

Notes on the semiotic phenomenology of social discrimination

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Abstract: The goal of this paper is to explore the application of some elements of Charles S. Peirce's semiotic phenomenology to the study of social discrimination. Using E. Valentine Daniel's ideas about the "limits of culture" as a point of departure to understand the process of semeiosis, this article argues that situations of social discrimination are a special case of the phenomenon where the process through which percepts are transformed into (new) concepts is held incomplete. The distinctive element here is the fact that the process of social stigmatization is only effective if capable of semiotically manipulating signs associated to group identity. This manipulation reduces the semiotic complexity of the signs associated with those stigmatized. Susan Gal's three processes of semiotic manipulation, namely *iconization*, *recursiveness*, and *erasure*, and Harold Garfinkel's work on *degradation ceremonies* will be brought into analysis as relevant cases.

Keywords: Peirce, semiotics, stigma, discrimination, degradation rituals

Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo é explorar a aplicação de alguns elementos da fenomenologia semiótica de Charles S. Peirce no estudo da discriminação social. Usando as idéias de E. Valentine Daniel a respeito dos "limites da cultura" como ponto de partida, com o intuito de compreender o processo de semeiosis, este artigo argumenta que situações de discriminação social são um caso especial do fenômeno onde o processo através do qual percepções transformam-se em (novos) conceitos se dá de forma incompleta. O elemento que faz deste um caso especial é o fato de que o processo de estigmatização social só é efetivo se for capaz de manipular semioticamente signos associados a identidades grupais. Esta manipulação reduz a complexidade semiótica dos signos associados com quem é estigmatizado. Os três processos de manipulação semiótica propostos por Susan Gal – *iconização*, *recursividade*, e *erasure* -, e o trabalho sobre *cerimônias de degradação* de Harold Garfinkel, serão discutidos como casos relevantes.

Palavras-chave: Peirce, semiótica, estigma, discriminação, rituais degradatórios.

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to articulate some aspects of Peirce's semeiosic phenomenology with recent theories about the political economy of linguistic exchanges, and we believe this articulation can be fruitful in the study of situations of social discrimination. We intend to use some insights taken from E. Valentine Daniel's argument about the limits of the semeiosic processes (DANIEL, 1998) to the analysis of the realm of discrimination, and to articulate it with Susan Gal's (1998) three semeiosic processes, namely *iconization*, *recursiveness*, and *erasure*, and with Harold Garfinkel's work on *degradation ceremonies*, as a way to discuss the political economy of semeiotic processes.

According to Peirce, individuals or cultures encounter novelty and incorporate it into their set of semiotic habits, either by denying the character of novelty of the external stimulus, through identifying it with some existing category, or through rearranging the set of semiotic habits through the incorporation of new categories, result of the transformation of that novelty (a percept) into a concept. Due to the teleological and self-protective character of semeiosis, the former is more frequent than the latter, what gives some degree of stability both to the sense of self and to cultural patterns. There is a political dimension in this, especially when the novel is related to behavioral deviance or ethnic difference: inclusive political ideologies (or inclusive political moments) have the tendency to support cultural relativism, and this implies the need for a semiotic effort to respect individual or group distinctiveness and to limit stereotyping. This generates the expansion the set of concepts associated to individual or group identities present in the configuration of semiotic habits. An exclusive political ideology or moment works in the opposite direction: stereotyping occurs more intensively, and the set of identity categories is limited. In a situation of social crisis, percepts carry with them emotionally-loaded contents, and these trigger self-protective mechanisms that reduce the openness of semeiosis to the outside world. The results of this phenomenon have been extensively studied in social theory under the influence of Emile Durkheim's ideas. What this text will argue is that social stigmatization is only effective if those perpetrating it are capable of semiotically manipulating signs associated to group identity. This manipulation is done in a way that reduces the semiotic complexity of the individuals or groups that are being stigmatized, what facilitates their location inside the pre-existing system of classification. This argument does not apply to all situations where cognition encounters novelty, but it should work for all situations when the result of this encounter is to prompt self-defense mechanisms. The text will start with a brief, simplified presentation of some of Peirce's ideas that will ground the development of its argument.

