LINGUISTIC PRAXIS AS INSTITUTION AND INDIVIDUATION BETWEEN SEMIOTIC IMAGINATION, NORMATIVE SCHEMES AND STYLES

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ABSTRACT
In this article we will dwell upon the relation between linguistic praxis and normative schemes with a particular focus on the concept of *institution* and on the role of *semiotic imagination*. We consider the importance of the theoretical link between *the individual moments* of *actual use* of language and the *organizational frames* in which they are inscribed. The theoretical framework is a *semiotic anthropology*. One of the most central issues for semiotic anthropology consists in understanding the nature of subjective experience as *perception* and *praxis* in its deep relation with the degrees of normativity at work in semiotic perception. We will propose a comparison between the gestural model of language praxis in Merleau-Ponty's perspective and the theory of the social imaginary of the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis. The institution is revealed as a social imaginary creation, where the body of the individual subject, with its potential of semantic meaning, is the centre of creation device. Thus, following Descombes's interpretation, the semiotic institutions have to be considered as dynamic devices which act as an intermediary between singular participation in community life and the set of material and immaterial rules and roles binding cultural perception and symbolic forms.

KEYWORDS
Linguistic institution, imaginary, semiogenesis, semiotic anthropology, phenomenology

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1. *Introduction: the semiogenetic cycle of semiotic forms and speech acts*

The relationship between the concepts of *institution* and *speech* has always been a central issue in humanities, and mostly in semiotics and language sciences. More specifically, semiotic investigations on social interactions have increasingly highlighted the importance of the theoretical link between *the individual moments* of *actual use* of language and the *organizational frames* in which they are inscribed. These inquiries support therefore the necessity to understand meaning as constitutively Janus-faced, arguing for a theory able to connect the singularity of each *phenomenon* of speech – conceived as *advent of meaning* – to the realm of modalities and conditions of its *transmission* as regimes of *duration* and *survival*. On the one hand, semiosis is then always conceived as *embodied within* and *emerging for* a subject. According to this premise, from a semiotic point of view it is possible to analyze a cultural phenomenon only providing the modalities by which every *object* participating of its constitution becomes meaningful *for* and *in* the subject's experience. Still, it is important to point out that this process of meaning attribution is necessarily rooted in the complex network that lies beyond a cultural phenomenon itself. Indeed, the analysis must also take in charge of the role that (i) the variety of plans of sensible manifestation, (ii) the devices of anthropological and technical mediation and (iii) the identity-making and narrative frames play in the process of construction of meaning as construction of meaningful *forms*. For this reason, semiotics and philosophy of language have focused on the *forces* animating these forms as well as on the *intensities* detected and captured in heterogeneous constructions and formal arrangements[1]. This

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[1] DELEUZE, GUATTARI 1980, VIVEIROS DE CASTRO 2009.

perspective has also important consequences on the way the concept of *sign* has to be understood. All that *makes sign* cannot be conceived as an *a priori* defined object. On the contrary, it reveals itself as something inextricably involved in a process of expansion and contraction of forms. These forms depend on the circulating or stored sociosemiotic values but they are subjected to virtual values as well, where the latter can be seen at work in times of *rupture*, of *innovation* and in creative processes or, more generally, in every dynamics of invention and innovation. What is more, the involvement *in* and *of* meaning that affects subjects in their social practices and semiotic productions deploys itself within two epistemic and epistemological regimes, as already suggested by Louis Jorge Prieto[2]. According to the Argentine semiotician, the relations between subjects and cultural objects are regulated by the coexisting regimes of *practice* and of *relevance*. If the former shows the wide horizon of the possible uses of the object, the latter delimits the extent of performed actions applying to it selective criteria of *significance for* and *in* a given context. On the other hand, any semiotic form exists *in* and *thanks to* a complex interplay which is originally social, i.e. always inherited, semiotised, normed and more or less stabilized. This means that every semiotic form is bound by several frameworks of apprehension/perception, apprenticeship, instruction, imitation, *mythisation* and *reprise*. If we take seriously the idea that both semiosis and perception are natively social phenomena of meaning constructions, we have to go beyond a certain phenomenological framework. In fact, some approaches inherited from a certain husserlian reception consider the intersubjective dimension as the only origin for all semiotic and social experiences. From these perspectives, intersubjectivity itself depends only on symmetrical or dissymmetrical relations between the subjects within a *neutral* space, a space of mere co-presence and co-action among the bodies.

