

## Social Action and its Sense

Historical Hermeneutics after Ricœur

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### Abstract

In the 1970s, particularly in his article "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text" (1971), Paul Ricœur proposed a hypothesis concerning the homology between the text and social action. That hypothesis is not reducible to the narrative logic prevailing in late Ricœur's writings, and we are searching to elucidate its further implications in social sciences. A new hermeneutics of social meanings can be founded upon it, enriched by the methodological experience of structural semiotics and taking into account some special processes of sense-giving as "remote-model behavior" and "sense-suppressing action".

*Keywords:* Hermeneutics, Semiotics, Social Action, Yury Lotman, Georges Bataille.

### Résumé

Dans les années 1970, et surtout dans l'article "Le modèle du texte: l'action sensée considérée comme un texte" (1971), Paul Ricœur a avancé l'hypothèse d'une homologie entre le texte et l'action sociale. Elle n'est pas réductible à la logique narrative prédominante chez le dernier Ricœur, et nous cherchons à élucider ses implications pour les sciences humaines. Une nouvelle herméneutique des significations sociales peut être fondée là-dessus, enrichie par l'expérience méthodologique de la sémiotique structurale et prenant en compte quelques processus spécifiques de l'attribution de sens, comme "le comportement selon un modèle éloigné" ou "l'action supprimant le sens".

*Mots-clés :* Herméneutique, Sémiotique, Action sociale, Iouri Lotman, Georges Bataille.

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# Social Action and its Sense

## Historical Hermeneutics after Ricœur

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My aim is to analyze a theoretical hypothesis proposed by Paul Ricœur and to trace its implications for the human sciences. In that way, I will consider Ricœur's philosophical ideas from the outside – not within a properly philosophical context but in search of another intellectual domain (or domains) where those ideas might be relevant. In a certain sense, such an approach may be called hermeneutic, for it intends not only to clarify an author's intentions but also, and maybe even more, to extend them to other fields and thereby to assign them a new sense of which the author might be unaware. "To understand an author better than he could understand himself" is Schleiermacher's famous motto, and in doing so, we ought to distance ourselves from the author's intellectual position and adopt a point of view which he might not have had in mind. Ricœur often emphasized the importance of distancing in the hermeneutic process, and his philosophy has always been open to dialogue with the human sciences;<sup>1</sup> hopefully, this distancing gesture can be repeated from the other side as well, that is, from the perspective of the human sciences, without betraying his methodological commitments. In the same spirit, in what follows I will show that hermeneutics does not only *find* but also *gives* sense.

The hypothesis (the word is Ricœur's)<sup>2</sup> in question is the homology between text and social action, as Ricœur stated in the article "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text", first published in English in 1971 and reprinted later in *Du texte à l'action*.<sup>3</sup> In later writings such as *Time and Narrative (Temps et récit)* and *Memory, History, Forgetting (La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli)*, he turned to a particular way of understanding that hypothesis, assimilating social action to a narrative text or story. Yet, his initial ideas about the text remain productive and allow a methodological interpretation not explored by the philosopher. Why did Ricœur abandon that idea? Maybe he was not sure of its validity; or, more likely, maybe it went beyond the limits of his method, because it could not be verified within pure philosophical reflection and called for a "positive" scientific research. As a philosopher, Ricœur could only outline that possibility and then hand it over to the social scientists for further elaboration.

Let me briefly expound Ricœur's argument. Before stating the homology between text and social action, the philosopher builds up what he calls "the paradigm of the text"<sup>4</sup> through a two-step dialectical movement: language (in Saussurean sense, i.e. system of linguistic rules) gets realized in discourse (act or process of uttering) which in turn gets fixed in written text.

In the first step, Ricœur opposes language and discourse in terms of the abstract and the concrete: 1) language is virtual whereas discourse "is always realized temporally and in the present"; 2) "language lacks a subject," while "discourse refers back to its speaker by means of a complex set of indicators such as the personal pronouns"; 3) "the signs in language only refer to other signs within the same system" and therefore language lacks a world, whereas "discourse is

always about something"<sup>5</sup>; 4) finally, language has no addressee, but discourse has "an other, another person, an interlocutor to whom it is addressed."<sup>6</sup>

In the second step, the concreteness acquired by discourse is once again *distanced*, dialectically negated by the text, which is independent of its discursive origin in the speech act by which it has been produced: 1) the text no longer conveys that act but only the meaning of utterance, its semantic content, including its verbally expressed illocutionary force – "not the event of speaking, but the 'said' of speaking"; 2) it dissociates "the author's intention and the meaning of the text", because the meaning is no longer supported "by all the processes by which spoken discourse supports itself in order to be understood – intonation, delivery, mimicry, gestures"; 3) it surpasses the immediate situation of oral utterance, insofar as its reference cannot be shown and thus refers to a *world* as "the ensemble of references opened up by texts"<sup>7</sup>; 4) it is addressed to an "unknown, invisible reader" who does not find himself in a face to face relationship with the author and at the limit may be identified with anybody who can read.<sup>8</sup>

Ricœur's two-step construction of the text thus loosely resembles the schema of the hermeneutic circle. While language provides us with an abstract idea of the possible meanings of an utterance (a kind of "pre-comprehension"), discourse leads us back to the particularity of the speech act. The written text dialectically sublates their contradiction, setting up an integral but at the same time multiple meaning, depending on different situations in which the text can be read.

