

Semiotic Ideology: A Dialogue across Semiotic Traditions

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Abstract: This dialogue between Webb Keane and Massimo Leone, moderated and with a preface by Constantine V. Nakassis, explores convergences and divergences between continental semiotics and North American linguistic anthropology on the topic of “semiotic ideology.” The discussion ranges over questions of intellectual genealogy, the status of interpretation, the epistemology of analysis, and methodology. It is an edited transcription of the opening session of the “Summer Symposium 2025: Ideologies of Conservation and Transformation,” organized by Massimo Leone at the Fondazione Bruno Kessler (Trento, Italy, 23 June 2025).

Keywords: semiotic ideology; continental semiotics; linguistic anthropology

Editorial note: This dialogue between Webb Keane and Massimo Leone was the opening session of the “Summer Symposium 2025: Ideologies of Conservation and Transformation,” organized by Massimo Leone at the Fondazione Bruno Kessler in Trento, Italy on 23 June 2025 (Figure 1). The panel was chaired by Simona Stano and moderated by Constantine (Costas) Nakassis, who began the event with prefatory comments. The dialogue has been transcribed and edited by the panel participants for readability and to clarify key points. Asides and bibliographic references that were not part of the oral proceedings have been put into endnotes and in certain cases, if in the main text, set between [square brackets]. Due the quality of the recording, some questions during the Q&A period could not be transcribed or, if included, are heavily redacted.



Figure 1. From left: Webb Keane, Massimo Leone, Constantine V. Nakassis, Simona Stano; at the Fondazione Bruno Kessler (Trento, Italy), 23 June 2025. Photo by Maria Giulia Dondero

Constantine V. Nakassis (CVN): I want to first thank Massimo and Webb for making this conference, and also this dialogue, possible, and to Simona Stano for chairing the session. The idea behind this dialogue is based on the notion that the wonderful diversity of approaches to sign processes, to semiotics, is an opportunity and a resource, and, further, that we always benefit from sustained efforts to explore what makes us different from and similar to each other; indeed, that dialogue across difference is an intellectual necessity and ethical good.

It's too bad it doesn't happen as much as it should! Our approaches too often toil independently of each other; or at least, this is a narrative taught to us and that we ourselves often reproduce: that modern semiotics is split into so many schools: one in Paris, another in Tartu, those in Bologna, others in Chicago; that there are structuralists versus pragmatists, indeed, that semiotics is split by the Atlantic, with each side captioned by the names of totems like Peirce or Saussure.¹

This narrative is a kind of myth (an ideology even) that engages in a kind of purification. Purifications like these, however, are never quite successful.² And hybrids abound. Voila! Here we are. And here we've also already been. There have long been such hybrids, those knights trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together again across the proverbial pond:

Roman Jakobson, his MA student, Thomas Sebeok, and his BA student, Michael Silverstein all come to my mind; similarly, we recall the great Umberto Eco. There are many others, needless to say, including those on this stage and in this room today.

In this session, we propose to use the term *ideology* to restage this dialogue. This is occasioned, in particular, by the felicitous use of the phrase *semiotic ideology* as a major term in the recent work of Massimo Leone and his colleagues: for example, in Leone's 2024 book, *Semiotic Ideologies: Patterns of Meaning-Making in Language and Society* or in the 2023 double issue of *Lexia* edited by Leone and Simona Stano. These volumes explicitly engage the work of Webb Keane, Michael Silverstein, and other Peirce-inspired American linguistic anthropologists who, since the 1980s, have explored the role of semiotic and language ideologies in social life.³ Semiotic ideology, in short, is a bridge that has already been laid. And today, we want to direct the traffic, to see what places this bridge connects, to what destinations it leads, as well as where our paths may diverge.

Before doing that, however, I think it useful to reflect on the history of the term *ideology*. While the historical resemanticization of this term is interesting for its own particular twists and turns, the reason I want to tread this territory is because doing so clarifies the semiotic—indeed, ideological—mediations that have driven the circulation of the lexeme *ideology*.⁴ This history bears an important object lesson: namely, it reveals why we need some notion of ideology, even as it helps contextualize how and why we use the term today, as well as some of the ambivalences and risks that its use presents.

The term *ideology*, as we know, is a neologism of the late 18th-century French Enlightenment. Its genealogy, interestingly, however, comes from the British empiricist philosophy of John Locke (1632–1704).⁵ Locke's philosophy of ideas, language, and the understanding was taken up in French philosophy by the "sensationist" Étienne Condillac (1714–1780); and from Condillac, in turn, by the most famous of the so-called ideologues, Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836), who coined the term, *idéologie*, in the 1790s.⁶

Ideology for de Tracy was, as per its etymon, the "science, or study, of ideas": their genesis, their origin, and their right use. In a spirit similar to other architectonic thinkers like Francis Bacon before him, and Kant, Hegel, and Peirce after him,⁷ de Tracy's science of ideas would be the foundation from which all other sciences were based. In fact, as de Tracy argued, since science is ultimately the manipulation of ideas, all science is Ideology. (The parallel with how many have framed *semiotics* as a sort of meta- or master-discipline within an architectonic of ways of knowing should ring familiar to our semiotician ears.)

De Tracy begins from the notion that ideas emerge from the individual's physical sensation, as spurred by experience of the material world, and from there to the mind, and

from mind to physical signs and speech, and from there to language and Reason. Ideology, then, note, curiously enough given its later history, was understood in its time as a materialist enterprise that was anti-metaphysical, and as I'll note in a moment, thus revolutionary in its politics.

Indeed, as a materialist theory of ideation that proceeded strictly from the individual, Ideology aimed to open a different epistemological space within the political and philosophical discourse in which it intervened, a space outside of received theories of right governance, of the nature of authority, and of truth. De Tracy was trying—much like Locke in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in discrediting scholasticism or, later, Marx and Engels in attacking the young Hegelians—to claim a space outside of metaphysics and Christian onto-theology so as to open the way for what he saw as Truth and Reason, for rational science and for individual freedom. Ideology was “a science which would rescue the mind from the domain of the priests”⁸ and repudiated metaphysical terms like the “soul,” “reflection,” and “consciousness.”

The irony is that de Tracy's Ideology (with a capital “I”) was a kind of ideology (with a lower case “i”) in the sense Marx and Engels used it in *The German Ideology*; that is, a system of ideas or beliefs that articulates an ahistorical, universalist philosophy (in this case, about the nature of ideas) from a particular social position, and yet disavows and effaces its own positionality, and in doing so, is politically motivated and entails particular political effects. Of course, it wasn't that Ideology for de Tracy wasn't political. It avowedly was. Indeed, de Tracy's “Ideology” advocated a Republicanist politics with strong liberalist, *laissez faire* leanings; it was a “theory of the moral and political sciences” and thus, was for “regulating society.”

Note how far de Tracy's Ideology is from our everyday, more-or-less Marxist, sense of the term; how they appear to be exact opposites. Yet also consider the uncanny similarities between de Tracy's universalist *science* of Ideology and Marx's *critique* of ideology as camera obscura of the social: despite their seeming opposite meanings, both were linked to revolutionary politics, both were critiques of dogma, both were attacks on idealism and metaphysics through materialist theories of ideation, and both were grounded in Enlightenment utopias.

How do we account for this intimacy and reversal? More than historical coincidence, I'd suggest that the semiotic process of how this lexeme came to take on an indexical and semantic meaning exactly the reverse of its coinage—and thus came to form a diagram of itself—provides the reason we need some notion of ideology in our semiotics. The question is, of course, what kind of notion of ideology?

Recall de Tracy's political context: he was writing during and after the French Revolution. Beyond its denotational "content," then, just as important was that his philosophy was associated with and circulated among a particular social domain: the propertied classes. De Tracy, like Locke, was a defender of private property and the emerging capitalist class (even if he himself was an aristocrat). De Tracy believed that property was inherent to the individual and his mind (mind being our primary locus of and for property), and thus both (the individual and his mind) pre-date social institutions like the Church or the Monarchy. Such ideas among such persons were, unsurprisingly, seen as dangerous by both Church and Monarchy. Indeed, the ideologues were accused as the very cause of the French Revolution.

And it was in the context of the conservative backlash after the Revolution that "Ideology"—as a kind of discourse—and the ideologue—as a typified social persona—came to be the site of a particular kind of cultural politics; in particular, as parodied by those who understood the ideologues to be politically opposed to them. It is from this parodicization of the "ideologue" as a social type that the nineteenth-century meaning, and pejorative social indexicality, of the term *ideology* came about.

