

## **Significs, Semioethics and Places of the Gift in Communication Today\***

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**“Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory,  
and stretch themselves upon their couches,  
and eat lambs from the flock,  
and calves from the midst of the stall;  
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,  
and like David invent for  
themselves instruments of music;  
who drink wine in bowls,  
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,  
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!  
Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,  
and the revelry of those who stretch themselves shall pass away.”  
(Amos 6, 4.7)**

### **Gift Giving and Significs**

**What is significs? Significs is that discipline, or better, theoretical orientation that consists in obstinately asking the question, “What does it signify?,” “What does it mean?,” “What’s the sense?”. It is no incident that this discipline should have been invented by a woman, Victoria Lady Welby (1837-1912). Nor is it an incident that this women should never have entered the Pantheon or genealogical tree of the “Fathers” (of course!) of the science of signs and language, in spite of the influence she exerted on such scholars as Bertrand Russell, Charles S. Peirce, Charles K. Ogden, George F. Stout, John M. Baldwin, Ferdinand S. Schiller, Ferdinand Tönnies, Frederik van Eeden, and many more.**

**“What does it signify?,” “What’s the sense?”. These are questions that Welby induces one to ask in the face of any form of expression, verbal and non-verbal, any piece of human behaviour or social practice, in the face of all languages in ordinary life and in the professions, in intellectual life, in the face of scientific languages, the languages of artistic discourse, religion, politics, economy, etc. As a significian Welby focused on the relation between the signs and values that go to form languages and behavior. This led to her invitation to interrogate the sense of words, human practices, in the ultimate analysis of the worlds human beings contribute to constructing for themselves. What does a given discourse, text, behavior mean?, what’s the sense of a given social program?, what does education imply?, why**

poverty?, why exploitation?, what are the implications involved in the progress of science?, what's the use of definition?, dogmatism?, why keep the different at a distance?, what's the sense in isolating that which is different?, the disobedient with respect to dominant ideology?, what is the sense of war?, how must we respond to all this?, these are examples of the questions that signification teaches us to ask.

With a focus on the dignity of the human person, Welby promoted and theorized the development of critical consciousness and interpretive capacity from infancy. Such themes are accompanied throughout her writings by reflection on the inevitable connection of signs and values with responsibility and freedom and, therefore, with the capacity for hospitality and listening to the other alien to self. According to the logic of signification, which is in line with the logic of a new form of humanism, the humanism of otherness, to take responsibility for the other is inextricably connected with creative love for the other, care for the other, and therefore with the capacity for proposing new and better worlds with and for the other.

Proceeding with Welby beyond Welby in the world of globalization, we propose to work for the construction of worlds which are no longer founded on difference understood in terms of the logic of identity. Thus understood difference means to construct worlds on the basis of identity separations – whether these pertain to gender, ethnic group, religion, ideology, etc. Such logic inevitably involves the need to defend rights and interests connected with difference as subtended by the egocentric logic of identity and belonging, even to the point of accepting the logic of war, which, impossible to deny, characterizes the global world today.

In contrast, from the perspective of Signification or what we propose to call “Semioethics”, it is possible to work for a world that is founded on difference understood in terms of otherness and dialogism, rather than of prevarication and dominion of one difference over another. Such logic involves the capacity to stay together on the basis of intercorporeal dialogue and co-participation among differences, even when they clash. Global peace and freedom cannot be separated from the relation of global involvement with the other – without identities, barriers, or alibis – from the relation of responsibility for the other, of dialogic responsiveness towards the other. And according to this logic, to be committed to human rights means to be committed, always and without reserve, to the rights of the other.

The gift is a constant theme throughout Welby's writings both as the object of discourse when she predicates such values as love and care for the other, compassion, justice and patience as the guiding values for social practice. But even more radically, she identifies gift logic as a constitutive component in the relation among signs, in the generation of

signifying processes and practices. Otherness and excess, overflow with respect to identity logic, are recognized as determining factors in the dynamics of interpretive processes and therefore in the development of expressive systems, including verbal language. This is all one with the dynamics of the constitution of subjectivity, the development of interpersonal relations and experience of the world.

