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# ON PEIRCE'S FALLIBILISM

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**RESUMO:** Neste artigo se oferece uma rápida noção das idéias básicas da semiótica de Peirce e se fazem alguns comentários sobre como ele via a participação do sujeito na semiose (significação) e da materialidade da mente e seus signos, mostrando como essas suas noções se aproximam e são relevantes para o movimento pós-estruturalista contemporâneo.

**ABSTRACT:** On this paper, general overview of Peirce's semiotic ideas is offered and some commentes are made about both his views on the role of the subject in semiosis (signification) and the materiality of the mind and its signs, which show how close and relevant they are today's post-structuralist movement.

**KEY-WORDS:** Semiotics: History  
Semiotics: Peirce  
Semiotics: Post-structuralism

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Peirce's semiotic project is, most of all, an inquiry about the way human beings struggle against doubt to attain a state of belief, a settlement of opinion (Peirce, 1955, p. 10). For him meanings are always disputable and potentially changeable. In other words, from his point of view dialectical (dalogical) thinking is an intrinsic feature of *signification*. This process of making sense (which he calls *semiosis*) is always mediated by signs, which he calls *interpretants*, intervening between two other initial signs, *representamens* and their respective *objects*. Although produced by a particular subject, the interpretive process also takes into account other people's opinions and beliefs which have been *internalized* by the subject.

Peirce said, for instance, that 'Conscience really belongs to the subconscious man, to that part of the soul which is hardly distinct in different individuals, a sort of *community-consciousness*, or public spirit, not absolutely one, and the same in different citizens, and yet not by any means independent in them' (Peirce, 1955, p.47) (my italics).

This statement, as semioticians will notice, apparently brings Peirce's *community-consciousness* close to Saussure's metaphysical notion of *langue*. But there is an important difference between them: according to Peirce, consciousness is not a separate skin or tissue '*overlying* an unconscious region of the occult nature, mind, soul, or physiological basis' (Peirce, 1955, p. 291) (my italics), but rather 'is in its ultimate nature...a sense of taking a habit, or disposition to respond to a given kind of stimulus in a given kind of way' (Peirce, 1955, p.209-291). Peirce's *consciousness*, thus, does not spring from a supposedly natural, inborn human essence, but is produced in the subject. It is the result of a repetitive process of positioning of subjects in relation to signs, but which is not purely deterministic nor unchangeable:

'Habits differ from dispositions in having been acquired as consequences of the principle...that multiple reiterated behaviour of the same kind, under similar combinations of percepts and fancies, produces a tendency - the habit - actually to behave in a similar way under similar circumstances in the future. Moreover - *here is the point* - every man exercises more or less control over himself by means of modifying his own habits...' (Peirce, 1955, p.284)

Moreover, our habits change, mostly due to acts of 'imagination', as Peirce (1955, p. 278-279) saw it.

Thus, Peirce's consciousness is not like Saussure's *langue*, for change is always potentially present in our thinking, since thinking entails semiosis, 'an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs' (Peirce, 1955, p.282). And Peirce's interpretants are always changing, according to the particular spatio-temporal situation of the interpreter.

Peirce's semiotic also stresses the materiality of the mind and its signs, something Saussure and his structuralist followers have consistently repressed through that sterile

and artificial dichotomy between form and substance which their theories presuppose. As Peirce saw it,

'...all mind is directly or indirectly connected with all matter, and acts in a more or less regular way; so that all mind more or less partakes of the nature of matter. Hence, it would be a mistake to conceive of the psychical and the physical aspects of matter as two aspects absolutely distinct. Viewing a thing from the outside, considering its relations of action and reaction with other things, it appears as *matter*. Viewing it from the inside, looking at its immediate character as feeling, it appears as *consciousness*. These two views are combined when we remember that mechanical laws are nothing but acquired habits, like all regularities of mind, including the tendency to take habits, itself; and that this action of habit is nothing but generalization, and generalization is nothing but the spreading of feelings...This hypothesis might be called materialistic...[but] it differs essentially from materialism in that, instead of supposing mind to be governed by *blind mechanical law*, it supposes the one original law to be the recognized law of mind, *the law of association*, of which the laws of matter are regarded as mere special results'. (Peirce, 1955, p.353)(my italics)

As we readily perceive, for Peirce both external, environmental signs, and internal, mental signs belong to one same material continuum, since the Peircean subject is also regarded as a sign and thus part of the environment. There is no room in his theory for idealistic and rigid, mechanistic dualisms (body vs soul, expression vs content, nature vs culture, etc) which structuralism has for so long cultivated through binary oppositions. As Peirce once prophetically envisaged: 'The old dualistic noting of mind and matter, so prominent in Cartesianism, as two different lands of substance, will hardly find defenders today'(Peirce, 1955, p.321).