After having established this paradigm of the text, Ricœur extends it to "meaningful action", that is, an action which the agent can account for.<sup>9</sup> According to his hypothesis, such an action may be considered as text, for, just as the latter, it is distanced, detached from the event of speaking/doing; as a result, we can and must *interpret* actions like texts. Here starts a new loop of dialectical/hermeneutical process, and now I am going to critically comment the four arguments alleged by Ricœur that correspond to his four distinctive features of the text.

In the first place, just as a text is written out, an action is objectified: it cannot remain purely mental and, Ricœur adds, its signification is separate from the event of its occurrence.<sup>10</sup> This argument concerns the locutionary rather than ontological aspects of the action. Action, Ricœur claims, "has the structure of a locutionary act," having "a *propositional* content" but it "also presents 'illocutionary' traits very similar to those of the complete speech-act."<sup>11</sup> In other words, action can always be described by a more or less complex verbal sentence, containing a specific action predicate and a certain number of complements (they will designate, for example, "where", "when", "by what means", "with the help of whom", etc., the agent accomplishes his or her deed). Like a text, its semantic meaning combines with an "illocutionary force", allowing it to leave a mark on its time. This point seems to be the most problematic among Ricœur's theses. Indeed, the argument in question rests more on the verbal description of the action than on its practical reality. It's because we describe an action by linguistic sentences, it's because we can apply to it the semiotic metaphor of "marking" that its structure seems propositional. We should keep in mind that Ricœur's object is not all actions but only "meaningful" ones, those which the agent can account for: "I do this or that, for such purpose, with such means, etc." Ricœur seems to follow here a circular reasoning (not in the good sense of a hermeneutic circle!): to prove the homology between action and text he is obliged to presume from the very outset a linguistic support of that action – so he finds in the action what he has placed into it. He takes this pan-linguistic point of view from the Anglo-Saxon "philosophy of action,"<sup>12</sup> extrapolating the logical approach to action and considering the latter as a kind of thinking and/or speaking.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, he tries to reduce the difference of interpretation as applied to text or to action:

whereas in the former case the sense is supposed to be interpreted by an external observer/reader, in the latter case its interpretation is a work of other agents, partners of the person(s) realizing the given action. Surely, the illocutionary factors of oral utterance (of “discourse”, in Ricœur’s terms) bring that utterance closer to action, introducing an active “force” into it. That is why the theory of speech acts is so important for Ricœur. But precisely the written text, detached from its “originating” speech act, is likely to lose at least a part of that force in favor of abstract semiotic structures. On the other hand, if we happen to consider the action from a remote point of view, as a remnant of the past, then it does get closer to a “text”; but whereas the potential premises of such re-focalizing are obvious enough (they reside in the very structure of language serving to describe actions), the modalities of its actualization are not elucidated in Ricœur’s argument, and I will discuss them later.<sup>14</sup>

In the second place, Ricœur draws a parallel in the status of the author of text and the performer of action. The action becomes *autonomous* from its author, and this “constitutes the *social* dimension of action.”<sup>15</sup> Social events are often hardly assignable to a particular author. Their remote consequences escape even more from the control of the agents, and so does a text, too: it leaves behind it the person who has written it and circulates in an open space of eventual readings. In his essay “What is a Text?” (1970), Ricœur illustrated this independence of the text by an expressive metaphor:

Sometimes I like to say that to read a book is to consider its author as already dead and the book as posthumous. For it is when the author is dead that the relation to the book becomes complete and, as it were, intact. The author can no longer respond; it only remains to read his work.<sup>16</sup>

In 1970, the “death of the author” sounded like an echo of Roland Barthes’ famous essay “La mort de l’auteur” (1968), although it means something else for Ricœur.<sup>17</sup> For Barthes, the author “dies” or disappears in the very process of text-writing; the text (in particular, the modern literary text) produces itself spontaneously, through an impersonal play of linguistic potentialities; it has no “author” from the very beginning. For Ricœur, there has been an author who has created the text, but who no longer has control over its circulation and interpretation – the author “dies” after writing, insofar as he or she writes for ulterior readers and no longer speaks for actual auditors here and now.<sup>18</sup> However, in both cases, a condition or a consequence of the “death of the author” is an active role of the reader or interpreter. For Barthes, “the birth of the reader must be requited by the death of the Author,”<sup>19</sup> while for Ricœur “the text thus produces a double eclipse of the reader and of the writer”, more exactly a substitution of reading for dialogue.<sup>20</sup> In the same way, social action acquires its whole sense only in the act of “reading” or of practical interpretation; until that moment, it has only a kind of pre-sense.

