Eco and the Text of the Communist Manifesto

Jan M. Broekman and Larry Catá Backer

Reading semiotics implies the reading of texts, which are—as suggested— never solely and/or explicitly semiotic. On the one hand, *there are no specific semiotic texts* (even not texts meant to be *on* semiotics) and on the other, *all texts contain semiotic elements* to be discovered, deciphered and read. But we withhold, that to read semiotics one needs a text. In that reading, one does not read the text 'only' as it appears like a novel, a poem or a scientific treatise, but also as a phenomenon filled with signs, a resource of signification ready to be articulated. This is in the opening statement of Eco's short contribution to the journal *L'Espresso* "On the Style of *The Communist Manifesto*" 1998[1] where he writes:

> It is difficult to imagine that a few fine pages can single-handedly change the world. After all, Dante's entire oeuvre was not enough to restore a Holy Roman Empire to the Italian city-states. But, in commemorating *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848, a text that certainly has exercised a major influence on the history of two centuries, I believe one must reread (…) its extraordinary rhetorical skill and the structure of its arguments.

The consideration that there do not exist specific and uniquely semiotic texts (in the sense that there are political, poetic or religious—not to mention legal—texts), but that all texts contain semiotically relevant components, suggests that texts are often more important for their (social, legal, political, cultural) context than for their strictly unique and singular meaning. That observation seems to be true for what

[1] Published in *L'Espresso,* 8 January 1998, for the 150th anniversary of *The Communist Manifesto,* republished in *Sulla Letteratura*, 2002, Republished in English translation by M.McLaughlin in *On Literature,* Hartcourt Inc., 2004

J.M. Broekman (✉)
Dickinson School of Law, Penn State University, Carlisle, PA, USA
e-mail: jmb56@dsl.psu.edu

L. Catá Backer
Departments of Law and International Affairs, Penn State University, University Park, PA, USA
e-mail: lcb11@psu.edu

J.M. Broekman, L. Catá Backer (eds.), *Signs In Law - A Source Book*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-09837-1_2

Eco famously formulated about the Marx' *Communist Manifesto*, 1848: "It is difficult to imagine that a few fine pages can single-handedly change the world". Can they? They did! But: who were they, and what components of them did cause that change? Was it the words of that text about 'the specter haunting Europe', or was it something else, something *in* that text or *in* those words? Even the combination of its rhetorical skill and the structure of argument, as Eco mentions, will not elucidate the unique historical event, which is called its 'reading'. If there was social change through the text, creating a new awareness, it was not because of the words, but because of the signs in the words, or the signs that words are, semiotics tells us. How do we understand this? Eco circumscribes this difficult question by pointing at the implicit (social) rhetorics, and how the Manifesto's slogan "A specter is haunting Europe" is followed immediately by a bird's-eye history of class struggle to the actual conquests achieved by a "revolutionary" class. Eco remarks, that this foundational epic is still valid today, for supporters of free-market enterprise. As a consequence, "the Jewish, Messianic Marx" (Eco's expression) is thinking of the opening of Genesis. But envisaged is ultimately how it becomes multinational, globalized, and even invents a literature that is no longer national but international. Eco adds in a footnote:

> Obviously, when I wrote this article, the term "globalization" already existed, and I did not use the expression by chance. (…) It is astonishing, how the *Manifesto* witnessed the birth 150 years ahead of its time, of the era of globalization, and the alternative forces it would unleash. It almost suggests that globalization is not an accident that happens during the course of capitalist expansion (just because the Wall has come down and the Internet has arrived) but rather the inevitable pattern that the emergent class could not fail to follow.

The issue fascinates jurists—who have in all regards emotional as well as cognitive relations with texts—since the late 19th and particularly the beginning of the 20th century, first under the name *significs* and later named *semiotics*. The latter embraces not only styles of word-use but also broader social structures of communication, which are forcefully meaning making.

"The upheaval becomes struggle as workers organize thanks to another power that the bourgeoisie developed for its own profit: communications. And here the *Manifesto* cites the example of the railways, but the authors are also thinking of new mass media (and let's not forget that in *The Holy Family* Marx and Engels were able to use the television of that age — namely, the serial novel — as a model of the collective imagination, and they criticized its ideology by using the very language and situations the serials had made popular)".