### **The Problem: The Logic of Identity and Global Communication-Production**

The expression 'global communication' refers to the capitalist, or postcapitalist, system in its current phase of development. It may be understood in at least two different senses. In fact, the term 'global' in the expression 'global communication' indicates: 1) the *extension of communication over the entire planet*; and 2) *the realistic tendency of communication to accommodate the world as it is* (see Petrilli and Ponzio 2000).

Globalization implies that communication pervades the entire productive cycle. That is to say, communication not only enters exchange relations, as in earlier phases of socio-economic development, but also relations of production and consumption.

Globalization involves interference of communication, understood as communication-production, not only in human life, but in all life over the planet. Therefore, the expression 'global communication-production' indicates the fact that the communication network with the market based on equal exchange logic have extended worldwide. But even more radically, it also refers to the fact that life in its globality, including the human, has been englobed by the communication-production system.

The capitalist system today in its global communication-production phase is characterized by the industrial revolution in automation, globalization of communication and universalization of the market. That the market has been universalized implies not only a quantitative fact of expansion, but also a fact of quality. This is represented by the translatability of anything into goods and by the production of new goods-things. Communication today does not just concern the intermediate phase in the production cycle (production, exchange, consumption). Far more radically, it has also become a constitutive modality in production and consumption processes. In other words, not only is exchange communication, but production and consumption are also communication. This means that the whole productive cycle is communication. For this very reason, it follows that the current phase in capitalist production may be characterized as the "communication-production" phase.

Communication understood as communication-production is *global* communication in the sense that it has expanded over the entire planet (of course, the planet of the privileged!), but also in the sense that it is communication of the world *as it is*, of *this* world. Communication-production relates to the world, it accomodates the world as it is, it is

appropriate to *this* world. In this socio-economic context, the capitalist or post-capitalist production system, communication and reality, communication and being coincide. Communication *is* reality. Realism in politics must keep faith to ontology, to being, and even goes as far as to accept the *extrema ratio* of war, the crudest and most brutally realistic face of being, dictated by the inexorable law of the force of things. Realistic politics (and if it is not realistic, it is not politics) is politics that fits global communication, the being of communication-production. Today, the relationship between politics and ontology is the relation of politics with the ontology of being-communication, which is global communication, that is, global communication-production.

Perseverance in communication-reproduction is *perseverance in one and the same social system*, the capitalist. Capitalist society, with its continual adjustments and transformations functional to its own maintenance, has not yet ceased to set, has not yet finished ending, in spite of the signs of its ending, in spite of its having emerged only at sunset (Hegel's noctule). Ideology that is functional to maintaining capitalism identifies *being, the being of communication-production*, with the *being-communication* of social reproduction in general. The being of communication-production identifies so closely with the being of social reproduction in general that it seems natural, indeed the only possibility for human beings, an inherent part, as it were, of human nature. In other words, once high levels have been reached in the economic, cultural, and scientific-technological spheres (according to the logic of linear development), *being-communication-production* is passed off as structural to human beings, as a necessary and unchangeable modality of existence for the human species.

World planning for the ongoing development of communication and for control over communication itself goes together with the reinforcement and reaffirmation of the being of communication-production. This approach to world planning is based on awareness of the productive character of communication and of the fact that communication and being identify in capitalist communication-production society. This socio-economic plan also knows that control over capital can only be achieved by controlling communication.

Communication-production ideology is the ideology of total control over communication. Communication-production ideology is so realistic, coherent and consistent with the being of things as they are that it would seem to be the logic of communication-production more than its ideology. Nor does communication-production ideology hesitate to flaunt the good news of the end of ideology. In relation to *global communication-production*, we propose the expression "*ideo-logic*" rather than *logic* or *ideology*. Ideology functional to

**maintaining this particular social system passes itself off, in good or bad faith, as the ideology that subtends social reproduction in general.**

**On the contrary, social reproduction must escape the established order, that of being-communication, in order to reinvent and re-organise social relations. Indeed, social reproduction must get free of social systems such as that represented by global communication-production given that the latter obstacles and endangers social reproduction itself.**