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), as we know, saw the liberalism and republicanism of the ideologues as a threat, both discursive and literal; indeed, a number of the ideologues, including de Tracy, were implicated in the failed Malet conspiracies of the first decade of the 1800s, a set of attempts, led by Claude-François de Malet, to depose Napoleon. Of this attempted coup, Napoleon said in 1808 (and note the poetic unveiling of the "reality" of ideology through the opposition of ideology and the real and the equation of the ideologues and conspiracy):

« Ce **n'est plus de l'idéologie**, mais une **véritable conspiration**. »

'This is **not ideology**, but a **real conspiracy**.'⁹

Ideology, here, is not mere ideas or science (as the ideologues would have us think, so suggests Napoleon); but rather hard facts, real politics. Napoleon went out of his way to ridicule "Ideology as metaphysical revery" vilifying "Windbags and ideologues [note the equation] who have always fought the existing authority."¹⁰

If we had more time, it'd be wonderful to look more closely at some of Napoleon's speeches denouncing the ideologues,¹¹ for there is much to say about his poetically rich oratory and how it indexically resignifies the notion of ideology and the figure of the ideologue. But the point here is to underline the political contestation emblemized in and concerning the lexeme *ideology* as personified in the figure of the ideologue. Through this process, what linguistic anthropologists call *enregisterment*,¹² *ideology* became a site of

resignification, a semiotic battleground between actors who held different positions on, among other things, questions like: what is a sign, a subject, and thus what is the social?¹³ [This process of enregisterment, in other words, was mediated ideologically.]

Ultimately, it is Napoleon's resignification that won out semiotically, even if Republicanism eventually won out politically in France. Through these metapragmatic efforts, *Ideology* became, semantically, its opposite: a term for idealism, metaphysics, illusion, subterfuge, political intrigue, and the situated point of view of a particular political group. As a mid-nineteenth century writer, Adolphe Franck put it: "ideology is no longer the science of ideas, abstracted from time and men; it is the science of ideas as the school of Condillac understood it."¹⁴ That is, not Ideology with a capital "I," a proper noun, but one of many *ideologies*, a countable, possessable common noun with a lower-case "i." Not just the fate of a social group or political philosophy, here, too, transformed are indexical meaning and lexicogrammatical form-class.

It's this resignified meaning of ideology that Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) famously used as their bludgeon in *The German Ideology*. Marx was, to put it lightly, highly critical of the heirs of Hegel in his day, as well as of the liberal political economists of his time and of the generation before, including de Tracy with whom he was familiar as someone who had formulated a labor theory of value.¹⁵ And while Marx praised de Tracy for seeing beyond exchange into the secret of capital—namely, labor—de Tracy for Marx was an exemplary ideologue (in the pejorative sense) by being a philosophical apologist for capital.

What I want to point out here—and without going into the hilarious if embarrassingly excessive, caustic rhetoric of *The German Ideology*—is how Napoleon's own satire of Ideology did exactly what Marx and Engel's critique of the Young Hegelians later did, and what even more interestingly, de Tracy's critique of the *Ancien Regime* also did: de Tracy, Napoleon, Marx—each undermines some other discourse by exposing it as a particularity masquerading as a universal; and moreover, as falsely imputing to the Idea a power to be, as it were, beyond ideology. Such an unveiling further shows how that other discourse, be it Royalism, Ideology, Young Hegelianism, or bourgeois political economy, misrecognizes some process of social (and we would add, semiotic) mediation, and in so doing propagates some (problematic) political project.

But not just opening another space, what's interesting across this history is how (the critique of) "ideology" works to *explain why* that other discourse ends up obfuscating the world it attempts to account for. It doesn't just reveal some position to be wrong but offers an account for how it came to be so. Hence the curious homology between de Tracy's and Marx's "ideology": they are opposites, and yet also curiously identical. In both cases, the

account of “ideology” formulates a model of the origins of ideas *and* is itself an idea that typifies *other* ideas in explaining their genesis and where, alas, they went astray. That is, there are two distinct uses of *ideology* by Marx and Engels: first, as a rhetorical hammer to bitingly satirize the young Hegelians so as to open up the space for a “true” Marxist science and thus also for revolutionary praxis; and second, to explain from where and how ideologies themselves emerge, that is, to provide a science of ideas, and the discourses that bear them, and to locate their place in the social process.

I would suggest that this second use of ideology articulates a semiotics (i.e., *The German Ideology* offers a semiotic account of how and why certain discourses are dominant across social classes: by their form, source of production, institutions that circulate them, etc.). This semiotic analysis understands ideology as a kind of metapragmatic discourse that *constitutes* the world it attempts to construe (for Marx, capitalist modernity with its characteristic forms of domination), if only partially and from some particular perspective. If we take this reading, notice that ideology no longer names a distorted reflection, or something to be done away with per se (as if it could be); rather, ideology becomes something that is beyond truth and falsity. It is performatively and materially efficacious, a social fact that plays a central part in generating other social facts (e.g., apologies for capital, social domination). Not an epiphenomenon, it is thus the heart of social phenomena: it is what makes the social, as lived in some time and place, possible because it illuminates experience and enlivens social action as (indexically) meaningful and forceful in some way or other.

Here, I think the account of commodity fetishism in volume 1 of *Capital* is most exemplary, even if Marx doesn’t use the term *ideology* in this context. Recall that while the commodity fetish— as a metonymization of the social relations it simultaneously effaces— cannot be taken at face value, it is not exactly false, for exchange under conditions of capitalism would itself not be possible without the reflexive, and situated, orientation of individuals *to* the event of exchange, an orientation mediated by the fetish, that is, by the semiotic reality of value. It is less that the fetish is unreal, distorted, or epiphenomenal; rather, it is all too real and all too infrastructural: it is a real social (economic) fact that emerges from and attempts to construe the very relations that it thereby also mediates and realizes; in short, the fetish and its signification— value itself— performatively constitute the grounds for commodity circulation and thus production and consumption. There is no capitalist exchange without the fetish. Less effacing the social grounds of semiosis, ideology and the fetish thus create them in and by positioning subjects oriented to a horizon of meaning and experience that is limited, in the sense that it is always open to other perspectives (e.g., Marxist perspectives).¹⁶

My point in these prefatory comments is that the problem space of ideology is, if somewhat ambivalently, *the very space of semiotics itself*; this is *both* in the classic sense of de Tracy: semiotics as a science of signs; but it is also in the sense that ideology is a centrally important *object* for semiotic analysis, not only in itself (as in modes of ideology critique) but also as the engine and heart of semiosis per se, that is, as part and parcel of everything we study. Ideology, in other words, is an intrinsic dimension of the sign. Moreover, this ambivalence is the outcome of a certain political and philosophical history that is a guide—for it is a diagram—for *how* and *why* we need some analytic notion of ideology in order to adequately account for semiosis (including for accounting for the history of the very term *ideology*).

Now, if this is the inheritance of this concept, this form of analysis and stance to semiosis, and if it is common to both our traditions, the question that I want to begin our dialogue with is how do our various traditions depart from this shared background, and how have they come back together through and around the question of ideology? That is to say, why "ideology" given this long history? What do we need this concept for? What problem or gap in the theoretical tradition in which we variously work does the notion of ideology solve for or fill?

Webb, why don't we begin with you, and then Massimo.

Webb Keane (WK): First of all, I want to thank Massimo for making all this possible and for letting me read his extraordinary magnum opus [*Semiotic Ideologies: Patterns of Meaning-Making in Language and Society*]. I also want to thank Costas for this incredibly insightful framing of the problematic we're engaged in here. It's a real pleasure to be here.

What I want to start with is simply this basic observation: that as we, at least in linguistic anthropology, think about the concept of ideology, it's never false consciousness. Therefore it raises for us this question: in what respect does the concept of ideology take us beyond very well-worn, very familiar competing concepts such as *worldview*, *culture*, or *semiosphere*? In what respect or what does it help us see what these already very familiar concepts do not allow us to see?

What strikes me is that at its heart there is a fundamental metasemiotic paradox, which is that ideology is, as Costas points out, its own opposite. In some sense, it is an objectifying account of the impossibility of objectiveness. It is, as I understand it, a fundamentally antifoundational account of the situatedness of our understanding of the world that is paradoxical insofar as it reflects upon itself. What is the position from which we know that we are situated? What is the position from which we know that we are

ourselves ideological and thus our understanding of ideology is itself inescapably ideological?

So there's a fundamental paradox here. This is something that I wanted to really ask Massimo to comment on, because I think it is a crucial point and one of the distinctive features about Massimo's book on semiotic ideology: I think you're pushing back against anti-foundationalism by giving us an account of ideology that is willing to say, "I know that *you* are ideological." So I think what I want to do is, in some sense, turn the tables and ask Massimo to comment on that particular question.