For this reason, we have previously introduced the notion of *semiotic perception*: a perception that is immediately *expressive* and *praxeological*, crossed by heterogeneous forces of constitution, differentiation and dynamic stabilization[3]. These forces convoke heterogeneous registers and modalities (fictional, praxeological, social and technological as well). By taking the hypothesis of a cultural perception seriously, we can state that each perceived form is always constrained by its modes of apprehension and not only by those of its production. According to Merleau-Ponty, all that we perceive is the manifestation of a style of being: «what is perceived is always perceived as an expression of a certain practical disposition» (ROSENTHAL, VISETTI 2006, 113). Perception is expressive because it is semiotic and linguistic; then, the being-in-the-world that we referred

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[2]   PRIETO 1975. Cfr. CITTON 2010.
[3]   ROSENTHAL, VISETTI 2010; BONDÌ 2012; BONDÌ 2015.

to is from the very beginning also a being-for-language, rooted in an expressive and semiolinguistic perceptive structure. Thanks to these premises, we are able to propose a *semiotic anthropology* perspective. This field of study considers symbolic, linguistic, practical or technical forms and activities and it is modeled as a symbolic economy of complex systems, where agents and transactions assign and transmit roles and values conditioning the interactions. This means that «human social phenomena do not emerge from interactions between individuals whose aims and modes of action are pre-programmed» (LASSÈGUE, ROSENTHAL, VISETTI 2009, 24). On the contrary, this approach places itself in the critical heritage of anthropology and structural linguistics: it proposes to think about the *destiny* of a sign as the result of the interplay of both fictional and practical registers, while its meaning is determined in the differential association to other signs and in the *translation* to other sets of signs. One of the most central issues for semiotic anthropology consists therefore in understanding the nature of subjective experience as *perception* and *praxis* in its deep relation with the degrees of normativity at work in semiotic perception[4]. In this article we will dwell upon this relation with a particular focus on the concept of *institution* and on the role of *semiotic imagination*.

2. *Expression and institution in semiolinguistic praxis*

From the previously sketched point of view, all subjective experiences are natively semiotic. Hence, forms and values – which are the objects of the semiotic mediation of experience – are indissociable. For this reason, we advocate an examination of existence and genesis of forms and values within the social transactions in which they emerge, develop and transform. In this way, semiotic anthropology allows us to escape the dilemma raised by the British anthropologist Tim Ingold[5] concerning the difficult cohabitation between a pure phenomenology of experience and the ecology of the real. In fact, semiotic anthropology aims to detect new regimes of explanation to clarify the complex relations between bodies, subjective experience and sociality of meaning.

2.1 *The speaking subject between expression and institution*

In order to examine in depth the role of the institution in the constitution of experience, the investigation on the *speaking subject* is required. Traditionally, the

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[4] DOYON, BRYER 2015.
[5] INGOLD 2013.

theme of institutions is covered by studies on social relations. Moreover, the opposition between individual actions and collective systems of representations and social behavior has permeated the epistemological history of the human and social sciences[6] – even if this opposition has never been truly discussed at a theoretical level. It seems that the investigations on institution as constitutive dimension of human sociality does not find the need to take account of subjectivity and singularity and its contingency[7]. Consequently, the theme of *speaking subject* in its relation with the institution has remained unfulfilled in several domains – language sciences, sociolinguistics, institutional analysis in pragmatics, enunciative theory and studies on performativity, among the others. More generally, the lack of a critical and deep discussion on this issue finds its reason in the idea of institution as an invariable phenomenon, which has nothing to do with the ordinary experience. According to this, the sensible experience of the subjects does not constitute a relevant point to be discussed in relation to institutional dynamics. On the contrary, in her recent book on the nature of institutional change, Virginie Tournay[8] has argued that the institution cannot be thought of as an invariable object: its form emerges thanks to those who realize it, that is in the relationships between *instituting* and *instituted* subjects. Analogously to Tournay's reflections, we insist on an idea of institution as a relational complex that can never be gathered in its entirety: an anthropological reality in which the individual perception of the changing form is a constitutive part of the institution's transformation movement. It is thus important to go back on the constitution and the nature of the subject, and especially of the speaking subject. This need is firstly motivated by the nature of language itself: in the wake of Saussure's lesson, we consider language as «a social institution with no analogues, a negotiated settlement but not perpetually lived in the conditions of its use/transmission, which precedes and enables any individual negotiations (and therefore other institutions)» (GAMBARARA 2005, 180). In this framework, language plays a fundamental role: not more conceived as anthropogenic intra-psychic dimension, it governs every relation between subjects as both social and natural beings. In addition, it is precisely the act of *speech* – or enunciation, as an *essentially human* action – which puts the speaking subject in a central position among different forces[9]. Indeed, the speaking subject lives in a state of permanent tension between languages, established knowledge and the unpredictability of individual improvisation; at the same time, he imposes limits and constraints to the expressive freedom. In this framework, it is clear how the exploration of the