Indeed, the sign (the Ancient Greek *seme*) occupies proudly a central position among scholars and practitioners of social as well as physical and psychological sciences. That interest proves how each text refers back and forth towards and in a wider context—a move, which in its own turn creates new references. As a consequence, a text has (like a word) not *one* meaning and in particular never *one forever fixated* meaning, as lawyers experience often against their desire when they would like to find an "originalist" ground for their determination of text-meanings in law.

Like Schmitz in the case of the *significs* movement[2] so does Eco in the *Manifesto* follow some of the cultural factors that determine the text at hand, its style, its rhetoric, its many historical evolutions included—such cultural events function as words when reading in a semiotic mode. We read the *Manifesto* appreciating its rhetorical gags, and forget how these are carefully prepared signs that unfold in words as composites of the text. What *significs* taught us, namely to be attentive for the unfolding of meanings, is repeated when the *Manifesto* text comes onstage. Its challenge is in the multiple meanings of words used in the text, is in where it hits the reader most, is in where it causes questions and raises doubts. Reading in the semiotic mode is reading sign meanings in connection with their social function, and, what is more: reading the sign whilst it unfolds into a diversity of meanings, so that "all this universe perfused with signs" (Peirce) seems to blossom in our words.

As a sign of this perfusion follows a more powerful observation regarding the total picture of the end-of-19 t-century attitude when we read:

> There then follows the most doctrinal part, the movement's program, the critique of different kinds of socialism, bur by this stage the reader is already seduced by the preceding pages. And two breathtaking slogans [follow], easy, memorable and destined (it seems to me) to have an extraordinary future

They are slogans of the Manifesto, well known even in a following century: "Workers have nothing to lose but their chains," and "Workers of the world, unite!"

Even apart from its genuinely poetic capacity to invent memorable metaphors, the *Manifesto* remains a masterpiece of political (but not only political) oratory, Eco concludes, and he suggests how it should be studied at school along with Cicero's *Invectives against Catiline* and Mark Antony's speech over Julius Caesar's body in Shakespeare.

Eco teaches us, that reading signs implies, how reading a text in the semiotic mode—which is the central activity in a lawyer's semiotic modus operandi—is at distance to any kind of passivity. Reading texts is a supreme form of action; it focuses on the serious and not-so-traditional labor to become a witness of the unfolding of a sign, followed by perceiving how it's meaning surfaces. Those signs are in words, which are at home in the minds of speakers and writers living in various periods of culture and history. Those words do never enjoy any fixated meaning beyond time and space. Eco's views on the Manifesto are in line with his basic ideas on semiotics, as already exposed in his famous 1976 *A Theory of Semiotics*:

> (…) some semiotic approaches do make semiotics the study of the creative activity of a semiosis-making subject, and intending this subject not as a phenomenological transcendental Ego but a 'deep', profound subject. Let me then assume that maybe semiotics is destined to overcome one of its natural boundaries and to become not only the theory of codes and of sign production but also of the 'deep' individual origins of any 'wish to produce signs'.

[2] H. Walter Schmitz: *De Hollandse Significa*, Assen/Maastricht 1990; J. van Nieuwstadt Transl. German-Dutch.

One should add a further remark in this context:

> … the subject of any semiotic enquiry (…) is a way of looking at the world and can only be known as a way of segmenting the universe and of coupling semantic units with expression-units: by this labor it becomes entitled to continuously destroy and restructure its social and historical systematic concretions[3]

Eco did not look at words only, but at events that surfaced in different periods of understanding, reference and cultural interest. The difference between linguistics and semiotics is of essence here; texts and social activities are soul mates, as Eco makes clear in his analysis of *The Communist Manifesto*.

[3] Umberto Eco: *A Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana UP 1979, p. 315.

http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-09836-4

Signs In Law – A Source Book
The Semiotics of Law in Legal Education III
Broekman, J.; Catà Backer, L. (Eds.)
2015, XVIII, 431 p. 11 illus., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-3-319-09836-4