

Genes, Memes and Signs: Evolutionary Social Semiotics as a Transdisciplinary Methodological Interface for Political Studies

Semiotics can provide tools to study any pieces of cultural reality, so in the humanities it can play the role of a methodological integrator similar to that played by mathematics in natural science (Morris, 1938, p. 2). However the concept of sign, which is the basic concept of semiotics, is not an exclusive notion used to refer to elementary units for the analysis of cultural reality. In social sciences and humanities one can find a whole range of categories that try to grasp and some basic forms in which culture is brought into existence, developed and reproduced. In this range one can find words like *idea, myth, image, symbol, performance, practice* etc. One of the newest concepts in this set is that of *meme*. This term was first introduced in 1976 by an evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who argued that there is a chance that evolution is the general principle that is applicable to all life in the universe. So *genes* that are used for evolutionary replication of species on our planet are not unique in this role. There can be evolutionary processes that involve other replicators, but follow the same general pattern. In this context, Dawkins used the word *meme* to refer to elemental units of cultural replication. As he suggested, any cultural information is composed of *memes*, in the same way as biotic information is composed of biotic replicators that are *genes* (Dawkins, 1990, p. 191-192).

At the end of the 20th century the works of Dawkins and of some other researchers and enthusiasts (Dennett, 1991; Lynch, 1996; Hofstadter, 1985; Brodie, 1996) contributed to a rise in popularity of the concept of *memetics* (study of memes). However the interest and excitement about this concept quite soon started to decline. An annual called «Journal of Memetics – Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission», that had been issued since 1997, was terminated in 2005. In one of the articles that were published in the last volume of the journal Bruce Edmonds (Edmonds, 2005) stated that the idea of memes “has not provided any “added value” in terms of providing *new* understanding of phenomena” and that those who sought to study memetics in serious ways “have suffered in the respect that they are often confused with those on the penumbra for whom memetics is a fad”. Edmonds also added that the evolutionary approaches to communication could still work in other frameworks without appealing to memes.

So memetics itself was doubtlessly a quite viral meme, but also a very short-living one. And even though Dawkins and his followers succeeded to popularize the evolutionary approach to culture, it is necessary to remember that they were neither the first (James, 1880), nor the last ones (Henrich, Boyd, & Richerson, 2008; Patzelt, 2011; Sasaki, 2013) to explore this domain. And it is quite obvious that even though a gene-meme analogy was not enough to make a functional research framework, the task

of building a conceptual framework for transdisciplinary evolutionary research in social and political studies is still on the table. This kind of framework, that can be called *evolutionary social semiotics*, would require integrating the insights from the theories of general and cultural evolution with existing theories and methods in sociosemiotic studies. Special effort should also be put in building of a working interface between evolutionary semiotics and social studies. Since even though both semiotics and memetics seek to become meta-methodologies for those disciplines (Morris, 1938, p. 2; Dennet, 2001, p. 309), today neither of them succeeds in actually occupying this niche. Besides, even though the project of memetics was not very fruitful in general, one should explore some of the social research projects in which the category of meme seems to be valuable (Patzelt, 2011; Патцельт, 2014).

One of the possible ways to bring memetics beyond its basic projections can be seen in building a conceptual interface between memetics and semiotics. The very term *meme* in most of the cases can be replaced with the word *sign*, as well as most of the other memetic categories can be reduced to semiotic ones (Фомин, 2015b, p. 80-81). However some products of memetics, probably, should not be neglected. While the concept of *sign* is more general and connotes all the variety of semiotic aspects, the word *meme* can be used in cases, when it is necessary to emphasize the sign's affordance to function in evolutionary processes. We can refer to signs as to *memes* in order to focus on the pragmatic questions of why certain signs in certain contexts are more efficient, more fitting and, as the result, more "viral" and "contagious".

The project of *evolutionary semiotics* can be structured with a meta-methodological framework that involves a distinction between three transdisciplinary *organons* (basic cognitive capabilities): *mathematic*, *semiotic* and *morphologic* ones (Ильин, 2014; Кокарев, 2014; Авдониин, 2015; Фомин, 2015а; 2015b; Золян, 2016b; Фомин, Ильин, 2016; Ильин, Фомин, 2016). According the framework suggested, all three organons exist in either *thick* or *thin* versions. In this dichotomy *thick* organons are understood as methodologies that are significantly narrowed and specified for certain subject-matters. These are, for example, linguistic semiotics or institutional morphology. And at the same time those methodologies can be seen as thickened versions of more abstract, *thin* sets of instruments, like general semiotics or general morphology. These *thin* versions of organons can be less effective, when it comes to the analysis of particular specialized subject-matters, but they are significant, because their development can provide a more integrated transdisciplinary vision. With those thin organons, it can be possible to "translate" research data from one disciplinary narrowed methodological language to another.

From this perspective the *evolutionary social semiotics* can be seen as an interface between *semiotics* and *morphology* or, to be more precise, as a junction of their *thickened* versions that are *social semiotics* and *evolutionary social morphology*. So one of the major tasks is to find a way of

productive integration of various conceptual and methodological resources from three domains of morphology: general evolutionary morphology, biotic evolutionary morphology (evolutionary biology) and morphology of culture (Darwin, 1968; Шпенглер, 1993; Тейяр де Шарден, 2002; Wilber, 2000; Ильин, 2009; 2016), as well as from the domains of semiotics: general semiotics (Pierce, 2012; Morris, 1938; Saussure, 1995; Lotman, 2002), biosemiotics (Kull, 2014; Золян, 2016а), social semiotics and semiotics of culture (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Randviir, 2009; Kress, 2010; Лотман, 1992; Sebeok & Danesi, 2000).

Semiotics can be used as the potent conceptual framework that evolutionary morphology of culture has been lacking. It can specify some of the memetics' insights with more abstract, but robust theoretical and methodological instruments. Some basic notions of memetics can be explained and operationalized with their semiotic equivalents. At the same time semiotics itself can be enriched with a number of inspiring pragmatic observations from the evolutionary perspective of memetics.

For the interface between semiotics, memetics and genetics to be effective one of the crucial first steps is to build for them a common interdisciplinary dictionary. My attempt to develop this kind of dictionary is represented in the table below.

Genetics	Memetics	Semiotics
Gene (a section of DNA, regulating the building-up of cells and cell structures)	Meme (an entity that in some form represents a rule that regulates the way particular practices are performed)	Sign (an entity that in some form represents something else)
Gene Pool (all the genes of a species)	Meme Pool (all the rules available)	Code (Langue) (all the rules available)
Genotype (a configuration of the genes in an organism)	Memotype (a configuration of rules used in a particular institution)	Discourse (a configuration of rules working in a particular situation)
Phenotype (a concrete shape that an organism assumes on the basis of its genotype and under influence of environment)	Phemotype (concrete practices performed in a particular institution)	Product (Parole) (concrete instances in which signs work)

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