

Biosemiotics 17

Gianfranco Marrone
Dario Mangano *Editors*

Semiotics of Animals in Culture

Zoosemiotics 2.0

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Biosemiotics

Volume 17

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Editors

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Introduction: Towards Zoosemiotics 2.0



Gianfranco Marrone

Abstract This volume has at least three directions of discourse. The first is a dialogue between semiotics and other disciplines dealing in animal studies: philosophy, the philosophy of language and mind, the human and social sciences, the cognitive sciences and the neurosciences. The second is a discussion within semiotics, in the passage from zoosemiotics 1.0 to zoosemiotics 2.0. Last but not least is the cultivation of an empirical field of research, or rather a critical exploration of social culture in search of interesting phenomena or, rather, phenomena pertinent to our in-depth theoretical and epistemological study.

1 A Sort of Parable

Not so long ago, over Sunday lunch, I was conversing with a middle-aged lady on the subject of recent summer holidays. ‘Don’t get me started’, she told me, ‘I am a grandmother to dogs’. She explains that her two sons, neither of whom have a steady job, both of whom live with their girlfriends but are too scared to have children. As such, both couples have each bought a pair of large dogs, which breed I don’t know. And they love them like crazy. During the holidays and on Saturday evenings, these dogs are wisely left at the parents’ house. And by parents, I refer to the lady with whom I am sharing the table, who loves her children and everything they do, to the point of sacrificing her own, hard-earned holidays in order to look after the undeniably intrusive, but nonetheless dear animals. By now, they are pretty much considered part of the family, as has been the case in the USA for a long time now.

Here we have a short tale of a personal experience that sheds light on a multitude of emerging social phenomena and unexpected philosophical consequences. A sort of parable. What does ‘a grandmother to dogs’ mean? At first it seems like a simple expression, if not irreverent towards both grandmothers and dogs. Much like the situation she describes, which could be interpreted as a minor localised madness.

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However, if we think about it, an entire world is opened up, an authentic anthropological condition, a psychological earthquake. On the one hand, the dogs' grandmother stands out against a backdrop of well-documented economic macro-phenomena (the financial crisis, growing unemployment, the increasingly precarious nature of employment) and their social consequences (giving up on the idea of marriage and being forced to give up on having children). On the other hand, what is interesting is the way in which this somehow leads to them being replaced (we'll put it like that) by widespread *bricolage*. As we know, often somewhat creative responses are developed in response to global problems, 'ways of doing' that were previously unthinkable, born of ulterior processes that are not simply metaphorical. So, as with all metaphors, we see substitutions that are, in fact, deferments being employed, translations that degenerate into betrayals: the dogs take the place of children without actually being them; the emotional relationship with the animal is a partial (and undoubtedly painful) transfiguration of the one between parent and child. In turn, the grandmother is no longer a grandmother in the same way, despite existing as a parental figure, with a pedagogical function and the offer of regular support. Even the dogs are, let's admit it, a little less 'dog' than before, given they occupy a space that has traditionally belonged to children, leading to the progressive (de)generation of a strange, new family and source of further chain reactions. For example, the entire universe of these gestures, the daily grind, the effort of family life, missing your unborn children destabilises life and yet, in its own way, makes it easier: no more heroic nappy changes and feeds at 3 am, the paediatrician is traded in for a trusted vet, whilst powdered milk, highly coloured rooms and plastic toys are cast aside for tasty biscuit treats, ridiculously comfortable beds and chains that aren't too tight round the neck *heaven forbid*.

To quote Bruno Latour (an author we will come back to later), one 'collective' is reserved in another, with everything that inevitably leads to a translation in terms of losses and gains, of loyalty and disloyalty. A 'collective', an articulated collection of actors who we dare to define as social and that, nonetheless, is made up of both humans and non-humans, men and beasts, spaces and things, sentiments and ideologies and institutions and processes: in short, reciprocal relationships.

From common sense, which is naively ontological, obsessively naturalistic, we move to a vision of the world that is systemic, structural and semiotic. We do not have humans on one side and animals on the other, which then strike up relationships with one another, relationships almost always of hierarchical subordination in which the former is the master and the latter is dominated. On the contrary, there is a specific relationship between the forces at play that tends to produce precise social actors, outlining their respective fragile identities: we have a new kind of parent, unwillingly deprived of the possibility of children, who turns their repressed affections to the dog, and we have a new kind of dog that, happily charged with being the substitute for economically unviable children, finds itself experiencing incredibly strong emotions, sharing spaces that are both entirely new and extremely comfortable. And so the human is no longer the dog's master, but his quasi-parent; and dog is no longer a domesticated beast or a faithful friend but a kind of child, the avatar of a baby. As for the grandmother, who is not only not the dog's master but nor its

mother, she is perhaps precisely a quasi-grandmother who has a consequent emotional relationship with the dog, and we could, for instance, imagine how she will spoil it outrageously, endangering the most rigorous parenting strategies.

