Turning Back to Nature: Perspectives of Biosemiotics in a Post-Pandemic Humanity

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Abstract: The paper represents a view on a plausible way of development of scientific methods and methodologies of the humanitarian studies in the post-pandemic society. Starting with the analysis of the current state of “lockdown” and “isolation” in the atmosphere of fear and insecurity, the idea of better understanding the reasons of such a situation is connected with the possibilities of interdisciplinary approach, called “biosemiotics”. In the context of paradigmatic change in the humanities, caused by the interpretative turn of deconstruction of the XX century, today’s situation with COVID-19 is also regarded to be a turning point in the history of post-modern humanity. As it often happens in the periods of change and transformation, the humanity searches for the answers to the questions of ontological character: What do we know about the world today? How our knowing of the world can help us in solving current problems and preventing further disasters? Is human knowledge sufficient to treat global problems? Biosemiotics, as a interdisciplinary scientific project, based on the assumption that life and culture are fundamentally grounded in the semiosis and are subject to biological laws of nature (Hoffmeyer, 2010) can unite a century long divide in scientific tradition of separation Nature and Culture, Body and Mind.

Keywords: *Umwelt; Nature-friendly approach; human expansion; philosophy of life; a change in scientific paradigm.*

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1. Introduction

Needless to say, how our life has changed in the last several months. It seems like eternity has passed since the time of human life has slowed its pace in hear and expectation of future possible death. This expectation, hardened by physical and psychological “lockdown”, “information attacks”, “isolation”, has caused a feeling of insecurity and instability in the future of humanity after pandemic and put into question human’s ability to accept this change, making it a part of her everyday routine. To put it plain, today’s situation with COVID-19 and the limitations of quarantine have represented a great challenge to the view of humans as “exceptional” species on this planet, the idea has been aired before by biosemioticians (Sebeok, 2000; Uexküll, 2001; Copley, 2016; Kull, 1998; Hoffmeyer, 2010). On the one hand, the tragedy of personal losses and absolute helplessness in fighting the spread of the virus caused in many the feelings of despair and fear in face of irreversible death. On the other hand, a search for reasons of the situation led some philosophers and scientists to mythological revival of the powerful personalized image of Nature and her revenge to humanity for neglect and pollution. Despite our adherence to either of the views, the situation in the global world represents a change, affecting all spheres and components of our umwelts, subjecting human beliefs, expectations and ways of thinking to “epistemological break” (Althusser, 1969). This change also calls for a rapid change in knowledge paradigms and our modes of conceptualizing the world in post-pandemic circumstances. To reach this objective one has to recognize the change that has already happened and change ourselves, our attitudes and values, formulated by logos into more Nature-friendly. In the humanities this tendency has already taken place in the 1960’s with the introduction of semiotics of “universe of mind” (Lotman, 1990) and was revived by Thomas Sebeok (2000) in a form of relatively new subject of biosemiotics (or global semiotics) in 2000. As an interdisciplinary approach to life and universe (Copley, 2016) it can level the epistemological divide between the rationalism and idealism in the issues of separation of Nature and Culture, Body and Mind.

2. The Chance for Change VS the Need for Change

In the current state of facts, the notion of “knowing” is the core of discussion: What do we know about the world today? How our knowing of the world can help us in solving current problems and preventing further disasters? Is human knowledge sufficient to treat global problems? To

answer these questions we will need a scrupulous look at the history of human knowledge and its transformations, the task, which seems too ambitious in the limits of this paper. The points of departure we see in the very division of sciences into soft (the humanities) and hard (the sciences), with the further delimitation of the scope for each of them.