In the third place, like a text, meaningful action surpasses the situation where it has been produced. To “the narrowness of the dialogical situation” of interlocutors/agents they both substitute a world, “the outline of a new being-in-the-world.”<sup>21</sup> In the case of action that substitution can be accounted for by the opposition of two modes of significance – relevance and importance: “...the meaning of an important event exceeds, overcomes, transcends, the social conditions of its production and may be re-enacted in new social contexts. Its importance is its durable relevance and, in some cases, its omni-temporal relevance.”<sup>22</sup> The world of a text or an action is constituted by their non-ostensible references, by what they make possible, though not necessarily present – as opposed to the ostensive references of a speech act which refers to things

and facts that can be shown *in actu*. So understood, the world has a phenomenological structure. It is constituted by human projects, and among all Ricœur's statements about the structure of action, this is the most phenomenological one. In his "Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" (1975), Ricœur cites explicitly Heidegger's *Being and Time* and retains from his analysis "the idea of 'the projection of our ownmost possibilities', applying it to the theory of the text. For what must be interpreted in a text is a *proposed world* which I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my ownmost possibilities."<sup>23</sup> Thus the interpreter's task, Ricœur concludes, is less to join someone's inner life (let us remember that the "dead" author is overcome by his or her text) than to describe the "proposed world" (comparable to Husserl's *Lebenswelt*) projected by a text or an action.<sup>24</sup> We are invited to "think of the sense of the text as an injunction starting from the text, as a new way of looking at things, as an injunction to think in a certain manner" – and, similarly, every human act projects a specific world, in the same way that Sartre explained the phenomenological dialectics of the individual and the universal: "In choosing myself, I choose man."<sup>25</sup> For instance, a man paying his debt to his dead creditor's heirs who do not know about the existence of that debt (a favorite Kantian example of moral behavior), thereby proposes a world where honesty must be expected from everybody; and other men, constructing gas chambers in extermination camps, propose another world where human lives may be destroyed by a simple administrative decision, under the pretext of their uselessness for the State. Not only when we act according to Kantian categorical imperative, but in all our acts we implicitly "propose a world" and consequently are responsible of its future configuration. Very interestingly, Ricœur mentions some particular events (social actions) possessing an "omni-temporal relevance": as his other writings suggest, he means "events of deliverance" like the Passion of Christ liberating the human kind from original sin. Already in the Old Testament, Ricœur argues in his essay "Manifestation and Proclamation" (1974), the mythical correspondences proper to the regime of the "manifestation" of sacred give way to the "hermeneutics of proclamation", submitting mythical events to a humanist allegorical interpretation: "They [cosmogonic myths – S.Z.] receive a new function in that henceforth they tell the 'beginning' of a history that is through and through a history of deliverance."<sup>26</sup> They are ready-made texts, and in allegorical reading they become what Ricœur calls "limit-expressions".<sup>27</sup> They project their sense throughout many generations and finally are transformed into pure sense.<sup>28</sup>

In the fourth place, as in text, "the meaning of human action is also something which is *addressed* to an indefinite range of possible 'readers'. The judges are not the contemporaries, but, as Hegel said, history itself."<sup>29</sup> This final thesis is the one least elaborated by Ricœur. Its statement occupies only a few lines, as if it seemed too obvious to the philosopher that the sense of an event is always "open to this kind of practical interpretation through present *praxis*."<sup>30</sup> However, this idea deserves a more attentive examination. First, at this point we discover the "social science" or "human science" that Ricœur had in mind when, in the beginning of his essay, he was speaking of "the notion of text as a good paradigm for the so-called object of the social sciences" and of "text-interpretation as a paradigm for interpretation in general in the field of the human sciences."<sup>31</sup> Johann Michel defines that implicit discipline as "socio-history", as opposed to "microsociology" which deals with face-to-face interactions and not with "great" events detached from their immediate practical context.<sup>32</sup> Ricœur himself uses another, more simple term, *history*. The word "history" appears many times in the text of his essay, whereas "sociology" is practically absent from it. It's history, not sociology, that constitutes an "archive" with events of the past and submits them to a retrospective interpretation. Yet – and this is the

second point to be noticed – the word “history” is ambiguous. It can refer to the discourse telling and analyzing the events of the past (*historia rerum gestarum*), but it can refer as well to the events themselves (*res gestae*). The two meanings tend to coincide in Hegel’s philosophy of absolute mind that the French philosopher refers to,<sup>33</sup> but Ricœur seems to privilege the second meaning when he is speaking of “this kind of practical interpretation through present *praxis*.” In his idea, there are not (only) professional historians but (also) ordinary men and women who “practically” interpret the others’ actions through their own social actions, and in that sense they can be called “apprentice-historians”.<sup>34</sup>

Now, how should we understand this “practical interpretation”? At this moment, Ricœur finds himself at a bifurcation point. In a certain sense, the choice to be made corresponds to the semantic ambiguity of the word “action”: in English as in French, this word can designate either a sequence of acts, a story (for example, “dramatic action”) or a single act (for example, “courageous action”). The first, holistic view is more proper to the great hermeneutic tradition longing to *find* a preexisting sense of a whole act/utterance; the second, analytic view, corresponds to structural semiotics which builds sense with particular elements and accounts less for sense-finding than for sense-making, sense-giving.<sup>35</sup>

A sequence of meaningful acts is a *narrative*, and, so understood, social action became the matter of Ricœur’s philosophy of narrative. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricœur attempted to incorporate the idea of practical interpretation (or “practical comprehension”, *compréhension pratique*)<sup>36</sup> into a theory of narrative rationality, and some of his essays brought together in the volume *Du texte à l’action* already prefigured this conceptual shift. According to that theory, social praxis might be considered as *mimesis I*, a narrative activity taking place in the acts themselves, prior to and regardless of any verbalization. Logically and symptomatically, the idea of the “paradigm of the text” disappeared from Ricœur’s argument at the same time and gave way to a new narrative paradigm. For the same reason, the opposition “live speech / written text” ceased in late Ricœur’s writings: indeed, a narrative plot can be based on mythic as well as ordinary events, referring indifferently either to distant, “textual” relations or to immediate, “speech” ones. For the same reason, history should no longer be a privileged discipline for interpreting social action – sociology and psychology can do it as well.

