

PSYCHOANALYSIS, MARXISM AND SEMIOLOGY: IDENTITY, VALUE AND THE SIGN

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This article explores the overlap between value, sign and identity - concepts central to Marxism, semiology and psychoanalysis. This overlap is possibly best represented in coins, stamped with the emblems of prominent merchants, kings or nations, and functioning as signs guaranteeing value, as well as embodying a certain identity.

In his book *Course in general linguistics* (1981) (posthumously published for the first time in 1916 from reconstructed notes) De Saussure saw semiology, or the "*science that studies the life of signs within society*" (1981:16) as part of "social psychology and consequently of general psychology" (1981:16). He framed the world of signs within the social and the mental - made the semiological, the psychological and the social into three interdependent categories.

He further emphasised the centrality of the economic concept of "value" for semiology when he stated: "as in political economy we are confronted with the notion of *value*; both sciences are concerned with a *system for equating things of different orders* - labor and wages in one and a signified and signifier in the other" (1981:79). Analogies and metaphors from economics recur throughout the book. What is important is that the sign, like value, points to dissimilar things that are exchanged, and similar things that are compared: "To determine what a five-frank piece is worth one must ... know: (1) that it can be exchanged for a fixed quantity of a different thing, e.g. bread; and (2) that it can be compared with a similar value of the same system, e.g. a one-franc piece, or with coins from another system (a dollar)" (1981:115).

In the chapter "Identities, realities, values" he shows that the identity of a sign is determined not by its material substance, but by the value socially given to it within a system of differences. He illustrates this with the following examples: "... we speak of the identity of two '8:25 p.m. Geneva-to-Paris' trains that leave at twenty-four hour intervals. We feel that it is the same train each day, yet everything - the locomotive, coaches, personnel - is probably different. Or if a street is demolished,

then rebuilt, we say that it is the same street even though in a material sense, perhaps nothing of the old one remains" (De Saussure, 1981:108).

Volosinov, who was part of the Bakhtin Circle in the 1920s, explores the three domains of psychoanalysis, Marxism and semiology more methodically and comparatively in the two books *Marxism and the philosophy of language* (1986) and *Freudianism: A Marxist critique* (1976). Although Volosinov is critical of some aspects of De Saussure's semiology such as the privileging of the synchronic and the systematic aspects of language above the historical specificity of the utterance, he, like De Saussure, emphasised the coincidence of psychology and semiology. This meant that he saw semiology as central to the study of psychology and ideology: "The reality of the inner psyche is the same reality as that of the sign. Outside the material of signs there is no psyche" (Volosinov, 1986:260). And again, Volosinov (1986:10) writes that "The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs ... Everything ideological possesses semiotic value".

Volosinov's psyche does not belong to the physical realm, but refers to the ideological content of verbal behaviour (inner and outward speech) which is determined by history and the socio-economic environment. The unconscious, which always manifests itself semiotically in symptom and speech, is merely an "unofficial" and ideologically different form of consciousness to the socially acceptable and dominant forms of consciousness in a particular historical period (Volosinov, 1976:85). The difference between the conscious and the unconscious indicates the way in which the social environment sanctions, determines and controls a person's verbal behaviour. The social environment is the source of the repression which forms the basis of the unconscious. This means that according to Volosinov psychological study must begin with "the objective sociological methods that Marxism has worked out for the analysis of various ideological systems - laws, morality, science, world outlook, art, religion" (ibid:87).

In Volosinov's writing one discerns an early recognition of the importance of semiology for Marxism. This has far-reaching implications for Marxism. Semiology shifts the attention from the "material world" and the "real" to the sign, language and psychology. Marx's opposition to idealism, with the idea and by implication psychology as its starting point, would seem to make Marxism and semiology incompatible. From a semiological point of view the "material world" is merely a system of signs, a text, or a discursive formation which has to be deciphered.

De Saussure defined language (*langue*) as the transindividual, social and unconscious system which regulates individual speech. Levi-Strauss and Lacan extended De Saussure's linguistic definition of language to incorporate other transindividual structures regulating individual behaviour such as kinship systems and the oedipus complex. Language to them refers to the linguistic and non-linguistic unconscious systems underlying human behaviour. Lacan named these systems the symbolic realm. This unconscious-as-language differs slightly from Volosinov's view of the unconscious as speech or semiotic act. To Volosinov the focus is on the utterance in its historical context, while Lacan and Levi-Strauss explored and assumed trans-historical structures as language.

