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**What is dead and what is alive? Philosophical-historical Remarks
on Rossi-Landi's Sociosemiotics**

1. Rossi-Landi was a methodical thinker, or rather a system builder, who did not care much for historical reconstructions and did not lose himself in detailed exegesis of the texts that had inspired him.

It would be therefore improper if, in re-reading his works, we were hunting for data demonstrating the fact that many of his theses had been formulated by earlier thinkers. We must, however, take into account also that his doctrines, naturally, had different components deriving from other sources. All of his readers acknowledge his admirable erudition with which he exploited the ideas of many earlier and recent authors, making use of them always in a very original way, depending on how they served his message. So it is worth investigating his relation with authors whose ideas were close to his thought or could have been incorporated into his socio-semiotic system. Which ones of the earlier or recent authors were really relied on or neglected by him?

This is the problem I propose to explore in what follows.

2. The main sources and components of Rossi-Landi's theory on the interconnection between material production, work, and language can be easily identified, since he himself referred to them. Besides, immediately after his death, as the necessity of giving a first global judgement on his work became an issue, it was Umberto Eco who individuated the components very precisely (Eco 1987: 13-23). They comprise: analytical philosophy, the historicist tradition of continental philosophy, Peirce's and Morris' semiotics, and Marxian theory.

In the preface of the second edition of *Significato, comunicazione e parlare comune* (1961), his first important philosophical book, Rossi-Landi wrote that he intended to complete the continental historicism with the modern linguistic and logical research techniques. Let us quote his remarks relevant to this point of view: „If in this book I try to plant some of the branches cut off from the modern linguistic and logical research techniques into the trunk of historicism, one will understand why I have to refer more frequently to the former than to the later. Talking further about Vico and Hegel to an Italian public is relatively superfluous (while

it would be still useful to do so to an Anglo-Saxon audience)".¹ While identifying the first two components of his investigation, Rossi-Landi suggests here that they are of equal value and it depends on the given cultural context which one of them must be thrust into prominence.

It is well-known that in Italy, he has been one of the first, perhaps the very first, of those philosophers who have studied and used analytical philosophy in a serious way. This was an important cultural and philosophical achievement at the given historical moment. It is also well-known that the analytical component of his thought is influenced by Wittgenstein (apart from Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*, which he translated into Italian). In the sentence just quoted, however, Wittgenstein and Ryle are not mentioned. Given this, it is even more interesting that when characterizing the second component of his thought, continental historicism, he *does* mention explicitly two names: those of Vico and Hegel.

This double reference is at once surprising and unsurprising. Vico here is apparently brought to the same level as Hegel, although, throughout his work, Rossi-Landi treats the two philosophers unevenly. While his explicit references to Vico are strikingly rare, he never stops paying attention to Hegel.

Notwithstanding this, his few references to Vico are without exception highly positive. We might think that the reputation Vico has in Italy is the only reason of Rossi-Landi's leaving him mostly unmentioned, and this may be made consistent with his having recognized Vico's heritage as part of the tradition he regarded as a major component of his own thought. I admit there is a hitch somewhere in this explanation, since in any case, Vico *is*, unlike Hegel, neglected in Rossi-Landi's writings. We thus come across a problem to which I will return later.

The metaphors of „grafting” or „implanting” can be applied also to the third and fourth components of Rossi-Landi's doctrine. As to the marriage of semiotics and Marxism, Eco speaks on „an other polemic implantation” (Eco 1987: 22). In this context, Marx is, of course the protagonist, but Hegel also reappears in the same context. Moreover, Rossi-Landi's many references are introduced by the conjunction „Hegel and Marx”.

The frequent conjunction of the two names has the unambiguous sense that Rossi-Landi considers himself simultaneously a follower of Hegel and of Marx, that is a „Hegelian” and a „Marxist” at the same time. Sometimes he states this explicitly. In an interview given to

¹ „Se dunque in questo libro tento di inserire alcuni rami tratti dalle moderne tecniche d'indagine logico-linguistica ed operativa sul tronco dello storicismo, si comprenderà come debba riferirmi più spesso alle prime che al secondo. Continuare a parlare di Vico e Hegel a un pubblico italiano è relativamente superfluo (mentre tuttora utile a un pubblico anglosassone)”. Rossi-Landi 1980: 21-22.