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[6] Cfr. BOURDIEU 1982; 1994; DESCOMBES 2004; KARSENTI 2013.
[7] ŽIZEK 2000.
[8] TOURNAY 2014.
[9] Cfr. COQUET 2007; BONDÌ 2012.

role of the speaking subject represents an urgent research topic, in opposition to what it has been tacitly affirmed by several sociological theories of institution.

2.2 *Merleau-Ponty: expression, institution and history*

For the same reasons we have pointed out in the previous paragraph, Vincent Descombes underlined the theoretical need to think about the nature of the *subject of the institutions* as a key dimension of the institutional device (DESCOMBES 1996). As Descombes affirms, there are institutions that are inherently social, and that is the case of the institutions of meaning. This means that they are constantly nourished by the individual subject's freedom of action as *agent* of (social) transition among individuals:

> «The institutions of meaning are social institutions in their origin (as are all institutions) and in their field of application. They regulate relations between particulars; they do not regulate relations between individuals. By definition, there are no intersubjective institutions, only conventions. An individual may think about others in deciding his own behavior. But if he wants to communicate his thinking to anyone, he must accomplish a speech act, and doing that entails the establishment of a social relation of interlocution» (DESCOMBES 1996, 308).

In other words, the institutions of meaning are intrinsically social because individual's behaviors and actions conform themselves to a disciplined conduct that does not depend on his options, choices and desires. At the same time, however, this kind of institution does not regulate the life of the individual, or his options, choices and desires. The institution regulates continuously the transition among subjects, as in the case of the social space of interlocution. We have already discussed (BONDI 2013) the model of the dyadic subject of the institutions of meaning proposed by Descombes. We will focus here on the centrality accorded to the dialectic between *body* and *institution*, between the material, symbolic and imaginary singularity of my being in the world and the network of rules and habits that regulate my relations with the world and the others, which we propose to understand as the subject's personal, collective and social *history*. The same dialectic characterizes the phenomenon of *expression* and the *expressiveness of experience*. We will present these concepts through the *phenomenology of speech* elaborated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As an attentive reader of Saussure's *Course of General Linguistics*, Merleau-Ponty conceives the phenomenological description of language as a *return to the speaking subject* without moving toward subjectivist or intentionalist accounts and, on the contrary, maintaining a dialectical relation with the "objective sciences of language". On the background of this phenomenology of speech lies the notion of *expression*.

«The reason why the thematization of the signified does not precede speech is that it is the result of it. [...] For the speaking subject, to express is to become aware of; he does not express just for others, but also to know himself what he intends» (MERLEAU-PONTY 1960, 90).