We need to be careful. We are not talking about the typical anthropomorphism of traditional folklore, fairy tales or Disney cartoons: there is no animal world that reinterprets a human one; there is no animal stereotype that behaves according to the corresponding human one. Nor has this story anything to do with the classic theme of hybrid figures, half human and half animal. Rather, what we find is a complex articulation of social and emotional relationships that generate *a brand new form of kinship*, a kinship in which the animal too plays a role, according to the subject with which it enters into the relationship: it will be the beloved child for the adoptive parents (we will use exactly this term here, adoptive), a dear grandchild for the adoptive grandmother, a suspicious sibling for the other animals in the family (dogs, cats, tortoises, birds?) and, why not, a cousin or in-law.

Now, in some cases, this might make certain hardened cynics smile, or scandalise many humanists. For others, it is an extremely interesting example of a relatively original socio-anthropological condition (relatively because this has been the case in the USA and elsewhere for quite some time), one that should be considered, interpreted and discussed. One possible interpretation, a minority one but convincing nonetheless, could, for example, indicate the growing diffusion within our society of a *widespread animism* that co-exists, in no strange way, with its dialectical opposite – naturalism. Animism, according to the anthropologist Philippe Descola (who we will also discuss later on), is the ontological position that thinks of humans and non-humans as being in psychological continuity and physical discontinuity. This is the opposite of naturalism, of course, which sees humans and non-humans as physically similar but incredibly diverse cognitively. To introduce the animal into a relationship of kinship is, for the animist, not an unexpected consequence but an ethnic necessity: be it the Amazonian Achuar people (who view apes as acquired relatives) or the activist who defends the last few seals left in the oceans (the activist thinks in scientific terms but acts accordingly to rigorously animist principles).

The animism present in our culture – the same culture that leads to a growing prevalence of animalism, vegetarianism, veganism and so on – is a new phenomenon that is also highly predictable. Unprecedented if we look closely at it using the tools of those farming out opinions for the media or the behavioural psychologist; taken as a given if observed from afar with the eyes of the anthropologist who tries, out of professional duty, to analyse the different human ethnicities spanning the millions of years they have been dispersed over the planet. Presenting deep similarities and feeble superficial differences. In one way or another, the relationship with the animal today requires further reflection, which must by definition involve scholars from diverse disciplines, authors, activists, journalists, ethologists and veterinarians, alongside politicians and administrators, companies and lobbyists and experts in marketing and communications. Today, *animal studies* is a fast-growing epistemological reality. Thinkers of all kinds are involved. It is worth involving also semiologists, who have always worked (through the branch known as zoosemiotics) on

the sign systems and forms of communication of animals, and which today leads to a kind of *zoosemiotics 2.0*, more strictly dedicated to the analysis of the social culture of our times.

2 This Volume

As a result, this volume has at least three directions of discourse.

The first is a dialogue between semiotics and other disciplines dealing in animal studies: philosophy, the philosophy of language and mind, the human and social sciences, the cognitive sciences and the neurosciences.

Secondly, a discussion within semiotics, in the passage from *zoosemiotics 1.0* (which has traditionally been more interested in the sign systems and forms of communication of various animal species) to *zoosemiotics 2.0* (together with other sectors that might, at first sight, seem opposed, such as *biosemiotics*, on the one hand, and the semiotics of culture, on the other).

Last but not least is the cultivation of an empirical field of research, or rather a critical exploration of social culture in search of interesting phenomena or, rather, phenomena pertinent to our in-depth theoretical and epistemological study.

3 Towards Multinaturalism

Here we need to take a step back and trace out the theoretical background against which this problem can be considered using a *semiotics of culture* that knows how to get anthropological studies to interact with research on the media. The starting point is the conviction that behind all of this and many other current, similar stand-points when it comes to animals hides a more general change of epistemological position, both ethical and aesthetic, regarding a rather broader theme: that of nature. It would seem, in fact, that for some time here the traditional notion of ‘nature’ – and the social practices that descend from the same – is in a state of crisis.

Nature today is an *absolute value*: in politics, in tourism, in religion, in urban thought, in design, in consumption, in nutrition, in the media and so on. It is enough to add the adjective ‘natural’ to any one thing – be it a city or a snack or a fur or a detergent – to immediately provoke smiles and acquiescence, certainties and credit cards. It has become a kind of brand or perhaps a meta-brand. This absolute value has even pervaded (for very different reasons) the fields of human sciences, which are now more than ever advocates of an empiricism that has lost all uncertainty, increasingly in search of the so-called biological basis of the so-called human nature – among which is semiotics, which often follows the most widespread epistemological trends like a dog that is forever running behind, without really discussing them in depth, starting with its own internal significance: to what extent does the paradigm of signification oppose, as it should, that of raw, naked fact? Is meaning

not contrary to the fact? Doesn't the primacy of the relationship not exclude, out of principle, any domain of objectivity?¹

Today, the word 'nature' functions as an 'umbrella term': the semantic evidence for which it would like to provide a vehicle fails to hide a total lack of definition. For example, the growing epistemological naturalism doesn't necessarily correspond to the widespread concern for the health of the planet, respect for habitats and the conservation of that image of pure nature that lies behind every ecological and environmental ideology. Similarly, it is not a given that the issue of sustainability, so beloved of economists and designers alike, sociologists and urban planners, belongs on the same theoretical and symbolic plain as that of organic farming, highly sought-after by local and multinational companies in search of an added value to offer their customers on supermarkets shelves or to rich consumers filled with aesthetic anxiety about their health. And yet, they all use the term 'nature' (with its correlatives, synonyms and antonyms), despite the fact it may not correspond to the same concept, the same field of ideas and meaning, as we have an accumulation of many different things enclosed in the same word. The renewed high priests of truth – often perplexed custodians of good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly – are today accompanied (more by chance rather than by choice) by environmentalist followers of Gaia and lovers of the organic, promoters of lost paradises and business strategies for wellbeing.

