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Notes on the semiotic phenomenology of social discrimination

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Abstract: The goal of this paper is to explore the application of some elements of Charles S. Peirce's semiotic phenomenology to the study of social discrimination. Using E. Valentine Daniel's ideas about the "limits of culture" as a point of departure to understand the process of semeiosis, this article argues that situations of social discrimination are a special case of the phenomenon where the process through which percepts are transformed into (new) concepts is incomplete. The distinctive element here is the fact that the process of social stigmatization is only effective if capable of semiotically manipulating signs associated to group identities. This manipulation reduces the semiotic complexity of the signs associated with whoever is stigmatized. Susan Gal's three processes of semiotic manipulation, namely *iconization*, *recursiveness*, and *erasure*, and Harold Garfinkel's work on *degradation ceremonies* will be brought into analysis as relevant cases.

Keywords: Peirce; semiotics; stigma; discrimination; degrading rituals

Resumo: *Notas sobre a fenomenologia semiótica da discriminação social* — O objetivo deste artigo é explorar a aplicação de alguns elementos da fenomenologia semiótica de Charles S. Peirce no estudo da discriminação social. Usando as ideias de E. Valentine Daniel a respeito dos "limites da cultura" como ponto de partida, com o intuito de compreender o processo de semeiosis, este artigo argumenta que situações de discriminação social são um caso especial do fenômeno em que o processo por meio do qual percepções transformam-se em (novos) conceitos se dá de modo incompleto. O elemento que faz deste um caso especial é o fato de que o processo de estigmatização social só é efetivo se for capaz de manipular semioticamente signos associados a identidades grupais. Essa manipulação reduz a complexidade semiótica dos signos associados com quem é estigmatizado. Os três processos de manipulação semiótica propostos por Susan Gal — *iconização*, *recursividade,* e *apagamento (erasure)* —, e o trabalho sobre *cerimônias de degradação* de Harold Garfinkel, serão discutidos como casos relevantes.

Palavras-chave: Peirce; semiótica; estigma; discriminação; rituais degradatórios

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to articulate some aspects of Peirce's semeiosic phenome-nology with recent theories about the political economy of linguistic exchanges, since we believe this articulation can be fruitful in the study of situations of social discrimination. We intend to use some insights taken from E. Valentine Daniel's argument about the limits of the semeiosic processes (DANIEL, 1998) to analyze the realm of discrimination and to articulate it with Susan Gal's (1998) three semeiosic processes, namely *iconization*, *recursiveness*, and *erasure*, and with Harold Garfinkel's work on *degradation ceremonies*, as a way to discuss the political economy of semeiotic processes.

According to Peirce, individuals or cultures encounter novelty and incorporate it into their set of semiotic habits, either by denying the novel nature of the external stimulus by identifying it with some existing category, or by rearranging the set of semiotic habits through the incorporation of new categories resulting from the transformation of that novelty (a percept) into a concept. Due to the teleological and self-protective character of semeiosis, the former is more frequent than the latter, which lends some degree of stability both to the sense of self and to cultural patterns. There is a political dimension in this, especially when the novel is related to behavioral deviance or ethnic differences: inclusive political ideologies (or inclusive political moments) have the tendency to support cultural relativism, and this implies the need for a semiotic effort to respect individual or group distinctiveness and to limit stereotyping. This generates the expansion of the set of concepts associated to individual or group identities presented in the configuration of semiotic habits. An exclusive political ideology or moment works in the opposite direc-tion: stereotyping occurs more intensively, and the set of identity categories is limited. In a situation of social crisis, percepts carry with them emotionally-loaded contents, and these trigger self-protective mechanisms that reduce the openness of semeiosis to the outside world. The results of this phenomenon have been studied extensively in social theory under the influence of Emile Durkheim's ideas.