**To preserve the being of communication-production is destructive. Reproduction of the *productive cycle* itself is destructive. The reproductive cycle destroys: (a) machines that are continuously replaced with new machines – not because they are worn out but because they are no longer competitive; (b) jobs, thereby making way for automation which contributes to increasing unemployment; (c) products on the market, where new forms of consumerism are ruled by the logic of reproducing the reproductive cycle itself; (d) products that once purchased would otherwise exhaust the demand (which means that products must be designed so as to become immediately outdated and obsolete; in this way similar but new products may be continuously proposed and introduced onto the market; (e) commodities and markets unable to stand up to competition in the global communication-production system.**

**The European Commission has devoted special attention to the problem of inventiveness and innovation functional to profit, to ‘immaterial investment’ and ‘competitiveness,’ as dictated by equal exchange market logic. In the context of this logic, the ‘ideo-logic’ of capitalism, it is not surprising that the European Commission has identified ‘*innovation*’ with ‘*destruction*’ (cf. *Green Book On Innovation*, 1995). The innovative character of a product coincides with its capacity for destruction: new products must be able to destroy products that are similar and already present on the market, which would otherwise obstacle the circulation of these new products. In today’s world the capacity for innovation coincides with the capacity for destruction, therefore the criteria for evaluating innovation are adjusted to equal exchange market logic.**

**The *conatus essendi* of today’s communication-production system destroys the natural environment, the life-forms that inhabit our planet. It also destroys difference among economic systems and among cultures. Equal exchange market logic activates processes of homogenization, which eliminate difference. Global communication-production renders habits of behavior and needs identical (although the possibility of satisfying them is never identical). Even worse, communication-production society levels desires and the imaginary at a worldwide level. The *conatus essendi* of communication-production destroys traditions and**

cultural patrimonies considered a threat to the capitalist logic of development, productivity and competition, or that in the light of capitalist logic are simply useless or nonfunctional. The communication-production system destroys any forces or expressions of humanity that tend to escape the logic of capitalist production. Intelligence, inventiveness and creativity are subject to 'market reason' and as such are penalized (especially when production forces invest in 'human resources'). Today's communication-production system is also destructive because it produces underdevelopment as *the condition for development*, pushing human exploitation and misery to the point of non-survival. This is the logic behind the expanding phenomenon of *migration*, which 'developed' countries are no longer able to contain because of objective space limitations. No doubt this problem has reached greater proportions today than ever before.

To globalize the market is destructive. The global market means to globalize the status of merchandise which is applied indiscriminately to anything, including relationships, this too is destructive. In today's world, the more merchandise is illegal, the more its economic value increases and the more it is expensive – think of the traffic in drugs, human organs, children, uteruses, etc. To exploit the work of other people is destructive. The more work produces profit the less it costs: with the aid of a powerful support system as is global communication-production, developed countries are ever more turning to low cost work in underdeveloped countries ('stay where you are, we will bring work to you'). The disgrace of the communication-production world is manifest in the spreading exploitation of child labor, which is mostly heavy labor and dangerous. Much needs to be said and done about children as today's privileged victims of underdevelopment, children living in misery, sickness, and war, on the streets, in the work-force, on the market.

The destructive character of worldwide communication-production is made obvious by war, which is always a scandal. Global communication-production is also the communication-production of war. War calls for new markets for the communication-production of weapons, conventional and unconventional. War must also be acknowledged as just and necessary, as an inevitable means of defense against the growing danger of the menacing 'other': from this point of view war is used as a means of imposing respect for the rights of 'identity' and 'difference'. However, identities and differences can neither be threatened nor destroyed by the 'other'. The real menace today is a social system that encourages and promotes identity and difference while undermining them, rendering them *fictitious* and *phantasmagorical*. This is why we tend to cling to such values so passionately, so unreasonably, according to a logic that fits the logic of the communication-production of war to perfection.

The spread of 'biopower' (Foucault) with the controlled insertion of bodies into the global production-communication system is supported by the idea of the individual as a separate and self-sufficient entity. The body is conceived as an isolated biological entity that belongs to the individual. Such a conception has led to the quasi total extinction of cultural

practices and worldviews based on intercorporeity, interdependency among bodies, the exposition of bodies and opening to each other. What we are left with are mummified residues studied by folklore analysts, archeological remains preserved in ethnological museums or in the history of national literatures – the expression of a generalized situation of museumification.