But let me start by taking several steps backwards and talking about something that we're all very familiar with already, which is *indexicality*. Linguistic anthropology came at indexicality through Roman Jakobson's attempt to find a way out of structuralism's impasse around the doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign. If structuralism is grounded in the doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign, then it raises a question that, in my own view, Saussure himself never found particularly interesting, which is the relation of signs to the world in which they are being used. This is what I think is at the heart of a problem that Umberto Eco refers to when he talks about the "problem of being," that's to say, the question of what is it that signs are grounded in, or what is it that they are supposed to be about. Now here is where I think our traditions might diverge. For linguistic anthropology, semiosis is often most important not for what it *names* about the world but what it *brings into being*. This is why in some sense I want to bracket the question of being by saying that, well, if the question of being is about naming or representing what is in the world, *that* is not fundamentally what is at stake here. Rather what *is* at stake is this: what are the creative possibilities? What is the condition of the possibility of creating the social?

This is a very interesting difference. Here, I'm going to quote Massimo from his book *Semiotic Ideologies*, where he says that "the ontological ideology of the discipline has revolved around the same axiom: what appears is not what is. There is something beyond what appears, and this something is posited as the goal of a narrative quest in which what appears plays an ambiguous role. It is a hindrance, because it somehow veils what is, but it is an aid too, since being can be solely accessed through the veil of appearance."¹⁷ That is, indeed, a central problem if the question is what is the capacity of semiosis to represent what is in the world. But if we think of semiosis as coming out of the pragmatist philosophical tradition within which Peirce formulated it, then the question becomes slightly different. I think here we have one of the points of distinction. Pragmatism, at least as developed by semiotic anthropology, is interested in the sign's capacity to mediate social existence and to be the medium of human social interactions and of interactions with the world beyond the human. This is why I have argued that we should link it [semiotic ideology] to what I've called a *representational economy*.¹⁸

By this, I mean the way that causal relations that are themselves not motivated by signification can have effects on the affordances for possible signs and their abductions. There's actually a great moment in *Semiotic Ideologies* where Massimo talks about the development of recording technology and things like the telephone, and what that meant for the voice, once it is no longer directly attached to the body. This is, I think, a really good example of what I mean by representational economy. The development of recording technologies and telephonic technologies, various forms of recording and transmitting the voice independently of the body, are themselves not grounded in meaningfulness. These are, in some sense, blind transformations of the world. They're not first and foremost logical or signifying. They are reconstructions of the capacities of the affordances available to us for meaning-making within the world that then become affordances for the transformation of the meanings available in the world.

The example that is closer to my heart as a former artist is what happened to painting after photography. After the advent of photography, painting could no longer simply be a representation of visual appearances, because in some sense that role was now taken up by a new technology, and thus painting had to find some other purpose. This was not because of some internal development within the history of painting but rather because of the transformation of the representational economy within which painting existed. I think we're going to see the same thing with writing with the advent of artificial intelligence.

So, the key here is the concept of *abduction*. This brings us to another point of difference that I think is worth probing. At some point, you [Massimo] say that abduction is "romantic intuitionism"; and in that respect, I think I completely agree if we think of abduction as primarily a hermeneutic method of the scholar. But the way that we use it in linguistic anthropology is that we're thinking of abduction first and foremost as the means by which people come to understand one another in the course of everyday life. That is to say, it is the *object* of our scrutiny rather than our *method*.

I think the different ways Massimo and I use the idea are consistent with each other, but I displace the concept [of abduction] from referring to how the analyst works to what it is to be a social being. Social beings are in the flow of semiosis, making what Peirce calls "abductions"; they are constantly drawing inferences from the signs around them that are always best guesses, as it were, and subject to further revision. They're defeasible. And so the key here, and this leads us back to the question of semiotic ideology, is that people's abductions of those signs around them are themselves the source of the ideological reflection. Abductions are predicated on ideological reflection on the question of what is the source of the sign, and therefore what does it index?

One of the less discussed triads in Peirce's semiotics is that of *rheme*, *dicent*, and *argument*. Now, what's interesting about *rheme*, *dicent*, and *argument* is that these are basically modes of semiotic ideology. By this I mean, these categories refer not to what the analyst claims is the case; rather, they refer to the abductions that people make in the course of their ongoing inferences about one another in the process of social existence. *Rheme* means to take a sign as being iconic; *dicent* is to take the sign as being indexical; the *argument* is to take it as being symbolic. But these abductions are always defeasible; they could turn out to be subject to revision. Now, you could say that they would be subject to revision because the analyst will tell us that this is not what they *really* are, that what you took to be indexical, for instance, is in reality only iconic. But a more anti-foundationalist account would be to say "this is not how they will turn out to have been, subject to what emerges from how they [were] articulated in the first place." This is a crucial distinction that is, in my view, truer to the pragmatist heart of semiotics. It stresses the creative dimension of semiotics rather than dwelling on the ways signs label what already exists.

Thus, abduction, again, is not primarily a hermeneutic method of the semiotician but part of the everyday business of people making sense of one another and of the world around them as they move through life. Because abduction is a best guess subject to further revision, it is necessarily situated in time and in social space and in social process. And thus this process of ongoing revision—including the revision of, let's say, the *dicent*, of it turning out not to be what I at first took to be, say, an index, but rather as better understood as iconic or symbolic—is part of the fundamentally *dialogic* nature of social life. (And here I might refer to some writers that we don't always refer to in the context of semiotic ideology, such as Vygotsky, Vološinov, and Bakhtin.) One reason that I want to stress this is because it is attractive to what I think is very characteristic of anthropology and perhaps is not as sympathetically received outside of anthropology, which is a certain kind of ontological modesty. That is to say, anthropologists tend to be very hesitant to stake a claim on the ultimate truth of our account of the world, amidst others. At the very least, our practice has to bracket the ontological premises on which it operates in order to remain open to those others we want to understand. Hence the role of semiotic ideology, which is essentially a mode of rendering coherent the abductions that mediate the flow of everyday life.

Now the concepts of *rheme*, *dicent*, and *argument* raise the question of whether there is, in fact, an objective account of a sign independent of how it is taken by someone in a particular situation. This at the heart of the concept of semiotic ideology. Now, there are two ways we might respond to this: ideology is a kind of false consciousness, or ideology is a constitutive element of semiosis. If the former, then we could see semiotic analysis as a corrective, showing what people had gotten wrong and setting them straight.

But does this itself not constitute a semiotic ideology of semiotics? Does semiotics turn out to be a kind of objectivism? And if it's a kind of objectivism, is it then claiming to be capable of standing outside of the ongoing processes of semiosis and outside of ideology? And if so, where is it standing? I know this is a question that Massimo wrestles with in his book. It's a question that, I think, in some sense we should all be wrestling with.

But if it is not an objectivism, that is to say, if there is not an objective account of the sign independent of how it's taken by particular people in particular situations, then ideology is a general *non-pejorative* concept. It would be the second of the two versions or dimensions of ideology that Costas mentioned in Marx's account. If it is not the first [false consciousness] but the second, a non-pejorative concept that applies to the *general* condition of signification as *necessarily* limited, perspectival, situated, taking place in time and in social space; *if* that is the case, and it seems to me that it *is* the case, then how do we understand the nature of semiotic analysis? At that point we have to understand it as *itself being situated*, and therefore necessarily ideological, and we have to, in some sense perhaps, in some existential turn, just accept that as the very condition of human understanding: to know without claiming a timeless epistemic authority that supersedes all others.

So, one answer to that, then, is to say it [semiotic analysis] is a perspective, not that is grounded in truth or objectivity or the way the world is, but is grounded in having selected this perspective, not as a god's eye view transcendent of perspective, but as a perspective that is useful for our particular purposes. And that brings us back to the pragmatics, the pragmatist foundation of semiotics, which is to say, it is situated in a world of endeavors, of projects and purposes, and thus can never be treated independently of those purposes. And it's those purposes that I think we have to always keep in mind. We're doing it not in search of some ultimate metaphysical truth, but in order to make sense of our condition, under certain circumstances, under particular historical and political conditions, and for certain purposes. That, I think, would be a truly pragmatist understanding of semiotic ideology.

CVN: Massimo, please feel free to reply to Webb's points, but also to this question, why ideology for you and especially at this point in your career?

Massimo Leone (ML): First of all, I would like to thank you very much for this wonderful opportunity and Costas for the idea for this meeting. I'm very humbled by the position that I hold at this moment, not only because I am between *the* anthropologists of our time, or at least in my reception of linguistic anthropology, but also because in the audience we have some very distinguished semioticians and scholars who would certainly be able to

articulate an answer in a very elegant and in-depth way, much more than I would ever be able to do.

