

4. Semiosphere and World-System

A Semiotic Reflection on Migration and Nationalism within the World-System

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In 2002, commenting on his previous article on the relevance of the *Communist Manifesto*,¹ Umberto Eco argues that the document “astonishingly witnessed the birth, 150 years ahead of its time, of the era of globalization.” He goes on to say: “[I]t almost suggests that globalization is not an accident that happens during the course of capitalist expansion ... but rather the inevitable pattern that the emergent class could not fail to follow, even though at the time, through the expansion of markets, the most convenient (though also the most bloody) means to this end was called colonization.” Eco concludes with a strategic comment: “It is also worth dwelling again (and that is advisable not for the bourgeoisie but for all classes) on the warning that every force opposing the march of globalization is initially divided and confused, tends toward mere Luddism, and can be used by its enemy to fight its own battles.”² Thus, one of the leading figures of semiotic studies presents with ease how

1 On January 8, 1998, Eco wrote an editorial for the Italian newspaper *L'Espresso* advocating the efficacy and currency of the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848. It was re-published in Umberto Eco, *On Literature*, trans. Martin McLaughlin (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2004), 23–27. The remarks added in a new Italian edition from 2002 address this passage: “One sees [...] this unstoppable force [the bourgeoisie], which, urged on by the need for new markets for its goods, pervades the whole world on land and sea [...], overturns and transforms distant countries because the low prices of products are its heavy artillery, which allows it to batter down any Chinese wall and force surrender on even the barbarians who are most hardened in their hatred for the foreigner; it sets up and develops cities as a symbol and as the foundation of its own power; and it becomes multinational, globalised, and even invents a literature that is no longer national but international.” *Ibid.*, 24.

2 *Ibid.*

a political perspective – or, more explicitly, a Marxist one – is vital when studying contemporary culture. This is no surprise since semiotics – at least in France and Italy – began to become a major approach to media theory in the late 1960s and considered itself a *critical method*, including through the notion of “semiotic guerrilla warfare” coined by Eco to claim the construction of counterhegemonic meanings for media texts.³ Moreover, another point of convergence should be noted.⁴ In a 1981 interview, Immanuel Wallerstein endorsed the spread of a shared language based on the Marxist perspective:

[W]e are moving toward a world in which everyone will use Marxist terminology. It'll take another fifty or one hundred years, but we'll get there. And I think that this will create a very favorable situation. On the one hand, if you use a certain terminology, you are compelled to accept certain presuppositions implicit within it, and in this case, these are presuppositions which I don't mind at all. But on the other hand, it is also true that when a terminology becomes universal, each person is intellectually free to think within it, internally.⁵

Not very unlike Wallerstein, Eco was committed to conveying the relevance of a widespread awareness of Marxism as far back as 1976. He claimed, taking a rather over-optimistic view, in hindsight, that Marxist values had become everyone's values, as the “set of so-called Marxist principles and political strategies” was eventually accepted and seen as undeniable.⁶ In the present day, it is quite ironic that such is the charge brought by many New Right movements

3 Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 1990), 165.

4 We may also add a strictly philosophical aspect according to Prigogine and Stengers, who assume that both semiotics and world-systems theory are based on the refusal of the human subjectivity as a core theoretical notion. Ilya Prigogine and Isabel Stengers, *La nouvelle alliance: Métamorphose de la science* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 16. It is also quite obvious that both world-systems and semiotics are structural models, in an extended sense. However, such a statement would open up a number of problems concerning different concepts of “structure,” and this is not the place to address them.

5 Immanuel Wallerstein, “Immanuel Wallerstein's Thousand Marxisms,” interview by Nicolette Stame and Luca Meldolesi, trans. David Broder, *Jacobin*, November 11, 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/09/immanuel-wallerstein-marxism-world-systems-theory-capitalism>.

6 Umberto Eco, “Scusate qualche testo,” *Corriere della Sera*, February 27, 1976. Despite his normal clarity, it is not clear, here, if Eco's motion is addressed to Italy, to the West, or even universally.

and populist movements, which mostly count Marxism among the forces endangering local people's rights, interests, and earnings.

Conversely, there are some reasons making the connection between the world-system and semiotics problematic. We will briefly examine two of them. As Wallerstein stated on many occasions, the first feature of the world-system is of being a totality, a capitalist system encompassing the economy of the whole world. The perspective is then enriched by the introduction of six kinds of institutions collected by the capitalist world economy: "the markets; the firms that compete in the markets; the multiple states ...; the households; the classes; and the status groups (to use Weber's term, which some people in recent years have renamed the 'identities')." ⁷ Subsequently comes a spatial model interrelating economic core areas, economic periphery areas, and economic semi-periphery areas where the institutions act and exist as products of the capitalist system. The world-system as such works within an admirable socioeconomic analysis of the system's stages and the proposal of a final ongoing transition from the capitalist system to an uncertain future ⁸ that will occur from about 2025. ⁹ One can notice three more meta-theoretical features resulting from the foregoing: the inclination for simple tools, which is, according to Wallerstein, also the key element setting an open, flexible and general theory; the virtual but complex possibility of relating migration phenomena with different institutions among those mentioned (see further on this below); and the focus on economics and historical studies, which, as stated by Stephen Shapiro, shows how it "does not immediately or easily offer them to application for cultural studies and the reading of texts." ¹⁰

The first friction hence involves the theoretical framework, chiefly since semiotics is largely committed more to microanalysis than macroanalysis, assuming a complex, stratified, and heterogenous set of models. All these models depend on an essential analytical prerequisite: the analytical outcomes logically follow the analysis and could never be predicted within its theoretical foundations. In other terms, the friction is between a method and a theory.