These questions lie within the issues of the continuity of matter and mind, an intentional separation of nature and culture with further division into the binary oppositions: individual – collective, agent – subject, verbal – non-verbal, human – non-human, mind – matter, culture – living nature, etc. (Cobley, 2016). This century long divisions reflected not only the status of the scientific paradigm, but it also influenced the grand narrative of the scientific progress, showing human being as a master of nature, capable of managing the demographic problems, captivating the Moon and space, and regulating the human behaviour. Darwin's theory of social development, absurdity of Lysenkoism, the extremes of eugenics, socio-biology and the development of nuclear bomb together with nuclear power stations, served as solid grounds for distancing from Nature, seeing it subject to human expansion. Kuhn's (1970) and Lyotard's (1984) observations on the philosophy of science only necessitated the recognition of this incredulity towards the scientific progress, and since then have become a common tone in the humanities. There was a chance to bridge the gap between the two cultures of scientific research with the help of general semiotics, attributing various degrees of agency to the lowest of interpretants and seeing life coextensive of semiosis *per se* (Lotman, 1990).

This paradigmatic turn coincided with the deconstructivist ideas of Jacques Derrida about the plurality of meanings by ruining existing stereotypes of true forms or essences, preceding appearance. By stating so, a range of theoretical concepts like justice and truth undergone deconstruction as well: they were not stable anymore, and, correspondently, couldn't be universals of science. Dynamicity of truth, in its turn, has been the point in subjectivity studies in psychology and philosophy. Thus, subjectivity presented a dynamic boundary in world interpretation by a human, and its world-creating potential has become an object of investigation in the semiotics (as cited by Peirce, 1967; Sonnenhauser, 2008) and philosophy (Langacker, 1990; Benveniste, 1971).

At the same time, ascribing agency to non-animate subjects (e.i. recognition of their subjectivity) brought some challenge to the view of humans as "exceptional" in Nature (Cobley, 2016), putting him in one line with animals and cells. This fact, according to Paul Cobley, has been considered by researchers from other fields controversial enough to be

accepted as a sound argumentation for their intellectual concerns (Cobley, 2016). Others didn't see it relevant and compatible with their research domains to become converts to biosemiotics. Anyhow, biologist Thomas Sebeok (2000) felt the need to level this field by putting culture into the centre of research. He is stating that:

A human body is thus an inextricably complex text that has been encoded and determined by the combined action of nature and nurture (or that miniscule segment of nature some anthropologists grandly compartmentalize as culture). (Sebeok, 1986, p. 60).

Thus, biosemiotics was seen a logical and natural departure from the post-modernist positions (Deely, 2003; Deely, 2009), which acknowledged continuity across nature and modes of thinking installing culture, culture in its broadest possible way. In such a fashion, biosemiotics offers the prospect for renewed cultural analysis of agency of signs in the codes of nature, "culture-friendly" (Deacon, 2012, p. 541), or let us call it more "Nature-friendly" approach.

3. Conclusion

In this position paper, we have attempted to provide a critical view at the state of research in the humanities and suggest a new approach to world creation, known as biosemiotic (incorporating findings of general semiotics with biology and philosophy of life). We argue here, biosemiotic approach to scientific research enriches our knowing of the world and can help us in solving current problems and preventing further disasters. It has the following implications to be considered in the current situation with global threat of COVID-19: (1) recognition of sign nature of all animate objects levels the field of research between natural and humanitarian sciences; (2) outside the study of human cultural sphere, biosemiotics deals with meaningful communication in many other species; and their Umwelten (as was studied by Jakob von Uexküll in 1920's); (3) though biosemiotics has inherited and developed the findings general semiotics, it is still being treated as somewhat marginal and esoteric among some scientists, due to a challenging view on a Homo sapiens as the only exceptional barrier of semiosis (as the situation with COVID-19 has demonstrated). Biosemiotics is seen as logical and natural departure from the post-modernist positions, which acknowledged continuity across nature and modes of thinking installed in culture in its broadest possible way. In such a fashion,

biosemiotics offers the prospect for renewed cultural analysis of agency of signs in the codes of nature, “culture-friendly”/“Nature-friendly” approach, which the post-pandemic humanity will definitely need in order to acquire knowledge sufficient to treat global problems.

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