Some notes on Peirce's semiotics

Three elements of Peirce's semiotics are central in this analysis: his conceptualization of sign and some of its implications, his phenomenological categories of existence, and his understanding of the work of cognition as the semeiosic dynamic movement through which percepts become habits.

Peirce defines sign as “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*” (PEIRCE, 2.228¹). The sign therefore has a triadic structure, what contrasts with de Saussure's conceptualization of sign as the dyadic relation between a signifier and a signified, in a closed system of signs that excludes empirical elements. Peirce's *interpretant* is the cultural factor of the sign, what necessarily implies open-endedness – the interpretant interprets something as signifying an object to somebody, in a specific context. It is the locus of interpretation, and what “makes signification part of a connected web and not an isolated entity” (DANIEL, 1984, p. 18).

Peirce's phenomenology is not interested in metaphysical modalities, but in modes of relation in experience (PARKER, 1998, p. 105). This relational focus can be seen in his phenomenological categories, themselves also triadic. Time is the basis of the phenomenological experience of the world, and in the phenomenon of time social and cultural phenomena are generated by principles that are constitutive of temporally structured phenomena. These principles are the phenomenological categories of Firstness (positive possibility), Secondness (individuating existence), and Thirdness (law-governedness). At the level of immediate experience, the dichotomy of subject and object is not existent. The distinction is introduced subsequently; the immediate experience is simply characterized by a sense of interruption, of discontinuity. In Peirce's phenomenology, time is defined as change and transformation. Change, or development, takes place with and through the determination of relations. The distinction that separates object and subject comes only reflectively and itself involves the determination of a relation (*Ibid.*, p. 111-112).

The actuality of events, the material world of objects, is what Peirce called Secondness. Secondness implies discontinuity, a rupture between the self and the particular instance of the world in question, and *bruteness*, or lack of reason. “We have a two-sided consciousness of effort and resistance, which seems to me to come tolerably near to a pure sense of actuality.” (PEIRCE, 1.24). Yet the brute fact that stands out in an experience is only defined by its occurrence in the context of an existential network of

¹ Citations of the Collected Papers of Peirce will follow the conventional form: the excerpt cited is to be found in volume 2, paragraph 228.

other brute facts – defined by a *cluster of qualities* that persist in association with one another in experience (PARKER, 1998, p. 113). A quality not (yet) objectified in a brute fact is what Peirce called Firstness. It cannot be anything except a possibility, in the same sense that “redness, before anything in the universe was yet red, was nevertheless a positive qualitative possibility” (PEIRCE, 1.25). Thirdness, by its turn, is the category of regularity in experience, of general principles or laws. “The experience of Thirdness is thus awareness of a *teleological* element in our own actions and in the natural world. Actuality, the course of natural events, tends to conform to an idea that in some way regulates them” (PARKER, 1998, p. 116). Thirdness is the principle that softens the edges of individuation and impels things towards greater unity. Peirce calls this teleology “habit”, the tendency of events to conform to general patterns.

It is noteworthy to mention Peirce’s classification of signs regarding their relationship to the object. In this regard, signs can be considered icons, indices, or symbols. Icons are signs that represent some qualities of the object. Sign and object resemble each other, share some quality. A map is an example of iconic sign. An index is a sign that is characterized by its contiguity or concurrence with the object. Smoke is an indexical sign of fire, for instance. According to Daniel, indexical signs are what we call facts, in the sense that they are “naturalized” interrelations between ideas and things – what we usually call “obvious” – predominant in the common sense world (DANIEL, 1984, p. 32). A symbolic sign is connected to its object by convention. Most words of a given language are symbols, once their connection with objects and concepts are arbitrary, not depending in contiguity or sharing of any quality.