However, another way of thinking, another idea of historical interpretation, might be deduced from Ricœur’s hypothesis of the text as model of social action; and, as we will see, such an idea is founded on his own insights. In that way, each particular human act would be considered as a semantic entity getting detached from its original context and submitted to new interpretations which constitute, precisely, the course of historical processes. The interpretation, so understood, consists in assigning to actions (generally by practical reactions, but not only) new meanings and reintroducing them into new semantic structures. In the early 1970s, after his turn from a hermeneutics of symbols to a hermeneutics of texts,<sup>37</sup> Ricœur found himself at a crossroads, having to choose between either narrative or semiotic approaches to texts/actions. While the narrative logic deals with homogenous objects (events), situated on the same level (that of syntagmatic unfolding), and endowed with immanent sense – the semiotic theory inspired by Saussure postulates a transcendent relationship between two levels, the sensuous signifier and the conceptual signified. In historical processes, these two sorts of unities interact and alternate; the narrative scheme appears like a straight line, while the semiotic process progresses by zigzags. Moreover, not only the unfolding of that process but also the historical or non-historical value of events depends radically on the results of social conceptualization.

Let me take as an example a (regrettably) typical incident of racial and ethnic relations: a male member of a minority group offends or sexually persecutes a woman member of a majority group. The resulting events will depend upon social qualifications of his deed. In a tolerant multiracial society, it will be normally condemned and repressed, but in the same way as if both implicated persons belonged to the same group, for it violated only a common law. In a society divided and anxious about ethnic differences, the same act may be considered a transgression of racial rules, trigger a lynch trial, a riot, a violent confrontation of communities, eventually with fatal political consequences. From the scientific point of view, its disciplinary qualification will vary as well: in the first case, it will concern sociology as a typical, statistically average fact, a simple act of delinquency, *un fait divers* (a fact of current affairs) to use a French expression; in the second case, it may be noted down in annals and interest history as a single event with irreversible effects on socio-political processes, an event which obviously exceeds its immediate interpersonal situation and acquires a general importance, being “addressed” not only to the victim but to a whole community.

The point is that the “historicizing” of common delinquency becomes possible through the fact of its social *interpretation*, which takes place before and after the act itself (*en amont* and *en aval*, upstream and downstream, as Ricœur wrote in *Time and Narrative*). First, in a racist society a male member of a minority group cannot “simply” desire a female member of a majority group; he cannot help consider her as a forbidden sexual object, and his behavior possesses from the very outset the meaning of a transgression. And second, his illicit act will entail a confrontation of communities only on the condition that racist views, racist stereotypes of thinking, are widespread in a given society and commonly utilized in interpreting particular incidents. Social interpretation precedes and follows social action (in our example, an offense), endowing it with moral and (potentially) historical sense. In other words, the effective meaning of meaningful action depends not only on the agent’s intentional awareness, but also on social conventions and presuppositions; they all contribute to create the “proposed world” of the action. As a moral implication, we are all responsible for, say, racial or ethnic delinquency – not necessarily for its physical occurrence but for its social, namely “racial” or “ethnic”, qualification, because we all, as members of society, bear our part of responsibility for modes of thinking and interpreting which are more or less widespread and acceptable in our society.<sup>38</sup>

Returning to historical science – how can it study these processes of social interpretation? In his book *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000), Ricœur opposes the “ordinary man’s” and the “historian’s” points of view on the events through the conceptual couple “memory/history”. History, he argues, cannot coincide with memory. They proceed with different devices and have different objects, even when they seem to treat the same historical events. In historical research, “memory is archived, documented. Its object ceases being a memory, in the literal sense of the word, that is, retained within a relation of continuity and appropriation in regard of some present conscious awareness.”<sup>39</sup> And, as a result, “numerous reputedly historical events were never anyone’s memories.”<sup>40</sup> Although memory and history are two different ways of thinking about the past, in both cases there are not practical acts but mental operations in question, which cannot be observed immediately.

Insofar as we claim to account for a historical process, we must take into consideration intentions and motivations as well as the succession of actions itself – in Aristotelian terms, not only material and efficient but also formal and teleological causality. Yet formal and final causes issue from the agents’ minds, and therefore they are invisible, especially when we are dealing

with obscure historical agents leaving after them few documentary traces (modern historiography is more and more interested in such people). We are forced to reconstruct their intentions on the assumption of general structures of thinking which we impute to particular agents. So, the hermeneutics of historical action implies a kind of seesaw motion between general mental structures and particular physical actions, between signified and signifier.