Habitual, as well as unexpected associations between thoughts and signs produce interpretation, thus meaning; in consequence of which meaning cannot be regarded as produced by the action of mere static dyads or equivalences (signifier/signified) stored in a *langue* of signs, as posited by Saussure's synchronic semiology. As Peirce stressed, 'there is no exception...to the law that every thought-sign is translated or interpreted in a subsequent one, unless it be that all thought comes to an abrupt and final end in death" (Peirce, 1955, p.234).

Successive interpretants need not necessarily agree with each other - in effect, they are potentially contradictory, for the individual's own thoughts are also made up of previous, plural, sometimes contradictory, interpretants present in its community and recorded by the interpreter's memory. As Peirce saw it, personal and cultural habits could hamper the development or the settlement of new interpretants, or ideas, in the subjects's mind, as well as retard their acceptance by other people. But habits could also be changed, for 'Unless we make ourselves hermits, we shall necessarily influence

each other's opinions; so that *the problem becomes how to fix belief, not in the individual merely, but in the community*' (Peirce, 1955, p.13)(my italics). As we notice, Peirce's semiotic was also concerned with the active role of the subject in signification, with his/her potential to influence public opinion.

He recognized that the actions of a subject were under the government of personal idiosyncrasies, communal laws and cultural traditions. However, he failed to explore further the nature and the implications of such constraints for the predicating subject. Thus, the role played by relations between social classes, genders, races, nations, etc. in signification is conspicuously absent from his semiotic project, which might explain why most materialist thinkers ignore it.

But since the fading of structuralism and orthodox marxism, which started with Lacan's psychoanalytic theories, and progresses through Derrida's, Barthe's and Kristeva's semiotic writings, it has become increasingly difficult to ignore the influence that Peirce's formulations have had in the post-structuralist movement.

The ultimate objective of all our actions, according to Peirce's theory, is a heterogeneous, but *amorphous*, conservative community which resists innovation and progress and which, in the end, restricts individual actions and defines what reality *actually* is. As he puts it: 'Conservatism...is altogether out of place in science - which has on the contrary always been forwarded by radical and radicalism, in the sense of the eagerness to carry consequence to their extremes. (Peirce, 1955, p.58)

'The real...is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge. And so those two series of cognition - the real and the unreal - consist of those which, at a time sufficiently future, the community will always continue to reaffirm; and of those which, under the same conditions, will over after be denied.' (Peirce, 1955, p.247-248)

As we see, Peirce's semiotic stresses the provisional nature of reality, and in this passage he somehow acknowledges the fact that reality can be known only through socially and historically informed signs.

As Silvermann (1983) observes, in respect to the above quotation: '[according to Peirce] the means for determining the truth of a representation lie beyond the reach of the individual...ultimately this cognitive process is diachronic - i.e. it unfolds over an extended period of time - and collective' (Silverman, 1983, p.17).

However, Peirce's subject, the *individual*, always has the possibility of transforming that reality, by his/her own actions, something which is out of question in Saussure's semiology.

But there is a problem with Peirce's formulation of 'community' - his naive reliance upon 'natural', empirically observable aggregates of unique freewilling

individuals forming communities is bling to the clashes of contratdictory positions, values, and desires which frequently occurs between subjects *in* communication as well as in the mind *of* the split subject *of* signification - clashes which cannot be solved by the individual alone, for only dialogue *and* collective action can bring about structural changes.

Peirce does not see signs *in-forming* the networked, open, dynamic and contradictory social system which defines the limits and alternative possibilities of *signific-action* of the subject, since he is pretty much an individualist. His project therefore does not recognize the existence of the wider social structuration of contradictory interests and conflicting relations of power which necessarily presides over private interests and individual actions. Consequently, his semiotic project is basically committed to the understanding of *individual*, rather than *social*, transformations.

As Markovic (1984) sharply observes, in his discussion about traditional philosophical theories of meaning.

'Pragmatism and instrumentalism are committed to the existence of human practive [which is a good starting point], either in the form of linguistic behavior ('use of words') or activity in general, where pratical operations associate with a sign (operations of producing, reconstructing, measuring, etc.) allow us to identify the meaning of the sign. The implicit ontological assumptions of pragmatism-instrumentalism-operationalism are the existence of agents and an environment upon which they act. *However, these remain vague and unstructured.* For Dewey (a philosopher influenced by Peirce's ideas), the external environment is plastic and formless: all forms, structures, properties of objects are the product of action and inquiry. Equally undifferentiated is the mind. Thinking is reduced to preliminary speech, 'a succession of silently spoken words'. It follows that meaning has nothing to do with some illusory mental processes but with practical action: it is a relation between signs and behavioral operations.' (Markovic, 1984, p.xiii) (my italics)

The problem with pragmatism, continues Markovic (1984, p.36) is that it *reduces* meanings of signs to a narrow conception of practice - meanings of semiotic acts are seen as deriving from the immediate practical consequences of such acts for the life of a *particular individual*, rather than seen as deriving from a much richer *concept* of social historical practice, which recognizes social formations and material determinants pre-existing any individual act and imposing limits to signification. Subjects, discourses, and articulated signs are treated in isolation, in their immediate but narrow contexts; and their interpretation relies mostly on their effects being successfully coherent with *personal experience*. Social factors dictating the direction which interpretations take are simply ignored, for only their pratical utility and consequences for the interpreter is seen as relevant for explaining the actual behaviours of individuals.