Let me start with an anecdote. My latest book, and I am very honored to have such distinguished readers, is called *Semiotic Ideologies*. For the last twenty years I've had a special relation with China and Chinese academia, working a lot in Chinese universities and especially in Shanghai University. And my Chinese colleagues have been generous enough to translate most of my past books, in particular Sichuan University Press, which is a very important press for semiotics in China. And recently they told me, well, we are not going to translate your last book. Or at least, we are not going to translate your last book with this title.

And so, I wondered, what is the problem with the title? You know, it wasn't my project to be translated in China with this particular book. So, in writing it and in choosing the title, I didn't specifically have a Chinese readership in mind. But briefly, the answer a colleague and friend gave me was that the problem is the plural. [That is, in China, there is only *one* ideology, not a plurality of them.] And I think that was, on the one hand, an accident, a diplomatic accident in the relation with the Chinese Academy. At the same time, it was a revelation. And it was also an episode that convinced me of the necessity to stay with the notion of semiotic ideologies, because somehow this episode had revealed the semiotic ideology of my [thinking about] semiotic ideologies, meaning that I hadn't considered that the plurality that was so spontaneously put into my title could have been very difficult to digest for another cultural, and of course also political, system. And so this is an anecdote to answer Costas's question in a very broad and initial way.

To me, *semiotic ideologies* is a space of tension. So, using this word, referring to this concept, and referring to the conceptual history you, Costas, have so brilliantly described, and that Simona Stano has also described in the preface of the special issue of *Lexia* about this topic, is to try to inhabit a space of tension, which is also a space of trouble. And, on the one hand, one could say, well, we are never going to get rid of the combative, pejorative, polemical, the contrastive, conflictive undertone of the word *ideology*. And, on the other hand, it is exactly the impossibility of stripping the technical, anthropology concept of ideology of these connotations that makes it to my mind such a useful- I wouldn't say useful, such a, let's say, interesting conceptual space to inhabit. And this was revealed to me by this anecdote.

So, how to describe this tension? Well, I'm going to try to at least sketch it myself, referring to the last book of Webb Keane, *Animals, Robots, Gods: Explorations in the Moral Imagination*,¹⁹ which is a wonderful book. I think it's a must read and a must translate as well and it should be translated and read as much as possible. It's really a

marvelous book. And it ends with a very compelling and poetic sentence, it's last four words. And I think I can reveal the last four words.

WK: Plot spoiler!

ML: Well, I'll reveal it, but, everybody, promise not to reveal it to other people! The last four words: "You are not alone." And this comes after an extremely elegant and extremely anthropologically dense discussion on the construction of the moral persona through an act of, essentially, dialogical addressing that constructs both the possibility of the moral position of the other and our own moral possibility. And, of course, as a scholar of the face, I immediately recognized Levinas and his philosophical roots, Rosenzweig and Martin Buber; and, of course, I recognize Bakhtin as well.

At the same time, [continental] semiotics would probably add to this last sentence, "you are not alone," a different sentence that would come out from a different configuration. In semiotics, we call it *enunciation*. The sentence could be, "*it* is not alone," somehow introducing the possibility that this moral dimension is spelled out not only in the relation with a *you*, which reflects the position of an I, but somehow from a third-person enunciation that recognizes this morality from a, I wouldn't say totally disembodied, but as *if* it was a disembodied point of view. And I'm hinting at this possibility because I think the tension I was mentioning before is the tension between this embeddedness of the dialogical *I-you*, in a mirror-like way, and a dimension that, nevertheless, we (whatever "we" might mean) experience in language, the possibility to somehow elevate, or at least distance, ourselves from this dialogical interaction and to take the position of the *he*, *she*, but also *it*. And this *it* is where semiotics lays: somehow the possibility to be surveying.

Now this position of the *it* has been inhabited by semiotics in different ways, and probably the dialogue with anthropology should tell us that it cannot be inhabited without constantly moving in a back-and-forth between dialogue and the third person, between being enmeshed, bodily, sensually, emotionally, empathically enmeshed in an ontology, and at the same time extracting a point of view that somehow simulates an externality to it. And the tension that manifests itself in the field of semiotic ideologies is the tension between these two polarities.

But it's a tension that is at the same time a musical tension. It is a tension that produces sound. It somehow tries to reflect the human condition. Maybe sometimes we have to choose between these two polarities, but it is substantially impossible to avoid either of them, and particularly in the field that I've tried to investigate, and of course that Webb has investigated with many more successful results than I have: the field of religion. And in this tension, how to characterize the specific situationality of semiotics?

Well, there were many references in Costas's beautiful reconstruction of the concept of ideology about how semiotic or linguistic ideology has an answer to how some discourse came to be so; at the same time, a certain semiotics (because of course there are also different branches [of semiotics]), in particular a structuralist and post-structuralist semiotics, has tried to accompany this question—that in the 20th century was represented by a specific methodology, which was the genealogical methodology, which had a champion in Foucault—with another, I wouldn't say opposite, but complementary, question, which is the *generative* question. So not asking how did this discourse come to this role—so from where or from what—but emphasizing the question *from how*, if you can use these two words together like this in English. So, giving an account of the conditions of possibility of the coming about of discourse, without stressing necessarily genealogy but stressing rather the logical possibilities of its outcome.

Now this [generative view] is also a position that cannot be exclusively inhabited, especially when we take into account the concept of semiotic ideology that we find especially in semiotic anthropology. We need both. I would say that reading this wonderful book by Webb, *Animals, Robots, and Gods*, my instinct was to somehow absorb all its flesh. And at the same time, I had the thought of cartilage coming into my mind. And maybe this is also one way of picturing the relation between semiotic ideologies in [linguistic] anthropology and in [continental] semiotics: as flesh and cartilage. They cannot really be separated, but even diagrammatically they each work in a different way from each other. So, this is just tentative way to start answering this very complex question.

CVN: A number of interesting things have come up in both of these answers, and maybe I can just pose a follow-up, which is where to place ideology in a scheme of terms? Webb, this is one way you started, saying, you know, if you start with the problem of the everyday, the question of indexicality, and the ethnomethods of making sense of the world, we are led to the problem of ideology. One question I want to push you, Massimo, on a little bit, is where would you situate ideology vis-à-vis other key terms in your work? So, for example, one question, which you began to answer, would be how is a term like *ideology* useful in reposing certain questions in enunciation [theory]? And I'd note that in much work in enunciation—here, I am particularly thinking of Claudio Paolucci's recent book²⁰—the word *ideology* is not really used. But there are other ways to answer that question, thinking about different kinds of semiotics. So, for example, another question would be, where does ideology fit within a Lotmanian understanding of the semiosphere, which is a term that you really engage with quite a lot in your recent book. So, let me pose that to you and ask for your preliminary thoughts about what do we get out of adding the term *semiotic ideology* to the already very complex theoretical register of continental semiotics (enunciation, semiosphere, etc.)?

ML: Well, I started with an anecdote, but I must say also that in using a concept like semiotic ideology, there are always multiple factors that play a role. One factor is contingent. It's coming across Michael Silverstein's and then Webb Keane's bibliography, and then becoming convinced that there is a heuristic potential there, that you cannot actually go on with your own work and research without absorbing that network of concepts and ideas, which of course you absorb always partially because you have your own background. And so, there is a contingency, but there's also a necessity somehow. And this is also linked to, perhaps, the personality of the scholar.

In my case, semiotic ideology has always been not only a space of tension, as I said before, but a sort of a trampoline of *self-reflexivity*. So, it was like a matryoshka that you could superpose; and [it was a concept that] would go well beyond the technical range of meta concepts that we [already] have, like meta-language, for instance, or meta-discourse. So semiotic ideology was a way to inhabit this space of tension in order to be constantly reminded of this possibility of self-reflexivity, not as a technical gesture but as an *existential* condition. And I think this cannot be, at least in my case, as far as I'm concerned, it cannot be downplayed. So for me it's a space of tension which comes with a provocation; and as you pointed out, Costas, in an earlier conversation, it probably was also a provocation in Michael Silverstein's work when he started to use [the concept of language] ideology.