For Peirce, the semeiotic process is not only related to cognition, but reality itself is semeiosically constituted. Boler (1963) claims that Peirce understands reality as a synthesis of epistemological realism and epistemological idealism. The realist aspect of this synthesis states that the semeiosic process is not unconstrained, and that one cannot think whatever he or she wants, but there are factors of the reality that influence our thoughts from outside. The idealist side defends the position that there cannot exist anything that is not “thought-like”, since ideas can only resemble other ideas (DANIEL, 1984, p. 16).

The dynamic quality of both semeiosic processes and reality can be found in several passages of Peirce’s work: “Anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*” (PEIRCE, 2.303). Peirce understands the self and culture as elements formed by and structured around signs. The human being itself is a sign. Personality is seen as

the connection among ideas; it is a developmental teleology, the general principle of which determines that some possibilities will be actualized and others avoided and neglected. [...] Personality is the continuum of potentiality that lives in the present and is most readily identified as the self. [...]

[P]ersonality may be characterized as the patterns by which ideas are associated, the set of good and bad rules of inference that govern one's thought. (PARKER, 1998., p. 126).

In this sense, the constituting agent must itself be a phenomenon constituted in the ongoing process of the world (*Ibid.*, p. 112).

By its turn, culture is understood as a dense cluster of semeiosic habits² (DANIEL, 1998, p. 67). The set of semeiosic habits imply certain understanding of what is possible, what is impossible and what is probable, what is reasonable and what is scandalous, in a seeming static way. It synchronizes the production of the commonsense, objective view of the world, and the collective consensus of meanings – even if only in a provisory and fragmented way.

One important aspect of culture as semeiosic habits is the way it tends to protect itself from external attacks. Culture is centrifugal, directed always towards itself; that is what characterizes its teleological character (Thirdness). That's why any fugitive, centripetal idea, action, or thing is almost impossible to seek and find. This is not due to culture's stability, but because of its patterned dynamism (DANIEL, 1998, p. 68).

From percept to concept

There are situations in which the restoration capabilities of culture - as cluster of semeiosic habit – are put to test, stretched to its limits. Daniel offers us an account of why a particular existent is or is not taken up by culture, based on Peirce's understanding of the appropriation of an external reality by the cognition through the dynamics involved in the transformation of the first sensory impression, a percept, into the status of a concept. The limits of culture are to be found in the threshold of the clusters of semeiosic habits – clusters that may go from discourses to the individual's sensory edges. Routine, redundancy, and regulation are some strategies used by the work of culture when hazards lurk at its thresholds. These are provided with power to colonize or conquer fugitive elements.

But it is also at these very thresholds that the semeiosic runs the risk of failing to tame, its expansion being abruptly obstructed and the action of semeiosic held at bay by the reaction of something that we can only call an object(ion) (*Ibid.*, p. 68).

These disruptive moments are counterpoints

that resists incorporation into the harmony of a still higher order of sound, sense, or society. It resists normalization; it is a shock that impairs habitus, it is a point of irresolution in a semeiosically realized inner world and a semeiosically unrealizable (at least for a time being) but all too real (or even surreal) existent (*Ibid.*, p. 69).

² Daniel notices the similarities between Peirce's semeiosic habits and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* (DANIEL, 1998, p. 67; Bourdieu, 1990).

What then is necessary for an external object to traverse the semeiotic threshold and become part of the semeiotic domain? In other terms, we want to understand how a (presemeiotic) percept is transformed into a concept³. Going back to the types of relationship between sign and object (called the “ground” of their signification), indexicality (Secondness), and symbolization (Thirdness) are what concern us here. Reality is related to Secondness, while in the cognitive dimension of cultural life, Thirdness predominates over Secondness,

process over haecceity, suasive power over brute force, knowing over willing, conceiving over sensing, symbol over index, the general over the actual and particular. Thus, for the most part, every Second becomes both logically and ontologically overcome or assimilated by a Third (*Ibid.*, p. 83).

