

SEMIOTIKA / SEMIOTICS

The Signifiers of Democracy and Commons

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Abstract. The current financial and moral crisis has triggered many discussions on the function of political institutions as well as the degree of participation of the peoples in decision making and in the political life in general. Another open issue in academic and political discussions is the management of common resources as well as what one could possibly call common (i.e. spaces, institutions, values, traditions, and customs). Many voices coming from the 20th century (Castoriadis, Arendt) are raising doubts about the form of our political systems the content of democracy and the use of public space. If we are indeed living in the era of a shift of paradigm in social and political life, humanities should treat the question of new forms of life, coexistence and governance and, hence contribute to the reconceptualisation of classical terms used to describe institutions, values and imaginary significations. This paper aims at examining the content of signifieds and the use of signifiers (signifieds of the signifiers) related to political theory, such as democracy, public, private, common(s), in the work of liberal thinkers and thinkers supporting political autonomy theories, and thus participating in the overall discussion regarding modern political transformations.

Key words: *signifiers, democracy, commons, public sphere, liberalism, political autonomy.*

Question and Method

The universal discussion on the ongoing financial and debt crisis during the last years has almost immediately shifted to other topics like policy making, forms of regimes, the nature of politics, the ethics of governance, the ownership of common resources as well as the new meanings arising out of the transformation of social relations and imaginaries. It is more than obvious that all crises in the human history left deep footprints in societies that experienced radical changes and unusual instability. Nowadays, six years after the outbreak of a global systemic turbulence, what seems to be at stake is not only the future of several countries in terms of financial surviving, but also words and significations of everyday life we used to take for granted. Groups of citizens and entire societies express the will for a certain restart, which seems to entail also the emancipation of terms used to describe financial notions from restricted applications by experts and stakeholders. This movement doesn't necessarily mean that a potential re-conceptualisation will definitely have a negative outcome for the life of peoples.

One might easily notice that in the current redefinition of words such as economy, representation and politics are involved different social movements and the struggle for prevalence is clearly open. Of course, this phenomenon is not unique in the human history: Thucydides, describing the circumstances of major political turmoil during the Peloponnesian War, states that words changed their ordinary meaning and took a new one that was given to them in order to support different groups of interest (Thucydides, 3.82.4). New or forgotten signifiers come on the surface, which supposedly reflect new trends in social life, while old signifieds lose their traditional semantic value and become part of strategic misrepresentations of mean-

ings. The task of humanities could be in that case the active participation in the dialogue regarding the meaning of words depicting political procedures and social values, while the task of semiotics as a discipline could be the investigation of how signifiers function in different contexts, having as a result to be applied sometimes in completely opposite signifieds.

This paper aims at exploring various uses of the term “democracy” – i.e. what we call today “democratic government” and what is used to be called democracy in Ancient Athens and in the theoretical framework of political autonomy – as well as the term “commons” – in its modern meaning in the works of liberal and Marxist thinkers – as they constitute two of the central issues of our globalised society: on the one hand, we will focus on the term representing the form and the content of the political governance of our states and, on the other hand, on the definition of common values regarding public life and the management of vital resources such as land, water, energy. In all societies, the handling of common resources as well as the definition and the significance of public sphere is a matter of political administration. Politics is an affair of how people understand or imagine the best way of resolving problems that are related to everyday life. For this reason, democracy, as the almost commonly accepted optimum political regime, is closely correlated – although not exclusively – to the answer to the question: “who owes vital resources and how those are allocated to human beings?”

In doing so, we will explore the thoughts of political philosophers who have treated the question of democracy as a regime, namely Aristotle, Rousseau, Schmitt and Castoriadis, and thinkers that have treated the question of the commons – in its modern acceptations –, namely Hardt and Negri, Hardin, Ostrom, De Angelis and Arendt.

To that end, i.e. the study of the signifiers “democracy” and “commons”, we will evoke the classical theory of connotation, which, even at the very beginning of the semiotic theory, was considered a cardinal point of reference for every theory of language. More precisely, according to Barthes (2014, p.108), as in all systems of significations, containing a level of expression and a level of content, the signification coincides with the relation between the two levels, connotation is the result of the creation of a new level of expression as an extension of the first relation between the first two levels (expression and content). In other words, we will have a close look at how the signifiers “democracy” and “commons” are correlated with their signifieds in different contexts and how this relation creates a new signifier that could have an ideological use. For Barthes, ideology is the form of the signifieds of connotation (Greimas & Courtès, 1979, p.63).