But it's also something that is a sort of a tinnitus, that sound that you always have ringing in your ear; it's a tinnitus, a sound that is always there to remind you that somehow there is always the possibility of a more enhanced self-reflexivity, and that while you have to stop somehow for the sake of analysis, coherence, or giving a somehow partial account of what you're doing with your research, there is always the possibility of this [further] superposition. And so I would say that enunciation can be the object of a reflection inspired by the concept of semiotic ideology. And this is also what Maria Giulia Dondero and Claudio Paolucci do in their analysis, even if they don't use the concept of semiotic ideology. I think the idea is there, that enunciational potentialities can be loaded with very complex historical, sociocultural connotations. What is not there sometimes [in that work], and this is something where semiotics has to yield to a kind of semiotically inspired moral philosophy, is the idea that the idea of enunciation itself is the object of an ideological choice.

So, in Greimas, this is, I think quite evident. It is the old idea of actuality and actualization as coming out from potentiality. So potentiality is a concept which is extremely ingrained in Greek philosophy and is fundamental to the definition of *dunamis* (δύναμις), for instance. So historically we can retrace this genealogy, but synchronically we could think also of an alternative, a semiotic ideology in which potentiality is not thought in this way,

where, for instance, actuality is actuality because it *is* and not because somehow it negates a being that does not come to be. You know what I mean?

CVN: I want to put a version of this question to you, Webb, but moving us toward reflecting on the relationship between the concept of ideology and the question of method. And one of the terms-, as you know Webb, as anthropologists we are often positioned as the people who study culture, and yet ideology is the term that emerges in linguistic anthropology at a moment where there was extreme pressure on the culture concept and where American anthropology abandoned in many ways the term *culture*. So, one question would be why ideology and not what we used to call culture? I'm specifically curious about how you might think about this with respect to the question of method. Because, of course, across this whole history of the politics around culture and representation, ethnography has remained as a central part of the anthropological project. So, the two questions I'd love to hear you reflect on a bit are the relationship of ideology and culture, and also where ideology fits within the methodological sensibility of the anthropologist.

ML: You have five minutes (laughing)!

WK: Thanks for such an easy question (laughing)! Maybe I can start by talking a little bit about the problem of culture, because I was thinking about this when I was reading Massimo's book and his use of the concept of semiosphere from Lotman. One of the questions that kept animating my reading of the book was how much the concept of semiosphere is like the concept of culture. What was especially striking to me about the notion of semiosphere is that it has a center and it has boundaries, and that it has this fractal character to it so that you find the same forms repeating themselves at different levels and at different scales.

And this is very close to the classic American anthropological concept of culture. So what happened to that concept? One thing that happened is the recognition of the contested and conflicted nature of what seemed in the original formulation to be coherent cultural systems. I think, in America, for a variety of reasons, many of which are historically contingent, not necessarily internal to the conceptual history of the word, the contested, conflicted, and internally differentiated nature of social worlds became so prominent in our understanding that it became increasingly difficult to talk about culture as something that had a center, that was coherent, and that was bounded. Now, linked to this in linguistic approaches is the recognition of the historical role of standardization in our understanding of languages. For how anthropologists understood culture, in the sense of countable units (like "the Balinese culture," "the French culture")—as opposed to a general category ("culture" as opposed to "nature")—was closely tied to common ways of thinking of

languages, not as a general human capacity but as distinct idioms (such as “Balinese” or “French”).

The idea that there just *is* such a thing as “French” or “English” or “German,” which is foundational to Saussurean structuralism, has really been challenged by our understanding of the rise of the nation-state and the mechanisms of language standardization that created—through enormous political pressure and institutional forces that were ideological (in the old fashioned sense of the term) operations—the *illusion* that there is a center, that there is a boundary around that center, and that therefore there is a coherent system. In short, we have “one” language called “French” because of the unended effort by schools, academies, dictionaries, newspapers and so forth, to instill a particular variant as the standard, to purify it and to patrol its borders. That effort is unending because actually existing speakers are an irresistible creative and disruptive force against, beside, or beneath that standard. National, ethnic, and other “cultures” are equally unruly.

And so, in response to this decomposition of the idea of culture as a coherent, systematic set of patterns, anthropologists have tended to focus increasingly on the kinds of processes that give rise to the *appearance* of coherence rather than the coherence itself, looking not at the product but at the *processes* that go into that product. For my little corner of this very unwieldy and internally conflicted field of anthropology, this means focusing on the processual, the interactive, the dialogic character of social life. Methodologically, that has tended to bring us, first of all, to narrow our scope, rather than talking about entire cultures, to focus on scenes of interactivity. I could point to Costas’s own work, for example, in his first book where he has this analysis, not of all of Tamil culture, but rather of the interaction between men at a certain stage of life and the figure of the movie star.²¹ So you might say, well, that seems very small. But it is out of those kinds of engagements or interactions in all of their *materiality*—that’s to say, in Costas’s ethnography, things like mustaches and the figure on the screen and audiences seated together in rooms facing screens—that we begin to see how the appearance of there being such a thing as say, a Tamil male subject, comes into being. Focusing on processes rather than the result of those processes is to stress the emergent quality of cultural phenomena. And, again, I think methodologically what it means is to pay very close attention to the material conditions and material processes by which semiotic form comes about and comes into play.

Now, let me shift a little and respond to something that Massimo said a moment ago that really resonated with me. But, first of all, I want to say that I’ve got my own anecdote. My new book, *Animals, Robots, Gods*, has just been translated into Chinese. The publisher did have one problem, though, which is they would not translate the word *shaman*,

because in China there's no such thing as shamanism, [because] officially that's "superstition." So they had to get my permission *not* to translate the word *shaman* and to find some euphemism for it. Translation is a wonderful thing, it is so extremely revealing! I don't know what the euphemism was, since I don't speak Chinese, but I told them, find something that sounds like "spiritual advisor" or some ridiculous thing like that.

ML: Life coach!

WK: Life coach! Oh, that would've been a very good one actually.

Okay, so I want to get back to this question of the "it," because this is very close to my heart. In my previous book, *Ethical Life*,²² I made the argument that you have essentially a conflict within moral philosophy between a phenomenological position and a Kantian model that appeals to a transcendental viewpoint. You find this [transcendentalism] in John Rawls's theory of justice as well but also in Utilitarianism. The idea is that a properly moral position is one that would apply to you and to everyone else, regardless of who you are, whatever your social position is. It is essentially a kind of objective, moral transcendental position. And then you have a much more phenomenological position which seeks the sources of moral intuitions in a variety of ways, depending on your school of thought and your methods, whether it be in neuroscience or whether it be in the nature of interaction, and so forth. The argument that I make is that implicit in the capacity to speak language (and I think this is completely consistent with what Massimo just said) and to be able to switch between the first- and second-person pronoun, is the capacity to step outside of yourself and see things from the outside; it is the possibility of inhabiting what I call the "third person" or "God's eye point of view," to take that transcendent position.

But you cannot live there. Moreover, the third-person position, let's say the Kantian categorical imperative, may tell you what the right thing to do is, but it can't tell you *why* you should care, *why* you should find it compelling, *why* you should find it to be an imperative to which you'll respond. And that requires an account of the first and second person. So, essentially, my answer to this conflict between these two positions or approaches is to say that we have to understand they have a fundamentally dialogic or dialectical relationship: between our situatedness and embeddedness in the here-and-now in the world, and our capacity to step outside of that. At the end of the day, though, you can't inhabit either of these positions totally; you are constantly in motion between them and thus putting them into dialogue with one another. We are embedded in the here-and-now but also quite able to step out of the action and view things from a distance. So, I completely agree with what you said – I guess that was a very long-winded way to say, "Yes"! (laughing)

CVN: Massimo, can I ask you to also reflect on this question of method? What difference does it make to use the word *ideology* as a theoretical term for us *methodologically*? So thinking of the pragmatic maxim: that the meaning of “ideology” for us should be whatever the *would be*-s would be for the project that we set ourselves to; in Webb’s case, as a social scientist, in your case, as a humanist and a semiotician, right? And so the question is what is the methodological implication of using [the notion of] ideology versus something else? And you started to give that answer with this idea of self-reflexivity. (**ML:** Yeah.) But I wonder if there’s more to be said there, given that semiotics has used many methodologies, but at least one of them has also been to take a hermeneutic, textual orientation as opposed to, or in addition to, the kind of methods that Webb was alluding to, of the anthropologist trying to immerse themselves in the everyday, in the “text” of a world rather than the text of a canonical cultural tradition.