There is a hierarchic inclusion among the categories, the Third including a Second, and every Second including a First, but not conversely. In Daniel’s understanding, every element of cognition contains an element of duality, of struggle, of interaction with something strange forcing itself on our cognition, this external element being what we call actuality or external reality.

For an understanding of the semeiotic process, another distinction needs to be introduced – the one that differentiates immediate and dynamic objects. The immediate object is the one internal to the sign, the one Neshier (1982) calls “internal object”, which stands in a triadic relation to its representamen and its interpretant. The dynamic object, by the other hand, is the object that the representamen stands for, the object that forces its way or offers resistance on the semeiotic drift. The word object is being used as general category – it could be an idea or law as well. Experience is the link between immediate and dynamic objects. Nevertheless, Peirce considered experience as falling under the category of Thirdness, once experience and background knowledge or cultural heritage cannot be separated. However, as every Third contains a Second, it is the Second sub-dimension of the experience that is most dominant in the semeiotic process. The clash between inner and outer world is precipitated into perception. Yet this dynamic duality, in becoming part of a percept, becomes a component of a triadic process of semeiosis. That is when the semeiotic habits take action. In usual situations, the inner structures of semeiotic habit accommodate readily the outer world that does represent a threat to them, in a self-protective way. The encounter with something “stranger” reveals the failure of the inertia of expectations that keeps the familiar world being continuously reproduced. The accommodation of the stranger implies its semeiotic appropriation by the habits of the inner world.

This process of semeiotic appropriation is the transformation of the initial percept, a First, into a concept, a Third, passing through the category of Second. In the first stage of the process, the surprise of the new perception is translated into a feeling-sign. The

³ Daniel here uses the work of Dan Neshier (1982; 1997) as basis for his argument.

triadic sign is composed, in its initial phase, by the dynamic object of the outer world, the *representamen*/entering percept, and the immediate/emotional *interpretant*. The immediate interpretant is a more general and paradigmatic category, of which the emotional interpretant is one specific manifestation.

In the second stage of the process, inner world and outer world in mutual resistance provoke a sense of duality. The expectations of the past, of the semeiosic habits, and the frustration of the present, cause a sense of exertion and resistance. At this stage, the percept is interpreted in an “energetic interpretant”. This energetic interpretant is a Second in the chain, the effects of exertion the sign has in an interpreting agent (LISKA, 1996). It captures the moment, the action and reaction of the impact of the strange in the semeiosic chain. The paradigmatic counterpart of the energetic interpretant is the dynamic interpretant. Dynamic interpretant stands as a Second for the immediate interpretant. It is the *singular effects* of the sign that the dynamic interpretant harbor, but there is no generalization yet, i.e., no inclusion of the percept under an existing (or new) category of concept. As the percept is interpreted through a logic interpretant, the conceptual import is gained, and the sign becomes meaningful. This process is a Third, in relation to the emotional and energetic interpretants. The more general category of Third interpretant is what Peirce called final interpretant. The term “final” does not mean termination of semeiosic interpretation, but only the fact that, once appropriated, this interpretation will happen inside the working of the signs of habits. In Daniel’s opinion, “whether and to what extent the disturbing potential of [the emotional and energetic interpretants] are appeased remains an open and empirical question” (DANIEL, 1998, p. 87).

The semeiosic appropriation operates in a cycle that goes from an immediate/emotional/feeling interpretant to a dynamic/energetic/reactive interpretant to a final/logical/assimilating interpretant. In this dynamic work of culture, percepts carry with them “undeniable and forceful traces or aspects of the outer world of dynamic objects” (*Ibid.*, p. 87). This is not solely a mental process, but body and mind are seen as just two aspects of the same whole.