Enzo Golino, which has been republished in the second edition of his volume *Semiotica e ideologia* (1971), he declares himself a Marxist „rather than a Hegelian”, adding at once to this the unusual remark that „to be a Marxist today amounts to being a Hegelian as well”.² On the same pages, he arrives at a curious historical statement: „The *Capital* is the form reached by Hegel’s thinking 50 years later”. If Hegel had lived for 100 years „he would have been compelled to recommence and dialectically reelaborate his studies in economics, getting to the point where he himself would have written the *Grundrisse* and the *Capital*”.³ Rossi-Landi, evidently, did not seriously commit himself to this historically absurd, counterfactual hypothesis. Nevertheless, the intentionally absurd character of his assumption expresses the conviction that Marx’ thought is nothing else but Hegel’s in process. That is, there is an uninterrupted continuity between the two thinkers.

Rossi-Landi made these statements in the end of the sixties, at the height of the discussions on re-reading Marx. It was clear that none of the various schools working on Marx’ exegesis could accept his standpoint. It was, however the Althusserian and, in general, the structuralist interpretation of Marx with which his declarations could be contrasted contextually, or against which they were in fact directed. Let us recall Althusser’s thesis about Marx’ epistemological rupture accomplished against Hegel and the entire preceding philosophical tradition, owing to which a new „continent” or a new „epistemological field” has been discovered.

I think that at the present time, at a moment in which it is difficult to imagine that the discussions on Marx recommence, we must admit that Rossi-Landi was right. As the distance between us and these two great thinkers of the past is increasing, and the question of their relationship has lost all political meaning, we perceive them as being closer to each other than ever. Perhaps Rossi-Landi’s statement should be inverted: „to be a Hegelian today amounts to being a Marxist in the reduced sense of conserving the surviving elements of Marx’ doctrines”.

3. Connecting Hegel and Marx has a further significance, namely that the four components of Rossi-Landi’s thought constitute a close unity. Accordingly, what must be said is not only that he inoculated continental philosophy’s trunk with analytical philosophy, or

² „Essere oggi marxiano significa *anche* essere hegeliano, con tutti gli scarti e tutte le aggiunte del «passaggio» da Hegel a Marx”. Rossi-Landi 1979: 227.

³ „[I]l capitale è la forma raggiunta del pensiero di *Hegel* cinquant’anni dopo”. Un Hegel vissuto fino a cent’anni „sarebbe stato costretto a riprendere i giovanili studi di economia politica e li avrebbe elaborati fino al punto di scrivere egli stesso i *Grundrisse* e il *Capitale*”. Rossi-Landi 1979: 226.

grafted Marxism into semiotics, but also that he fused all these things, applying to the overall mold the hall-marks of Hegel and Marx. In order to keep together these elements, he needed another great figure from the 20th century. This for him was Wittgenstein.

Uniting what he has learned from Wittgenstein with Marxism and semiotics, may be judged unnatural by a historian. It is well to note, however that earlier it had been attempted by others to discover affinities even between Wittgenstein and Hegel (Lamb 1979). Attempts of this kind have always belonged and still belong to the endeavors aimed at bridging the gap between analytical and continental philosophy (Apel 1993). We have already seen that the bridge-building between analytical and continental philosophy formed a part of Rossi-Landi's program from the beginning. He was well aware of the lack of any significant connection between semiotics and Wittgenstein's linguistic analysis, but he found it natural to point out that the problems Wittgenstein was interested in were particularly relevant to the philosophical foundations of semiotics. It is in this spirit that he declared: „once the philosophical origins of the semiotic endeavor are acknowledged, Wittgenstein's teachings and methods ought to be applied to current discussion about the foundations of semiotics” (Rossi-Landi 1981: 41). This statement can be fully accepted but it expresses a goal to be attained in the future, rather than a historical fact.