Understanding language as an organism – and, from a historical point of view, as a body subjected not only to evolution, but also to regressions – we would argue that human communication, on the basis of the first network of meanings created through the ordinary use of language, seeks for and constructs second networks of meanings, which are the expansion or the destruction of the first ones. We comprehend as connotation all cultural units, which a clear definition of the signifier can activate and bring to the mind of the recipient of a message (Eco, 1972, p.92).

Hence, the spotlight from a semiotic point of view will be transposed to the signifier, which, due to the meaning attached to it – or eventually despite of it – creates a new universe of significations. As Agamben puts it:

“the fact that a word always has more sense than it can actually denote corresponds to the theorem of the point of excess. Precisely this disjunction is at issue both in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s theory of the constitutive excess of the signifier over the signified [...] and in Emile Benveniste’s doctrine of the irreducible opposition between the semiotic and the semantic” (Agamben, 1998, p.25).

Democracy and commons are two signifiers literally overloaded in the history of political thought, due to their original signification which brings to mind positive and at the same time crucial ideas for the survival and the well-being of mankind. Let us begin with “democracy”.

Democracy

1. What We Call Democratic?

This excess mentioned by Claude Lévi-Strauss is an amplified semiotic value that some terms acquire commensurate with the contexts in which the former are to be found and to the degree that their determination by the latter becomes elementary and reconstructs the signified. The signified of the term “democracy”, for instance, could be defined as the regime, in which citizens discuss and decide by themselves for the affairs of their state. However the use of the term in contexts that apparently have not to do directly with political administration and governance – e.g. human rights, social relations and ways of discussion – gradually weakened the original signified in favor of a series of positive and, thus desirable, signifieds: the interlocutor who respects the rules of a civilized dialogue is often called “a democratic

personality” or just “democrat”. It is not however obvious that we could indubitably call “democrat” someone who supports a totalitarian or racist idea but nonetheless observes at the same time the rules of a proper discussion.

The issue of the equality of human beings is often linked with democratic procedures that enable and ensure the same human and political rights for everyone: freedom of speech, equal access to political decision making, equal opportunities to participation in public dialogue, etc. Nonetheless, according to Schmitt, a real democracy is based on the equal treatment of equals and the unequal treatment of unequals, while equality remains a rather liberal – and parliamentary – and not a democratic value; equality is not a regime but an individualist moral principle and worldview (1996, pp.116–7). Consequently, the government by discussion is another liberal principle and not a democratic one (Ibid. p.111).

This is how a signifier could be used in an entirely unusual environment and therefore be vulnerable to modifications of its signified. The reason for the legitimate use of “democracy” in contexts that have few things to do with decision making is the important distinction between politics and the political. Politics refers to actions in the framework of legislative, executive and judicial power concerning a political entity such as a community, a nation, a multinational organization. The political is a concept that refers to any action that may concern institutions and values of a collective entity. For instance, the conceptions of a community about how religion influences life is profoundly political, although *prima facie* it seems that it doesn’t constitute necessarily the subject of a central political regulation. This is how human rights are a question of the political within the societies, regardless that in the most of the times they are also included in the official legislation.

However, this positive value attributed to democracy has repeatedly led to significant misconceptions and intentional falsifications up to today. As democracy conserves its positive connotation independently of contexts, it is used by states or political parties to justify interventions in other countries, war crimes and totally unacceptable ideologies such as racism and anti-Semitism. As, we generally tend to believe that everyone who uses the term democracy believes in a set of values that should be at any rate included in it, we sometimes neglect to examine the content of the actions made in its name. It is needless to insist that this set of values is not democratic but liberal.

