Semiotics of the Book:

Books, Stories, Narratives and Sign Systems

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I. A Semiotic Approach to the Printed Book:

This is a brief essay in what could be called sociological semiotics. The central thrust of this paper is to discuss the theoretical value of combining a sociological approach associated with Max Weber and a semiotic approach identified with Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce underlines the importance of sign systems and Weber emphasizes the value of studying sociological phenomena comparatively and historically. A comparative-historical sociology (Wood and Williamson 2007) that takes semiotics into account can be heuristic for the study of books and other printed documents.

This approach resonates with the so-called "New American Cultural Sociology" that is associated with a group of writers interested in the study of "textuality" and the production and reception of various kinds of cultural products. They focus on what could be called "discourses" or "narratives". For example, Jeffrey Alexander at Yale has written on "The Computer as Sacred and Profane". [1] He is particularly concerned to contrast the "sacred" with the "profane" in terms of discourse associated with computers. But we can take a few steps back from the contemporary "information age" and look at an earlier technological innovation: the printed book. The printed book, both sacred and profane, has been important for at least five hundred years.

The printing press (Einstenstein 1979) was a very significant invention. It has led to printed books and pamphlets of all kinds. The study of print media (Danesi 2002) is vitally important. Print media can be thought of as sign systems which promote certain kinds of perceptions of reality shared by members of interpretive networks. Such networks are agents of social change (Febvre and Martin 1997). The print media have had a significant impact on many aspects of modern life,

including nationalism (Anderson 1983). The importance of print media is a very important idea. It will become increasingly easy to lose track of the importance of the printed book as we move on to various new electronic technologies like the I Pod. But the idea that printed books have had an important impact historically is not particularly new. What is new here is the attempt to link the well known idea that print media have affected societies with a deeper sociological and semiotic understanding of *why* that has been the case. While this essay is pitched at a fairly high level of abstraction it will appeal to the "sociological imagination" of those who really want to understand the book as a "sign vehicle".[2]

This paper will begin in a preliminary way to make it somewhat clearer how: (1.) the impact of the printed book has sociological importance and (2.) how print media are a part of the semiotic web. The "value added" of this paper is that a "semiotic sociological approach" (Bakker 2005) has not yet been widely discussed. The level of discourse in this paper presumes some background in sociological theory and in Peircian semiotic. This is not intended to be an analysis of "data" or historical facts. Instead, the goal is to examine two broad theoretical ideas and point out that they can be utilized together. Considering the sociological and the semiotic together is more heuristic than thinking of them separately. The key idea is quite simple: let us combine both sociological and semiotic insights. But that key idea is difficult to communicate. To fully grasp it requires a kind of Gestalt Shift. An important contribution to that shift in our way of thinking has already been made by Marshall McLuhan.

It is well understood that the Gutenberg Revolution (McLuhan 1951, 1962), like the "Copernican Revolution" (Richards 2002), is important. However, one does not have to accept McLuhan's somewhat doctrinaire aphorisms that "the medium is the message" and "the medium is the *massage*" (McLuhan 1964, 1967) to be aware that communication media have a significant impact on how a message is perceived. The reason media are significant is precisely because they alter the way in which **sign-**ification takes place (Innis 1986 [1950]). Each and every medium constitutes a slightly different kind of message.

The "sign system" is modified and so, therefore, the way any sign is received is changed as well. Media become extensions of our selves (Wiley 1994).[3] Each change in media technology tends to modify the ways in which "societies" get constructed; the printing press and the printed book cannot be fully understood if we do not grasp the whole *Gestalt* of semiotic communication before and after "Gutenberg" (Richards 2002).[4]

The classical sociological writers, like Weber (to only mention one out of dozens), did not necessarily escape a dualist epistemology. Weber's insights concerning "The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism" are brilliant and build to some extent on earlier work by Marx (Bakker 2003, 2004a). But if we combine Weber's insights with those of comparative linguists and other semioticians we can gain a much deeper understanding of what a book signifies. There is no opportunity in a brief paper to fully explore the whole range of issues to which the inter-disciplinary field of semiotics can contribute important new insights. But although we cannot here discuss "zoo-semiotics" and aspects of

Neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory, we can stick with the comparative and historical framework that we find in the overlap between aspects of Neo-Weberian theory in sociology. This paper attempts to provide an original contribution and a new way of thinking based on the general theory of signs. But rather than try to elaborate the whole epistemological basis for signs it is useful to simply focus on the printed book as a sign. (However, see section IV below.) All aspects of communication is through signs, but here the emphasis is on the book.