It is still less possible to ascertain affinities or connections between Wittgenstein and Marx (in spite of the supposed impact of Sraffa, Wittgenstein's and Gramsci's Marxist friend, on Wittgenstein). Rossi-Landi discovered just the same that there was a possible „Marxian use” of Wittgenstein's teachings. The concept of „use” is contained even in the title of his classical essay („Per un uso marxiano di Wittgenstein”),⁴ where this idea has been expounded for the first time. Such a title is suggestive also because it refers in an unambiguous way to the „use theory” of meaning attributed in general to the later Wittgenstein. But, with this title, Rossi-Landi wanted to express another point too, namely, that what he intended to do was not an exegesis or an interpretation of Wittgenstein's texts, but indeed a use of them, in the true sense of the word. I think he proceeded in the spirit of the distinction between „interpretation” and „use”, established much later by Umberto Eco.⁵ By the way, elsewhere, in his paper „Wittgenstein and alienation”, he himself pointed out that he was never occupied with Wittgenstein in a professional way (Rossi-Landi 1999: 135).

As his paper dedicated to Wittgenstein and to the problem of alienation shows in itself, Rossi-Landi „uses” Wittgenstein as a philosopher of alienation. Briefly: the Marxian use of

⁴ Rossi-Landi 1966: 187-230. See also: Rossi-Landi 1992: 11-60.

⁵ Eco 1990. (See the chapter „Interpretazione e uso dei testi”, 32-34.)

Wittgenstein, proposed by him, consists in interpreting Wittgenstein's critique of language as a critique of *linguistic alienation*. Thus in this manner the linguistic phenomena studied by Wittgenstein can be comprised in the sphere of those social and ideological phenomena which were the target of Marx' critique.

4. In view of what has been said, the relevance of Wittgenstein's linguistic analysis must be confined to a restricted, but very important domain, since linguistic alienation, as Rossi-Landi believes, bears upon the totality of material and linguistic production. This interconnection has been shown for the first time in the volume *Il linguaggio come lavoro e come mercato*, published in 1968, where Rossi-Landi treated language as work and market, and exposed his general thesis on the homology of production and language. Recall also the characteristic subtitle of the book: *A Theory of production and linguistic alienation* („Una teoria della produzione e della alienazione linguistiche”).

Let me add to this that the volume *Semiotics and Ideology* from 1972, where Rossi-Landi promised to apply the theory exposed in the former book, has a similar subtitle: *Investigations on the Linguistic Alienation* („Indagini sulla alienazione linguistica”). It can be said even on the basis of the external evidences of titles and subtitles that the relation of the theory of linguistic alienation, inspired by Wittgenstein's teachings, and the general linguistic theory, formulated in terms of the Marxian political economy, is a relation of part and whole.

After 1968 Rossi-Landi has been working mainly on a general theory of language and sign systems based on the concepts of „linguistic work”, „linguistic production”, „linguistic use-value and exchange-value”, „linguistic capital”, „linguistic money”, etc. As is shown by the mere enumeration of the above categories, in the framework of such a theory the social character of language and sign systems equals the reducibility of linguistic categories to economic ones, while economics is conceived as the study of a non-verbal sign-system. As Rossi-Landi puts it, „economics proper is the study of the non verbal sign-system which makes it possible for particular types of messages, usually called commodities, to circulate” (Rossi-Landi 1975: 134).

This is the period in which he unites semiotics with Marxism, and takes the role of a rigorous system-builder. His works from this period are very different, in their subject-matter as well as methodology, from previous ones like *Significato, comunicazione e parlare* in which, by raising the question of ordinary language and adopting a colloquial style, he followed the example of ordinary language philosophy dominating at that time in Oxford.

Cinzia Bianchi is therefore absolutely right when she stresses that there are *two* characteristically different phases in Rossi-Landi's thought (Bianchi 1995: 6).

5. As regards Rossi-Landi's Marxist period, it has been pointed out by several authors like Tullio de Mauro, Luigi Rosiello e Giuseppe Prestipino, that the concepts introduced by him are metaphorical and devoid of empirical content. In fact, the close analogy between material production and linguistic activity may easily misrepresent what it is that may be taken properly linguistic and makes language a specific object of linguistic descriptions and explanations.

The charge of there being a metaphorical character to Rossi-Landi's theory has been recalled by Enzo Colino as well in the interview I quoted above. According to Colino's own words, the charge consists in Rossi-Landi's „metaphorizing [metaforizza] language”, as a consequence of which he „does not offer an analytical description apt to justify fundamentally the analogy of production” (Rossi-Landi 1979: 256-257).