What this text will argue is that social stigmatization is only effective if those perpe-trating it are capable of semiotically manipulating signs associated to group identity. This manipulation is done in a way that reduces the semiotic complexity of the individuals or groups that are being stigmatized, which facilitates their location inside the pre-existing system of classification. This argument does not apply to all situations where cognition encounters novelty, but it should work for all situations when the result of this encounter is to trigger self-defense mechanisms. The text will start with a brief, simplified presentation of some of Peirce's ideas that will ground the development of its argument.

Some notes on Peirce's semiotics

Three elements of Peirce's semiotics are central in this analysis: his conceptualization of sign and some of its implications, his phenomenological categories of existence, and

his understanding of the work of cognition as the semeiosic dynamic movement through which percepts become habits.

Peirce defines sign as

something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. (PEIRCE, 2.228)[1]

The sign therefore has a triadic structure, which contrasts with Saussure's conceptualization of sign as the dyadic relation between a signifier and a signified, in a closed system of signs that excludes empirical elements. Peirce's *interpretant* is the cultural factor of the sign, which necessarily implies open-endedness — the interpretant interprets something as signifying an object *to somebody, in a specific context*. It is the locus of interpretation, and is what "makes signification part of a connected web and not an isolated entity" (DANIEL, 1984, p. 18).

Peirce's phenomenology is not interested in metaphysical modalities, but in modes of relation in experience (PARKER, 1998, p. 105). This relational focus can be seen in his phenomenological categories, themselves also triadic. Time is the basis of the phenomenological experience of the world, and, in the phenomenon of time, social and cultural phenomena are generated by principles that are constitutive of temporally structured phenomena. These principles are the phenomenological categories of Firstness (positive possibility), Secondness (individuating existence), and Thirdness (law-governedness). At the level of immediate experience, the dichotomy of subject and object does not exist. The distinction is introduced subsequently; the immediate experience is simply characterized by a sense of interruption, of discontinuity. In Peirce's phenomenology, time is defined as change and transformation. Change, or development, takes place with and through the determination of relations. The distinction that separates object and subject comes only reflectively and itself involves the determination of a relation (PARKER, 1998, p. 111-112).

The actuality of events, the material world of objects, is what Peirce called Secondness. Secondness implies discontinuity, a rupture between the self and the particular instance of the world in question, and *bruteness*, or lack of reason. "We have a two-sided consciousness of effort and resistance, which seems to me to come tolerably near to a pure sense of actuality" (PEIRCE, 1.24). Yet the brute fact that stands out in an experience is only defined by its occurrence in the context of an existential network of other brute facts — defined by a *cluster of qualities* that persist in association with one another in experience (PARKER, 1998, p. 113). A quality not (yet) objectified in a brute fact is what

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[1]   Citations of the Collected Papers of Peirce will follow the conventional form: the excerpt cited is to be found in volume 2, paragraph 228.

Peirce called Firstness. It cannot be anything except a possibility, in the same sense that "*redness*, before anything in the universe was yet red, was nevertheless a positive qualitative possibility" (PEIRCE, 1.25). Thirdness, in turn, is the category of regularity in experience, of general principles or laws. "The experience of Thirdness is thus awareness of a *teleological* element in our own actions and in the natural world. Actuality, the course of natural events, tends to conform to an idea that in some way regulates them" (PARKER, 1998, p. 116). Thirdness is the principle that softens the edges of individuation and impels things towards greater unity. Peirce calls this teleology "habit", the tendency of events to conform to general patterns.

It is worth mentioning Peirce's classification of signs regarding their relationship to the object. In this regard, signs can be considered icons, indices, or symbols. Icons are signs that represent some qualities of the object. Sign and object resemble each other, share some quality. A map is an example of iconic sign. An index is a sign that is characterized by its contiguity or concurrence with the object. Smoke is an indexical sign of fire, for instance. According to Daniel, indexical signs are what we call facts, in the sense that they are "naturalized" interrelations between ideas and things — what we usually call "obvious" — predominant in the common sense world (DANIEL, 1984, p. 32). A symbolic sign is connected to its object by convention. Most words of a given language are symbols, since their connection with objects and concepts are arbitrary, not depending on contiguity or the sharing of any quality.