As suggested by Victor Rosenthal and Yves-Marie Visetti[10], the *expression* can be understood in terms of *imminence of language*, as its perpetual movement admits to think about it only as locally, and never totally, available. As pointed by the authors, the consequences for linguistic studies are remarkable. In fact, *the phenomenology of speech* implies *a linguistics of speech*, for which for language becomes possible to be glimpsed only in the effective act of speaking. Taking account of the peculiarity of the speaking subject standpoint *in* and *on* his actual use of language means also to reinterpret the saussurean concept of *synchrony*, so much that we can affirm that in Merleu-Ponty's perspective synchrony can be replaced with the idea of a *thick present*. More specifically, this *gestural model* of language, a model that compares speech to gesture, has important repercussions on the theme of linguistic institution. If the linguistic heritage is always present in the exercise of speech as a floating Gestalt, even the actuality of each act of speaking is not detachable from a steady act of recovery (*reprise*), which gives us «the illusion that its contents were already present in the already available significations» (MERLEAU-PONTY 1945, 110). In this way, every linguistic or expressive gesture is not just a replica of something already available, inherited and transmitted, but it has to be conceived as a constant infusion of new life, as a continuous process of resemantization. As written in *The prose of the world*, linguistic elements are not a finite number of tools but a way of modulating «an inexhaustible power to differentiate a linguistic gesture by another» (MERLEAU-PONTY 1969, 47). Merleau-Ponty's theory of expressive gesture shows his interest (and its limitations) in its impact on the institutional character of the *langue*. The *langue* is a principle of distinction and continuous differentiation. It is a moving institution not only because it can only be glimpsed as a *trace* in the exercise of *speech*, but also because it is subject to the transformational movement of recovery and repetition, which are the two instituting operations of the *prise de parole*.

«It might be said, restating a celebrated distinction, that languages or constituted systems of vocabulary and syntax, empirically existing "means of expression", are both the repository and residue of acts of speech, in which unformulated significance not only finds the means of being conveyed outwardly, but moreover acquires existence for itself, and is genuinely created as significance. Or again one might draw a distinction between a speaking word and a spoken word. The former is the one in which the significant intention is at the stage of

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10 ROSENTHAL, VISETTI 2010.

coming into being. Here existence is polarized into a certain "significance" which cannot be defined in terms of any natural object. It is somewhere at a point beyond being that it aims to catch up with itself again, and that is why it creates speech as an empirical support for its own not-being. Speech is the surplus of our existence over natural being. But the act of expression constitutes a linguistic world and a cultural world, and allows that to fall back into being which was striving to outstrip it. Hence the spoken word, which enjoys available significances as one might enjoy an acquired fortune. From these gains other acts of authentic expression – the writer's, artist's or philosopher's – are made possible. This ever-recreated opening in the plenitude of being is what conditions the child's first use of speech and the language of the writer, as it does the construction of the word and that of concepts. Such is the function which we intuit through language, which reiterates itself, which is its own foundation, or which, like a wave, gathers and poises itself to hurtle beyond its own limits» (MERLEAU-PONTY 1945, 229).

In this passage of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, we can observe how the *expressive power* is characterized as something that we gradually acquire. The language does not rely on stable identities, but on a *bodily and expressive knowledge*, a *habitus* with systemic vocation. Rosenthal and Visetti have insisted on the paradoxical nature of this elaboration. On the one hand, the act of speaking totally relies upon repetition. On the other hand, it is repetition itself that allows the speaking subjects to innovate language. How to account for the paradoxical feature of the dynamics described by Merleau-Ponty? We will return on the distinction between *speaking word* (*parole parlante*) and *spoken word* (*parole parlée*) that will lead our discussion in an interesting direction.

2.3 *The linguistic gesture and the "figures of body"*

The notion of *recovery* is not identical with that of *reply* and neither, from a linguistic point of view, with the idea of a given type instantiation. It should rather be understood as the recognition, creation and sensitive modulation of linguistic virtualities. Through the recovery, the expression installs a linguistic and semiotic form as a thing perceived and accessible to all in nature and in the world of perception: «[t]he word and speech must somehow cease to be a way of designating things or thoughts, and become the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world, and, moreover, not its clothing but its token or its body» (MERLEAU-PONTY 2011, 211).

These accessibility and perceptibility allow the fusion of *speaking word* and *spoken word* in the actual use of language:

«the signification of signs derives initially from their configuration in current usage, from the style of human relations that emanate from them, and only the blind and involuntary

logic of things perceived, totally suspended in our body's activity, could lead us to a glimps of the anonymous spirit which, in the heart of language, invents a new mode of expression» (MERLEAU-PONTY 1969, 37, translation mine).