Earlier I also tried to show that it is not on the same level that Rossi-Landi had compared production and language, economic and linguistic activities (Kelemen 1987). In other words, the structures of human activities which according to him are homologous do not represent the same level of abstraction and universality. The concepts to which linguistic categories were reduced were essentially the concepts of a capitalist economy. Therefore, they apply only to a relatively short phase of economical history. On the other hand, Rossi-Landi cannot conceive of language except in the sense of a universal human capacity. This is true even if his fundamental intention is to prove the multiple social determination of language. The very fact that economy has a different type of history than language does, challenges the homology thesis, or at least a strong formulation of it.

I think this line of criticism is still valid. To the foregoing, we might add that the adoption of economic categories in linguistics involves not only „metaphorizing language” but also an even more problematic consequence, namely, the explanatory force of our linguistic and semiotic theory will depend on whether and how the economic theory is justified, from which the given categories derive. If the concept of „linguistic work” is to be reduced to the concept of work taken in the sense of Marx' political economy, then we must apply the Marxian labor value theory to linguistic phenomena too. And this theory certainly is less applicable in the postindustrial epoch than it was under the conditions of the mechanical great industry of classical capitalism.

In the light of all this, is it still possible to defend the systematic part of Rossi-Landi's work, which was born from the union of Marxism and semiotics?

My answer is yes and no.

The negative answer is supported by the critical remarks I made above, and by certain further arguments following from them. In what follows, I will set aside the counter-arguments.

Among the arguments in favor of the affirmative answer let me mention the following ones. In the first place, it can be shown that in many cases the economic-linguistic notions introduced by Rossi-Landi *do* have an empirical content which is not metaphorical. Sometimes it is possible to speak in a literal sense about a linguistic division of labor,⁶ about linguistic alienation, about words as artifacts and utensils, etc. We may accept also that what is called by linguists „linguistic value” can be subsumed under the general notion of „value”, or that words and money have in common certain semiotic properties.

The truth of such statements depends obviously on the given context of our investigations. At the same time, as to the critique about the metaphorical character of the theory, I would like to provide a reminder: metaphors are in general inevitable phases in the formation of scientific concepts, and in virtue of their heuristic force, they may have a serious role in the process of cognition. This can be seen frequently in the initial phase of the development of a scientific discipline, that is, in the course of discovering new research fields. Hence the charge of the metaphorical character of a theory is not always as grave as it seems to be. Rossi-Landi tried to open a new field for semiotic research, and it is precisely for this reason that he could not avoid describing his findings by means of terms deriving from other disciplines, that is, through metaphors.

Quite apart from that it is not mere chance that his metaphors (as far as they are indeed to be regarded as metaphors) can be traced back to the very beginning of linguistic thought. We read even in Plato's *Cratylus* that a name is an instrument, like an awl or a shuttle (Plato 1984: 388). According to Plato's strikingly clear formulation, speech is a kind of action which is done according to its “proper nature” (Plato 1984: 387), that is, with the help of instruments the norms and rules of which do not depend on the speaker. Needless to say, at the other end of the story we find Wittgenstein. He has in fact resumed the tradition of an instrumentalist conception of language, summing it up in the concise formula: „Language is an instrument. Its concepts are instruments” („Die Sprache ist ein Instrument. Ihre Begriffe sind

⁶ I exposed this problem elsewhere in a more detailed way: Kelemen 2003-2004.

Instrumente". Wittgenstein 1958: [§569] 151). As regards the connection between words, signs, and money, this has been described long ago by Augustine, Boethius, Saussure and many other important authors. Such statements, whether they be interpreted in a literal or in a metaphorical sense, express essentially one or another aspect of the social nature of language. It is sufficient here to refer to the traditional conception of *critique of language* which has been formulated for the first time in the form of Plato's critique of rhetoric, and so can be similarly traced back to the very beginnings. According to the evidence of the history of thought this conception reflects, in many different formulations, the truth that language is not only a common instrument, but also a device of domination.

To say that Rossi-Landi „opened a new research field" for semiotical investigations is of course in itself a metaphorical statement. But his conception of language as work and market is being more and more confirmed in the 20 years that passed since his death. It is an empirical fact that social work takes on more and more of a linguistic character. Messages take on the shape of commodities, and commodities circulating on the market are metamorphosing into *commodities as messages*.

Rossi-Landi, properly speaking, anticipated the semiotics of information society.