For Peirce, the semeiotic process is not only related to cognition, but reality itself is constituted semeiosically. Boler (1963) claims that Peirce understands reality as a synthesis of epistemological realism and epistemological idealism. The realist aspect of this synthesis states that the semeiosic process is not unconstrained, and that one cannot think whatever one wants, but that there are factors of reality that influence our thoughts from outside. The idealist side defends the position that nothing can exist that is not "thought-like", since ideas can only resemble other ideas (DANIEL, 1984, p. 16).

The dynamic quality of both semeiosic processes and reality can be found in several passages of Peirce's work: "Anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*" (PEIRCE, 2.303). Peirce understands the self and culture as elements formed by and structured around signs. The human being himself is a sign. Personality is seen as

> the connection among ideas; it is a developmental teleology, the general principle of which determines that some possibilities will be actualized and others avoided and neglected. […] Personality is the continuum of potentiality that lives in the present and is most readily identified as the self. […] [P]ersonality may be characterized as the patterns by which ideas are associated, the set of good and bad rules of inference that govern one's thought. (PARKER, 1998, p. 126)

In this sense, the constituting agent must itself be a phenomenon constituted in the ongoing process of the world (PARKER, 1998, p. 112).

Culture, in turn, is understood as a dense cluster of semeiosic habits[2] (DANIEL, 1998, p. 67). The set of semeiosic habits imply a certain understanding of what is possible, what is impossible and what is probable, what is reasonable and what is scandalous, in a seemingly static way. It synchronizes the production of the commonsense, objective view of the world, and the collective consensus of meanings — even if only in a provisional and fragmented way.

One important aspect of culture as semeiosic habits is the way it tends to protect itself from external attacks. Culture is centrifugal, always directed towards itself; that is what characterizes its teleological character (Thirdness). That's why any fugitive, centripetal idea, action, or thing is almost impossible to seek and find. This is not due to culture's stability, but because of its patterned dynamism (DANIEL, 1998, p. 68).

From percept to concept

There are situations in which the restoration capabilities of culture — as clusters of semeiosic habit — are put to the test, stretched to their limits. Daniel offers us an account of why a particular existent is or is not taken up by culture, based on Peirce's understanding of the appropriation of an external reality by the cognition through the dynamics involved in the transformation of the first sensory impression, a percept, into the status of a concept. The limits of culture are to be found at the threshold of the clusters of semeiosic habits — clusters that may go from discourses to the individual's sensory edges. Routine, redundancy, and regulation are some strategies used by the work of culture when hazards lurk at its thresholds. These are provided with power to colonize or conquer fugitive elements.

> But it is also at these very thresholds that the semeiosic runs the risk of failing to tame, its expansion being abruptly obstructed and the action of semeiosic held at bay by the reaction of something that we can only call an object(ion). (DANIEL, 1998, p. 68)

> These disruptive moments are counterpoints

> that resist incorporation into the harmony of a still higher order of sound, sense, or society. It resists normalization; it is a shock that impairs habitus, it is a point of irresolution in a semeiosically realized inner world and a semeiosically unrealizable (at least for the time being) but all too real (or even surreal) existent. (DANIEL, 1998, p. 69)

What, then, is necessary for an external object to traverse the semeiosic threshold and become part of the semeiosic domain? In other words, we want to understand how

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[2]   Daniel notices the similarities between Peirce's semeiosic habits and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* (DANIEL, 1998, p. 67; BOURDIEU, 1990).

a (presemeiosic) percept is transformed into a concept.[3] Going back to the types of rela-
tionship between sign and object (called the "ground" of their signification), indexicality
(Secondness), and symbolization (Thirdness) are what concern us here. Reality is related
to Secondness, while in the cognitive dimension of cultural life, Thirdness predominates
over Secondness,

> process over haecceity, suasive power over brute force, knowing over willing, concei-
> ving over sensing, symbol over index, the general over the actual and particular. Thus,
> for the most part, every Second becomes both logically and ontologically overcome or
> assimilated by a Third. (DANIEL, 1998, p. 83)

There is a hierarchic inclusion among the categories, the Third including a Second,
and every Second including a First, but not conversely. In Daniel's understanding, every
element of cognition contains an element of duality, of struggle, of interaction with
something strange forcing itself on our cognition, this external element being what we
call actuality or external reality.