In Ricœur's own terms, this back-and-forth intellectual movement might be described by the dialectic of *explanation* and *understanding* (which seems to disappear from his later works, along with the hypothesis of "action as text"). Although I will not analyze this problem here, I would like to emphasize one point of great import for Ricœur in the 1970s. Revising Dilthey's definition of those two categories, the French philosopher observes that in the contemporary human sciences "explaining" can no longer signify assigning isolated, independent "causes" to an event: in the structural analysis of social life, we are dealing with systemic causality, which determines particular actions and events by the total structure of a system.<sup>41</sup> Explaining an event, in this sense, means describing formal relations between "empty" elements of the system (for example, having to explain a marriage in traditional society, we inscribe it into the structure of kinship adopted in that society); and "understanding" the same action no longer implies an intuitive penetration (*Einfühlung*) into the inner life of the agent but more exactly a characterization of his or her "proposed world" correlative to the mental structures of the given culture.<sup>42</sup> As a result, Ricœur reshapes the relationship between explanation and understanding, putting forward his famous methodological principle: "explaining more in order to understand better" (*expliquer plus pour comprendre mieux*), we explain the intra-systemic relations in order to understand a conceptual "proposed world" that is implied and projected by a particular action. In that sense, Ricœur appreciated the Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright, who had shown that to explain a system one had to put it in motion by an experimental gesture which could no longer be "explained" but only "understood", interpreted through the experimenter's intention.<sup>43</sup> Von Wright also stressed that, moreover, "the systems which social scientists study cannot, as a rule, be manipulated by outside agents. Instead they can be manipulated by agents inside,"<sup>44</sup> - which means that understanding events issuing from such systems coincides with understanding the agents' motives inscribed into the systemic structure.

Ricœur has dialecticized the relationship between explanation and understanding: he does not regard them anymore as mutually exclusive terms of classification but as alternating moments in the never-ending process of interpretation.<sup>45</sup> An aspect that should be emphasized - it follows from Ricœur's "textual" hypothesis but is not reducible to the narrative logic of his late writings - is the fact that the same process takes place in spontaneous social action as well as in methodic scientific knowledge: historians' thought as well as history itself progresses as a continual self-interpretation where "understandable" acts produce "explainable" structures, and vice versa. History is auto-hermeneutics, but also auto-description.<sup>46</sup> To prove this point, I will highlight two specific spheres of this exchange - two limit-cases - that have been discovered and described by two other outstanding theoreticians.

The first is what we can call remote-model behavior. In the 1970s, the Soviet semiotician Yury Lotman postulated a discipline named the "poetics of everyday behavior" which later inspired some theoretical insights of the Anglo-Saxon New Historicism.<sup>47</sup> As it results from Lotman's researches, it is not only our current manners of behaving that may be described as playing a certain "role" conserved in our social skills and adapted to the given situation (this fact, the interactionist psychology and sociology have for a long time accustomed us to); there are also



specific modes of socio-historical behavior – “heroic”, “revolutionary”, and so on – in which groups like the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian nobility imitate literary or theatrical patterns and are thus subject to a genuine poetics in this sense. Their specificity resides in the remote character of the models they imitate: they follow the example not of their neighbors, as all people do more or less, but of “transcendent” persons, like literary or dramatic characters. The remoteness of these models makes evident the semantic exchange between acts and structures: while the former are performed in the real social world (sometimes as very serious acts, for instance political suicides imitating tragic scenes of theatre), the latter may remain in the fictional world of works of art. Their ontological separation implies a discontinuous, dialectical character of interaction. The remote-model behavior takes place not only in “everyday” situations but also in political events (the French Revolution imitating the Roman Republic), in religious asceticism (“the imitation of Christ”), and so on. It is important to underline that remote-model behavior can hardly be accounted for in the framework of narrative logic: Christ’s life is certainly a narrative, and the life of a Christian monk may be another one, but they do not form a single narrative together. There is an ontological, or semiotic gap between them, which gets filled and mediated by the mimesis of semantic structures.

The second specific case is what may be called sense-suppressing action. The French writer and philosopher Georges Bataille has pointed out, in a series of works, the importance of consumptive, sacrificial activities in social life.<sup>48</sup> Those who practice such activities – and we all do so at some special moments of our existence, like religious rites, feasts, sexual or artistic experiences – strive more or less consciously to abolish the very idea of sense, to burn out in sacrificial fire any chance of rational accounting, and to make impossible any subject’s distanciation from his or her object. Ecstatic experience, Bataille claims, refers to the pre-cultural “intimate” connection between the individual and his or her environment (at the limit the whole universe). Humans have to relive, from time to time, their pre-human condition by committing absurd, useless, and sometimes self-destructive acts to which no sense might be assigned by definition. Those acts interrupt every logical sequence, including that of a narrative. Nevertheless, the socio-historical process does not stop. After being interrupted by senseless deeds, it begins immediately to re-narrativize them, to endow them with secondary meanings and functions concocted afterwards: religious sacrifices get the sense of propitiating supernatural powers, the feasts that of social integration, sex that of reproduction of human species, and art that of moral edification. Undoubtedly, these functions really do exist and genealogically they may even be primordial (as reproduction seems to be the primitive natural function of sexual activity), yet they cannot cover completely the experience of senselessness lived in such moments. The experience in question surpasses the sense that agents may have consciously assigned to their deeds – somewhat in the same way as a text or a meaningful action, according to Ricœur, surpasses its original situation and its author’s original intention. It is true that, in Ricœur’s terms, such actions should no longer be characterized as meaningful. For, although their authors can tell us “what they are doing” (“I am sacrificing an animal”, “I am enjoying a work of art”, etc.), in the final analysis the sense of their deed resides in its very senselessness: “I am doing it for nothing.”<sup>49</sup> In such conditions, the dialectic of semantic structures and non-semantic acts takes the form of open conflict, and its (always temporary) resolution shapes the course of our social life.