The heuristic value of a semiotic epistemology for Neo-Weberian comparative historical sociology has not been widely appreciated by semioticians or by sociologists. I believe that Weber's (1978) masterful sociological analyses need to be re-framed within the context of a broader awareness of semiotics. While semiotics is often regarded as being separate from sociological analysis and social context altogether, this paper assumes that there is no necessary reason why a primarily sociological analysis of print media and a more semiotic analysis of print media (Danesi 2002: 54-80) cannot be joined. Semiotics is an inter-disciplinary field and the disciplines of sociology and anthropology can be regarded as benefiting from insights from semiotics (Peirce 1931-58, Deely 1982, 1990, 2001, Sebeok 1979, Nöth 1995, Cobley 2001), although not all sociologists and anthropologists see it that way. Similarly, many semioticians view sociology as irrelevant to those aspects of semiotics they are most interested in studying.

What is the usefulness of a "semiotic sociological approach" for understanding somewhat more clearly the importance of the printed book? Is printing, not only of books but also of other texts, largely a neutral technological innovation? Or did it promote a certain *kind* of sign system? Can we take the sociological aspects of the Innis-McLuhan thesis (Innis 1986, McLuhan 1964) about the importance of media of communication and think about printed books in an even more inter-disicplinary but empirically grounded way?

As noted, Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979) has written on the printing press as an agent of social change. However, she has not always combined her wonderful historical insights with a more general sociological and semiotic approach. She emphasizes that the development of movable metal type by Johannes Gutenberg led to: (1.) standardization of content, (2.) widespread dissemination of ideas, and (3.) a "fixed product" (Basbanes 2003: 312). But the broader comparative historical sociological and semiotic implications could be made even more explicit than Eisenstein already has done. That is what I will attempt to do in a very preliminary way here.

Obviously to really do the topic justice would require a book length treatment. But the sympathetic reader can gain two important new insights not found in the enormous existing literature. It is impossible to "begin at the beginning" and also develop a sophisticated, general argument about the mixing of sociological ideas with semiotic epistemology.[5] The whole argument hinges on Peirce's notion of the "sign" (Wienphal 1949, Nöth 1995: 79-91, Peirce 1991, Hoopes 1991, Gottdiener 1985).

I believe that social scientists have ignored Peirce's epistemological emphasis on the 'sign" (icon, index, symbol) at their peril. Rather than follow Peirce's

sophisticated idea that all aspects of human communication are rooted in the use of "signs", most sociological theorists (and anthropological theorists) ignore Peirce's brilliant insight and proceed as if a Cartesian dualist epistemology of subject and object is sufficient (Heller 1989). Peirce's key idea is that the "sign" always stands mid-way between what Cartesian thinking would call the "subject" and the "object". But there is more. The idea of the Cartesian subject is then considered as something much different from simply a single author or thinker. The subject becomes a "sign" in turn (what Peirce calls the "Interpretant"). The Peirician interpretant is never the single interpreter. The interpretation, sociologically speaking, is an "interpretive network" (Bakker 2005). Words which are close to being synonyms include: "commuity of discourse", "scientific community", and "imagined community". But those phrases are not true synonyms unless the implied Cartesian epistemological model is rejected. Since phrases like "scientific community" tend to be interpreted from within a Cartesian epistemology rather than a Peircian epistemology it is useful to stick with Peirce's "Interpretant" or some technical variant (like "interpretive network") that is clearly intended to be thought of within a Peircian epistemological framework. It is very difficult to make the "Gestalt Shift" to a Peircian way of thinking about "subjects" and "objects" as "signs".