His statements on „linguistic alienation" are similarly prophetic, even if the notion of „alienation", like other Hegelian-Marxian notions, has fallen into disuse in today's philosophical discourse. „Alienation" is a critical concept, and the last 20 years did not cancel the grounds for a critical social science. There is moreover a growing demand for a new critical social science capable of discovering the post-capitalist and post-communist forms of ideological mystification. The importance of the phenomena described by Rossi-Landi as cases of linguistic alienation is growing, too. As work is transforming more and more into linguistic work, as the market of commodities is more and more a market of messages, alienation too is taking on a linguistic character and commodity fetishism becomes message fetishism.

6. Rossi-Landi's theory as a whole can be characterized as socio-semiotics (in fact, he is the founder of the discipline), and as a philosophy of language focusing on the social nature of language and grounded on the paradigm of production. In this framework, equally important properties of language that derive from power relationships are described in terms of production as well. As a consequence, Rossi-Landi pays relatively limited attention to language as a means of power, although of course he was fully aware of how language is a mirror and a battlefield of social conflicts, oppression, exploitation, social and cultural

discrimination. Such problems are treated in his works in the framework of the theory of linguistic alienation and „linguistic private property”.

What is in this connection of utmost importance, and must be stressed, is that in his works the problem of „linguistic private property” is kept distinct from the discussion on whether language is private or public. Relying on Wittgenstein’s famous private language argument, he accepted that language by its very nature is public. As he pointed out, that is exactly what makes it possible to expropriate the means of production in the domain of language which is just what may be called linguistic private property.

Ownership in this domain has been defined by him as the expropriation of public and social goods on the part of a privileged group „which possesses control over the emission and circulation of the verbal and non-verbal messages which are constitutive of a given community.” This definition serves also to characterize the notion of the „ruling class” from the point of view of communication. It is the ruling class that controls the codes and the modalities of codification, the channels of communication, and the modalities of decoding and interpretation of messages.” (Rossi-Landi 1975: 134.)⁷

Needles to say that the right of control over the messages and exercising power through symbolic means is the key issue of information society. The importance of the role of information in power relationships keeps growing, and I believe that the traditional paradigm of production does not offer a sufficiently articulated framework to study the new phenomena of communicative oppression and domination.

We need an independent, non-reductive theory to be able to explain and understand the relationship of language and power under the conditions of neo-capitalist media societies. A theory to be developed according to this line has deep roots in history. One of its sources is Vico’s philosophy of language. It is Vico who before Hegel, Marx, and Wittgenstein raised the problems Rossi-Landi proposed to investigate in the light of a new socio-semiotic theory.

As I have already mentioned it is surprising that, compared with the three other classic thinkers, Rossi-Landi made so small use of Vico. The solution to the puzzle might lie in the fact that Vico’s ideas do not fit into the paradigm of production.

In spite of everything Rossi-Landi’s few remarks on Vico are worthy of our full attention, since Vico is always ranked by him with the greatest thinkers of the history of ideas. In one place he calls Vico „the forerunner of ideas emerging only in recent times”,⁸ elsewhere he speaks of him as „the greatest master of historical contextualism” (Rossi-Landi 1961: 259).

⁷ On this problem see also Rossi-Landi 1979: 291.

⁸ „straordinario precursore di idee sviluppatesi recentemente”. Rossi-Landi 1961: 86.

He ascribes to Vico, like to Hegel and Comte, the merit of having conceived the formation of knowledge as a relative process (Rossi-Landi 1961: 91), and of having discovered with Hobbes, Leibniz, and Peirce, that thought must be investigated through language (Rossi-Landi 1961: 94). But what deserves our utmost attention is the unique sentence we can read in *Il linguaggio come lavoro e come mercato*: „the first part of the thesis of this essay is the somewhat Vicoian tenet that the notion of artefact as such can be applied to language”.⁹ This means that according to Rossi-Landi himself, the book where he expounded for the first time his linguistic theory, must be viewed as a „Vicoian” book, even if in a restricted sense. Here we have some material for thought. It is in the light of this remark that Rossi-Landi’s follower should read Vico.

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⁹ „La prima parte della tesi di questo saggio è dunque quella, alquanto vichiana, che la nozione di artefatto si applica tale e quale al linguaggio.” Rossi-Landi 1992: 185.

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