These two limit-cases that I could only outline here (there may be others, too) are surely very different, opposed as an excessive sense-giving in remote-model behavior (the subject longs

to make more sense by his or her acts than “normal” people do) and the refusal of any sense-giving in sense-suppressing behavior. However, they do share an important feature in common: they are both unproductive, non-practical modes of action. To utilize Aristotelian categories again, their formal cause (how to do, how to make up an act?) subdues completely any final cause (what it will serve for?). Their non-finality allows them to be classified along with “existential” moments, in which a human being discovers his or her open, non-essential nature, when the question “to be this or that” absolutely prevails over the question of “what to be for”. Integrating such highly problematic moments into the semantic structure of socio-historical movements is a decisive task of human sciences; indeed, the socio-historical movement operates in the same way. By assigning senses to acts and its spontaneous hermeneutics, it must be followed by a more self-conscious one. That will still be a hermeneutics, a discourse interpreting social senses, but a hermeneutics renewed and enriched by the methodological experience of structural semiotics.<sup>50</sup>

With regard to the division of the disciplines, the epistemological task that Paul Ricœur has left us when he proposed his “model of the text” for social actions requires us to couple the efforts of two historical disciplines which do not always go easily together: the “ordinary” history of deeds (*historia rerum gestarum*) and the intellectual history of ideas. Since acts and semantic structures are exchanged continuously in the course of history, new methodological approaches must be found in order to account for their dialectical and often conflicting interaction. As I have already noted, Ricœur’s philosophy, like any other *a priori* reflection, could only point to this problem and sketch out its most abstract aspects; it is now the business of the “positive” human sciences to fill out this schema with concrete historical content.

- <sup>1</sup> This is a key feature of Ricœur's work, as Christian Delacroix, François Dosse and Patrick Garcia state in their introduction of a collection they have edited: "Une des originalités de son parcours aura été de conduire un dialogue constant de la philosophie avec son autre, et notamment avec les sciences humaines." See *Paul Ricœur et les sciences humaines* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007), 7.
- <sup>2</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP – Paris, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1981), 197.
- <sup>3</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Le modèle du texte: l'action sensée considérée comme un texte," in Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique II* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1986), 183-211. In a later essay, "Expliquer et comprendre" (1977), he resumes the same thesis as follows: "Je dirais en bref que d'un côté la notion de texte est un bon *paradigme* pour l'action humaine, de l'autre l'action est un bon *réfèrent* pour toute une catégorie de textes" (175).
- <sup>4</sup> Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action*, 184.
- <sup>5</sup> Some pages below, "separating [himself] from any ideology of an absolute text," Ricœur admits however that "only a few sophisticated texts satisfy this ideal of a text without reference" (201). He obviously refers here to the structuralist theory of closed text and to experimental literary works attempting to realize it.
- <sup>6</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 198.
- <sup>7</sup> In conceptualizing the relationship between the text and the world, Ricœur might appear inconsistent. So, in his essay "What is a Text?" (1970) he claims that in a written text "the suspense which defers the reference merely leaves the text, as it were, 'in the air', outside or without a world. In virtue of this obliteration of the relation to the world, each text is free to enter into relation with all other texts which come to take the place of the circumstantial reality referred to by living speech" (148-149). In fact, it is the meaning of the term "world" that varies: sometimes Ricœur understands it as the "proposed world" immanent to the text, and sometimes (as in the citation above) as the outer world, which should be "bracketed" in Husserl's sense of the term. David E. Klemm distinguishes, somewhat in the same manner, two meanings of Ricœur's notion "the world of text": on the one side, a fictional meaning ("the ensemble of references opened up by the power of fictional language to suggest images that are formed in response to the content of the text"), and on the other side, an ontological one ("it is not formed by the imagination but is articulated as a work of description undertaken by the reflexive subject"). See David E. Klemm, *The Hermeneutical Theory of Paul Ricœur: A Constructive Analysis* (London and Toronto, Associated University Presses, 1983), 86-87.

It is also to be noted that Ricœur's metaphor "the text in the air" may originate from Gustave Flaubert's famous letter, where the author confessed his desire to write "a book about nothing [un livre sur rien], a book dependent on nothing external, which would be kept together by the internal strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support." See *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1830-1857*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge (Ma) and London: Belknap Press, 1980), 154; letter to Louise Colet on January 16, 1852.

<sup>8</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 199-203.

<sup>9</sup> He borrows this notion of *action sensée* from Max Weber, who defined it as *sinnhaft orientiertes Verhalten*, "meaningfully oriented behavior" (203).

<sup>10</sup> "In the same way as the fixation by writing is made possible by a dialectic of intentional exteriorization immanent to the speech-act itself, a similar dialectic within the process of transaction prepares the detachment of the *meaning* of the action from the *event* of the action" (204). Johann Michel comments: "En fixant l'action, il est donc possible de l'extraire en quelque sorte de l'événement dans lequel elle s'est réalisée..." See his *Paul Ricœur: Une philosophie de l'agir humain* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2006), 233.