And yet, as we often forget, this generalised option when it comes to nature as an environment to protect and a social value to defend – with all of the consequent overlapping and ambiguity – is the fruit of an epochal trend inversion. For millennia, human societies, especially their Western versions, have emerged and developed by going *against* nature, against the limits and constrictions that it would have imposed upon the human race. Progress – both mythical and real – is something that is born in opposition to a supposedly 'ungenerous' nature (Giacomo Leopardi *docet*), so that the sciences and technologies are configured much like other operations of discovery, even forced and violent ones, 'secrets' within which the supposed nature, slyly, entrenches itself. And now that this same progress, as our collective imaginary tells us, has surpassed every limit, destroying the environment and the planet, now it needs to reimagine itself, its own opportunities and its own results, perhaps going against that of centuries past and precisely towards a degrowth that happily allows it to recover a healthy relationship with the natural environment. Environmentalism promotes this degrowth.

It is well known that behind this most complex and varied of scenarios lies the entire history of Western society and culture, which laid its own political, epistemological, economic and religious foundations, building, undoing and reconstructing an articulation that is as weak as it is necessary, which creates a reciprocally constituted rapport between nature and society, divinity and humanity, objectivity and subjectivity and the I and the other. In short, facts and values. No political idea has been implemented without an idea of society that takes with it complementary ideas of nature, god and man. Above all, when negotiating that theoretical oxymoron that

¹ See at least Greimas and Courtes (1982), Fabbri (2008), and Marrone (2014b, 2017).

is ‘human nature’, whose contradictions have acted as a flywheel for ideologies and mythologies, axiologies and strategies. Much like a blanket that is too short, human nature is pulled towards a universal and eternal biological supposition (leading to the homogenisation of sociocultural differences in the name of a supposedly natural basis shared by all and metaphysical by principle) and then towards cultural articulations (leading to more or less strong differences between groups and individuals, societies and historical epochs).

However, today there are those who, aware of the very real fragility of these similar negotiations, even in the light of the current ethnic unrest caused in Western societies caused by mass migration, talk of *multinaturalism*, in an attempt to engrave that unfading conviction, at the same time both religious and epistemological, about the existence of a single, unique nature that provides the shared background for successive anthropological suppositions.

On one side we have Bruno Latour (1993, 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2015) and those studying the so-called sociology of translation (Akrich et al. 2006), who have always maintained a dialogue with semiotics. They remind us that nature is the fragile result of scientific *discourse*: nature as realities is built from the scientific fare, it changes alongside it and it multiplies as science does, between continual, iridescent controversies in which science sits down with politics, administration, lobbies, religions, nationalisms and so forth. Controversies, therefore, are not simply scientific but also political. On the other, we have anthropologists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2009), who coined the term *multinaturalism* to describe the pronominal system of the Amazonian Achuar people, who – in simplified terms – use the pronoun *you* to describe a great many beings and entities that we Westerners would consider to be natural. Using Benveniste’s formal apparatus of enunciation and Deleuze’s principle of difference, Viveiros reconstructs an intersubjectivity that is extended to non-human subjects (animals, plants, dreams, etc.), an intersubjectivity which includes an *inter-objectivity* constructed differently from culture to culture, whereas in these cultures there is also the affirmation of a *plurality of nature*. It is Philippe Descola who, in *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013, see also Descola 2010, 2011, 2014), casts a critical eye over the dualism nature/culture – drawn on extensively by semiotics, proposing a four-way partition of ontologies: alongside our *naturalism*, *animism*, *totemism* and *analogism*, which are four different ways of objectifying reality, placing it as other than itself, on the basis of the relationship of continuity or discontinuity between human psychic interiority and non-human exteriority.

4 Return to the Cave

We’ll begin with Latour. His work takes as its starting point, particularly in the volume *Politics of Nature* (2004), the myth of Plato’s cave, a pretext for the reconstruction of a profound nexus between politics and science, society and nature. The words used in Plato’s text are of little importance; that which is fundamental,

however, according to Latour, is the fact that this tale can be used as an event from which to roll out the figures and actors of an initial scene, rebuilding a script that is still performed in masks today. With this myth as our starting point, it is possible to demonstrate how the ideal division between nature and society is not a new issue but one that actually goes far back in time and, as such, is significantly more radical and complex than it first appears. Latour believes Plato's famous tale from the seventh book of *Republic* as particularly significant. In it, some slaves are chained up inside a cave whilst the sun shines outside; all they can see are the shadows of the things projected onto the rock face in front of them, and only the philosopher manages to free himself from his chains and see the real things outside the cave. In a single enunciative gesture, it establishes both a theory of a science and one of politics, starting with an essential spatial fracture, which is not so much a rupture between a dysphoric interior and a euphoric exterior, as we often hear, but a strong topical discontinuity, an effective *narrative disjuncture* between places and agents.