It is evident that the connotational function of the signifier dominates over the primordial identification of the signified to the signifier. Obviously, the elemental signified of democracy “where people decide for their own affairs” is completely absent, and a new one emerges: this of the state, the country or the nation. As democracy, in modernity, is identified with elections and the political right for one to vote and be candidate for a public office, we are often indifferent to the official name of a state containing the term “democracy”, providing that regular elections are taking place, even when there is only one candidate or the procedure is strongly biased. The contemporary massive democracy could be based on the identity between rulers

and citizens, which is opposite to the institution of parliament (Ibid. 119).

There are numerous examples of modern states that call themselves democracies and still use or threat to use force against other sovereign countries as well as there are examples of European political parties that contain the term “democracy” in their name and at the same time propagate doctrines of hatred and their devotion to god-like – most of the times deceased – leaders. What is really important here is not only the fact that this kind of institutions and organizations distort the positive connotation of the signifier “democracy”, but also take advantage of it in order to eliminate it. The history of interwar years, when a democratically elected party established a dictatorship and drove a nation to kill millions, is quite representative.

This is what we could call the revenge of the original signified: if we unquestionably accept the alteration of the original signified, which is the active participation of citizens in decision-making, and we unconditionally affirm the current positive, but at the same time vague connotation, then we would leave ourselves defenseless against those who wouldn’t hesitate to abuse democracy or yet to forge institutions and values. It is precisely this absence of citizens from the public speech and policy making that encourages the emergence of authoritarian ideas and actions. We should also mention here that the problem does not even reside in the conditions under which elections are taking place, but rather in what are the conceptions in our societies about democracy. To this intent, we will call upon some thoughts of political philosophy from Antiquity up to the last century.

2. How Democracy Used To Be Called?

We will now try to offer some insights on the signified of democracy and how its structural modification results in the misrepresentation of the concept, in a way that the signifier could bear even an opposite connotation. Firstly, democracy is a regime and its model dates back to Ancient Athens. Aristotle provides in the *Politics* one of the first and most famous definitions of democracy:

“it is thought to be democratic for the offices to be assigned by lot, for them to be elected oligarchic, and democratic for them not to have a property-qualification, oligarchic to have one” (*Politics*, 1294b9–11).

If we acknowledge this signified of democracy, we should admit that our regimes are not democratic, but oligarchic, given that the offices are elected. The argument that the assignment of offices by lot could be very dangerous, given that not all people are in the position to express or want to defend the common good, is well-known. Furthermore, one may claim that the participation of all citizens in the decision making and the enactment of laws is impossible, as the magnitude of population growth of modern states does not permit collective procedures in political acts, and, after all, it would presuppose a wide political education, which is to be defined as such. Nonetheless, for some thinkers of our era – e.g. Castoriadis (2008, pp.325–6), who observes that real democracy means the participation of the entire community in decision making, and Schmitt (1996, pp.111–13 and 121), who emphasises

on the fact that parliamentarism belongs to the liberal intellectual world and not to the democratic one – it is not justifiable for one to call our parliamentary, or indirect, democracies, with the same name, which was used in Ancient Athens. If we would accept the term “oligarchy” the negative connotation would undermine the legitimacy of our regimes in people’s imaginary. It is not a mere question of form; it is rather a question of content.

At any rate, the absence of property-qualification in the election of officers in our political regimes could be considered as a democratic institution even in our societies, although we must confess that in our political systems the elections are the most of the times an extremely money-consuming procedure. This assumption could mean that, however equal all citizens are in offering themselves as candidates for public offices, in real life, we ascertain that the more money a candidate has, the more efficiently he can promote his candidature and eventually get voted. This is why the philosopher, commenting the way Athenians have organised their political system, argues that:

“[T]he people has made itself master of everything, and administers everything by decrees and by jury courts in which the people is the ruling power, for even the cases tried by the Council have come to the people. And they seem to act rightly in doing this, for a few are more easily corrupted by gain and by influence than the many” (*Athenian Constitution*, 41.2.).

This quote introduces us into two of the core problems of our modern republics: lack of peoples’ participation in politics and corruption.

Obsolete and applicable only to ancient societies though these signifieds may seem, the question of the exercise of political power through the representation is still to be answered. Rousseau, examining the nature of humans as political beings, stated that:

“Sovereignty can not be represented by the same reason to be inalienable; consists essentially in the general will and the will is not shown: it is one or the other. The deputies of the people, therefore, are not and cannot be their representatives; they are only their commissioners and definitely cannot solve anything. Every law the people have not ratified in person is void” (Rousseau, 1997, pp.251–3).