Merleau-Ponty moves closer to certain forms of externalism in enhancing the expressive mediation, the corporeality of interactions and the necessary pragmatic dimension of the forms that always occur through the personal style of each speaker. There is not semiosis without a concrete plan of tangible manifestation. Therefore, expression is always bodily or quasi-bodily and «the expression ensures the subject to discover himself out of him, distantly from this "quasi-bodiliness", that demands him for a well-definite standpoint» (ROSENTHAL, VISETTI 2010, 40, traslation mine). Then, the expressive operation always corresponds to a definition of a standpoint:

> «[e]xpresses not only for others, it expresses in order to know for itself what it is aimed at. If speech wants to incarnate a meaningful intention which is only a certain emptiness, it is not only to recreate in others the same lack, the same privation, but also to know its lack and deprivation. Significant intention gives itself a body and knows itself by seeking an equivalent in the system of available meanings represented by the language I speak and the whole of the writings and culture of which I am the heir» (MERLEAU-PONTY 1960, 113, translation mine).

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty is even more explicit. Here he posits that to say that language activities and the act of speaking define the subject's position towards meaning involves thinking about language as *the body of thinking*. From this it is possibly to conceive the speech *as a gesture*:

> «[t]he phonetic "gesture" brings about, both for the speaking subject and for his hearers, a certain structural co-ordination of experience, a certain modulation of existence, exactly as a pattern of my bodily behavior endows the objects around me with a certain significance both for me and for others» (MERLEAU-PONTY 1945, 225).

The linguistic and, more widely, expressive gesture does not coincide with a mere reiteration of a pre-assigned model. On the contrary, it works as a praxeological movement that actualizes linguistic forms. Somehow, the function of the linguistic gesture is equivalent to what Saussure called the *tourbillon sémiologique de la langue* (SAUSSURE 2002) (*language's semiological turbulence*), the revival of something in the semiological circuit as a social circuit that continuously assigns values. The stabilization of the latter is subjected to different collective sanction regimes, and firstly to its *institutionality*, that is its collective ratification. For this reason, for Merleau-Ponty the *prise of parole* is a permanent practice of "shaking

up" of the entire set of linguistic possibilities rather than a performance that uses the stored and available linguistic tools. It corresponds to the inscription of a *style* in the world, and thus implies perception regimes of evaluative nature. As remarked by Rosenthal and Visetti:

> «[t]he introduction of a "style in the world" is based on relevant examples of sophisticated semiotics, in which the role of codes and institutions is evident. But "style" has actually a universal vocation: everything points to a style of being – or better, if we take seriously the idea of a cultural perception, everything raises the issue of the stylistic registers in which it would be apprehended. To this resurgence of language as a gesture on its perceptive side, corresponds, in accordance with the figure of chiasmus, a movement which discovers all perception as expression. It can be understood first of all as a "descent" of culture into perception» (ROSENTHAL, VISETTI 2010, 42).

In other words, every perception carries with it the traces of a production by an *emblematic nucleus* from which the expression takes shape with its multiplicity of styles and registers. And if the body represents the material support of language, the movement of the expression reveals itself as a bodily standpoint in the world: then, according with Merleau-Ponty, it is the body itself that constitutes this "emblematic nucleus". At the same time, this bodily expression becomes actualized only under thematic forms: the body becomes then a proto-agent able to *leave traces in the wake of his passage*. It is not by chance that Jacques Fontanille attributes to Merleau-Ponty the authorship of the *semiotics of imprint*: the body is not only a moving expressive nucleus but also a syntactic figure subject to a continous modification and thematization activity (FONTANILLE 2004). It follows that the body represents at the same time the *theme* and the *figure* of its own expressive movement: constantly involved in various and complex discourses, it ensures the genetic continuity between culture and nature – a central theoretical concern in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

Expression then represents a central issue in the investigation on institution. Institutional power cannot take place out of the expressive experience. As we have illustrated, this is characterized by the dialectical intertwining of *cultural perception* and *bodily-expressive action*. Nevertheless, the perspective offered by Merleau-Ponty presents two problems. The first concerns the absence of an accurate reflection on sociability and normativity expression; the second regards the imaginary and social constitution of institutions' constitutive expression[11].