Latour observes that there are two contradictory aspects of Plato's tale. On one hand is the clear caesura: the chained prisoners do not know how to escape, and even when they are able to, they prefer not to; they stay inside and squabble, inert and ignorant, subjugated and foolish, the epitome of every 'hell of the social'. The real world, the heavenly reality of things, lies beyond them; it exists in spite of them and makes fun of them. This delineates a primordial schism between society, constitutively ignorant and as such incapable of giving itself rules for sensible co-existence, and nature, located elsewhere, whose entities exist autonomously mute. On the other, Latour goes on, the original caesura is experienced by the philosopher twice and in both directions. A fortunate escapee, the philosopher manages to see the reality of things, achieving both knowledge and truth; then he returns to the cave to tell the ignorant detainees how things really are. And if, in Plato's text, he meets a sticky end, not believed and subsequently lynched by the others, in later times he becomes a scientist; he will manage to give his own word to the world and impose, as a scholar, his own power in it. As a vessel of truth, he will put himself forward as the best possible governor, or at least the ideal advisor to the king. He will explain how things really stand, both inside and outside the cave.

From here comes the tacit, eternal alliance between science and power and between the truth of things (that exist in spite of man) and the human government (which doesn't need those things in order to act and impose its will). It is according to this ideal primitive division between nature and society that scientists and politicians, a priori, divide up their reciprocal expertise, helping each other, a posteriori, every time someone tries to attack their twofold dominion. The more the supposedly evident opposition between nature and culture is loudly proclaimed, with great condescension of the means, the more such a division is actually neutralised, put out of use or negated. This allows for the emergence not only of the culturally constructed character of every supposed natural reality but, above all, of a game that makes such a construction possible. And as soon as one attempts to point to all of this, to reconstruct the semiotic meta-mechanism (to use Lotman's words 1990) that lies at the basis of every cultural opposition between nature and culture, then one is accused of relativism (cognitive) and defeatism (social); one is reproached for not wanting to

accept the real truth of the world (or science) and, with it, the good governance of human beings (or politics). The diarchy of the powerful and the scientist does not forgive: instead they use that which Latour calls the *rhetoric of the fist on the table* and reaffirm, without solving the problems of continuity, with arguments such as ‘well, stop making life complicated; that’s how things are, the facts speak for themselves; if someone doesn’t believe in the laws of nature then they can throw themselves out the window from the eighth floor: in any case, as far as they are concerned the law of gravity is purely a social construct; surely they aren’t scared?’ This is followed by a sort of *fundamentalism of reason*, which evidence suggests is very similar to religious intolerance. It is no coincidence that today the accusation of relativism comes both from the scientific elite and the central institutions of major monotheistic religions. And so, two republican chambers are established and kept under close surveillance: science and politics, nature and society, non-human and human, truth and opinion, heaven and hell and objectivity and subjectivity. An authentic division of power, a political position (or perhaps a metapolitical one) that establishes what falls under the dominion of politics and what falls under the dominion of science. But there is also a scientific (or metascientific) division, an epistemological one, therefore, that decides what falls within the dominion of knowledge and what does not and belongs, therefore, to power. This is the result of the myth of the cave, a sort of participative double opposition: on one hand, a political meta-mechanism that distinguishes (to a lesser degree) that which is political from that which is scientific, and on the other, an epistemological meta-mechanism that distinguishes (to a lesser degree) that which is scientific and that which is political.

5 Facts and Values

Almost as a response, albeit oblique, to accusations of relativism that had already been posited by a number of scientific philosophers (Sokal and Bricmont 1998), Latour (2004) demonstrates here how the fundamental intention of his work (as is generally the case with a sociological-ethnographic approach to science) is in no way nihilistic. On the contrary, his work tends to reconstruct the political-epistemological dispositifs on which concrete scientific practices are founded and the philosophical theories that support it. Furthermore, it aspires to the constitution of ‘a new shared world’ or, rather, the reorganisation of the system – at once, political and scientific – of the two ‘chambers’. From this we locate the conditions of possibility, of an authentic politics of nature.

