

Critical global semiotics: Understanding sustainable transformational citizenship (a review)

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A book about semiotics with no reference to its founder, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure? Now that must be a first. But *Critical Global Semiotics* is not about linguistics but about culture and citizenship and how it works in a global context and across a multiplicity of disciplines. In doing so its 16 chapters review health, labour (in particular, child labour), music, dance and artistic culture, town planning, political economy, climate change and education. The essays explore aspects of culture and citizenship in a wide range of countries including India, China, Iraq, Turkey, Brazil, Mexico and Europe and the US. It is a scholarly and wide-ranging book edited with an introduction and conclusion by Maureen Ellis.

De Saussure might be conspicuous by his absence but Saussure's ideas are there. As Victoria Lindsay points out in her essay on the phrase *Countering Violent Extremism*, Saussurean linguistics bridged the gap between anthropology and semiotic principles and identified the need to consider not just words but the relationship between terms, their intrinsic identity and their value in a cultural system. She also cites the Russian formalist Yuri Lotman, who believed firmly in the relationship between semiotics and culture. A key theorist whose ideas are developed in the book is the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce,

whose concept of critical realism (CR) methodology is basic to the approach to the individual essays in the book. Peirce identified three characteristics of a semiotic symbol – a sign (what is signified), an object (whatever is signified) and an interpretant (how the sign is interpreted and presented).

The other key concept is Systemic Functional Semiotics (SFS). SFS is based on the ideas of Halliday who coined the term Systemic Functional linguistics (SFL) and is a method of analysis that covers the entire field of signs, codes and modes across cultures, geography, professions and disciplines. But first of all, what does Ellis mean by semiotics and how does it apply to global citizenship? For us as teachers of language semiotics is described by de Saussure as the science of signs. For Ellis it embraces a larger canvas, covering the symbols and ideologies expressed in rhetoric and metaphor and applied to countries, different kinds of activities and even philosophy and religion. We live, says Ellis, in a semiotic world which goes back to the dawn of language and embraces multimodality, media and metaphor. Thought itself is semiotic, as Peirce would have said, and most of our deepest held cultural and religious beliefs are expressed semiotically through symbols, through rhetoric and through religion. In short, the way we think and express ourselves has been dominated

by symbols from the beginning of recorded time and we live in a semiotic world. As Per Aage Brandt, a Danish Jazz musician and lecturer at the Sorbonne in Paris, puts it in his chapter entitled *What is a Global Citizen*, the mind itself 'is shaped by the semiotic world that evolved with it during its 50,000 years of modernity'.

As a teacher I was particularly interested in Alison Greig's and Wendy Purcell's semiotic reflections on our academic systems and particularly our institutions. For Wendy Purcell our academic institutions are no longer fit for purpose. Why not? Because they were designed for a different age, says Alison Greig. The world has gone through different 'ages' in the last century and a half. The large-scale development of higher education was originally to serve the needs of the industrial age and then the machine age, where it got stuck. We are now in the information age and rapidly approaching the ecological age. Our perspective needs to change, she said. A key to this is a stress on interdisciplinary studies, which is why she started at Anglia Ruskin University in the UK an MA devoted to the interdisciplinary study of sustainability. We need new programmes, new degrees, new courses and new approaches to teaching, including online, and this will involve a change in rhetoric, terminology and symbols – in short, a change in semiotics.

Wendy Purcell stressed the need for new technology, notably AV equipment and facilities, online learning as a basis of learning blended with face to face interaction and universal e-support. Once again, the spread of a new rhetoric and a new semiotic terminology.

However, it's not all about words. At the book launch, Paul Barker, a music teacher at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama said, 'I love words but I don't trust them.' For him the language of semiotics is the language of music. As he said, music came before language and sounds preceded sentences. So for him, as a semiotic transmission, music comes first and language second. Maybe that's why music is such a fundamental aspect of all societies, even more than spoken or written language.

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What is obvious from reading *Critical Global Semiotics* is that the science of signs goes way beyond language. As one contributor, Susan Petrilli, put it, there are layers of semiotics extending from bacteria to artificial intelligence. What we need to understand is that everything is interconnected although they may use different rhetoric and symbols. The biosphere of semiotics contains a core of common beliefs and needs which are expressed differently in belief systems, politics, symbols, images, sounds and language. Our job as global citizens is not just to understand the semiotic differences but to break through those differences to appreciate the commonalities beneath.

That leads us back to the subtitle of Maureen Ellis's work, *Understanding Sustainable Transformational Citizenship*. In short, can we use the study of semiotics to help us and our students become international citizens of our sociosphere? The first step is to recognise that semiotics – the signs and symbols that we use – although expressed in language and symbols are not limited to the language we use to describe them, though that is important, but extend to the phenomena themselves.

As Per Aage Brandt points out in his opening essay, our job is to recognise that every society on earth has common realities in their need to organise their lives but have evolved different ways of doing it and different symbols to represent it. Our job is to appreciate those different ways but never to lose sight of the common realities underneath. He cites Kant's enlightenment concept of the welt-burger, the global citizen, to reinforce the realisa-

tion that, faced with global catastrophe, the possible collapse of our habitat, we need to recognise the commonalities in our societies and work better together in order to survive. This means critically examining differences between how we express ourselves socially, politically, commercially and religiously and exploring how we can work together to create a sustainable future.

Can we do it? The deep and rigorously academic contributions to this collection of essays present some of the issues both from the point of theory and practice. The value of the book to linguists

and teachers is that the essays expand the application of language and semiotics as applied to language and symbols and extend it into the arts and social and political organisation. It is a book of essays in which we can follow our interests, be they primarily political, social or linguistic, or all three. The underlying message, however, is clear: we live in a world that is under threat and only by understanding our different societal symbols, interpreting them and recognising the commonalities lying beneath can we move forward to a sustainable future.