To put the kernel of the combined Peircian-semiotic and Weberian-sociological argument into a very brief compass, we can take the example of the effects of the printed Bible and printed pamphlets on the Protestant Reformation (Bakker 2003, 2004a) and on the early modern stages of the development of modern capitalism (Weber 1978, Anderson 1983). In a book on "ordinary people" in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in Europe Te Brake (1998: 20, emphasis added) states: "Especially during this period **the spread of new printing techniques**, the disintegration of the Roman Catholic church, and **the rise of mass literacy** helped to reconfigure the choices and channel the cultural resources available to all political actors within any given space." The printing press allowed for the first wave of mass production of books and pamphlets and the availability of books and other printed materials helped to promote the first stages of mass literacy. The emergence of "print media" was well under way in ths sixteenth century and "books were being written not only for religious or scientific purposes, but also more and more for public edification and diversion" (Danesi 2002: 61-62). People started to see the world in a different way. A new "imagined community" (Anderson 1983)[6] started to emerge, but not just at the level of nationalist sentiment. The "community" was a semiotic interpretive network that spread out throughout Europe and eventually encompassed most of the modern capitalist world. All kinds of sub-sets and smaller "imagined communities" or "communities of discourse" started to form. It was no longer just the aristocracy or even the prosperous *haute bourgeoisie*, but even ordinary people, who had access to information and ideas. Books became sociological "sign systems" which allowed people to see the world through different semiotic lenses. In the early sixteenth century all kinds of people had access to the Bible

and other print media for the first time. The "word of God" was suddenly no longer something that only the priests, monks and nuns could examine firsthand.

The sociological implications of the spread of all kinds of printed media are a kind of baseline for the work that Max Weber (1978) and other classical sociological theorists did (at a later time) in order to explain the rise of the "Spirit" (*Geist*) of "modern capitalism". The emergence of printed books widely available to many people helped provide an impetus for the rise of modern capitalism and the modern capitalist nation-state. Weber may not have fully comprehended the *semiotic* importance of the printed book, but he did analyse the complexity of social change in a very sophisticated way.[7] Since he did not necessarily escape from a Cartesian dualism of "subject" (e.g. ordinary people) and "object" (e.g. printed pamplets and books) we can say that to some extent his analyses are somewhat limited. So a slightly deeper discussion of some elementary aspects of semiotic theory that have not already been mentioned and that even a thinker as brilliant as Max Weber may not have fully grasped may help to deepen our understanding. (The same could be said of Marx and Durkheim.)[8]

The key is seeing the book as the physical embodiment of a sign system, a permanent, fixed record that is disseminated widely and that is standardized in a way oral communication and even hand written books could not be. That is an important extension of the significat historical work that has already been done (e.g. Eisenstein 1979, 1983). That sign system, however, is not concrete and material in the same way as other "objects" we may be curious about. In fact, a physical book is a concrete "object" (in the Cartesian sense) only when we speak of it in the singular. When we think of the impact that books can have we almost never think merely of one exemplar, one physical book. We are really talking about a relatively large number of printed copies. In the sixteenth century a sale of one thousand copies could be highly significant. Today a book that sells only one thousand copies is not likely to have much of an impact. It is the very wide dissemation of ideas through sales of hundreds of thousands of copies of books that provides the possibility of a significant semiotic impact sociologically. The sign systems that make books possible are invisible, but they are nevertheless ontologically real. Like Oxygen and Helium, they surround us everywhere. Now that books are relatively cheap and extremely abundant the importance of a semiotics of the book is all the more self-evident (Tarasti 2000). The "task of the interpreter" (Vandevelde 2005) is something that all of us are involved in whenever we pick up a book and read! While Max Weber provides the basis for a very important set of insights concerning social change in Europe (and in the world as a whole) he nevertheless is somewhat limited in his perspective to the extent to which he continues to think largely in implicit "Cartesian" ways.