ML: Yeah, thank you. It’s something that I would like to answer briefly because then we should give space also to our distinguished audience [for questions and comments]. Again, making reference to *Animals, Robots, Gods*, I was struck by and very enchanted by the very frequent references to what I would call, I don’t know if this word exists in English, “alongsideness.” So, the fact of being alongside, of walking side-by-side, and somehow this behavioral, but also topological and spatial, but at the same time, embodied figure, is very present [in my thoughts about method], you know, walking side-by-side. Because it is, indeed, something that reflects what Webb was saying. It’s not only staying side-by-side. It’s about accompanying the processuality and the process of the other while he or she, or it, is walking. So it is transforming somehow. And this is something that will always be crucial for all humanities. It is something that we must continue to absorb from anthropology. It is something we should never forget, although our methodologies might diverge, because we are scholars who from time to time sit and take notes [instead of going out into the world]; but it is a very nuanced spectrum, this continuous walking side-by-side and this, something, limping and walking. It has to take its own rhythm, also to measure the rhythm of the other. But semiotic ideology, at the same time, and going back to that notion of self-reflexivity, it is somehow a door opened to a self-alongsideness. You are creating a sort of a friendly doppelganger and you are walking beside them. This is how I see semiotic ideology.

CVN: We want to make sure that we have time to open up the discussion to the audience. We’re happy to take any questions that you may have.

Q. One really interesting question that’s unresolved in a lot of discussions around ideology is what is the social unit of ideology, the social unit which “has” or “takes” an ideology? Is it an individual, is it a group? Is it a practice, an institution?

WK: That is a great question and I think I'll take a first stab at it and just say that it [ideology] is implicit in a practice. Again, I'm going to show my own disciplinary bias here. My most thoroughgoing attempt to grapple with this question was in my book *Christian Moderns*.²³ So, if you think about what is the unit of analysis there, you might say, well, it's something like Christianity, Protestantism, or Catholicism, but it's not. It is certain kinds of practices, for example, the Eucharist, prayer, the reading of books, cultivating sincere speech, and the like, which are shaped and made sense of in light of underlying assumptions which include a distinctive semiotic ideology. You could then say, perhaps, that these [practices] go into some larger formations such as Dutch Calvinism, but that's not where you're going to find semiotic ideologies. You're going to find them by making sense of the practices and where they come into sharp view, which is when there is conflict over the nature of practices, such as the true nature of the Eucharist, the power of curses, or the dangers of money. That is where they really become visible. So, now, in some sense, this discussion perhaps raises as many questions as it answers, but that's how I would start to answer that question. That's not probably where I would end, but that's where I would start.

Q. [In taking up the question of ideology,] is semiotics not too overly rationalist or individualist in its approach to properly account for questions of meaning and community, for example, in questions of religious life and belief?

ML: I would say that the direction I would go towards is saying that there is, on the contrary, a certain grain of togetherness, and that is something you can describe also through the concept of semiotic ideology. So the rationalist, individualistic aspect that you're pointing out is there [in semiotics], but I tend to think about it in the terms of a scholar and theologian that I frequently quote when I have to deal with this issue, which is Augustine. And in Augustine you have this dialectic, but also this tension, between a very articulated understanding of the symbolical logic that founds the togetherness of the Christian community, the semiotic ideology of the Christian community, while being perfectly able to surrender to what he, himself would call love, which is an unreflexive yielding to a semiotic ideology that somehow disappears and vanishes. It's still there but it vanishes in the second movement. So, I don't see these elements in contradiction. I see them in tension. Of course, Augustine was the same person- maybe he wasn't exactly the same person when he would, for instance, dwell on the functioning of signs and being a proper semiotician and when he was a bishop animating his community, but at the same time he was the same person. And I want to believe that these elements not only are not contradictory and not only are in tension, but somehow they nourish each other.

This is probably a teleological and slightly existentially moral aspect in my reflection, that this circularity is pointing towards a more perfect love somehow, or a more perfect

ideologization. Or, as we read in Webb's book, toward a more self-reflexive empathy. You know, there is a beautiful passage in which you [Webb] point at the sometimes disruptive consequences of moral empathy. And so, somehow, it's also a way to elevate yourself in relation to those contradictions. I could give many examples, but for the moment I would like to underline this circularity that elevates between communitarian adhesion and individual self-reflexivity.

CVN: It reminds one of Peirce thinking about agapism and the role [of love] in the growth of the community that is achieved, partly, through an ethics of self-control that the individual engages in as an ethical ideology. We have a question from Maria Giulia [Dondero].

Q. [Maria Giulia Dondero (MGD)]: I thought that it would be interesting to understand ideology from the perspective of enunciative praxis, for example, with the I–you as the moment of realization and the third person as the moment of virtualization, as well as to consider the aspectualization of ideology; all this with the objective of actantially and temporally articulating the encompassing notion of ideology. How can we think these concepts, of ideology and enunciative praxis, together? I also wanted to ask what is the pole that is opposite to ideology? Because if ideology is a system of values, are there any system of values that are not ideologized, somehow vague, disorganized and not recognizable, and not guided by purposes as Webb put it?

ML: Thank you very much. During the entire conversation, I couldn't but think about my daughter, who is now twenty months old and she hasn't yet acquired the capacity of switching between pronominal roles. So she would point at herself as *tu*, so *tu* wants, because she was addressed as *tu* and so *tu* for her was *I*. And that opens also a door not only, let's say, to culturalist reflection on the modality of enunciation, I think that the reflection [on questions of enunciation and ideology] must [not only] be on the transformation of culture but also on the transformation of our linguistic abilities [over developmental time]. And I'm not an expert on that, but certainly it's an aspect to explore. And so, there is the same necessity to include a very nuanced variability also in diachronic terms and in synchronic terms. Claudio [Paolucci] has underlined, for instance, in many of his books that there is not only "it," there is *il* [in French], there is *ça*; so there are different forms of third-ness and they probably have consequences in cultural terms and in moral terms. So, this is one way to start answering the question.

CVN: As a footnote, before letting Webb address the second part of the question: you know, it was [Otto] Jespersen who coined the term *shifter* in his 1922 book, *Language*,²⁴ and he raises the question of shifters in the context of children and their difficulty in acquiring personal pronouns, and how late it actually comes to them. So it totally tracks in

terms of the developmental process you allude to, Massimo. Webb, let me direct Maria Giulia's question [to you]: if we think of ideology as a system of values, are there systems of values, or processes or organizations [that evince systems of value but] that are not driven by projects, that have all those other features of ideology but are not ideological? What is *not* ideology would be another way of putting it?

WK: It seems to me that the way we've been developing the concept of semiotic ideology is that what is not ideology is non-sense. That is to say, it is impossible to make sense of signs without some ideological guidance for how those signs are connected to the world and what actions they can carry out there. And so, to imagine a life without semiotic ideology would essentially be to imagine that either there are signs with no people – perhaps like one AI talking to another AI, just code with no connection to a world – or that there are people who are blind to signs and to signification, because signs require a mode of sense-making. And that sense-making is necessarily guided by some kinds of underlying assumptions about what they're about, how they function, what they can do. As far as the question of a project, my fundamental understanding of human life is that *humans are up to something*. They're always up to something. Whether it's merely surviving, they're still up to something. Now whether that project is necessarily teleological, whether it's necessarily coherent, no, I don't think they are necessarily coherent, but there is this basic assumption I make about the nature of agency: that to be in the world is to be in some sense an agent; and to be an agent is to have some sense that you are engaged in something, some form of purposeful activity. To repeat, to be without a semiotic ideology, I think, is essentially to be mute, to be speechless.

ML: It's a very provocative question and I completely agree, but I'll also say that maybe when it is used as an analytical framework, it is inevitable to be faced with some, let's say, semiospheric situations, we could call them, of minimal coherence. This could be reframed if you want also in Gramscian terms, those moments in which somehow a very long-lasting and influential configuration starts to disintegrate, but it's not being replaced by another one which is equally effective as a framework. For instance, if the human relation with the truth was somehow disintegrating and there wasn't a clear replacement, at least in the eyes of the analyst, it would be difficult to recognize their semiotic ideology, but it would be there, I mean prospectively. And so I agree that it's impossible not to have a semiotic ideology, but it is possible to be in a chaotic analytical situation in which minimal coherence doesn't give you enough clues to articulate what is framing meaning in a given circumstance.

WK: I completely agree with that. I'm not saying that the world is necessarily coherent, quite the contrary. I come from America! (laughing) Talk about incoherent. But to even register incoherence is still to register that against the possibility that things might be

otherwise, right? That's very different from being completely mute, completely silent, completely without any kind of significance at all. So I don't want to confuse significance with coherence. I think those are quite different. You might even say that coherence requires a lot of work.

MGD: What about coherence as recognizability?

WK: Well, we might say that to recognize is to say, "Oh yeah, that's what that is!" Which is also to say, to see it again, to say, "I've seen this before." Of course, that's not always the case. There are sometimes things that are completely unrecognizable, but then we know [that they are]. To encounter something as unrecognizable is to have in the background the failed possibility of recognition that I could have recognized it, but I don't.