He concludes that English people think they are free, but they are actually free only for one day every five years: during the elections of their deputies. Castoriadis, two centuries later, will add that they cannot claim freedom even for that day, because they cede their political identity although in fact it is not transferable (Castoriadis, 1999, p.29). In their thought, political identity is nothing more than the natural will of human beings to take care of their own affairs without any kind of intermediation whatsoever. How this could be feasible in the states of the past three centuries and today is still to be found.

We might assume then, according to Aristotle, Rousseau and Castoriadis, that the alteration of the signified of democracy modified radically the function of the signifier, which still represents a common value. The content inevitably keeps pace with the form: as far as we accept a – to a certain extent – oligarchic system of governance and we

constantly refuse to participate in the decision making, democracy will be just an illusion in the hands of few people. Living in republics where the human rights are not self-evident and for that reason they must be protected and citizens' vigilance is a *sine qua non* requirement for that purpose, means that we do not live in societies of equality. A pure democratic society is based in political equality which assures the same rights for all people. If this is uncertain, perhaps we should cast doubt on the quality of our political institutions.

Commons

1. *Common as an Adjective*

In a real democracy, society and politics are united, since the latter is exercised by the former and does not condition it. On the contrary, in our societies people are frequently characterized as apathetic; idiot is an ancient Greek term used with the meaning of individuals retreated to private life (*idiōtikē zōē*), that did not take part in public political life and preferred to deal only with their own affairs; citizens, who refuse to participate in the creation and development of commons, namely, according to Hardt and Negri, the management of all public affairs, the control of production and the making of major decisions such as war and peace (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p.411; cf. Magoulas, 2012, p.94). Commons, in this context, seem to mean not only all powers of the government, as they were defined by Montesquieu (Book 11, Ch. 6) and exist in our political systems, but also the production and distribution of goods.

Commons are another term, the signifier of which entails a series of connotations not included in the first attribution of a signified to it, and it would be possibly crucial for the future of social and political relations. Common, in our era, could be understood either as an adjective or as a noun; on the one hand, it is not evident to which noun the property predicated by the adjective is applied, while, on the other hand, the signified of the noun is not unanimously defined. The divergence in both cases reveals fundamental political and ideological differences.

We will first try to tackle the commons as an adjective. A famous historical example of the use of commons is that of Thomas Müntzer, the German theologian of the Reformation era, who confessed under torture about the community of peasants, of which he was the leader that:

“It was their article of belief and they wanted to establish this principle, ‘All property should be held in common’ (*Omnia sunt communia*) and should be distributed each according to their needs as the occasion required. Any prince, count, or lord who did not want to do this, after first being warned about it, should be beheaded or hanged” (Müntzer, 1993, p.200).

Omnia comprises here all kinds of goods, property, lands, water, i.e. materials necessary for the life and the well-being of human beings. In late Middle-Ages, the farmer who had access to and cultivated common lands used to be called “a commoner”, term which also meant the one who was a member of neither the nobility, nor the priesthood.

Moreover, nowadays, in political and social contexts, common is a synonym of “public”. Common affairs are

those who interest more than one person and may refer to decisions concerning a community and wider bodies of citizens, such as states. In that case, common is not only the management of a product or a source, but also a crucial judgment regarding the defence or the surviving of the community, or a system of beliefs shared by many persons. Common can be a good, but also a past, a tradition, a conception, a moral code, a destiny. Sometimes, the latter is a means for a group of people to control the essentials, which are the necessary goods for the existence of a community.

What is not directly said in the case of common goods is the fact that the criteria, according to which those were distributed, were not mere economical but also represented social relations. As it is defined by basic economic theories, goods can be or cannot be rivalrous and excludable: when the consumption of a good precludes its consumption by another person, then the good is rivalrous; when we have to pay for a good in order to consume it then the good is excludable. In all cases, the distribution and the consumption of a good is not only an issue of a mathematical approach of economy. What is behind any management of goods is political thought and action.