The process described above is an instance of a relatively successful appropriation of something stranger into the inner semeiosic dynamics of culture/habit/personality. Yet, such appropriations very frequently are not equally successful. In Daniel’s words,

The semeiosic process of incorporation can be stopped in its tracks so to speak, at the very gate of the inner world. It could be arrested in its initial hybridity; it could progress into its translation by an immediate/emotional interpretant and not move beyond it. Or it may go as far as being translated into an energetic/dynamic interpretant, arrested in its specificity, and be stuck there as nothing more than a trace of action and reaction, a reminder of the Secondness, the uniqueness, the incomparability, and the ungeneralizability of the event of the “stranger’s” entry into the inner world, who was then condemned to remain there as a stranger (*Ibid.*, p. 88).

Semeiosis and the politics of signs

Some aspects of the semeiotic appropriation of novelty need further analysis. We propose the hypothesis that, in given circumstances, the emotional content of the immediate interpretant, in consonance with the self-protective qualities of the semeiotic habits, may be the factors operating semeiotic processes that are central in situations of social discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and the like. We will focus on some of these processes responsible by the “naturalization” of socio-cultural differences and relations of power and domination, the ones Susan Gal (1998) termed *iconization*, *recursiveness*, and *erasure*.

Before commenting on these semeiotic processes, let’s bring Daniel’s work on the limits of culture back. In his article (1998), he mentions a moment of semeiotic crisis during his ethnographic work. After hearing from one of his informants an unspeakable description of collective violence against a defenseless boy that was attacked, mutilated and set on fire during the Sri Lanka riots of 1983, in which the informant participated as perpetrator, Daniel asked to his interlocutor (out of a desperate effort to change the subject, as Daniel himself suggests) what was his goal in life. “I want a VCR”, replied the informant. This answer left Daniel “speechless”, in his own words (1998, p. 76).

From the perspective of the anthropologist, operating inside the linguistic game of the dialectics of analytic and synthetic thinking in the academic construction of the Other’s cultural universe, always running the risk of ethical hypercorrection in the effort of being self-conscious about his or her own biases, there could be no possible meaningful articulation between the description of that horrendous scene and the “I want a VCR”. “What stance does one take toward the Other when the Other is evil?” asks Daniel. “The question is held at bay at the limits of culture” (*Ibid.*, p. 90).

Yet, given the pragmatic orientation of the everyday life, holding such too-powerful questions at bay is a luxury that most people cannot afford. Of course there are cases in which the limits of the work of culture are obvious, like the example Daniel provides about a man that could not talk about his father and brother, both murdered in front of him, during the same riots in Sri Lanka, without losing his consciousness; the literature on trauma is rich on descriptions about the theme. Nevertheless, it happily seems to be more a rule than exception that people do the effort of trying to overcome (in semeiotic and many other domains) the effects of trauma. So, returning to our analysis of the semeiotic dynamics of the contact with the stranger, our argument is that in the situation in which no logical interpretant would do the work of incorporating the percept transforming it into a concept, the percept is connected to the semeiotic dynamics through other means, through already existing concepts, and that would happen according to an indexical relationship between the available concepts and the political

economy of the situation⁴. Here is the point in which emotions are a key element, in the sense that they trigger the mechanisms of self-defense of the set of semeiotic habits. In theory, the anxiety that springs from the usual political life of a given social group, in its multiple levels, would be enough to start the process. Part of the defense mechanisms is to channel psychic energy to counter-attack whatever is the menace. In semeiotic terms, that means associating the new percept with interpretants that are located in the particular position of signifying danger, disgust, evil, and the like, i.e., in the position of being somehow attacked, inside the gradation of categories associated to its political economy. Not all situations of semeiotic confusion are associated with danger, and some may be even associated with divine intervention (cf. OBEYSEKERE, 1984), but the indexical elements of the situation will then play a role in providing the percept with indexical traces that will define what logical interpretant will be summoned by the situation.