Q. [Claudio Paolucci]: A question for Massimo: we might think of ideology as a kind of semantic force that prunes the contradictory [properties] of our semantic space. On this view, ideology is somehow a kind of cutting. This is Eco's conception of ideology, which is much more of a semantic conception. And if you take this up, perhaps you can resolve the different senses of ideology that have arisen between semiotics and linguistic anthropology.

ML: I agree. And my agreement is based mainly on the fact that I've always thought that your mentor, Umberto Eco, was constructing a semantics, but was also constructing a moral wisdom. And constructing a semantics was his own effective way, in accordance also to the audience he was addressing at that time, to be a moral philosopher. Of course, we don't think about Umberto Eco as a moral philosopher; but I think that deep down, in the way he described semantics, and somehow prescribed semantics as well, there was a moral wisdom, one that I completely endorse. So, for many reasons, also because maybe we [you and I] have so much background in common, I would agree [with you], but would also say that the technical dimension in Eco's reflection on ideology was already infused with a moral understanding of interpretation. There is a moral model there, you know? And there are alternative models [to Eco's]: there are conflictive models that come also probably with other possible projects, maybe not with the same level of technicality in semantics, but I don't know whether we would appreciate, for instance, a handbook of fundamentalist semantics because it's not in the register of that construction, it's not part of that, again, semiotic ideology. One of the origins of this moral wisdom, I think, was Peirce. It was inherited from Peirce through semiotics.

CVN: Let's collect a couple of comments and questions and then give our speakers a couple of minutes for final remarks.

Q. [Massimiliano Pandimiglio]: My interest is in philosophy of religion, and I am especially interested in your dialogue for the moral aspects that you mention. In particular, I was impressed by the anecdotes about China and the idea of pluralism in the word *ideologies*. So I was thinking about, as well, when you [WK] mentioned the fact that *shamanism* is not going to be translated, I was thinking about the fact that- and I'm sympathetic to your view that you don't have signs without ideology, as well as, I think, you don't have religion without ideology; so what about if religions in China can be the very source of these, I can't say liberation of, but let's say, pluralization of views, of worldviews?

Q. [Jack Sidnell]: Well, first, let me say what an incredibly simulating, intellectually generative discussion this has been from the three of you. I have a series of questions that maybe hopefully will touch on each of your contributions and hopefully point to some common, possible directions.

So, one way of hearing Costas's initial remarks is as a critique of ideology as an analytic. One way that I hear it is that what ideology does is it glosses a diverse range of metasemiotic processes, practices, and possibilities. And that analysis is always going to involve breaking those [processes, practices, and possibilities] down, breaking them apart, disaggregating them and introducing distinctions that are useful, and precisely in a way that allows us to see that these semiotic processes are event-anchored, that at some level they must be realized through *moments* of semiosis. And here, I see a connection in the repeated discussion of first person, second person, and third person. Because what are those? Those are projections from the grammar of language—basically every language that we know of has first-person, second-person, and third-person distinctions, although they're not always configured in the same way; in the language I work on, Vietnamese they're not at all grammaticalized at the same level as they are in Romance languages, and so on. So, they [first person, second person, third person] are essentially projections from the grammar of the immediate reality of the speech event. So, in some sense, it [what I hear Costas suggesting] is a move to re-anchor ideology in events of semiosis, and, in particular, events of metasemiosis.

Going in a slightly different direction, I want to come back to Webb's remarks. Webb, you made a very clear remark that without ideology we have non-sense. So, one shortcut to my question would just be to say, well, where does ideology bottom out? And if it doesn't bottom out, if it's just signs under signs, if it's just signs all the way down, then I guess I don't quite see how that can't but be an infinite regress, with the problem being that any ideology that in some sense informs us about what is a sign and what is not a sign, and what do signs do, surely must itself be conveyed by signs. So it seems to me that that necessarily leads us to a kind of infinite regress, if you want to take ideology to that

extent. An alternative would be to say that what's powerful in semiotics is that it actually bridges the gap between norms or reasons, on the one hand, and natural causes, on the other. And here I am thinking of Peirce's remarks on the "outward clash" and Peirce's remarks on reaction, that is, of sign processes that are, in some sense, understanding independent. I don't know if you have thoughts on that, Webb, as well as on Peirce's insistence on realism as opposed to any form of nominalism, and I wonder how semiotic ideology can avoid the spectre of nominalism that was so much a part of Peirce's universe and thinking.

A thought on the transition between *The German Ideology* and *Capital*, and why suddenly ideology drops out of Marx's later writings: in *The German Ideology* you have this very familiar idea of ideology as a kind of interpretive lens. The problem with Stirner and all the other Young Hegelians is that they see the world in a particular way. But with *Capital* what's happening is that the commodity is actually establishing the conditions of its own intelligibility, and so it's much more a projective force rather than a receptive [conception] of ideology.

WK: Let me just give a very quick response to Jack. I understand the problem of infinite regress. I am not worried about it, in part because infinite regress is only produced when you're looking for the bottom. And my own understanding of Peirce is that his realism is tempered by the fact that it's always just out of reach, that is to say, there is a real world, but you're not going to capture it in its entirety. So, semiosis is always a process of grabbing onto those parts which you can. And he talks about the community of inquiry, right? So what we grab onto, what we understand, is what the community of inquiry *needs* at any given moment. Those understandings are real, but they're not everything; there's always more. And as the community of inquiry changes through history, as its needs change through history, and as what it projects and creates semiotically through history, that's going to continue transforming, with results that might indeed be real, but never the whole story. And this is part of the point of the concept of affordance, which is that there's an indefinite number of possibilities available, only some of which are realized in any given moment, and they're realized relative to what you need to do at that moment. It doesn't mean that they aren't real, it's just that all the unrealized parts remain available for some possible future uptake. Affordance gives us an image of reality of which we only make selections at any given moment. And those selections, of course, are guided by projects and the ideologies that allow us to construe them and so forth. But I want to also emphasize, and this is I think where Costas's remarks about fetishism and commodities are very useful, which is that projection is also real. We're constituting new realities as well. That's not nominalism though.

CVN: I would add here a perhaps heterodox view, which is that Peirce *is*, in a certain way, a nominalist, and he is uncomfortable with the fact that he's a nominalist, and he harps on nominalism; that's a symptom, actually, of his discomfort.

WK: (laughing) He protests too much!

CVN: He protests the fact that he was too nominalistic in his youth. And there's a way in which his style of thinking incorporates nominalism, in just in the same way he's really uncomfortable by his Hegelian influence; and there is a way, I think, in which he's trying to grapple with this problem [the spectre of nominalism] later on [in his career] and render it in terms of a semiotics that could be adequate to another set of commitments that he has about realism. And the infinite series is something he's always thinking about, right? The asymptote, the problem of infinitude, and things like Zeno's paradox as a model for this kind of dialectic [of interpretation].

To the comment about *The German Ideology*: it wasn't published in Marx's lifetime, and in one of the letters that Marx wrote to one of his publishers, he says that this book is a kind of ground clearing [for his political economic work].²⁵ *The German Ideology* is a five-hundred-page book of which three-hundred pages is a screed, a total rant [about Stirner, in particular]. And it's all just to demolish them [the Young Hegelians] and get them out of the way so we can do political economy. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels give a critique of the view that domination is solely a function of ideas—it's Christianity [as a body of ideas and beliefs] for someone like Stirner—or, for some of the other Young Hegelians, the state, but without any attention to actual social relations. And so *Capital* is the theory of mediation that the young Hegelians lacked. It's interesting how ideology reappears [in *Capital*] as a theory of mediation. So I also read Marx as a semiotician.

WK: Remember, money is a hieroglyphic for Marx!

CVN: That's right.

ML: Well, every word now is stolen time from a coffee break, which it is very important.

CVN: One minute equals X quantity (of pleasure) of coffee.