3. *Beyond a gestural model of language: sociality and cultural imagination*

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[11] CARRON 2008.

The limits of the gesture-model of language have been deeply discussed by Vincent Descombes. More in detail, he insists on one problem concerning the dialectical relationships between *langue* and *parole* and between body and institution: the one emerging in relation to the dimension of the social *in the mind of each of us*. For Merleau-Ponty, the word is a gesture, a form of corporeal presence that participates in personal expression: neither object nor pure intention, but rhythm of forms, depending on various degrees of thematization, a transition between bodily presence and material trace. Despite that, it appears that Merleau-Ponty recognizes that the identity of the sign and of the linguistic gesture «can only be fully guaranteed by the gesture detaching itself entirely from the speaking body in order to become an endlessly transmissible text or the equivalent of one» (DESCOMBES 1996, 285). In this moment of detachment lies the objective mind (*un esprit objectif*): a cultural world given to perception in things. By that, Merleau-Ponty introduces an intermediary, which is an *objectified* mind. The objective mind, described as *the trace of the absent in the landscape*, overlaps the materiality of equipment and tools: as the latter, it remains after the disappearance of the actors who used them. Then, the objective mind lies not just outside of human beings, but *in their absence*:

> «[o]bjective mind, after having been introduced as the crystallized result of a human act – i.e., a subjective act that presents itself as the trace left behind in material things – now begins to look like an impersonal mind. This impersonal status of mind is engendered by the transition from the productive act to the product, from the operation to the result: a result that has *detached* itself» (DESCOMBES 1996, 287).

For Descombes, in this framework every cultural object is as a text and requests the need of a hermeneutical context in order to be understood as a human cultural production. It follows that «the mind that is present outside of individual consciousnesses is above all a practical mind, a mind that manifests itself in gestures and behaviors the traces of which can later be uncovered» (DESCOMBES 1996, 288). A plow, a house, a pipe, a bell, artifacts or monuments are perceived as traces or relics of another presence. The same trace is conceived here as the result of the action of other people, of their past presence and, finally, of their disappearance. This position can be considered acceptable in several cases. Let us consider, for example, the personal use of a tool. It requires a practical and intersubjective meaning that is possible to *reactivate* in the objectified trace carrying the living presence of other users. Confronted with a pipe, for example, I imagine myself smoking it. My imagination plays with the realm of my potential actions toward the object: «the entirety of this exercise of the imagination is an outline of the human reaction to a human object by someone who grasps its practical sense. To understand in this way is to rediscover the subject – the pipe smoker – behind the bit of objectified mind that

the pipe is» (DESCOMBES 1996, 288).

Nevertheless, this account shows its partiality faced to the distinction between *sociality* and *intersubjectivity*. A theoretical device that considers the "human intermediary object" in terms of an agreement between subjects cannot entirely explain human life. Descombes resorts to another example by Merleau-Ponty: the bell used to order something. In this case, a corporeal imagination – an imagination that is connected with a practical knowledge – is not enough. Another type of imagination is required: a *scenario* has to be imagined, in which there are not only an acting body and a bell involved in a set of recognized social actions but also a *master* ordering something ringing a bell and a *servant* who responds to it and executes the given instruction. This scenario adds to practical knowledge a specifically *social* feature:

«[i]n order to understand this fragment of objectified mind, one must grasp the social relation that gives it its meaning. I imagine myself seated at a table and ringing for the maid, or I imagine myself waiting in the kitchen for the masters to give me the signal to bring the next dish. […] What has to be imagined is a two-person scenario, which means that one must imagine the gestures to be accomplished by each of the two people. What one must imagine is thus not so much gestures as it is the complementary social statuses involved» (DESCOMBES 1996, 289).