The work of Susan Gal (1998) highlights an important aspect of the semeiotic dimension of situations of conflict. It refers to the way in which identity signs are manipulated, facilitating the work of transforming individuals or groups into candidates for being stigmatized and discriminated. Gal makes reference to three semeiotic processes: iconization, recursiveness, and erasure. *Iconization* is the process by which the linguistic differences that index social contrasts are reinterpreted as icons of the social contrasts (*Ibid.*, p. 328). This ideological representation fuses, then, some qualities of the linguistic feature of the group in question and a supposedly quality of this group, and understands one as the cause of the other, or even as the inherent essentiality of the other. “Participant’s ideologies about language locate – and sometimes even generate – linguistic phenomena as part of, and as evidence for, what they believe to be systematic behavior, aesthetic, affective, and moral contrasts among the social groups indexed” (*Ibid.*, p. 328). The logic could be expanded to include other classes of phenomena that are not necessarily linguistic, and the iconic relationship may be established between any behavioral pattern and the represented essentializations: patterns of cultural practices, as different diets, different calendars, different sexual orientations, and the like.

The semeiotic process of *recursiveness* involves the projection of an opposition characteristic of one level of the relationship onto some other level (*Ibid.*, p. 253). Intragroup distinction can be projected onto intergroup relations, and or the other way around. And *erasure*, the third semeiotic process, refers to the situation in which “an ideology simplifies a sociolinguistic field, forcing attention on only one part of it, what

⁴ This affirmation may seem tautological, but we should remember that there is no point of departure in the dynamics of semeiosis, but it is a continuous process.

renders some linguistic forms or groups invisible or recasting the image of their presence and practices to better fit the ideology”⁵ (*Ibid.*, p. 253).

Recursiveness and erasure usually work together, in the sense that recursiveness often leads to the erasure of inconvenient elements. Through the action of these three semeiotic operators, representations are attached to social groups, alternative representations are excluded, and discursive authority and political legitimation are constructed and contested.

The argument then could be summarized in the following way: on one hand, extremely energetic percepts may in fact be a challenge to the semeiotic process, but the cognitive apparatus will summon a logic interpretant that is most coherent or adaptive to the actual set of semeiotic habits, and it would happen according to the self-protective mechanisms of these habits. On the other hand, the logic interpretant summoned in the process will necessarily be related to the political economy of the context in which the experience takes place, and because of the fact that there is hardly any semeiotic moment that will be disconnected from this political economy, we may assume that this logic can apply to other situations that are not the limits of semeiosis. Since average verbal intercourse involves some anxiety, these ordinary intercourses can trigger semeiotic processes in which the result of the appropriation of the percept is a Third, a symbol, but a degenerated symbol, i.e., a symbol that tends to favor its iconic and/or indexical aspects. Iconization, recursiveness, and erasure, are some of the semeiotic processes in action on those circumstances.

Traces of what is being said here can be found in well-known social theories about deviance (e.g. DURKHEIM, 1965; FREUD, 1960; GIRARD, 1977). Durkheim’s theory of crime is one important example. For Durkheim (1965), the social process itself creates crime, as it does in the process of creation of punishment. The groups better identified with the moral standards in use will frame some behavior as criminal, so they can punish it, and the punishment is a ritual which reminds everyone of the power of society and of the ideal of following its rules. In this sense, the principle of rebellion is the same as that of conformity. Therefore, crime cannot be eliminated, once whatever behavior is erased, something else would immediately take its place and fit the role of “outermost” extreme. But more important than that, it is the ritualized action of recruitment of criminal behavior from the margins that recognizes, reaffirms, and celebrates society. The recruitment, trial, and punishment of crime within a society are essential to the

⁵ Gal’s erasure is the semeiotic operator that generates what Lyotard (1988) called *différend*, the situation in which there is no possible communication between two parts once the terms one of the parts recognizes as proper and identifies with are, before hand, defined as illogic or unintelligible by the other.

experience of order, and the process works as a ritual anomie⁶-prevention practice (HILBERT, 1992).