Think of how the body is perceived by popular culture as discussed by Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1963 and 1965), of the various forms of ‘grotesque realism’. According to the logic of grotesque realism, the body or corporeal life in general are not conceived individualistically, that is, separately from the rest of life on Earth, indeed, from the rest of the world. However, only weak traces of the grotesque body have survived in the present age. Examples include: rites, ritual masks, masks used during popular festivities, masks used for carnival. Before individualism was asserted with the rise of the bourgeoisie, the body was presented by ‘grotesque realism’ ideology in popular culture during the Middle Ages as undefined and unbounded, as flourishing in symbiotic relations with other bodies. In the Middle Ages the body was related to other bodies in relations of transformation and renewal that transcended the limits of individual life. On the contrary, present day global communication-production reinforces the individualistic, private and static conception of the body.

As evidenced by Michel Foucault, division or separatism among the sciences is also functional to the ideological-social necessities of the ‘new canon of the individualized body’ (Mikhail Bakhtin). (On this point we must also remember the work of the Italian philosopher and semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi and his sharp analyses of the 1970s). Separatism among the sciences associated with ideological and social individualism favour control over bodies and their insertion into the reproductive cycle of the communication-production system.

### **A Way Out as Indicated by Global Semiotics and Semioethics: The Logic of Otherness**

We propose an approach to the signs of life and to the life of signs that is global and at once detotalizing. This approach is connected with the logic of otherness. It implies a high degree of availability for the other, readiness to listen to the other, a capacity for hospitality, for opening to the other both in qualitative and quantitative terms (global semiotics is omnicomprehensive). Semiotic interpretation must not prescind from the dialogic relation to the other. Dialogism and the condition of intercorporeity are fundamental conditions for an approach to semiotics that is oriented globally and at once open to the local which is not

simply to be englobed. The approach we are theorizing privileges the tendency toward detotalization and otherness rather than totalization and englobement according to the logic of identity.

As Emmanuel Levinas demonstrated, otherness obliges the totality to reorganize itself ever anew in a process related to what he calls 'infinity'. This process may also be related to the concept of 'infinite semiosis,' as understood by Charles S. Peirce. The relation to infinity is more than a cognitive issue. It involves co-implication with the other, responsibility beyond the established order, beyond convention and habit, and beyond the alibis these provide to keep a clean conscience. The relation to infinity is the relation to *absolute otherness*, that is, a relation to that which is most refractory to the totality. The relation to infinity implies a relation to the otherness of others, to the otherness of the other person. We are alluding to the other understood as the other that is alien, the extraneous other, and not the other understood as another self like one's own self, another *alter ego*, another 'I' belonging to the *same community*. The other we are theorizing is understood in the sense of strangeness, diversity, difference toward which we must not be indifferent, toward which we must tend in spite of all the efforts made by self to the contrary, in spite of guarantees offered by the identity of I, of self.

This approach to semiotics is not ideological. On the contrary, our focus is on the human being understood as a 'semiotic animal', therefore on human behavior in the light of a unique capacity specific to human beings for responsibility. The expression 'semiotic animal' indicates a responsible agent capable of producing *signs of signs*, of suspending action and of meditating and reflecting: the semiotic animal is capable of responsible awareness with respect to signs over the entire planet. From this perspective, 'global semiotics' does not imply a cognitive approach alone to semiotic processes. Global semiotics is sensitive to another dimension beyond the theoretical, that is, the ethical. Given that this dimension concerns the ends toward which we must strive we have also designated it with the terms 'teleosemiotics' or 'telosemiotics'. Now we propose the term 'semioethics'.

Semiotics and, therefore, the semiotician, must inevitably make a commitment to the 'health of semiosis'. The capacity for responsive understanding toward the entire semiotic universe must be cultivated. To do this, semiotics must be ready to improve and refine its auditory and critical functions, its capacity for listening and critique. Semioethics can provide semiotics with adequate instruments for a critique of signs and sign systems. We believe that semioethics can provide an interpretation of sign processes in transition, that is, an interpretation in terms of the dynamics of shift, rupture and flux that regulate sign processes,

in contrast to signs and sign systems fixed and crystallized into objective entities and conceived in terms of being instead of becoming.