Politics is defined first and foremost as ‘the sum of tasks that allow for a progressive composition of a shared world’, where by ‘shared world’ we mean a form of totalisation, the constitution of a ‘something’ as an organic and concluded ‘everything’, which very clearly involves inclusions and exclusions, as we will see. According to Latour, in order to build a common world as a collective entity, it is not enough to bring together the two existing chambers of nature and society, established using the double platonic trick. It is also necessary to disarticulate them one

by one from the inside, to deconstruct them into their essential components and to then re-articulate the single elements that have been discovered according to a different order, original in its formulation but that responds to effective practices according to which both science and politics have always operated. So, the new separation of powers” hoped for by Latour foresees an eccentric way of carving up jurisdiction and competencies, power and knowledge, whose constitution will be slow and progressive and without definitive certainties, without rationality to oppose irrationality, where everything will be negotiated between those that tend towards order and closure and those that tend towards disorder and openness. And above all, *that no longer opposes facts and values*, both facts and values are ‘unpacked’, demonstrating their intimately contradictory nature, before being then ‘repacked’ in an efficient way so that they form two new chambers. Let’s start with facts. On the one hand, facts are *facts*, in the sense that they are ‘constructed’ and therefore the concrete outcomes of an operation of production, of a transitive action of transformation of the world that stockpiles heteroclitic material (think of Saussure’s language) in view of a practical or theoretical objective. On the other hand, however, the use of the term ‘fact’ as a noun leads us to forget the work necessary to produce it, much like the question of difference of question between one fact and another: not all facts are constructed in the same way; they find themselves at the same starting point and are equipped with the same guarantees of existence and so on. Furthermore, viewing facts as events that are inert, obtuse and mute that sit there in their own supposed evidence means forgetting that they have been formulated by some theory which uses them as examples of itself, or as empirical manifestations of some abstract model, or as the models themselves or even as expressions of a prototype. It is only by starting from some *theoretical point of view*, often retroactively justified by them, that facts are constructed and then posited as a given – therefore receiving not only a form but a sense.

Similarly, there is an internal problematicity in values. Above all, Latour observes, in our Platonic-modern cultural configuration, values are defined negatively with respect to facts: they follow them. The must being presupposes the being that also wants, in principle, to contribute to the creation. Values try to reintroduce some form of humanity to the fact, without chipping away at the fact as it stands, contributing to a corroboration of its innate insistence upon existing (e.g. first comes cloning, and then we think about it). As a consequences, without any basic material, the moralists end up falling into a quest for basic universal ethics, so far from the minutiae of everyday life and, as such, from the detail of facts, their contribution to which would actually be incredibly useful. The universal ethic loses sight of practical morality, much like the notion of fact had forgotten the production of knowledge.

In one way, much like the other, both facts and values show two faces that are almost entirely opposite. In order to resolve the internal contradiction, Latour argues that it is necessary to keep these two physiognomies separate and rebuild them together, in twos, thus reformulating the political-epistemological system of the two chambers. Maintaining the separation between facts and values means surreptitiously allowing the deception of the continuous passages from one to the other

(think of racism). Reshuffling the cards, however, has as its aim the avoidance of such fraud, returning to the fact all of the pride of its planning phase and, to the value, the efficacy of its material foundation. Let's have a look how this might be possible.

Facts, as we have seen, have two important properties:

1. The ability of an entity to alter the order of the discourse, to interfere with habits, to surprise, to provoke perplexity and to complicate matters. Facts are born when beings of uncertain status ask to be considered; they put forward their candidacy to existence, demanding to be considered.
2. Evidence, the objectivity that closes the discussion, the outcome of an acclaimed acceptance of beings before they have manifested themselves, the institution that forgets the past and the end of discussions.

Values, in turn, have two characteristics:

1. They cause other, unconsidered entities to emerge; they pose the demand of a consultation to see if and whether to admit them to the collective, evaluating the possibility of adding other voices to the call.
2. In the concept of value, there is an almost opposite thrust, that is, to determine the choice, to push for the decision on what should happen and to take the decisions, therefore instituting hierarchies between what is right and what is not, between what is more correct and what is less correct.

In other words, in the old chamber of facts lies a need for *perplexity* and one for *institution*; in the old chamber of values, there is a need for *consultation* and another for *hierarchisation*. In the two new chambers, which Latour respectively calls of *Take into Account* and of *Put in Order*, these four elements find their place in pairs. Perplexity and consultation are located in the chamber of Take into Account (answering the question, how many of us are there?), whereas hierarchisation and institution are ordered within the chamber of Put in Order (answering the question, can we live together?). From this we can draw up the following framework:

1. Power to Take into Account 'How many of us are there?'

1.a. First demand (already inscribed in the concept of fact): 'You will not simplify the number of propositions that must be considered in the discussion' = *perplexity*.

1.b. Second demand (already inscribed in the concept of value): 'You will ensure that the number of voices to participate in the articulation of the propositions will not be circumscribed' = *consultation*.

2. Power to Put in Order: 'Can we live together?'

2.a. Third demand (already inscribed in the concept of value): 'You will discuss the compatibility of the new propositions with those already instituted, in such a way as to maintain all of them in the same shared world that will confer upon them their rightful place' = *hierarchy*.

2.b. Fourth demand (already inscribed in the concept of fact): 'Once the propositions have been instituted, you will no longer discuss their legitimate presence at the heart of collective living' = *institution*.