<sup>11</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 204-205.

<sup>12</sup> Ricœur provided a detailed account of that philosophy (represented by Elisabeth Anscombe, Arthur Danto, Charles Taylor, Richard Taylor, Anthony Kenny and others) in his long contribution to the collective work: *La sémantique de l'action*, recueil préparé sous la direction de Dorian Tiffeneau (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1977), 1-137.

<sup>13</sup> Another application of the same tradition is the Anglo-Saxon theory of metaphor, represented for example by *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), where George Lakoff and Mark Johnson attempted to show how human behavior is determined, not by exact logical arguments but by semantic distortions comparable to those which take place in figurative expressions in speech. Ricœur himself has contributed to this theory with his book *The Rule of Metaphor (La Métaphore vive)*.

<sup>14</sup> In a later text that does not deal with texts but *narratives*, Ricœur stresses "the pre-narrative capacity of what we call life." See Paul Ricœur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," in *On Paul Ricœur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 27. The problem is still to know when and how this pre-narrative capacity becomes a textual reality.

<sup>15</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 206.

- <sup>16</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 147.
- <sup>17</sup> Robert Scharlemann points out as a possible source of Ricœur's conception of text the mystical temporality of "being beyond death", proclaimed by St. Paul (*Col. 3: 1-2*): "Set yours minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." See Robert P. Scharlemann, "The Textuality of Texts," in *Meanings in Texts and Actions: Questioning Paul Ricœur*, ed. David E. Klemm and William Schweiker (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 14. Scharlemann adds: "If the being of Dasein as care, and the meaning of that being is temporality, then the being that is the textuality of such texts is a freedom beyond care" (24).
- <sup>18</sup> In reality, the difference between speech and text is not so absolute as Ricœur supposes it to be. There are oral utterances (political slogans, jokes and so forth) which enter into public circulation and (re)interpretation without being necessarily recorded by writing. "Speech" and "text" should be understood here less in a physical than a functional sense. In the same way, Jacques Derrida opposed (*On Grammatology*, 1967) writing and oral speech as two modes of sense-making – curiously enough, with inverse distribution of predicates. According to him, speech sets up a fixed meaning whereas writing maintains its incompleteness ("différance"). In nearly the same way, the "text" may be defined, not as any written linguistic message, but as an especially qualified semiotic object, submitted to a special regime of conservation, reproduction and study, as opposed to many worthless written products destined to be thrown away and forgotten (see Yuri Lotman and Alexander Piatigorsky, "Text and Function," in Yuri Lotman, *Izbrannye stat'i*, t. 1 (Tallinn: Alexandra, 1992), 133 ff.
- <sup>19</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 55.
- <sup>20</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 147. The French text is a little more explicit: "...le lecteur est absent à l'écriture; l'écrivain est absent à la lecture. Le texte produit ainsi une double occultation du lecteur et de l'écrivain; c'est de cette façon qu'il se substitue à la relation de dialogue qui noue immédiatement la voix de l'un à l'ouïe de l'autre" (*Du texte à l'action*, 139). This "double occultation" must be understood as reciprocal: the writer and the reader are not "eclipsed" absolutely, but they cannot enter into a dialogue.
- <sup>21</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 202.

- <sup>22</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 208 and 207.
- <sup>23</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 142.
- <sup>24</sup> "The principal task of hermeneutics eludes the alternative of genius or structure; I shall link it to the notion of 'the world of the text'" (140).
- <sup>25</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 218. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), 25.
- <sup>26</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 66.
- <sup>27</sup> Ricœur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 57 ff. The interpretation of "deliverance events", according to Ricœur, is a matter of religious faith - "la constitution proprement herméneutique de la foi elle-même" (*Du texte à l'action*, 131) - as well as of social critique: "Critique is also a tradition. I would even say that it plunges into the most impressive tradition, that of liberating acts, of the Exodus and the Resurrection" (99).
- <sup>28</sup> The emancipatory value of Ricœur's theory of action-text has been pointed out, in a somewhat different perspective, by Domenico Jervolino, "Herméneutique de la praxis et l'éthique de la libération," in *Paul Ricœur: Les métamorphoses de la raison herméneutique (Colloque de Cerisy)* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1991), 223-230.
- <sup>29</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 208.
- <sup>30</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 208.
- <sup>31</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 197.
- <sup>32</sup> Michel, *Paul Ricœur: Une philosophie de l'agir humain*, 236-237. Michel has in mind, on the one hand, the sociology of great historical movements illustrated by Max Weber, and on the other hand, the sociology of particular human interactions exemplified by Erving Goffman.
- <sup>33</sup> He quotes Hegel's formula "*Weltgeschichte ist Weltgericht*"(208), "the world history is the world law-court." I am not going to discuss here the semantic difference between two German terms (*Geschichte* and *Historie*) usually translated into English as "history". It is worth noting instead that in French orthography the second meaning of the word *histoire* (history as *res gestae*, the process of events, especially in the Hegelian-Marxist sense of historical determinism) is often, though not always, marked by a capital letter (*l'Histoire*); Ricœur does not utilize that means in the discussed

essay, and in his other works (*Time and Narrative; Memory, History, Forgetting*) he apparently gives preference to “lower case” uses of the word *histoire*: either as “discourse about the past” or “a particular story” (true or fictional).