### Places of the Gift from a Semiotic Perspective

As I stated in a paper published in the collective volume *The gift/Il dono. A feminist analysis* (*Athanos*, XV, n. 8, n.s. 2004), edited by Genevieve Vaughan, semioethics may contribute with gift theory (see Vaughan 1997) to a better understanding of today's world and of the subjects who inhabit it. Ultimately, they may contribute to radical social change according to the logic of 'social agapism' (from 'agape' = love). This is a happy expression proposed by Vaughan in a letter to me commenting my paper of 1997 'Subject, Body and Agape'.

As Vaughan says, gift giving exists '*in many places*' but is made invisible by patriarchal capitalism. In reality, gift giving is effectively the basis of communication, including communication-production in the present day phase in capitalist production. Traces of gift-giving are in fact visible on a large-scale in the capitalist system: for example, in economies of indigenous cultures, in such phenomena as women's free housework, or the remittances sent by immigrants to their families in their home countries. As Gen Vaughan also demonstrates in her book of 1997, even linguistic work, or 'immaterial work' (as we now call it) is inseparable from gift giving and, in effect, is itself gift giving, linguistic gift giving. What we also need to underline is that in the global communication-production system, linguistic work or immaterial work is now acknowledged as a fundamental 'resource', a basic 'investment' (that is, an 'immaterial investment'), indispensable to that system.

As a contribution in a semiotical key to the gift giving paradigm as conceived by Vaughan, the following may be indicated as further places of the gift and may also be considered as susceptible to development in the direction of semioethics (and signification).

*A place of the gift is creative inference* which the American semiotician Charles S. Peirce has contributed to emphasizing with his concept of *abduction*. In the language of inference and inferential processes abduction indicates innovative argument, creative reasoning. Abduction is the name of a special type of argumentation, the development or transition in reasoning from one interpretant to another which is foreseen by logic but supercedes the logic of identity. Abduction develops through argumentative procedures that may be described as eccentric, innovative, and inventive, specially in its more risky or creative expressions. In abduction, in contrast to induction and deduction, the relationship between the interpreted sign, i.e. the premise, and the interpretant sign, i.e. the conclusion, is regulated by similarity,

attraction and reciprocal autonomy. Grounded in the logic of otherness, abduction is dialogic in a substantial sense. Therefore, abduction belongs to the sphere of otherness, of substantial dialogism, creativity, it proceeds through a relationship of fortuitous attraction among signs and is dominated by similarity. As anticipated, abductive argumentative procedure is risky, which is to say that it advances mainly through arguments that are tentative and hypothetical, leaving a minimal margin to convention and mechanical necessity. Insofar as it overcomes the logic of identity and equal exchange between parts, abduction belongs to the sphere of excess, overflow, exile, *dépense*, of giving without profit, of the gift beyond exchange, of desire. It proceeds, more or less always, at the level of the 'interesting' and is articulated in the dialogic and disinterested relationship among signs. This relationship is regulated by the law of creative love. Therefore, abduction is an argumentative procedure of the *agapastic* type. Another place of gift giving that is strictly connected with creative inference, is what Victoria Welby called 'Primary sense'. Victoria Welby proposed the term 'primary sense,' or 'mother-sense,' for a capacity which is common to men and women as much as it may be sexually differentiated in our patriarchal-capitalist society. Primary sense is commonly referred to with a series of stereotyped terms including 'intuition', 'judgement', 'wisdom'. In any case, 'primary sense' is common to men and women even though it may be particularly alive in women owing to the daily practices they are called to carry out in their role, for example, of mother or wife. The allusion is to practices oriented by the logic of self-donation, giving and responsibility for the other, care for the other. Welby also underlined the women's responsibility, as the main custodian of primary sense, in the development of verbal and nonverbal language and, therefore, in the construction of the symbolic order. With the concept of 'primary sense' or 'mother-sense', Welby also signalled the need to recover the human capacity for criticism, for gift logic subtending inferential procedure (in particular abduction), otherness, and dialogism, for unprejudiced thinking, for shifts in the orientation of sense production, for prevision and anticipation, for translation (understood in the broadest sense possible of this term, that is, for translation across space and time, across the order of signs and the axiological universe with which the latter are interconnected).