6 Political Fantasies and Mad Cows

Let's try and follow in a little more detail the process that articulates these four positions, bearing in mind certain issues. First of all, the process is circular: it can be started at any point. Secondly, it should be remembered that the various stages of this political-epistemological process derive from a recomposition of the implicit elements present in facts and values, de-structuring them and neutralising their opposition. Such stages, considered from positions that are, for the most part, scientific or scientific-political (such as, e.g. ecology), can be extremely useful when reflecting on other circumstances, such as those of social politics (think of the consequences of mass migration) or, as is our case, of that liminal sphere between nature and culture and science and politics that is animality. Finally, it should be noted how, in neutralising the difference between facts and values, the model has its own dose of useful ambiguity as it often passes without problem – or scandal – from the descriptive to the prescriptive, from being to having to be, from formal principle to substantial concreteness.

Let's return to the new subdivision of the two chambers as considered by Latour. The 'high chamber', called Take into Account, poses a numeric problem: how many propositions and how many entities must we take into consideration in order to articulate the shared world in a coherent way? The theoretical enemies, in this case, are scientific reductionism and political exclusion – as aprioristic as they are difficult to kill off. In the 'high chamber', there is no desire for an arbitrary or a priori reduction in the number of entities put forward. There is a kind of thrust towards the internal realm of the subjects who would like to be taken into account and whose candidacy gives rise to perplexity. This is what Latour calls *need for reality* – in which *recalcitrance* rather than 'reality' is the evidence given here: the obstinate desire to be (precisely) taken into account. This is followed by the activation of a consultation in order to open political contests or scientific controversies around these emerging subjects, around the perplexity they cause and around the aspirations they harbour. Consultation must be broad and must not be rushed so that it can measure the importance of the candidates. From here comes the opening of a series of inquiries looking for trustworthy witnesses, certified opinions and credible spokespeople. It is that which Latour calls, structurally speaking, *need for jurisdiction*.

The 'lower chamber', known as Put in Order, poses the problem of the continual organisation and reorganisation of new and old actors, both human and non-human. From this emerges an issue of compatibility between the old and the new, in such a way that ensures the new does not supplant the old, or vice versa, so that the old leaves the new space to act. The resulting hierarchy, which comes from the consultation that has taken place in the first chamber, is explicit and motivated, but it is continually being negotiated. From this comes a *need for publicness* (here 'publicness' is opposed to the 'clandestine' but also to the opacity of the procedures). It can finally proclaim institutionalisation, the final decision on social order and the laws of nature, on the overall physiognomy of the shared world. From this comes a *need for closure*.

Let's look at an example that has a great deal to do with animality. In the early years of the new millennium, as you will remember, there was much discussion of *prions* with the explosion of the hotly debated political/scientific/ecological episode that was BSE or mad cow disease. Early on, the question was framed in terms of the Platonic cave: on one hand there was a nature to be discovered (what is the real cause of the disease?) and, on the other, a society to govern (how to safeguard public health?). From this came the question posed by the French President Jacques Chirac to the celebrated professor Darmont, expert in the field, on how much responsibility for the disease could be attributed to certain nonconventional proteins called prions. But Darmont's response broke with the Platonic structure. He simply said, 'I don't know', as he did not intend to take on a responsibility – by affirming anything regarding the supposed 'natural' role of that protein – that transcended his role as a scientist. Darmont made it clear with that response, which at first sight might seem reactionary, that the issue was not uniquely or simply scientific but also, and perhaps above all, political, economic, gastronomic, touristic, ecological, technological, entrepreneurial and so on. It was an issue that, as such, required an obligatory (and happy) journey through both chambers, *Take into Account* and *Put in Order*. First, if we think about it, prions not only left researchers perplexed but also the farmers, Eurocrats, consumers, animal feed producers, the cows and the politicians. Their candidature to existence generates a need for a broad consultation between biologists, who quickly place their expert knowledge at the disposal of the collective, often contradicting other witnesses or spokespeople such as veterinarians, farmers, consumers, butchers, officials and cows, calves and even sheep. The levels of alarm were high, and the only way to face them effectively was to no longer put forward the *ancien régime* that distinguished between facts and values, assuming, in a positive way, an order that came in course without being rushed. And it is, in any case, necessary to stabilise the controversy in order to return to some kind of everyday life in which new hierarchies are instituted between that which is important and that which is less so. What should win out? The tastes of consumers, the country's economy or the animal's wellbeing? Or perhaps the balance of nature or the status of the researching scientists (to one of whom, Stanley Prusiner, a Nobel prize has already been awarded for his discovery of prions)? The institution of a clear hierarchy, public and negotiated, meant deciding at the same time if and what needed to change, how the way in which we eat meat or feed cows needed to be modified, how to present countries such as France or the UK to the tourism market as countries that love the taste of great meat and so on. To express an opinion regarding the existence of prions was, therefore, at once both a political gesture and a scientific assumption. Darmont was implicitly suggesting that, at some point, someone had to decide whether, from the perspective of overarching social organisation, the risk of contracting the disease was relevant or not, pertinent or not. At some point someone would have to ask much more radical questions – both ethical and economic at the same time – regarding the number of possible deaths that would it 'make it worthwhile' – as Latour reminds us, 8000 people die each year on French motorways, a figure long institutionalised as an assumed risk given the positive force that those motorways are for French society. Deciding where the axe should fall between eth-

ics and economics is a political act but also a scientific one: Latour believes it hypocritical to distinguish between the two roles. But the story doesn't end there. The process, as we have said, is circular, so that which is deliberately and publicly left outside the shared world, precisely in order for it to be able to claim at any moment its own candidature to existence and to want to try to enter into it. From this comes Latour's ulterior theoretical passage: that of the constitution of exteriority, of a *new exteriority*, which is no long aprioristically nature but rather the outcome of an explicit process of exteriorisation. Exteriority is that which it has been decided will remain outside but that has a continual possibility of being called upon, allowing for a dynamic reactivation of the entire process. One day, prions will have their say.