Regardless of that, in that sense, when we talk about commons we are referring to common goods, things that apparently belong – or may belong – to everyone indistinctively. Nevertheless, the restriction of this signifier to common goods has a deep impact on the way we think and construct our relations. Religion, morality, myths, art may be common and may also condition the way goods are shared in a society; however, we can indisputably assume that those common concepts are more than that. From a semiotic point of view, they are common networks of meanings and common interpretations of fundamental questions, such as the origins and the destination of human life.

2. *Commons as a Noun*

For the same reason, the noun “commons” is usually regarded as a synonym of the phrase “common goods”. Some of the most influential political theories regarding the commons during the last fifty years tend to treat the term as synonym of resources. On the one hand, the liberal thinker, Garrett Hardin, examines the term as the common use of rare resources, which are rivalrous, either excludable or not, fact which will unavoidably lead – if there is no central management either by a state or by a market – to the tragedy of their destruction, given that our planet is of course finite and the population growing (Hardin, 1968, p.1244). This is the famous theory about the commons as the theatre where is played the tragedy of the extinction of necessary means for the survival of mankind. The tragedy is solved, when an extra-social – or, at least, presented that way – institution will undertake the management of goods. Commons can be also this management as a result of a social consensus.

On the other hand, Elinor Ostrom, although she investigates various forms of effective management of the commons – she calls them “common pool resources” – like central administration, private initiatives as well as actions

of communities on the basis of self-organisation (Ostrom, 1999, pp.20–1), approaches the social relations only to the extent that they are related to the production of goods and the reproduction of the communities. Even if she recognizes the fact that efficient management of the goods flow can be achieved by the traditional communities, which, besides, handled the issue for centuries or millennia, still she does not include any cultural or anthropological approach to the commons; it is just economy and relations built to that end.

In contrast, the Marxist Massimo De Angelis proceeds further to the acceptance that

“[c]ommons are not simply resources we share – conceptualizing the commons involves three things at the same time. First, all commons involve some sort of common pool of resources, understood as non-commodified means of fulfilling people’s needs. Second, the commons are necessarily created and sustained by *communities* [...]. Communities are sets of commoners who share these resources and who define for themselves the rules according to which they are accessed and used. In addition to these two elements [...] the third and most important element in terms of conceptualizing the commons is the verb ‘to common’ – the social process that creates and reproduces the commons” (De Angelis, 2010).

Nonetheless, De Angelis doesn’t also avoid another rather resources-oriented view of the commons, since he, as Hardin and Ostrom, considers that economy and the management of resources is the only field where social values and relations are generated. It seems that those thinkers, being part of two of modernity’s most significant movements and schools of political philosophy, Liberalism and Marxism, cannot help but considering economy not only the basis of all human activities and the filter, through which all actions are highlighted, but also as the only field/generator of human values and perceptions of the world.

The connotation of the signifier “commons” keeps its original worth, i.e. “something that we all share”, but the signified appears mainly to be that of common resources and common relations in handling those resources. The connotation of the signifier is neither positive nor negative, but it indicates a fact, which we are involved in, or a thing that belongs to all of us. What could possibly amplify the signified and at the same time correspond perfectly to the main property of the commons? An answer to this issue could be the term public, which wouldn’t be perceived only in a cultural sense but also in a firm political one. If something is common, it could be public in a sense that all members of a community would be interested in its nature and destination.

As Hannah Arendt points out:

“The term ‘public’ signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it. [...] To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time” (Arendt, 1998, p.52).

The connotation of public, as opposed to private, implies here all human activities that compose essentially our civi-

lization and goes beyond the simple management of common resources. Common resources and their management are only a part of the common world: even though human history is a great scene of battles and struggles for the infinite conquest of material goods or just the narration of human dominance on nature, it also consists of great moments, where the human intellect tried and somehow managed to go beyond its mortal nature.