For an understanding of the semeiotic process, another distinction needs to be in-
troduced — the one that differentiates immediate and dynamic objects. The immediate
object is the one internal to the sign, the one Nesher (1982) calls "internal object", which
stands in a triadic relation to its *representamen* and its *interpretant*. The dynamic object,
on the other hand, is the object that the *representamen* stands for, the object that forces its
way or offers resistance to the semeiosic drift. The word object is being used as a general
category — it could also be an idea or law. Experience is the link between immediate
and dynamic objects. Nevertheless, Peirce considered experience as falling under the
category of Thirdness, since experience and background knowledge or cultural heritage
cannot be separated. However, as every Third contains a Second, it is the Second sub-
dimension of the experience that is most dominant in the semeiosic process. The clash
between the inner and outer world is precipitated into perception. Yet this dynamic duality,
in becoming part of a percept, becomes a component of a triadic process of semeiosis.
That is when the semeiosic habits take action. In usual situations, the inner structures of
semeiosic habit readily accommodate the outer world that represents a threat to them, in
a self-protective way. The encounter with something "strange" reveals the failure of the
inertia of expectations that keeps the familiar world from being reproduced continuously.
The accommodation of the strange implies its semeiosic appropriation by the habits of
the inner world.

This process of semeiosic appropriation is the transformation of the initial percept,
a First, into a concept, a Third, passing through the category of Second. In the first stage
of the process, the surprise of the new perception is translated into a feeling-sign. The

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[3]   Daniel here uses the work of Dan Nesher (1982, 1997) as basis for his argument.

triadic sign is composed, in its initial phase, of the dynamic object of the outer world, the *representamen*/entering percept, and the immediate/emotional *interpretant*. The immediate interpretant is a more general and paradigmatic category, of which the emotional interpretant is one specific manifestation.

In the second stage of the process, inner world and outer world in mutual resistance provoke a sense of duality. The expectations of the past, of the semeiosic habits, and the frustration of the present, cause a sense of exertion and resistance. At this stage, the percept is interpreted in an "energetic interpretant". This energetic interpretant is a Second in the chain, the effects of exertion the sign has in an interpreting agent (LISKA, 1996). It captures the moment, the action and reaction of the impact of the strange in the semeiosic chain. The paradigmatic counterpart of the energetic interpretant is the dynamic interpretant. Dynamic interpretant stands as a Second for the immediate interpretant. It is the *singular effects* of the sign that the dynamic interpretant harbors, but there is no generalization yet, i.e., no inclusion of the percept under an existing (or new) category of concept. As the percept is interpreted through a logic interpretant, the conceptual import is gained, and the sign becomes meaningful. This process is a Third, in relation to the emotional and energetic interpretants. The more general category of Third interpretant is what Peirce called *final interpretant*. The term "final" does not mean termination of semeiosic interpretation, but only the fact that, once appropriated, this interpretation will take place inside the working of the signs of habits. In Daniel's opinion, "whether and to what extent the disturbing potential of [the emotional and energetic interpretants] is appeased remains an open and empirical question" (DANIEL, 1998, p. 87).

The semeiosic appropriation operates in a cycle that goes from an immediate/emotional/feeling interpretant to a dynamic/energetic/reactive interpretant to a final/logical/assimilating interpretant. In this dynamic work of culture, percepts carry with them "undeniable and forceful traces or aspects of the outer world of dynamic objects" (DANIEL, 1998, p. 87). This is not solely a mental process, but body and mind are seen as just two aspects of the same whole.