7 Four Ontologies

This is the point at which I would like to reflect on the work of anthropologist Philippe Descola (2013). He starts from the idea of elaborating *action strategies* as intermediary forms between depth and the superficial, profound universal and idiosyncratic structures of manifestation. Here we have four types, each disarticulated between themselves by differences and oppositions, starting with the different ways in which discontinuity and continuity, interiority and physicality, the psychic and physical planes and human and non-human are perceived (also animals and plants and even artefacts and various divinities). Descola also says that we strive to make judgement outcomes in identity between ourselves and the things around us.

First we have *animism*, typical of the Amazonian Achuar, but not exclusive to it. According to animism, animals and plants (as well as devices, artefacts, supernatural beings, divinities, spirits and various other presences) have a soul, they are people like us and they have forms of intentionality, action plans and an ability to reason, feelings exactly like our own. They are 'dressed' in another way, they have a different appearance to the human one, but they belong to society on an equal par with humans. They therefore have the same rights and laws. Animals and plants, for example, have relationships and therefore an alliance with humans. Apes, of course, are like our brothers and sisters in-law: they are our relatives but only up to a certain point. If necessary, we can hunt and eat them. There is, therefore, a level of appearance and a level of reality. Society is made up of humans and non-humans: this is the reason, as Latour would say, it needs to be reassembled once more.

Totemism is, instead, typical of Australian aborigines. According to the aborigines, there are spirits linked to different places, a kind of *genii loci*, which act as a model – mould for the creation of various totemic groups. These include living beings – regardless of whether they are human, animal or plant – with shared generic characteristics, the same morals or physical qualities, such as behaviour (slow, lively, resourceful, passive), temperament (choleric, calm, happy, melancholy), form (large, burly, slim, round) and consistency (soft, hard, flexible, rigid). It is therefore possible that a woman, a serpent, an insect and a shrub are all slim, calm and resourceful, meaning they belong to the same group. This is because they

Table 1 Descola's ontologies

	Interiority	Physicality
Animism	Continuity	Discontinuity
Naturalism	Discontinuity	Continuity
Totemism	Continuity	Continuity
Analogism	Discontinuity	Discontinuity

descend from the same totem, and so despite their difference of species, they are different manifestations and incarnations of the same totem/model.

As for *naturalism*, this is our dominant ontology, and it is a rather recent one that has come into being with the experimental sciences. According to naturalism, humans and non-humans have the same natural basis, the same physicality and the same materiality, but only humans have an interiority. This is a way of totalising the world as other to us, using the form of a unique and compact nature. This is Kant's famous 'cosmological idea', highly plausible as a normative idea for scientific knowledge, and therefore rather paradoxical in facts, the empirical and that which we experience. From this comes both the exploitation of a natural world that is not ours, for common use and consumption, and the parallel problem of having to defend and safeguard it, because it affects us (a little light ecology). Lastly we have *analogism*, typical of the Orient and China, as well as the Andes and our own Renaissance. Here, everything is different from everything else; we live in a mode of singularity, of radical difference. From this comes a sense of disorder, which we can overcome by proposing vague analogies, a jungle of similarities by which things, though diverse, resemble one another through determined characteristics, in a cross-referencing/deferment ad infinitum, and without specific criteria. One thing is like another because both are warm; this other thing is then like a third because both are female; another two are similar because they are dry; and so on. The schema looks like Table 1.

Descola clarifies how every ontology has specific references, not necessarily in the same territories. These are ideal types that we can see throughout our own history, ways of objectivising and of perceiving continuity and discontinuity between ourselves and the world. A biologist (naturalist given their consideration of living things) may well consult a horoscope (analogism) or speak to his/her cat (animism). And so, rather than maintaining a distinct separation between these four ontologies, it will be rather more useful for us to see if and how they are interwoven together in our modern day, giving rise to extremely diverse forms of thought and behaviour based on possible hierarchies and the relative dominance at times of one ontology and then another.

I have an exemplary case that is more than a simple example because, according to Kuhn (1977),² it could be a thought experiment (*gedankenexperiment*) for us. It regards *natural* or *organic* wine, which given its name makes clear the evident problems in the problematic connection between facts and values. Natural wine, to use

²See also Goodman (1978, 1988).