ML: Exactly! [To Massimiliano Pandimiglio's question:] The anecdote with Chinese translation was really revelatory, but not so much about the specific content of this accident, let's say, but because it points at the unconscious and unreflexive easiness with which we, or I, pluralize certain nouns and certain concepts: talking about religions, talking about ideologies, talking about languages. And so it points at another matrix, which is of

the same quality of the pronominal matrix that was mentioned many times today, because one could think of different kinds of pluralities; one could think about dualities, one could think about singularities that are not singularities in the way I might conceive them in my linguistic and semiotic space. But then there is also, I think, a constructive possibility that was hinted at, you know? Which is thinking about a concept or an idea or a reality that I would not pluralize in my own semiotic *Umwelt*. I think it's a very useful exercise and it hints at the possibility, maybe it's, how do you call it in your book, Webb? Utopian enthusiasm. But I see also in this exercise the possibility to create a space of translation among different semiotic ideologies. Yesterday I was in Istanbul. I was giving a seminar on the semiotics of religion, and some members in the audience asked me, what is the equivalent in Islam of *acheiropoieta*, images not made by the hand of God? And I couldn't answer, of course, but I reminded them that a great poet, Goethe, in the *West-östlicher Divan*, after being in dialogue with Hafez, the Iranian poet, himself gave an idea of a possible translation. So, Goethe in one of his poems says, what for me is the face of Jesus in the veil of the Veronica, that is for you the holy Koran. And it is an artistic, but very deep, attempt at translation among different semiotic ideologies somehow.

CVN: Please join me in thanking Webb and Massimo.

Endnotes

1. For example, Keane (2007:22) draws a stark distinction between “semiology” and “semiotics,” Saussure and Peirce (also see Lee 1997), though he is not unique in doing so. We find contrastive comparisons abound in the writings of Jakobson, Sebeok, Benveniste (e.g., 2019[2012]), and Fontanille (e.g., 2006), among others.↵

2. Latour 1988; Keane 2007:23.↵

3. The concept of language ideology was introduced in linguistic anthropology by Michael Silverstein (1979) and flourished in the 1990s and 2000s as a key concept in the field (see Woolard 1998), where it continues as a bedrock concept (Gal and Irvine 2019) that has generated other related concepts, such as semiotic ideology, which Keane has pioneered in his work from the early 2000s (e.g., Keane 2003, 2007, 2018).↵

4. Here, I largely rely on Emmet Kennedy's (1979) and Hans Aarsleff's (1982) writings. I also direct the reader to the 2023 double issue of *Lexia* and its excellent introduction by Simona Stano (2023).↵

5. It is from Locke that Peirce took the term *semiotic*. Locke's conception of communication and language was, through various historical mediations, also an influence on Saussure's (Aarsleff 1982).↵

6. See Aarsleff 1982.↵

7. Ideology, thus, was the apex of a hierarchy of sciences of man (and thus the basis of all that fell under it), part of what Tracy called “zoology” (given that, for de Tracy, the basis of ideas is in sensations), following which came, in architectonic priority, the sciences of signs, of language, of logic (“right thinking”), of morality, and then of politics. While Bacon had Theology at the core of his sciences, de Tracy put ideology in its place; cf. Peirce’s placement of semiotic in his own architectonic of the sciences.↵

8. Kennedy 2001:23.↵

9. Napoleon I 1897[1808]:206, as translated in Kennedy 1979:359; emphasis mine. The political relation between Napoleon and the ideologues was, of course, more complex than I can discuss here; after all, it was also the ideologues who helped stabilize Napoleon’s power initially after Thermidor, the backlash against the Reign of Terror.↵

10. See Kennedy 1979:358.↵

11. See, e.g., Napoleon’s speech to the Prussians in Erfurt, 1808, recounted in de Talleyrand-Périgord 1891:445 and discussed in Kennedy 1979:359; or Napoleon’s speech to the Council of State (December 1812), recounted in Napoleon I 1868:343 and discussed in Kennedy 1979:360.↵

12. On enregisterment, see Agha 2007; Silverstein 2022.↵

13. These are precisely the questions that mark the domain (of contestation) that constitutes semiotic ideology in Keane’s sense (see, e.g., Keane 2003). ↵

14. Cited in Kennedy 1979:363–64; emphasis added.↵

15. See Marx 1976[1867]:173–74n33 on de Tracy’s account of labor and value in relationship to Ricardo’s political economy, and p. 718 where he refers to the political economist as an “ideologist” for the capitalist.↵

16. CVN: Perhaps the schematization just given articulates its own linguistic ideology, one which prioritizes the *denotational content* of what Marx has to say about “ideology” over its poetics. But it is the poetics that we need to focus on, ultimately. While *The German Ideology* offers a Marxist “science” of history (and ideation’s and ideology’s place within it), this is confined to the first hundred pages of the five-hundred plus page text; overly focusing on this section misses a key point. Indeed, as is clear from the biting hilarity of *The German Ideology*, “ideology” is nothing if not polemical and rhetorical, and nothing if not funny, I would

add. *The German Ideology* is a parodic text, for example mimicking the textual organization of Stirner's *Ego and His Own*. It is satirical, as all the epithets show (Stirner is called Saint Max, both Sancho Panza and Don Quixote, Jacques le bonhomme, and referred to as the church father and even messiah [1976(1846):117–18]). It is full of intertextual allusions (not just to Hegel and his heirs, but also to Shakespeare, for example) and rife with complex Bakhtinian voicings. It is also pathologically *ad hominem* (see, e.g., Marx and Engels 1976[1846]:449–50). One of the more interesting examples of the text's voicing structure is how Marx and Engels treat their quotations of Stirner; for example, on page 182 (but also elsewhere), Marx and Engels insist on shifting the register of the Stirner quotations to Berlin dialect, respelling standard German words with that dialect's non-standard forms. Conveying their irony, they paint Stirner as both provincial and as narcissistic, confusing world history with German history, and German history with Berlin trifles, that is, of the trifles of Hegel and his followers. Here, through Berliner spellings, Marx and Engels voice precisely the slippage and collapse that they critique, between the general and the particular, between the pseudo-universal and the insular, narcissistic interest of the individual. Moreover, they do so through a register shift which paints Stirner as a bumpkin, a fool, uneducated, a peasant (hence Jacques le bonhomme as they also call him). The point, in short, is that the poetics and humor of *The German Ideology* can't be ignored. Nor can the pragmatic aims of that poetics and humor. In fact, both have to be central to how we approach this text, and the very construct "ideology." This is particularly important because what Marx and Engels say resonates with, in fact is figured by, the poetics of their text. And this is one source of the pragmatic force of their text. To repeat: what they say, and the way they say it, is aimed to change the discourse of their time, to radically alter *how* to do social critique and social science. By formulating an epistemological argument as to the social and material basis for thought itself, Marx and Engels are trying to show how thinkers like Stirner—in emphasizing the centrality of ideas to the unfolding of history—could never grasp *actual* social processes, and in fact were doomed, at best, to partial understandings of history, and at worst, anti-revolutionary positions. Marx's critique of ideology, thus, both dismisses and explains the discourse of the Young Hegelians. It accounts for its condition of possibility as it simultaneously cuts its legs out from under it. In short, then, a reading of *The German Ideology* as a theory of distorted reflection (and thus as a naïve epistemological stance towards representation in the sciences as truth-functional) misses the larger poetic and pragmatic/political point (or rather, the pragmatic/political point of the poetics of the text). It also perhaps misses Marx's own worry that he will have missed the point, as Derrida (1994) notes; that is, *The German Ideology*'s attempt to secure a positivist Marxist science betrays an anxiety that empirical historical reality is itself spectral and always already (semiotically) mediated. Once this Stirnerian double, this specter of Marx, is exorcized through the excessive polemic of *The German Ideology*, it returns and reappears—as the commodity form itself, as capital—described through the muted, scientific poetics of *Capital*. I would add, as a final aside, that the form of Marx's argument is similar to that of Durkheim's (1912) account of religious belief and the social, as well as Silverstein (1979, 1985) account of language ideology within what he calls, in a reference to Mauss and Durkheim, "the total linguistic fact." Silverstein situates his notion of the total linguistic fact—as the mutually mediating, non-resolving dialectic of ideology, practice, and

structure—as a further elaboration of Boas’s and Whorf’s insights into the way in which secondary rationalizations (Boas 1911) of language (viz. “ideologies”) are mediated by (i.e., emergent from or suggested by) “fashions of speaking” (Whorf 1956), habitual practices of speaking that are themselves mediated by language structure, *even* as those very ideologies come to mediate linguistic practices and, thus, in turn, language structure.↵

17. See Leone 2024:348.↵

18. See, e.g., Keane 2003, 2007, 2018.↵

19. Keane 2024.↵

20. Paolucci 2021.↵

21. Nakassis 2016.↵

22. Keane 2015.↵

23. Keane 2007.↵

24. The coinage is *skiftere* (‘shifters’) from Jespersen’s 1916 Danish language text, of which Jespersen 1922 is a translation.↵

25. In a letter to a German publisher in 1846 (see Churbanov 1976:xvi), Marx is said to have written that, in Churbanov’s words, the “publication of a polemical work against the German philosophers was necessary in order to prepare readers for his point of view in the field of economical science,” that is, *Capital*.↵

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