The process described above is an instance of a relatively successful appropriation of something strange into the inner semeiosic dynamics of culture/habit/personality. Yet, such appropriations very frequently are not equally successful. In Daniel's words,

> The semeiosic process of incorporation can be stopped in its tracks so to speak, at the very gate of the inner world. It could be arrested in its initial hybridity; it could progress into its translation by an immediate/emotional interpretant and not move beyond it. Or it may go as far as being translated into an energetic/dynamic interpretant, arrested in its specificity, and be stuck there as nothing more than a trace of action and reaction, a reminder of the Secondness, the uniqueness, the incomparability, and the ungeneralizability of the event of the "stranger's" entry into the inner world, who was then condemned to remain there as a stranger. (DANIEL, 1998, p. 88)

Semeiosis and the politics of signs

Some aspects of the semeiosic appropriation of novelty need further analysis. We propose the hypothesis that, in given circumstances, the emotional content of the immediate interpretant, in consonance with the self-protective qualities of the semeiosic habits, may be the factors operating semeiosic processes that are central in situations of social discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and the like. We will focus on some of these processes responsible for the "naturalization" of sociocultural differences and relations of power and domination, the ones Susan Gal (1998) termed *iconization*, *recursiveness*, and *erasure*.

Before commenting on these semeiosic processes, let's bring back Daniel's work on the limits of culture. In his article (1998), he mentions a moment of semeiosic crisis during his ethnographic work. After hearing from one of his informants a description of unspeakable collective violence against a defenseless boy who was attacked, mutilated and set on fire during the Sri Lanka riots of 1983, in which the informant participated as a perpetrator, Daniel asked his interlocutor (in a desperate effort to change the subject, as Daniel himself suggests) what his goal in life was. "I want a VCR", replied the informant. This answer left Daniel "speechless", in his own words (1998, p. 76).

From the perspective of the anthropologist, operating inside the linguistic game of the dialectics of analytic and synthetic thinking in the academic construction of the Other's cultural universe, always running the risk of ethical hypercorrection in the effort to be self-conscious about his or her own biases, there could be no possible meaningful articulation between the description of that horrendous scene and the statement "I want a VCR". "What stance does one take toward the Other when the Other is evil?" asks Daniel. "The question is held at bay at the limits of culture" (DANIEL, 1998, p. 90).

Yet, given the pragmatic orientation of everyday life, holding such exceedingly powerful questions at bay is a luxury that most people cannot afford. Of course, there are cases in which the limits of the work of culture are obvious, like the example Daniel provides about a man who could not talk about his father and brother, both murdered in front of him during the same riots in Sri Lanka, without loosing consciousness; the literature on trauma is rich in descriptions about the theme. Nevertheless, luckily it seems to be more a rule than an exception that people make an effort to try to overcome (in semeiosic and many other domains) the effects of trauma.

So, returning to our analysis of the semeiosic dynamics of the contact with the stranger, our argument is that in the situation in which no logical interpretant would do the work of incorporating the percept, transforming it into a concept, the percept is connected to the semeiosic dynamics through other means, through already existing concepts, and that would happen according to an indexical relationship between the available concepts and the political economy of the situation.[4] Here is the point at which emotions are a key ele-

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[4]   This affirmation may seem tautological, but we should remember that there is no point of departure in the dynamics of semeiosis, which is a continuous process.

ment, in the sense that they trigger the mechanisms of self-defense of the set of semeiosic habits. In theory, the anxiety that springs from the usual political life of a given social group, at its multiple levels, would suffice to start the process. Part of the defense mechanisms is to channel psychic energy to counter-attack the menace, whatever it may be. In semeiotic terms, this means associating the new percept with interpretants that are located in the particular position of signifying danger, disgust, evil, and the like, i.e., in the position of being somehow attacked, inside the gradation of categories associated to its political economy. Not all situations of semeiosic confusion are associated with danger, and some may be even be associated with divine intervention (OBEYSEKERE, 1984), but the indexical elements of the situation will then play a role in providing the percept with indexical traces that will define what logical interpretant will be summoned by the situation.