Latour's conceptualisation, is the classic *entity called into question* that demands to *enter the collective*. This poses the problem of it eventually being *taken into consideration*, or determined as an entity in itself, different and autonomous from conventional wine, on the side of oenologists, wine critics and consumers. *Perplexities* arise regarding its value, with all the imaginable reactions ('it smells funny', 'it's undrinkable', etc.) but also its positive vindications, not just ontological but, as we will see, also ethical. Constructing it as an entity requires a change in the ethics of its production and of it being *made* as a fact. It sets forth the problem of its *institution* (at a certain point, this becomes part of the wine system, with labels and brands, from this, e.g. comes the difference between 'natural' – a generic term that is not branded – and 'organic', a term that is branded, the fruit of a precise form of recognition with stamps, guidelines and so on). Finally, there is the question of *hierarchy* (is natural wine more or less tasty than conventional wine?), thus leading to the reorganisation of the entire wine industry.

The trend for organic wine is a not indifferent tile of the complex mosaic of gastronomy or, rather, of 'gastromania' (Marrone 2014a). At first sight, the expression 'natural wine' seems an oxymoron: there is nothing more artificial than wine, nothing further from the idea of nature as a separate reality that exists in spite of the human. Hemingway said that wine was one of the greatest signs of civilisation in the world. If this phrase has any meaning, it is that which becomes clear when it is *placed in a narrative relationship with that which it opposes*: the conventional, if not industrial, wine that globalisation has made uniform both in terms of taste and production. A standardised taste, derived from the general demand to objectivise the quality of wine, corresponds to a production that has done all it can to achieve that taste, modifying the product according to the model to be maintained. And so, wines have ended up the same, regardless of who owns the vines and land or the traditions and styles of the winemakers: put plainly, regardless of *terroir*. In response to this planetary uniformisation comes the idea of a wine defined as natural, organic or biodynamic, depending on the rigour shown both in the vineyards and the wine cellar, exploiting the myriad variables 'naturally' (or rather, habitually, traditionally) faced in wine production. On one hand, then, wine is understood as natural *because of negatives*: vines cultivated *without* the use of fertilisers, herbicides or pesticides and *no* yeasts added to the must, *no* filtration and so on. On the other, this trend towards elimination (or rather, this inversion of trend with regard to common viticulture and its use of chemicals) is not an empty gesture towards a nature that, working on its own, would obtain better results. In fact, it is accompanied by the *value of diversity*, biological and anthropological, and therefore to the multiplication of possibilities within wine production and, with these, the possible quality and plurality of tastes derived from it (*analogism?*).

By refusing the idea of an objectification of the taste of wine, we open ourselves to a host of possibilities both regarding the moment in which we taste the wine, which no longer searches for a single prototype, and only one of quality, and, most importantly when it comes to production, a taste that must no longer follow pre-established standards, favouring the potentialities of every single *terroir*, and therefore bio- and ethnodiversity. In this way nature becomes plural, in a sort of *totemism*

that doesn't know how to be such: *terroir* is a kind of totemic model from which vines and vineyards, cellars and oenologists and farmers and businesses are instituted.

Natural wine, you will have noticed, is not a thing, a product or a finished entity but the long and complex process that has brought it into being. We understand why such strong passions, both positive and negative, are inspired when it comes to natural wine. There are those who rail against the destruction of the age-old art of wine-making: organic wine, they say, gives off a bad smell. There are also those who, on the contrary, make natural wine their mission, if not religion, which when poured into the glass shows existence in its complexity, in the name of values such as honesty, mutual respect, equilibrium and universal harmony. From the aesthetic comes the ethical: there is an entirely ethical dimension to nature that is constructed around an ethical-political consideration of 'other' beings which, as Latour would say, are not represented in the parliament and do not have adequate rights or duties. Natural wine poses the problem of the ethics of things, of the vine and of the wine cellar before that of human beings: here we have an *animist* dimension of *deep* ecology or *anima mundi*, almost *new age*, in which the problem is posed regarding the rights of non-humans, thus upturning the Kantian mechanism of man as an end and not a means.

8 An Unsteady Threshold

It was worth pausing over these theoretical and epistemological presuppositions of that which we would like to call 'zoosemiotics 2.0', from which the question of animality can be reinterpreted using a semiotic and anthropological framework. Semiotising the animal – telling of it, saying it, representing it, thinking it, making it an object of science and knowledge – means managing a politics of the unsteady threshold: that which separates the animal, more or less obstinately, from the human being, first guaranteeing it a supposedly natural autonomy, one that is apparently free from ethical-political implications, and then undergoing continual incursions, on different levels and with different intensities, of the animal-human. To define the animal is to define the human, of course. What is more interesting, however, is observing how, often surreptitiously, we give an animal a place in the kingdom of 'nature', inserting it, in parallel, among the articulations of the social and among the institutions of culture (relatives, affections and affiliations, strategies and conflicts, etc.). In other words, making it an object of knowledge means demanding of it some political vision and praxis. In doing this, the current environmental, ecological and animalist demands, as well as vegetarian and vegan ideologies and ethics, have done nothing more than show us the Emperor's new clothes. There has always been a politics of animals: now it has meticulous and very determined spokespeople.

Semiotics, the science of systems and signification processes, does not escape this chiasma, which, from its first research strategies, inserted the (old) question of language in the different animal species among its foundational objectives. This was