II. A Printed Book as a Sign System:

One way to think of a book is to think of a tangible "object". But the physical object is only one aspect of the phenomenon being discussed here. Even more

fundamentally, a book is a system of signs (Wienpahl 1949). A book is more than just a physical thing; it contains words (signs) which reveal stories, or "narratives", as text (Mitchell 1986, Danesi 2002). When we read a book we act in part as a semiotician or hermeneut. That is true for ordinary people no less than for scholars (Basbanes 2003). The ordinary citizen may not have the same skills but she or he is still making interpretations. For example, every time we read a newspaper we make all kinds of assumptions about what we are reading. We take on the "task of the interpreter" (Vandevelde 2005). Our conceptualizations concerning the nature of Life (*Leben*) are re-experienced again with each "re-reading" of the "text." Those narratives can be fictional or non-fictional, or sometimes somewhere in between (Bandlamudi 1994). But a physical book is a tangible "super-sign" of a sign system. When I hold a book in my hand I know that this will represent a body of work with a complex set of narratives. Maybe that book will teach me something about a complex thinker like Sakuntala (Figueira 1991). Perhaps it will open my eyes to Gandhi (Bakker 1993a, 1993b). Perhaps it will range through all of the world's theologies and philosophies (Collins 1999). In any case it will be a "window" to a sign system I had not previously known very much about or, at least, still could learn more about.

Before the printed book there were, of course, other kinds of texts. But their distribution was limited and the extent to which "ordinary people" had access to ideas was therefore also limited. Many European peasants relied on rumor, gossip and hearsay. There were also oral traditions, but as myths got passed down they often involved a certain degree of exaggeration and mystification. To some extent the homily by the priest or later on the sermon by the minister helped to provide some broader insights. But those religious messages were often quite severely limited and biased. It was the rare priest or minister who really had a solid education that went beyond the accepted dogma. A book that is widely distributed can open up our eyes to other semiotic systems. When we consider the political economy of a historical era we have to consider how the wide-spread dissemination of relatively cheap books has influenced human beings.

Before the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the printed book was extremely rare and even manuscripts were quite expensive. Few had access to a complete "sign system" in one volume! Our tendency to refer to the Christian Bible as "*The* Book" is in part a result of that. The one book that some monks, priests and nuns might have access to was a collection of manuscripts commonly named after the city of Byblos, a city of pre-modern, international trade and commerce. Eventually, "grammatical man" emerges (Campbell 1982). We move toward the idea of the individual "person" (Cahill 1998). But the specific way in which we interpret anything depends on our membership in an "interpretive network". For example, interpretations of even one "book" of the Bible, like the book of Job (Creeland 1984), can vary enormously. Similarly, secular books can be interpreted in many different ways, depending on initial assumptions shared by members of an interpretive network. We expand our "horizon" as we attempt to utilize the "hermeneutic circle" to situate the particular in the whole and learn more about

the whole through the detailed parts (Gadamer 1998). The process of interpretation is part of the human condition.

Our very Being-ness (our *Dasein*) as individuals has to do with hermeneutics and semiotics. Interpretation is a big part of what it means to be human (Heidegger 1996). But before we accept every aspect of the Heidegger-Gadamer account we should remain aware that what they wrote is also "merely" a product of a set of signs, many of which can be arranged in the form of a physical book. What they wrote was "made" and it can only be as well informed as the makers (Kisiel 1993). Before we can move to a hermeneutics of Being (*Sein*) we have to be aware of the use of a hermeneutics of the everyday symbol, a textual semiotics of signs. Heidegger and Gadamer are original thinkers in many ways, but they may have exaggerated the extent to which their insights are primarily a product of their individual "geniuses." For example, many of their ideas are pre-dated by work done by Charles W. Morris (1925, 1971). Morris, of course, leans on Mead (1922) and Peirce (1966, 1998).

There can be little doubt that, to repeat, the printed book served as an important "agent of social change" in the sixteenth century (Eisenstein 1979, Febvre and Martin 1997). Printed books and pamphlets of all kinds, sacred and secular, were very important. Printed books included vernacular versions of the New Testament and eventually the whole Bible. Moreover, the printed book and other printed documents had a great deal to do with the Protestant Reformation, which in turn had some impact on the emergence of Modern Capitalism (Eisenstein 1983). There is no need to rehearse the history of the development of the printing press here since the story is well known. Useful technological histories which cover the earliest origins of the book in parchment (and before that in clay, wax, rice paper and papyrus) are available (Finkelstein 2005). The importance of movable type cannot be denied (Eisenstein 2005). But is the "narrative" of the history of the printing press merely a kind of make-believe "story"? Would another narrative account be more heuristic? If we wish to fully understand the importance of the printed book in history we need to examine the book from a sociological and semiotic perspective, seeing the generic idea of "the book" as a kind of "sign". What does the book (in the general sense) signify? What does it mean to have a collection of books? What is the cultural significance of vernacular texts? What is the long-term effect of the public library? Those kinds of questions are underlined when we approach the semiotics of the book from a Peircian-Weberian perspective.

