sign systems. Capitalism therefore affects how and what humans are able to communicate. The result of capitalism is a curtailed linguistic exchange that results in linguistic alienation. In developing his theory of exchange within sign systems, Rossi-Landi developed numerous concepts that have enriched materialist semiotics, such as "linguistic work," "linguistic tools," and "linguistic capital."

Both Rossi-Landi's and Lukács's concepts of communication, however, ultimately face the limitations of the orthodox Marxist conception of ideology in which the economic base is seen to determine the subjective superstructure. Both assume that a direct correlation can be drawn between economic exchange and the exchange of signs within language structures. It is a somewhat problematic assumption that Marx's methodology can be shifted in this way, but this idea that Marx's method of analyzing material structures can simply be transferred into a means for analyzing language structures also bears some resemblance to the premises underpinning Louis Althusser's work. The key break that Althusser initiated within Marxism came in his effective destruction of the traditional historical-materialist model of base and superstructure (object and subject). As with Voloshinov's construct, there is no one-on-one relationship between class and language in the Althusserian model. For Marx, the economic structure was the center; it determined other structures. Similarly, in his structuralism, Althusser specifically detaches ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) from the economic base. ISAs become "autonomous" within a complex reality. Within this model, human thought or consciousness can be formed independent of given economic conditions, purely as a result of the interpellation of people into subjective structures. The Althusserian structural model argues that at any historical conjuncture there will be multiple and complex interrelationships and causations. Althusser used the term *overdetermined* to describe this complex structural reality. Althusser's structuralism is premised upon a decentered hierarchy of practices within which one of the structures is dominant at any particular point in time. Theoretically, a subjective structure could even be dominant at some point. This possibility represents a radical departure from the original Marxist model. The Althusserian approach to materialist semiosis differs significantly from the Voloshinovian approach precisely because of the implications of the notion of "decenteredness" and because of the granting of autonomy to subjective structures. In fact, the Althusserian approach can be seen as no longer strictly materialist. By detaching subjective structures (ISAs, language) from material structures, Althusser effectively moved into the realm of free-floating subjectivities and thereby opened the door to what Marx had objected to about philosophy—namely, its subjectivism and idealism. Ironically Althusser's philosophy is a subjectivism without an active human subject. By ignoring the humanist strand and the subject-object dialectic within Marxism, Althusser merely succeeded in transforming the most reductionist aspects of Marxism's materialist determinism into a subjectivist determinism. He collapsed ideology as false consciousness into determining subjective structures.

In this respect, there is a parallel between Althusser's work and Roland Barthes's Marxist phase. Barthes fused a Maoist interpretation of Marxism with

a Saussurean semiology to produce a social critique that rested upon the decoding of meanings. Barthes and the *Tel Quel* group sought to strip away the myths of bourgeois life by applying a structuralist methodology to the texts and intertextuality of their society. Ultimately, however, Barthes and the *Tel Quel* group drifted into the production of subjectivist semantic games or metalanguages that were divorced from considerations of the historical material context.

Althusser's work, on the other hand, attempted to deal with the methodological crisis of Marxism. But Althusser's "solution" to this crisis proved to be no solution at all. In fact, his work seems to have accelerated the collapse of the Marxist dream. However, even if Althusser failed to save Marxism, he unintentionally enriched the debate about structuralism, as Althusserian structuralism melted into post-Althusserianism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction. Materialist semiotics has, however, resurfaced in the expanding field of cultural studies, which includes among its models Althusser's and Voloshinov's reformulations of structuralism, Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, and Raymond Williams's culturalism. The resultant concern with an active human subjectivity within a material context has meant that cultural studies has developed a specific interpretation of materialist semiosis in which to undertake a humanist rereading of structuralism.