Finally, *individual identity* itself may be indicated as a place of the gift. The individual may be described, as does Welby, as a dialectical, indeed dialogical, relationship between the 'Ident' and the 'Self'. The Ident is a generative center of multiple *selves* and at once a multiplicity inhabiting each one of our selves. The Ident is a dialectical and open unit with respect to the sum total of its parts, its multiple selves. With respect to the self, the Ident represents an overflow, an excess value, a gift:

In order to Be — and really to Be is to be Given — what is impotent for fertile being IS not; there *must* be overflow, there must be in some sense gift. True that in the arithmetical sense the bare unit may be added to and may multiply. But that is just because it has no content and no identity, as it has no fertility. Full identity is generative, is a Giver of its very self. (11 December 1906)

The Ident is an orientation toward the other, toward the self insofar as it is other; a continuous transcending and transferral of the limits of the subject as it is, of the *hic et nunc* of subjectivity. The self represents that which to a certain extent can be identified, measured, calculated; instead the Ident can only be approached by approximation, tentatively and hypothetically – but never captured – , and only by working through the means at our disposal, that is, our selves.

In Welby's description and similarly to Peirce, the human being is a community of parts that are distinct but not separate. Far from excluding each other, these parts, or selves, are interconnected by a dialogic relation of reciprocal dependence. In other words, they are founded in the logic of otherness and of non indifference among differences, which excludes the possibility of non differentiated confusion among the parts, of levelling the other on to self. As says Welby, to confound is to sacrifice distinction (*ibid.*). Therefore, to the extent that it represents an excess or an overflow with respect to the sum of its parts, the I or Ident is not the 'individual' but the 'unique' (Welby, 'I and self', June 1907). What Welby understood by 'unique' — which has no relation to the monadic separatism of Stirner's conception of the unique, of singularity — may be translated with the concept of 'non relative otherness', as understood by Levinas, or with his concept of 'significance', which is also theorized by Welby in the context of her own theory of meaning. In fact, she proposed a meaning triad that distinguishes between 'sense', 'meaning', and 'significance':

[...] for we may represent the Unique. That is the word which might well supersede the intolerably untrue 'individual'. It is in fact just our dividuality which constitutes the richness of our gifts. We can, but must not be, divided; we must include the divisible in the greatest of

Wholes, the organic Whole, which as risen to the level of the human, may crown each one of us as unique. ('I and Self', June 1907).

From Welby's theoretical perspective, the self is also described as a way and not as an end; and in this sense it may be considered as 'individual', that is, a way without interruptions to life and knowledge.

The ether, as science is revealing, is the unfailing way, the medium, whereon and whereby the light itself reaches us. Now 'Self,' again, is properly a Way, a Medium through which we energise and act, though alas, with our unconscious selfishness, we turn it into an End and identify Man with that. Yet, even as it is, we do not praise a man when we call him selfish. One who knows his self not as end but as means alone understands the highest form of identity. For the true Man is first and last the way through truth to life in a mentally Copernican sense, and through consciousness and tested observation, to knowledge. In such a way there must be no flaw, no slit, no gap or chasm. In this sense Man as a way is individual, that is, not divided or broken (Welby 1910a, 'Jesus or Christ?' *The Hibbert Journal* 8(2): 430-433).

According to Welby, the secret of life is the concept of life as the gift, which means also the gift for truth, knowledge and interpretation. In her own words from her early papers: 'The power of the Gift [...] was vitalising all truth, interpreting all problems, unifying all nature' (Welby 1887). The gift is described as the human capacity to perceive life in all its expressions, to experience nature, the world at large, the universe in their dialogic relations of interconnection and vital interdependency; the capacity to experience, to know and be conscious of the existent in a Copernican or heliocentric perspective, indeed, even more broadly, in a cosmic perspective. And to live and experience the relation among signs and senses in their dialogic and intercorporeal dynamism and interdependency, in their capacity for change, transformation and continuous development, in their capacity for creative interpretation, also means not only to recognize but also to enhance the human capacity for critique and radical change.

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\* Lecture delivered at the International Conference, *A Radically Different World View Is Possible. The Gift Economy Inside and Outside of Patriarchal*, Gift Economy Conference, November 12-14, 2004, Clark County Library, 1401 East Flamingo Road, Las Vegas, Nevada.