According to Lacan two structuring processes are at work in the formation of individual human identity. The first is the imaginary process whereby the subject,

during the pre-linguistic phase of development, identifies the self with the visual *gestalt* of its own body in the mirror (Lacan, 1982:18). The word *gestalt* points to an iconic relationship between the subject's identity and the body perceived as its own. The second process is symbolic and refers to the formation of the identity of the subject in language: when the subject recognises the name given to him/her.

Anticipating Lacan's theory, Marx (1982:143) described the process whereby the *gestalt* of other people (and therefore the social) forms the basis of self-recognition: "(Man) neither enters into the world in possession of a mirror, nor as a Fichtean philosopher who can say 'I am I', a man first sees and recognizes himself in another man. Peter only relates to himself as a man through his relation to another man, Paul, in whom he recognizes his likeness. With this, however, Paul also becomes from head to toe, in his physical form as Paul, the form of appearance of the species man for Peter.

Volosinov (1976:87) took this further by emphasising the class dimension of the recognition of the self in the other. Self-consciousness becomes class consciousness: "In becoming aware of myself, I attempt to look at myself, as it were, through the eyes of another person, another representative of my social group, my class. Thus, self-consciousness, in the final analysis, always leads us to class consciousness, the reflection and specification of which it is in all its fundamental and essential respects". Class consciousness itself, though, is historical. It emerged with the imposition of capitalism and the commodification of labour, but also depended on the advent of Marxist discourse. It had to be formulated and uttered before it could be recognised as part of the "real" world.

Class consciousness is not the only form of collective identity in the modern world. Against class identity stands the identification with the nation - or nationalism. Nationalism is enigmatic in that it attracts "supporters from a heterogeneous social basis" and attempts "to be a representation of the whole national community rather than of particular social strata" (Laqueur 1988:4). In the process of unifying diverse and oppositional class interests, nationalism depends strongly on exploiting the identification of groups with symbolic factors such as shared language, culture and history.

In nationalism the pre-eminence of the symbolic in structuring the individual's identity does not imply the recognition in others of the self as human being, but makes the self a sign of the nation and the fatherland. The self becomes an empty signifier in relation to its own physical and material meaning. Mussolini expressed this as follows: "The man of fascism is an individual who is nation and fatherland, which is a moral law, binding together individuals and the generations into a tradition and a mission, suppressing the instinct for a life enclosed within a brief round of pleasure in order to restore within duty a higher life free from the limits of time and space (in Ebenstein, 1969:625).

The word "fatherland" exemplifies the individual's childlike position in relation to the nation as a family, with the land being identified with the father as origin. This infantile helplessness of the individual in fascism forms the basis of nationalist identification processes.

Identification, or the process whereby a subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed according to the model the other provides (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1985:205), is an essential process whereby the personality of a subject is formed. Individual identity depends on identification with others outside of itself in the social domain. This means that the identity of an individual is essentially non-coincidental with itself. Individual identity does not refer primarily to a physical body which is equal to itself and "wholly coincides with its particular given nature" (Volosinov, 1986:9).

The properties of the physical body often form an important part of the symbolic realm from which a shared identity derives. The blackness of the skin, for instance, forms the basis of black consciousness. Black consciousness, like other forms of nationalism, presupposes an iconic form of identification in so far as the self identifies with others on the basis of a shared and reflected physical property.

In Marxism class consciousness determines identity. This does not point to an iconic overlap between one signifier and another, but is indexical in that it is grounded on a cause and effect continuum: economics determines the degree of class identification. The more a class is exploited the more likely it is that a class identity will emerge in opposition to that exploitation.

Whether identity is iconic in the sense that it points to assimilation of attributes of the other or whether it is indexical in so far as it refers to consciousness as a product of economic conditions, individual identity is a sign. As a sign it indicates a self (signified in language) which does not coincide with itself (physical signifier). The sign constituting self and identity makes for the inevitable falsity and literary dimension of consciousness and self-consciousness.