One of the key difficulties with the standard accounts of the history of the printed book is the extent to which such narratives tend to make the concrete object the "object" of investigation. The physical book itself is regarded as "real" in an ontological sense, simply because it has a tangible existence as a material object. But what is sometimes lost from such a physical awareness of the book is the fact that every sign is empty without an interpretive community. The book has value only in so far as the members of a community or network have a sense of "what it means." So the physical object cannot be taken as the sum total of the sign; the sign is embedded in a sign system. What is the most important thing

about the Bible? Is it the author? Or is it the narrative? Would the narrative be nearly as important if it was not believed that the ultimate author is none less than God (YHWH, El) himself? The belief that a Supreme Being wrote a specific book (Bible, Tanakh, Qur'an) tends to influence the way such a book is read. Those who are part of a religious tradition will read their religious book in a way that is quite different from those who are not part of that tradition. The interpretive network determines the meaning of the signs and the sign systems, in turn, help to maintain the interpretive network. That is part of the reason we refer to the people of the book.

Perhaps a preliminary answer to that can be grasped if we consider the difference between a "story" and a "narrative". That differentiation is not always made in a consistent manner, but several authors have commented on it and have expressed the belief that a book is not just a story (or set of stories) but a kind of semiotic narrative. One does not need to invoke Peirce's semiotic theory in order to be aware of the importance of stories. But when we use the term "narrative" in a somewhat more technical manner, then the heuristic value of a combined sociological and semiotic approach becomes somewhat more apparent.

III. Stories and Narratives:

We can make a rough and ready distinction between ordinary stories and narratives. The main point of that distinction is to clarify the way in which narratives are semiotic discourses based on sign systems that are shared by interpretive networks. A semiotic system system provides an operationalized representation of reality that is accepted by "those in the know". Stories, on the other hand, sometimes have a kind of universal appeal.[9]

In order to illustrate the differentiation often made between Astories@ and Anarratives@, Dave Maines (2001: 170-71) mentions an anecdote about an exchange between T. E. Lawrence, the famous Lawrence of Arabia, and Leonard Wooley, the archaeologist. Lawrence comments to Wooley A*It is not the tale that counts so much as he who tells it*@. Wooley, after discovering the Babylonian roots to the story of the Flood in Genesis, responded: A*You were wrong! It is the tale, not he who tells it!*@ (Pellegrino 1994: 133, 135).

Human agency, Maines points out, is present not only in the telling of a story, but also – and especially -- in the social process of constructing a narrative. Some group of people wrote the story and shaped it into a narrative. Later that narrative was put together with other narratives. Ever since, scholars have attempted to decipher what it all means. Does it fit together? Or is it a disparate collection of quite diverse and sometimes even contradictory narratives? Is it one narrative or "just" many narratives, or even just many stories? The narrative is a semiotic sign system that is complex enough to require an interpretation by members of an interpretive network.

The term "tale", of course, can cover both. But if we want to make the distinction, Lawrence is emphasizing the importance of the interpretive network (i.e. who tells it, and who listens to it). Wooley believes that the tale can stand on

its own. I would definitely side with Lawrence. The idea that the Flood story in Genesis is a story common to many cultures is not sufficient basis for believing that it is a simple story that can be understood literally, at a surface level. Many so-called stories are very complex tales indeed; they take on the character is semiotic narratives or discourses. Perhaps it is even true that ultimately even the simplest possible story can only be interpreted correctly if one fully grasps the narrative and discursive elements embedded in it.