The work of Susan Gal (1998) highlights an important aspect of the semeiosic dimension of situations of conflict. It refers to the way in which identity signs are manipulated, facilitating the work of transforming individuals or groups into candidates for being stigmatized and discriminated. Gal makes reference to three semeiosic processes: iconization, recursiveness, and erasure. *Iconization* is the process by which the linguistic differences that index social contrasts are reinterpreted as icons of the social contrasts (GAL, 1998, p. 328). This ideological representation fuses, then, some qualities of the linguistic feature of the group in question and a supposed quality of this group, and understands one as the cause of the other, or even as the inherent essentiality of the other. "Participants' ideologies about language locate — and sometimes even generate — linguistic phenomena as part of, and as evidence for, what they believe to be systematic behavior, aesthetic, affective, and moral contrasts among the social groups indexed" (GAL, 1998, p. 328).

The logic could be expanded to include other classes of phenomena that are not necessarily linguistic, and the iconic relationship may be established between any behavioral pattern and the represented essentializations: patterns of cultural practices, such as different diets, different calendars, different sexual orientations, and the like.

The semeiosic process of *recursiveness* involves the projection of an opposition characteristic of one level of the relationship onto some other level (GAL, 1998, p. 253). Intragroup distinction can be projected onto intergroup relations, and/or vice versa. And *erasure*, the third semeiosic process, refers to the situation in which "an ideology simplifies a sociolinguistic field, forcing attention onto only one part of it, which renders some linguistic forms or groups invisible or recasts the image of their presence and practices to better fit the ideology"[5] (GAL, 1998, p. 253).

Recursiveness and erasure usually work together, in the sense that recursiveness often leads to the erasure of inconvenient elements. Through the action of these three semeiosic

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[5]   Gal's erasure is the semeiosic operator that generates what Lyotard (1988) called *différend*, the situation in which there is no possible communication between two parts since the terms one of the parts recognizes as proper and identifies with are, a priori, defined as illogical or unintelligible by the other.

operators, representations are attached to social groups, alternative representations are excluded, and discursive authority and political legitimation are constructed and contested.

The argument, then, could be summarized as follows: on the one hand, extremely energetic percepts may in fact be a challenge to the semeiosic process, but the cognitive apparatus will summon a logic interpretant that is most coherent or adaptive to the actual set of semeiosic habits, and it would happen according to the self-protective mechanisms of these habits. On the other hand, the logic interpretant summoned in the process will necessarily be related to the political economy of the context in which the experience takes place, and because there is hardly any semeiosic moment that will be disconnected from this political economy, we may assume that this logic can apply to other situations that are not the limits of semeiosis. Since average verbal intercourse involves some anxiety, these ordinary intercourses can trigger semeiosic processes in which the result of the appropriation of the percept is a Third, a symbol, albeit a degenerated symbol, i.e., a symbol that tends to favor its iconic and/or indexical aspects. Iconization, recursiveness, and erasure are some of the semeiosic processes in action on those circumstances.

Traces of what is being said here can be found in well-known social theories about deviance (DURKHEIM, 1965; FREUD, 1960; GIRARD, 1977). Durkheim's theory of crime is one important example. For Durkheim (1965), the social process itself creates crime, as it does in the process of creation of punishment. The groups better identified with the moral standards in use will frame some behavior as criminal, so that they can punish it, and the punishment is a ritual that reminds everyone of the power of society and of the ideal of following its rules. In this sense, the principle of rebellion is the same as that of conformity. Therefore, crime cannot be eliminated, since whatever behavior is erased, something else would immediately take its place and fit the role of "outermost" extreme. But more important than that, it is the ritualized action of recruitment of criminal behavior from the margins that recognizes, reaffirms, and celebrates society. The recruitment, trial, and punishment of crime within a society are essential to the experience of order, and the process works as a ritual anomie[6] — prevention practice (HILBERT, 1992).