One very insightful experience, done by Harold Garfinkel, explores the principles by which the three semeiosic processes discussed above are put to work in his study of *degradation ceremonies*. A degradation ceremony takes place when the necessity to start the process of finding a deviant arises, and it prepares the “victim” to be criminalized without doing harm to the social group, but to the contrary, fortifying its existence, by operating a transformation in the victim’s identity. In Garfinkel’s definition, the grounds and the behavior that the grounds make explicable as the person’s conduct constitute his or her identity (GARFINKEL, 1972, p. 202). In order to be victimized, the person should be expelled from the group⁷, and this process is done through an identity transformation. “The work of the denunciation effects the recasting of the objective character of the perceived other: The other person becomes in the eyes of his condemners literally a different and new person” (*Ibid.*, p. 204). But what are the programs of communicative tactics, the semeiosic operators that will get the work of status degradation done? The first transformation that takes place in the process is in the realm in which the involved are situated. Event, denouncer and denounced (“perpetrator”) must all be removed from the ordinary everyday life and made to stand as “out of ordinary”. Indexical elements of the ordinary context must be erased, even if momentarily, and substituted by extraordinary ones. Persons and events are essentialized; *types* of people and *types* of events become units of analysis, *iconized*. Gal’s *erasure* can be seen in the fact that the unique and distinctive character of people and events, any sense of accident, coincidence, indeterminism, chance, should all be lost. The *recursiveness* process makes the qualities of types, nevertheless, be defined in a polarized way: “the profanity of an occurrence or a desire or a character trait, for example, is clarified by the reference it bears to its opposite, the sacred. The features of the mad-dog murderer reverse the features of the peaceful citizen” (*Ibid.*, p. 205). By the same logic, the status of pariah that is being imputed to the denounced is countered by the close identification between the denouncer and the witnesses as to transform him into a public person, an *iconic* and at the same time *indexical symbol* of the collectivity. As a public defender of the order, the denouncer then makes salient the supra-personal values of the collectivity, and his denunciation is delivered in their name. The distance between the denouncer and denounced are also experienced by the witnesses. Finally, “the denounced person must be ritually separated from a place in the legitimate order, i.e., he must be defined as standing at a place opposed to it. He must be placed ‘outside’, he must be made ‘strange’” (*Ibid.*, p. 207). The set of indexical signs that connected the

⁶ Anomie, in Durkheim’s terminology, refers to the situation in which the social fabric starts to decompose and the social basis for community life starts to fade.

⁷ Or the group by the social order, in processes of collective victimization.

denounced to the original group are destroyed. The conditions are then set for his victimization in the ritual construction of deviance.

Conclusion

This paper intended to demonstrate that there is a semeiotic microphysics organizing conflictive contexts where identities are reified, and notions of culture, race, social class and other essentialities are hardened along the political strategies of the contenders. In this context of low communication but intense production and reproduction of representations of the other and of the self, it is these representations that give content to both the logic and the unconscious actions and strategies used by the contenders. Police reports produced under the *ethos* of the militaristic control of order, newspaper sensationalism and moral panic are elements that retro-aliment themselves and that sustain the fabulation and the fictional accounts of the marginalized groups. The crucial feature of work of fabulation, according to Taussig, “lies in the way it creates an uncertain reality out of fiction, giving shape and voice to the formless form of the reality in which an unstable interplay of truth and illusion becomes a phantasmic social force. All societies live by fictions taken as real” (1987, p. 121).

The representations are produced in the conceptual lines of moral essential oppositions, and the existence of the conflict and of the contenders themselves becomes structured along these typifications. Essentialized moralities, social organization of the conflict according to cultural opposites, fictional realities – one more time, iconization, recursiveness, and erasure.

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