Ultimately, even providing an excuse for being late or justifying the choice of spinach versus broccoli requires a kind of discourse. The fundamental Peircian insight is that signs are all pervasive. Prior to telling or writing a story, and long before examining a text as a narrative, we have to pay attention to the concept of a sign. In a sense it is never either/or and always both/and. The tale (Aaccount@) is very important. But, without the story teller (the novelist, the sociologist, the physicist) and the audience there is no narrative. The narrative is the product of the shaping of a mere "tale" or story into something more: a culturally shared sign system. The building block for all of that is the sign. Analytically, we begin with signs as the atomic units and then build up to simple stories and more complex narratives and discourses.

Similarly, there cannot be any symbolic interaction among human beings without signs in the form of significant symbols. Symbols gain their significance not merely on the basis of what individual story tellers make of them, but also on the basis of how those symbols are usually seen and interpreted in a broader narrative of events and meaning. When the eight year old child tells a story about her day at school it quickly turns into a kind of discourse.

Narratives are complex **sign systems**. Such sign systems exist not only in literary texts by long dead authors. Such literary texts cannot be directly related to a specific, pragmatic action (Shut the door!).

Sign systems exist as stories, but also in sociologically-based *narratives*. That is, at least from the standpoint of the hermeneutics and semiotics of texts, the concept of a text can be extended far beyond literary narrative sociology to a more general sociology that is deeply concerned with Athe dialectics of structure and process. Such a sociological semiotics Arefuses to separate human group life into reified micro- and macrospheres (Maines 2001: 171). At the heart of a narrative is a set of stories and at the heart of the story is the sign. Much more elementary than either story or narrative, text or conversation, academic paper or newspaper cartoon, is the sign.

We often primarily conceptualize signs in terms of texts and that we often think of texts as books. As mentioned above, a Neo-Weberian Comparative-Historical Sociology (CHS) of print media can help us to reconceptualize books as "texts" which are composed of complex narratives, or systems of signs. While CHS is often associated with Neo-Marxian and/or Neo-Weberian insights, it is nevertheless the case that neither Marx (1971) nor Weber (1976) explicitly discusses the textual semiotics or hermeneutics of texts at any length. There are scattered comments but they offer no sustained analysis. That may be due in part to the fact that neither Marx nor Weber had first hand acquaintance with the work

of Charles Sanders Peirce. Marx died before Peirce wrote most of his work and Weber moved in different intellectual circles. When we analyse the history of the printed book from the CHS perspective we can supplement the sociological imagination with the inter-disciplinary approach known as **text semiotics**. In turn, text semiotics is closely associated with hermeneutics. Both have implications for epistemology. The semiotic and hermeneutic approach can help provide a rationale for true inter-disciplinary work. That is especially the case if we forego the more extreme versions of the ontological hermeneutics of Heidegger (1996), a point alluded to above. Sign systems are complex narratives or discourses.

A narrative, in turn, can be said to constitute a "frame" (Goffman 1974). We tend to frame an argument or provide the framework for a worldview (*Weltanschauung*). But rather than pursue that point in a purely abstract manner, it may be useful to return to the topic of the printed book. The book is a kind of symbol of the importance of narratives.

IV. Text Semiotics, Sociology, Signs and Books:

A textual semiotic approach that deals with the printed book allows us to see that it is not just a matter of "the forces of production" (i.e. the printing press, the ink, the paper, the labour) but also a question of "the relations of production". As indicated¸ the physical book (i.e. the words on paper) means nothing in and of itself. Words on paper only capture meaning when interpreted as stories and, ultimately, semiotic narratives. The readers of early Bibles and pamphlets (sacred and secular) were able to attach a semiotic meaning to the signs used. We might not interpret John Locke or the Bible in the same way today, but the precise meanings attached to words and phrases tended to be the source of a great deal of conflict. There was not just one interpretive community. Instead, there were many different groups and sub-groups. There were also many different scholars and ministers with strong opinions. There would never have been such an active interest in the Bible and in the numerous secular pamphlets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had it not been for the political and theological issues at stake. But those issues had very little to do with forces of production in any direct sense and had a great deal to do with the *Geist* of modern capitalism.