One very insightful experience, described by Harold Garfinkel, explores the principles by which the three semeiosic processes discussed above are put to work is his study of *degradation ceremonies*. A degradation ceremony takes place when the need to begin the process of finding a deviant arises, and it prepares the "victim" to be criminalized without harming the social group, but conversely, fortifying its existence by operating a transformation in the victim's identity. In Garfinkel's definition, the grounds and the behavior that the grounds make explicable as the person's conduct constitute his or her identity (GARFINKEL, 1972, p. 202). In order to be victimized, the person should be expelled from

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[6] Anomie, in Durkheim's terminology, refers to the situation in which the social fabric starts to decompose and the social basis for community life starts to fade.

the group,[7] and this process is done through an identity transformation. "The work of the denunciation effects the recasting of the objective character of the perceived other: The other person becomes, in the eyes of his condemners, literally a different and *new* person" (GARFINKEL, 1972, p. 204). But what are the programs of communicative tactics, the semeiosic operators that will get the work of status degradation done? The first transformation that takes place in the process is in the realm in which the involved are situated. Event, denouncer and denounced ("perpetrator") must all be removed from ordinary everyday life and made to stand as "out of the ordinary". Indexical elements of the ordinary context must be erased, even if momentarily, and substituted by extraordinary ones. Persons and events are essentialized; *types* of people and *types* of events become units of analysis, *iconized*. Gal's *erasure* can be seen in the fact that the unique and distinctive character of people and events, any sense of accident, coincidence, indeterminism, chance, should all be lost. The *recursiveness* process causes the qualities of types, nevertheless, to be defined in a polarized way: "the profanity of an occurrence or a desire or a character trait, for example, is clarified by the reference it bears to its opposite, the sacred. The features of the mad-dog murderer reverse the features of the peaceful citizen" (GARFINKEL, 1972, p. 205). By the same logic, the status of pariah that is being imputed to the denounced is countered by the close identification between the denouncer and the witnesses as to transform him into a public person, an *iconic* and at the same time *indexical symbol* of the collectivity. As a public defender of the order, the denouncer then makes salient the supra-personal values of the collectivity, and his denunciation is delivered in their name. The distance between the denouncer and denounced is also experienced by the witnesses.

Finally, "the denounced person must be ritually separated from a place in the legitimate order, i.e., he must be defined as standing at a place opposed to it. He must be placed 'outside', he must be rendered 'strange'" (GARFINKEL, 1972, p. 207). The set of indexical signs that connected the denounced to the original group are destroyed. The conditions are then set for his victimization in the ritual construction of deviance.

Conclusions

This paper intended to demonstrate that there is a semeiosic microphysics organizing conflictive contexts where identities are reified, and notions of culture, race, social class and other essentialities are hardened along the political strategies of the contenders. In this context of low communication but intense production and reproduction of representations of the other and of the self, it is these representations that give content to both the logic and the unconscious actions and strategies used by the contenders. Police reports produced under the *ethos* of the militaristic control of order, newspaper sensationalism and

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7   Or the group by the social order, in processes of collective victimization.

moral panic are elements that retro-aliment themselves and that sustain the fabulation and the fictional accounts of marginalized groups. The crucial feature of work of fabulation, according to Taussig (1987, p. 121), "lies in the way it creates an uncertain reality out of fiction, giving shape and voice to the formless form of the reality in which an unstable interplay of truth and illusion becomes a phantasmic social force. All societies live by fictions taken as real".

The representations are produced in the conceptual lines of moral essential oppositions, and the existence of the conflict and of the contenders themselves becomes structured along these typifications. Essentialized moralities, the social organization of the conflict according to cultural opposites, fictional realities — again, are iconization, recursiveness, and erasure.

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