- <sup>34</sup> The expression belongs to Jean Greisch (“Le sujet comme ‘apprenti-historien’”) applying it to psychiatric subjects. See Jean Greisch, *Paul Ricœur: L’itinérance du sens* (Grenoble, Jérôme Millon, 2001), 190-194.
- <sup>35</sup> Note the opposition of Ricœur’s and Lévi-Strauss’ conceptions of sense, as formulated by Daniel Becquemont: “Pour Lévi-Strauss, il y avait à l’origine une intelligibilité radicale: le monde n’a pas de sens avant d’avoir été mis en forme par des écarts signifiants, il se présente d’abord comme un flux indistinct sans cohérence [...]. Ricœur, au contraire, voyait à l’origine une plénitude de sens, grâce abondante qui inonde le monde. Le ‘monde plein’ de Ricœur est débordement analogue à la grâce divine, il est chaos aveugle chez Lévi-Strauss.” See Daniel Becquemont, “La confrontation avec le structuralisme : signe et sens,” in *Paul Ricœur et les sciences humaines*, 189-190.
- <sup>36</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, t. 1 (Paris: Seuil, 1983), 89.
- <sup>37</sup> “La problématique de l’herméneutique s’élargit encore en intégrant dans son orbite des structures plus vastes que les symboles: les textes” (Michel, *Paul Ricœur et les sciences humaines*, 162).
- <sup>38</sup> Treating of a more specific and more “cultural” domain, Pierre Bourdieu stated in the same way that the production of literature is not only production of works but also production of their evaluations, effectuated not only by men of letters but by all the readers. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l’art* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 318 ff.
- <sup>39</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 177-178.
- <sup>40</sup> Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 497. Ricœur has in mind events like “the Renaissance”, constructed afterwards by the historians, and grounded on comparative study of documents and monuments of culture (works of art, etc.), which can hardly be regarded as their creators’ testimonies. The problematic status of this kind of “events” had been pointed out by Frank Ankersmit in his *Narrative Logic* (1983), cited by Ricœur.
- <sup>41</sup> “...the kind of explanation which is implied by the structural model appears to be quite different from the classical causal model, especially if causation is interpreted in Humean terms as a regular sequence of antecedents and consequents with no inner logical connection between them. Structural systems imply relations of a quite different kind, correlative rather than sequential or consecutive”

(219). Johann Michel comments: "L'explication de type structural ruine certes la *compréhension* au sens psychologique du terme, mais demande en contrepartie un autre type de *compréhension*, lui-même non pensé par le structuralisme" (*Paul Ricœur et les sciences humaines*, 152).

<sup>42</sup> "Dilthey, still close in this sense to Romantic hermeneutics, based his concept of interpretation on that of 'understanding', that is, on grasping an alien life which expresses itself through the objectivations of writing. Whence the psychologizing and historicizing character of Romantic and Diltheyan hermeneutics. This route is no longer open to us, once we take distancing by writing and objectivation by structure seriously" (140).

<sup>43</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action*, 172-174 ; Paul Ricœur, "Le discours de l'action", in *La Sémantique de l'action*, 104-108.

<sup>44</sup> Georg Henrik von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 164.

<sup>45</sup> "Ce combat sur deux fronts contre une réduction de la compréhension à l'intropathie et une réduction de l'explication à une combinatoire abstraite m'amène à définir l'interprétation par cette dialectique même de la compréhension et de l'explication au niveau du 'sens' immanent du texte" (*Du texte à l'action*, 33). In this statement, Ricœur confines his idea to the domain of "texts" – but, as we have seen, in another essay of the same book he extends the "model of the text" much wider, to the whole domain of "meaningful" social action.

<sup>46</sup> "L'explication se présente dès lors comme le prolongement de la distanciation générée par le texte lui-même, et non comme une réplique un peu désespérée à l'étrangeté du texte." See Daniel Frey, *L'interprétation et la lecture chez Ricœur et Gadamer* (Paris: PUF, 2008), 160. Understanding a text implies therefore a moment of explicative distancing – understanding an action does so too, in science as well as in everyday life.

<sup>47</sup> See Stephen Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 14.

<sup>48</sup> In particular, see the article "The Notion of Expenditure" (1933) and the book *The Accursed Share* (1949).

<sup>49</sup> At this point, the theory of speech acts, to which Ricœur sets his hopes for understanding social action, reveals itself to be insufficient. Indeed, our language always allows us to account, somehow or other, for what we are doing, but this account does not necessarily match with the true sense (or *non-*



sense) of our activity: when I say “I am joking” I am not joking at all, and when I really am I cannot express this fact by a convenient illocutory act. Here the blind spot in Ricœur’s speculation – the gap between two meanings of action, “descriptive” and “practical” – becomes ostensible.

<sup>50</sup> Ricœur’s critique of structural semiotics is well known, and I don’t intend to discuss it here. It is worth noting, however, that Ricœur opposed mostly the French school of semiotics, originating from Saussure and considering texts as closed systems (such was the main Ricœur’s reproach to it); yet there are other trends in semiotics, represented for example by Umberto Eco in Italy and Yury Lotman in Soviet Union, that define their object as “open semiosis”, a process of intertextual semantic exchange. That conception seems more likely reconcilable with Ricœur’s philosophy of the text.