Max Weber's notion of the "*Geist*" of modern capitalism is not an aspect of simplistic, materialist economic determinism. Weber argues in his many books that the rise of modern capitalism (as opposed to "generic" aspects of "capitalism" stressed by, among others, anthropologists) is in part a result of changes in the attitudes and opinions of ordinary people. The printed pamphlet and book allowed sixteenth century people to appreciate aspects of history and theology that had previously been obscured. Even the most progressive thinkers of the sixteenth century were still largely ignorant of many things that are commonly known today. Imagine how badly informed the average peasant or small scale merchant must have been. But gradually people were starting to think of themselves as citizens of nation-states. As national identities became solidified and as "bourgeois" citizens (i.e. both *petite bourgeoisie* and *haute bourgeoisie*) became

more self-confident and politically significant the "spirit of the times" (*Zeitgeist*) changed. The Geist of modern capitalism emerged. A new way of thinking came to be accepted by ever wider groups of people.

The world is a semiotic place, at least for us human beings. We are human because we use symbols in sophisticated ways. We are sign people, people of signs. Without the signs we are not human. In the beginning was the sign. Now there are signs. In the future there will continue to be signs. As long as there is any form of symbolic interaction there will be a context of sign complexes in which that interaction takes place. The widespread use of the printed book makes the importance of signs especially clear to us since the book is the main example of a "text" and printed words are the most direct manifestation we have of symbols.

V.   Conclusion:

This all too brief essay has merely touched on a number of important topics. Not everyone would agree that a semiotic approach is fruitful. Similarly, there will be many sociological theorists who see Weber as fundamentally incompatible or see no reason why their work should be re-interpreted in light of Peircian semiotics, particular Peircian Pragmatism ("Pragmaticism") and epistemology. There are many different kinds of sociologists and there are many different kinds of semioticians, to say the least! There are, for example, many kinds of Interactionism (Forte 2001) and there are many ways of conceptualizing semiotics (Lemert 1979). I have to some extent skirted several issues related to ontology (e.g. Meddin 1979) and epistemology (e.g. Olivier 1983), but I have tried to indicate in broad strokes that to a large extent a full and complete discussion of the importance of the printed book should include awareness of the heuristic value of a semiotic perspective.

To repeat once again, if we apply "the sociological imagination" (Phillips, Kincaid and Scheff 2002), we can also add a semiotic twist. The added dimension is due to the fact that we can put the process of semiosis front and center. The activity of reading books is a part of the dialogue that forms the semiotic self (Wiley 1994). That is, not only is the book itself a semiotic system, the community of people who are also an interpretive community. The "object" of investigation is not separate from the "subjects" who as active agents make choices about which books to read, or not to read. A similar phenomenon is very clearly at work when we think of any socio-cultural product. What we think we believe about what we have read is not purely an individualistic, utilitarian choice. We are caught up in a kind of semiotic web. The medium and the message cannot easily be separated. While it is definitely not the case that the medium is always equivalent to the message, it is nevertheless true that the message is intrinsically part and parcel of the semiotic medium. The sign system determines how we see the world.

That point could be expanded for other sociological theorists (Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, Mead, Elias, Habermas) and discussed in terms of many

topics (e.g. race, ethnicity, class, status, power, gender, religion, spirituality). In this short essay the idea is to use the idea of the importance of the book, particularly the printed book, as a kind of key "sign" that will require far more attention than it has already received. A truly inter-disciplinary approach to the study of the book provides wonderful opportunities for further detailed historical and comparative sociological investigation. There is much that is still left unsaid, but the fact that these words appear on a printed page, in a journal, makes these exploratory remarks available to those who would like to engage in further dialogue on all of the complex ideas touched on in a creative manner. This is not a set piece with a narrow focus; it is a general analysis that tries to combine highly abstract ideas at a sophisticated level of general theorizing. But it can provide a kind of groundwork for all kinds of more detailed studies. I am trying to light a spark that will allow others to perceive inter-connections between sociology and semiotics that have not been commonly recognized in the detailed study of the book, nothing more and nothing less. The goal is both very grand and also quite focused. It would require a book length treatment to begin to detail all of the idiographic historic material that would serve to provide illustrative evidence. I love books and I agree that in a way books constitute a kind of "permanence" in a world that is largely "impermanent" but in our acceptance of the "splendor of letters" (Basbanes 2003) we should not forget that all sign systems, sociologically speaking are subject to constant social change (Davies 1991) and in that sense are semiotically ephemeral, at least in terms of nuanced understanding (*Verstehen*).