Beyond practical knowledge and gestures, in perceiving an object like the bell it is necessary to imagine the scenarios and the social roles that it implies. Essentially, the dialectic between body and institution presupposes common roles and models that represent the condition – rather than the result – of every intersubjective adjustment. The social mind and its anthropogenetic manifestations – i.e. the institutions and among them especially language – are opposed to objectified mind: instead of being manifested through the trace of an absent presence, it claims at the outset the familiar presence of the social in the mind of each of us. If objectified mind just affirms that we live in a world that others inhabited before us, objective mind structures our familiar relationship with the world: «it is not the trace of absent people within our field of perception; it is the presence of the social in the mind of each of us» (DESCOMBES 1996, 294). This familiar relationship has not to be reached or interpreted: it is already *here*, present to ourselves, in my language as in my mind. This dialectic between body and institution concentrates on the external canvas modeling interactions among individuals and, at the same time, articulating the specific type of agentivity created within this dialectic. In this framework the notion of *institution* shows its importance, highlighting the metabolic structure between (subjective) expression and (intersubjective) trace. Even Merleau-Ponty moved in this theoretical direction, as testified by one of his course notes at Collège de France. From a

phenomenological point of view, by institution we shall intend those events

> «which endow the experience with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense, will form a thinkable sequel or history – or again events which deposit a sense in me, not just as something surviving or as a residue, but as the call to follow [*un appel à une suite*], the demand of a future» (MERLEAU-PONTY 2003, 77, translation mine).

How can gestures make sense to other gestures, calling to follow and create history? Which is the device that constitutes linguistic institution as an anthropological institution marked by the dialectic between the dimensions of *body* and of *norms, meanings and cultural traces* at our disposal? From our point of view, Merleau-Ponty's model of the trace is not able to satisfy the need of continuity between these dimensions, even if he advocated for this in the course taught at the Collège de France. As we already pointed out, each instituted semiosis feeds itself with *presence* and *absence*. To account for the role of absence, in the next paragraph we will introduce a theory of imaginary and of semiotic imagination inspired by the thought of Cornelius Castoriadis. Thanks to this final brick,

> «we will better understand that identity and quality of things are not only made by sensible profiles but they immediately refer to a semiotic imaginary horizon: an horizon that involves individuals' participation to the semiotic life and their – otherwise inaccessible – quest of values» (ROSENTHAL, VISETTI 2010, 47, translation mine).

4. *The radical imaginary between institution and subjectivation*

In his work *The Imaginary Institution of Society*[12], Castoriadis aims to return on the concept of *imaginary* from a philosophical perspective. In fact, *imaginary* represents a useful tool to hold together: i) an ontology of socio-historical *creation*, based on a conception of the realm of symbolic as disposition and institutional (social and imaginary) creation as well; ii) an idea of *subject* as fundamental *source* of this creative fluctuation and as figural emblem of this movement at the same time. According to Castoriadis, imaginary recurs in history as «continued origin, always-actual foundation, central component in which both what holds every society together and what produces its historical change are generated» (CASTORIADIS 2007, 145, translation mine).

Castoriadis moves from a strongly critical point of view towards the sociological

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[12] CASTORIADIS 1975.

and functionalist flavor of contemporary main anthropological theories. Rather than an answer to the social needs of individuals, he considers the symbolic dimension – and all socially instituted forms – the trace of a *creation* that allows language to become more than a code, and specifically a world-making device. The nature of symbolic contradicts anthropological functionalism: there is no symbolic institution in which each of the elements that compose it always fulfills a specific function. On the contrary, the realm of symbolic is characterized by a relative independence to both biological and social functionality. Then, how to explain the emergence of institution following this non-determinism, since human needs are not a sufficient criterion? Castoriadis answers to this questions with the introduction of the dual centrality of imaginary and subject. This point emerges in some reflections, now collected in *L'Imaginaire comme tel* (CASTORIADIS 2007), which should have constituted the first chapter of a never completed book, whose title should have been *The Imaginary Foundation of Socio-Historical*.