Marxism's specificity within this all-encompassing domain of signs is that it foregrounds the material aspects of the signs and the underlying processes which constitute them. Volosinov (1986:10) stated that "Signs also are particular material things", and "Idealism and psychologism alike overlook the fact that understanding itself can come about only within some kind of semiotic material (e.g. inner speech), that sign bears upon sign, that *consciousness itself can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs*" (1986:11). When applied to the broader theory of Marxism this means that labour-power is conceivable because of the physical form of the labourer and the machine.

The human body as a sign therefore occupies a privileged position within the realm of semiology; it is the deep structure of all signifying activities within social history. Physical reproduction and desire should therefore be central to Marxist economics. Marxism consequently defines as irrational the behaviour of those who act against the needs of their own bodies: those who are hungry and don't steal, who are exploited and don't strike (Reich, 1978:53).

In the Marxist discourse on capitalism the human body, in so far as it refers to a body of a member of the "working class", signifies all of the following:

1. Labour-power: "a productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands, etc" (Marx, 1982:134).

2. A commodity because it has value which is equal to "the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner" (Marx, 1982:274).

3. Alienation: "Alienation expresses the fact that the creations of men's hands and minds turn against their creators and come to dominate their lives" (Mandel & Novack, 1979:7), and "The causes of existing alienation are rooted in capitalism which was born and bred in the dispossession of the working masses from the means of production and the consequent alienation of wage-labour" (ibid).

4. A particular type of consciousness in contrast to the slave of earlier ages: "the slave works only under the spur of external fear but not for his existence which is guaranteed even though it does not belong to him. The free worker, however, is impelled by his wants. The consciousness (or better: the idea) of free self-determination, of liberty, makes a much better worker of the one than the other, as does the related feeling (sense) of responsibility; since he, like any seller of wares, is responsible for the goods he delivers and for the quality which he must provide, he must strive to ensure that he is not driven from the field by other sellers of the same type as himself" (Marx, 1982:1031).

5. Historical teleology: "what the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces above all, are its own gravediggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable" (Marx, 1982:930).

The body of the worker is central to the Marxist analysis of the capitalist age. The structures discerned are emplotted as a sequence which will ultimately lead to the conclusive victory of the proletariat. This emplotment indicates the semiology of narrative structure, the dream, divination and tragic-comedy.

Marx (1982:944), aware of the aesthetic qualities of his economic history, wished to present **Capital** as a "dialectically, articulated artistic whole". The use of poetic devices is therefore not alien to it. Of these devices metaphor is of central importance. It is not only present in the image of capitalism which "comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (ibid:926), but also in **Capital** as a whole which as narrative (meta-narrative - Lyotard, 1984) explores the metaphor of force functioning as form (compare Derrida, 1981:3-30). Value (which signifies the force operative in the capitalist economic system) has no fixed material form, but presents itself to the senses as a commodity. The value of the commodity which is hidden in its material form is merely a metaphor of the force exerted during the labour process: "Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects (Marx, 1982:138).

As against its value form the physical form of commodities is analogous to the pictographic script of the dream. Like Freud in his exposition of dreams, Marx (1982:167) uses the image of hieroglyphics when he writes: "Value (...) does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language".

The central place of value within Marxist deciphering of the social hieroglyphics implies a move away from the "real" and makes semiology and Marxism two systems which are not incompatible. The utility and the value form of the commodity are similar to the relationship between the signifier and signified in semiology. De Saussure (1981:108) illustrated the non-materiality of the sign in its value form with the example of the two 8.25 p.m. Geneva-to-Paris trains that leave at twenty four hour intervals and which we feel to be the same train while everything from personnel to locomotives are probably different.

The sign, the commodity and identity are non-real and non-substantial in their value form. It is force, energy, labour-power, life, libido and that which is difficult to visualise which is the hidden form of reality: "every commodity is a symbol, since, as value, it is only the material shell of the human labour expended on it" (Marx, 1982:185). Understanding and deciphering would nevertheless not have been possible if it was not for the materiality with which the hieroglyphics as signs, commodities and identities present themselves. It is this materiality which presupposes the materialist basis of both semiology, Marxism and psychoanalysis. The non-coincidence of signifier and signified, the commodity and its value, identity and the body does not cancel out the material basis of signifier, the commodity and identity.

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