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[1] He points out that "The gradual permeation of the computer into the pores of modern life deepens what Max Weber called the 'rationalization of the world'." (Alexander 1998: 29). Impersonal rational control based on computer bits and bytes is not the only thing going on, he argues; there is also something "cultural" happening. But, unfortunately, his notion of "culture" is still very Cartesian, where culture is the "object" of investigation by individual theorists who are the "subjects" doing the interpreting. He argues that "… even at its most socially embedded, semiotics can never be enough". This essay takes issue with that idea to some extent, but Alexander seems to agree on the general importance of "narratives" or "discourses".

[2] Please note that this is not a standard article in what might be called "normal science" where a well accepted theoretical idea is briefly presented and then a data set is used to test a set of hypotheses. It is also not a literary article where the main purpose is to provide rich idiographic illustrations concerning such important historical "data" as the precise technological innovations in book publishing. The intent here is "theoretical" and "philosophical". Hence, there is no "data analysis" per se. Space limitations (5,000 words) make for certain kinds of constraints.

[3] The serious study of Marshall McLuhan's work involves such an extensive bibliography that I will not attempt to capture the nuances of the analyses that have been done on such topics as the emergence of McLuhan's thinking in the context of the sociological ideas of the "political economist" and historian Harold A. Innis. Suffice it to say that Innis' (1950) work on *Empire and Communications* may have been a very significant impact on McLuhan. Neither Innis nor McLuhan seem to have placed an awareness of Peircian semiotics at the center of their analyses of communication and popular culture.

[4] This is not the place to rehearse the complicated specialist literature on Gutenberg and the discovery of printing. Everyone knows that when we speak of Gutenberg we are using him as a kind of abstract "sign" of an underlying phenomenon and not necessarily making historically precise statements. The situation is similar with Copernicus since it

was not really until much after Copernicus's death that work by Johannes Kelper and others made the full mathematical implications of a helio-centric theory clear.

[5] I will use the terms "sociology" and "sociological" to also include those aspects of anthropology which tend to no longer be "traditional anthropological research". Since World War II many anthropologists have written on sociological themes and the two disciplines are sometimes a bit blured . At the same time, the literatures do still constitute two different "interpretive networks".

[6] The term "imagined community" is read here from within a Peircian rather than a Cartesian framework. Anderson (1983) does not explicitly make the distinction. At times he discusses the views of individual, Cartesian "subjects". But in other parts of his book he does attempt to move beyond a "billiard ball" notion of self (Wiley 1994).

[7] To a large extent Harold A. Innis' "political economy" perspective draws on both Marx and Weber, as well as many other writers, and Innis' stress on the importance of communication media can be regarded as an aspect of the sociological synthesis that was starting to form in Canada among "Canadian Political Economists" in the 1940s and 1950s. Again, Marshall McLuhan benefited from Innis' synthesis.

[8] I have purposely avoided any mention of Emile Durkheim, the other great founder of sociological theory. Some sociologists speak of the "holy trinity". In a first draft I did include his name, but I started to realize that to some extent the later Durkheim (1983) may have actually understood some of the essence of the semiotic epistemology that is so characteristic of Pragmatism, particularly Peirce's later "Pragmaticism". I would like to thank Bob Prus for helpful comments on Durkheim's later work.

[9] Like all dualistic distinctions, the polarization of stories and narratives has only a limited heuristic value. A story can "stand by itself", so to speak, while a narrative requires a very clear interpretive network to be credible. One example of a narrative is the Zen Buddhist koan. A koan cannot be understood in a simple and direct manner without some acquaintance with Zen Buddhism and the Zen Buddhist interpretive network. Ultimately, even the acceptance of the value of the koan depends on being privy to the interpretive network's assumptions about direct knowing.