For Castoriadis, the social imaginary is the very genetic source of institutions. The need of this idea of imaginary is demanded by the constitution of symbolic, as each symbolization must presuppose an imaginative act. Radical imaginary can be considered as a special faculty of the human being, which enables him to add through an image something that is not given in perception. Effective imaginary and symbolic are then rooted in radical imaginary; the importance of the latter lies in the fact that it is required to confer meaning to institution but it cannot be reduced to the product of an individual or of a collective activity. This is the case of linguistic institution: it is not possible to consider it as the result of a rational and declared act by a single person or a plurality of individuals (supposing them to master a language and to reach an agreement). This formulation becomes even closer to Saussure's idea of the language as institution without analogue when Castoriadis affirms that imaginary function establishes through a *praxis communis* the meaningful expressive canvas of the *socio-imaginary meanings*. As Arnaud Tomès points out, far from being reducible to the activity of an individual or a community, the radical social imaginary lies at the very core of the action of what Castoriadis defines *anonymous collective*[13]. Radical imaginary coincides with this anonymous collective movement – which elsewhere[14] Castoriadis calls *magma* – that produces the *social imaginary meanings*. These assign places and values to the different factors that exist within a society. The imaginary social significations confer unity to the institutions: they direct the flow of the different semantic crystallizations, solidifications and fusions in a given historic moment. These significations are both imaginary and social for two reasons. On the one hand,

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[13]   Cfr. TOMÈS 2007.
[14]   CASTORIADIS 1975. Cfr. CASTORIADIS 1978; 1986; 1990.

they exceed perceptual schemes – conceived as rational and real –; on the other hand, they are set *by creation*. This means that these significations are both social creations in permanent metamorphosis and, at the same time, the condition of the meaning transformations that influence institution. Furthermore, social imaginary meanings present two favorable features in comparison to the idea of the *trace* in the gesture-model of Merleau-Ponty: we will discuss them to sketch some final formulations to the theoretical itinerary of this article. First, for Castoriadis there is no perception without imagination: perceptual modalities of construction and circulation of a semiotic (or symbolic) object exceed its sensible profiles. Following this point, the semiotic unity of the object has to be attributed to the *socially imaginary* horizon that the dialectic between trace and *reprise* does not satisfy. The semiotic unity of the object is constitutively *social*: it is continuously governed and determined by a plurality of creative schemes. This unity is also constitutively *lived* by a historically concrete subject: it is informed by the relationship between *fantasmatization* and *self-constitution* (CASTORIADIS 1975, 493-497). From the point of view of Castoriadis, there is no distinction between real and imaginary: «the institution of society is in each case the institution of a magma of social imaginary significations, which we can and must call a world of significations» (CASTORIADIS 1975, 359).

> «The radical imaginary exists as social-historical and as psyche/soma. As social-historical, it is an open stream of the anonymous collective; as psyche/soma, it is representative/affective/intentional flux. That which in the social-historical is positing, creating, bringing-into-being, we call social imaginary in the primary sense of the term, or instituting society. That which in the psyche/soma is positing, creating, bringing-into-being for the psyche/soma, we call radical imagination. The social imaginary or instituting society exists in and through the positing-creating of social imaginary significations and of the institution; of the institution as the "presentification" of these significations, and of these significations as instituted. The radical imagination exists in and through the positing-creating of figures as the presentification of meaning and of meaning as always figured/represented. The institution of society by instituting society leans on the first natural stratum of the given – and is always found (down to an unfathomable point of origin) in a relation of reception/alteration with what had already been instituted. The position of meaningful figures or of figured meaning by radical imagination leans on the being-thus of the subject as a living being, and is always found (down to an unfathomable point of origin) in a relation of reception/alteration with what had already been represented by and for the psyche» (CASTORIADIS 1975, 369).

We will not examine the relationships between *psyche/soma* and imaginative activities, neither that between *society* and *imaginary*. We rather discuss the second favorable feature of this perspective over Merleau-Ponty's gesture-model. Castoriadis' thought allows us to conceive the institution as a modeling system

that ensures both the continuity of human and social actions and the unpredictability of imaginary creation's *magmatic* movements. Against the opposition between individual and social, Castoriadis shows us how each symbolic object is constitutively *trans-subjective*, since its imaginative nature enables it to overstep individual experience. At the same time, the symbolic object exists only through the *praxis of an imagining subject*: a subject socially constituted by the imaginative praxis. It follows that social imaginary meanings are not semantic elements of abstract nature that the subject passively acquires, but something emotionally felt and actively tested by them: further, social imaginary meanings allow this affection to be constantly produced. Finally, this *testing* dimension of magmatic, emotional, imaginary and socio-historical movement puts the subject's *participation* to the semiotic life at the center of the creative and institutional engine.

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