Conclusions

The concept of the commons could be eventually analyzed as a way of public communication insofar that the latter corresponds to anything we could call sometimes civilization sometimes culture; Kantian terminology in the essay “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose” would define culture as *morality* (*Moralität*) and civilization as *science* or *technology* (*Wissenschaft*) (p.26). Subsequently, we could talk about political culture, as the way of political communication, about economical culture, as the way of economical communication, and, by dividing the social space in parts, we could reach the limit of our personal culture, which is the living together of two persons (Kotsakis, 2012, pp.80–2). This is a political perspective of the commons examined through the intermediation of communication as a methodological tool. The mission of a semiotic theory could thus be to contribute to the highlighting of those concepts, task which is feasible and extremely beneficial in view of a general history of ideas: the semiotic research, after having confirmed the potential identifications of signifiers to signifieds as well as the valid connotations of the former, could advance to the scrutiny of political, cultural and social significance of terms such as democracy and the commons (Magoulas, 2014, p.28).

There is now an open discussion about the nature of representation in political life, the meaning of politicality of human nature, the content of democracy, the kinds of democracy, the concept of the commons and the population growth along with the scarcity of vital resources. If the future of our societies is closely linked with the function of political systems and the management of common resources, then we might have to re-conceptualize those two signifiers, which represent two of the most important values for the everyday life. Therefore, on the one hand, democratic should be called a regime where people participate directly in the decision making and the execution of decisions. On the other hand, the term commons should include not only the essential means for the survival of the societies as well as the relations created in this framework, but also any kind of social communication and interaction such as customs, traditions, and art.

The current economical, political and moral crisis, together with the unresolved environmental issues, is a fine opportunity for the global community to revise the meanings of our institutions, to reexamine traditional signifieds and reveal the fact that our actions are absolutely compromised by the social imaginary which describes them. This operation presupposes the political reactivation of citizens. As Negri and Revel suggest,

“for nearly three centuries we have thought of democracy as the administration of public matters, that is, as the institu-

tionalization of the Statist appropriation of the common. Today democracy can no longer be thought of but in radically different terms: as common management of the common” (Negri & Revel, 2008).

If we are about to live in a truly common world, then we have to find the common *modus vivendi* and *operandi* in the creation of institutions and the management of resources.

The reappropriation of public sphere as a substantial negation of individualism could be a solution to the problem of who is supposed to decide for the distribution of common goods and the preservation of common culture, ethics and traditions. At the same time, this opening of the public discussion would be the expression of a genuine democratic value of a foremost political importance. An active citizen, who is well-informed about his history and the meanings of concepts he uses in his everyday life, is the best antidote against any totalitarian and inhuman ideology and practice. As Hannah Arendt argues,

“the ideal individual for absolutism is neither the convinced Nazi, nor the convinced communist, but the person who cannot make the distinction between fact and mythmaking (namely, the person who ignores the reality of experience) and between truth and lies (namely, the person who ignores the rules of thinking)” (Arendt, 1988, p.272).

Semiotics has much work to do to this direction.

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Demokratijos ir paprastų žmonių (liaudies) žymikliai

Santrauka

Šiuolaikinė finansinė ir moralinė krizė nuolat įžiebia diskusijas dėl politinių institucijų funkcijų ir dėl paprastų žmonių dalyvavimo priimančioms sprendimams priėmimo bei politiniame gyvenime apskritai. Daugelis pasisakymų dar XX amžiuje (Castoriadis, Arendt) irgi žadino abejones dėl mūsų politinės sistemos formų, dėl demokratijos turinio ir viešosios erdvės naudojimo. Jei mes iš tikrųjų gyvename socialinių ir politinių paradigmu pokyčių eroje, humanitariniai mokslai turi nagrinėti naujų gyvenimo formų, koegzistavimo ir valdžios klausimus ir tokiu būdu prisidėti prie klasikinių terminų, skirtų apibūdinti institucijas, vertybes ir įsivaizduojamas signifikacijas (prasmes, reikšmes) rekonceptualizacijos. Šio straipsnio tikslas yra iširti su politikos teorija susijusių žyminių (*signifieds*) turinį ir žymiklių (*signifiers*) naudojimą. Tai yra liberaliųjų mąstytojų, remiančių politinės autonomijos teorijas, naudojamos sąvokos: demokratija, viešas, privatus, paprasti žmonės ir pan., taip įsitraukiant į visuotinę diskusiją apie šiuolaikinės politinės transformacijas.

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