'Experience' is a key word for empiricists and pragmatists alike. For empiricists and pragmatists do not accept *a priori*, dogmatic or metaphysical 'truths' in explaining individual thinking or actions. Rather, they emphasize factual, individual, circumstantial observations and their quantitative measurement.

Therefore, they assume the existence of a universal, *material* reality waiting to be studied; they also assume that we are capable of devising methods to study this reality *objectively*; and, finally, they believe that we are also capable of proving or disproving *objectively* the hypotheses we provisionally infer to explain such reality.

Furthermore, they also assume the possibility of intersubjectively communicating such *objective* experiences of reality (which is always believe to be same for *everybody*). Content analysis, a well-known method of investigation which tries to quantify meaning, is the typical way they approach communication and cultural studies (Fiske, 1982, p.118-142).

The problem with the adoption of such a narrow and simplistic perspective in studying signification is that there are no such things as 'objective' and 'universal' meanings in the interpretation of reality. Ignoring that, empiricists and pragmatists regard contradictions as resulting from individual mistakes or methodological failures. Their theories treat reality as if it *ought* to have a straight-forward denotative meaning, independently of one's personal history and ideological positioning, thus dismissing political factors and sociocultural determinants as irrelevant for their own analyses and interpretations.

Now, Peirce's semiotic seems to have been initially based on such traditional empirico-pragmatist assumptions, but, as one notices in his writings, very soon he recognized that 'objectivity' and 'truth' were to be always treated as provisional, and somehow socially informed concepts. That realization lead him to opt for a probabilistic (or 'fallibilistic', or 'pragmaticist', as he sometimes called it) semiotic approach to 'truth' and 'the real'.

For Peirce was already aware that the recurring philosophical dream of a coherent and 'correct' version of reality was an utopia, since he also realized that 'we live in two worlds, a world of fact and a world of fancy' (Peirce, 1955, p.87). That split makes it impossible for the subject to establish a straightforward boundary between reality and fantasy, mainly considering that 'the ego is a mere wave in the soul, a superficial and small feature, that the soul may contain *several personalities* and is as complex as the brain itself...' (Peirce, 1955, p.52)(my italics). This statement anticipates by several decades the split, heterogeneous, post-modern subject of semiotics posited by Lacan.

For Peirce, thus, even scientific 'truths' keep on changing, for they are imperfect human constructs which can only hope to approach 'the final truth'. The subject is bound to produce fallible meanings under the rule of his/her historical, personal habits, as Peirce sees it. He/she can play with them, but cannot escape from them.

Therefore, unanimous and consensual meanings could only be attained by persuasion based on logical argumentation, according to Peirce's semiotic perspective.

Thus, we could say that 'reality' is in effect a dynamic network of several social,

cultural, subjective, conflictual interdependencies, where any one thing is connected to, and affects as well as is affected by everything else. There is not one reality, but several interwoven, dynamic *representations of reality*.

Consequently, as Kristeva (1986) reminds us, in interpreting semiotic 'fallibilism' from a materialistic perspective.

"...semiotics cannot harden into a science let alone into *the science*, for it is an open form of research, a constant critique that turns back on itself and offers its own auto-critique ... [We have to realize that] Semiotic [is a] practice [which] breaks with...[the] teleological vision of a science that is subordinated to a philosophical *system*... Without becoming a system, the site of semiotics, where models and theories are developed, is a place of dispute and self-questioning, a 'circle' that remains open. Its 'end' does not rejoin its 'beginning', but, on the contrary, rejects and rocks it, opening the way to another discourse, that is, another subject and another method..." (Kristeva, 1984, p.77-78).

Pragmatism and materialism, despite their differences, have much in common, namely in their *refusal* to treat reality and subjects in either idealistic, formalistic, mechanistic, or existentialistic terms (Markovic, 1984, p.x-xiv).

Therefore, Peirce's semiotic, when interpreting the subject as not simply an individual belonging to a naively conceptualized community, but rather as a subject determined by multiple and contradictory social relations, ideas and beliefs, seems to offer valuable insights to a post-structuralist semiotic approach to any social practice. An approach which realizes that intersubjective, social communications is always dependent upon an unstable subjective practice of *signification*. From such a perspective, social communication is not only a practice responsible for producing, reproducing and transforming *realities*, but also a practice implicated in the production, reproduction and transformation of the social, gendered *subject*, since, as we already foresee, subjectivity and objectivity are necessarily interdependent and mutually implicated.

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