7 Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 24.

8 See also Giovanni Arrighi, *Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Time*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2010), 247–386.

9 Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds., *The Age of Transition: Trajectory of the World-System, 1945–2025* (London: Zed Books, 1996), 200–233.

10 Stephen Shapiro, "What is World-systems for Cultural Studies?" chapter draft provided by the author, 2020.

Semiotics is a *method*¹¹ developed by collecting tools, mainly from linguistics and anthropology (but with a political basis, as stated), to empower the *analytical description* of practices, discourses, strategies, images, as well as verbal texts considered as communicative phenomena.¹² World-systems is a *theory*, albeit a very solid one, built on general economic assumptions on the way the whole reality we experience works, and its theorists seek to refine it almost independently from empirical data or, more precisely, to work out empirical data illustrating its validity.¹³ Succinctly, we are dealing with a triple divergence: while the world-system is a theory focused on macro-economic and self-validating problems, semiotics is an analytical method to be applied to empirical

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- 11 For this issue as the main topic, see Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage I* (Paris: Hachette, 1979); Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage II: Compléments, débats, propositions* (Paris: Hachette, 1986); Algirdas Julien Greimas, *The Social Sciences: A Semiotic View*, trans. Paul Perron and Frank H. Collins (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); Bronwen Martin and Felizitas Ringham, *Key Terms in Semiotics* (London: Continuum, 2000); Gianfranco Marrone, *The Invention of the Text*, trans. Sara Anselmi, Dario Mangano and Peter Carne (Milan: Mimesis, 2014).
- 12 At times, semiotics and Louis Althusser's semio-political thought are confused. For a precise account on the reception of Althusser's thought through Gramsci's in the field of *cultural studies*, see Miguel Mellino, "Note sul metodo di Stuart Hall: Althusser, Gramsci e la questione della razza," *Décalage* 2, no. 1 (2016): 12, <https://core.ac.uk/reader/73345870>. Another possible confusion with Chomsky's perspective, very much far from the contemporary semiotic perspective, is settled by Greimas, *The Social Sciences*. In light of this clarification, semiotic studies are related to two fundamental theoretical bases: an antidealist approach to phenomena – so that the idea of *one* migration does not make much sense in semiotics – and the assumption that Marx's idea of superstructure can be somehow overturned, since any speculation and/or action is interpreted by the framing of human languages.
- 13 In his fairly well-known critique of Wallerstein's theory, Aronowitz disputed, among other points, the assumption of "expansion" as an universal feature: "Take the proposition that expansion is a property of all social systems or they must die. Critical theory would refuse this formulation as ahistorical and would argue that societies are not understood by cyclical theories that purport to explain contraction by means of 'natural' causes. Nor is 'growth' an invariant property of social formations. These disputes cannot be settled empirically but must be argued on the basis of metatheoretical assumptions that underlie research. To be sure, Wallerstein does not argue his starting points either, but tries to account for well-known events such as feudalism's decline by means of them." Stanley Aronowitz, "A Metatheoretical Critique of Immanuel Wallerstein's The Modern World System," *Theory and Society* 10 (1981): 511.

discourses and practices and which refuses any general correspondence of research questions and research outcomes.

The second friction is the more interesting. The semiotic model developed by the Russian scholar and semiotician Yuri Lotman,¹⁴ which has spread widely and somehow independently from semiotics as a whole field of studies,¹⁵ features a spatial pattern partially overlapping with Wallerstein's one. It is only partial, however, since it seems possible to enable a first exchange between semiotics and world-system precisely because of such overlays.

Lotman's Semiosphere

Yuri Lotman studies culture as a living, evolving, and complex system and introduces the notion of the "semiosphere" by analogy with Vladimir Vernadsky's concepts of the noosphere and, particularly, the "biosphere."¹⁶

The semiotic universe may be regarded as the totality of individual texts and isolated languages as they relate to each other. In this case, all structures will look as if they are constructed out of individual bricks. However, it is more useful to establish a contrasting view: all semiotic space may be regarded as a unified mechanism (if not organism). In this case, primacy does not lie in one or another sign, but in the "greater system," namely the semiosphere. The semiosphere is that same semiotic space, outside of which semiosis cannot exist.¹⁷

A semiosphere consists of a nested link of subsystems, each organized by the presence of a core-periphery hierarchal structure. The core (or the center) is occupied by normative (familiar) elements, and the periphery with irregular,

14 For a general introduction, see Aleksei Semenenko, *The Texture of Culture: An Introduction to Yuri Lotman's Semiotic Theory* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

15 See Andreas Schönle, ed., *Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Andreas Ventsel and Peeter Selg, "Towards a Semiotic Theory of Hegemony: Naming as Hegemonic Operation in Lotman and Laclau," *Sign Systems Studies* 36, no. 1 (2008): 167–183; John Hartley, Indrek Ibrus, and Maarja Ojamaa, *On the Digital Semiosphere: Culture, Media and Science for the Anthropocene* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

16 Vladimir Vernadsky, *The Biosphere* (New York: Copernicus, 1998).

17 Jurij Lotman, "On the Semiosphere," *Sign System Studies* 33, no. 1 (2005): 208.

innovative, and/or foreign elements. It is noteworthy in this regard how Lotman states that all levels of the semiosphere – at various levels of culture – are “semiospheres inserted into one another,” like matryoshka dolls.¹⁸

Therefore, there are two caveats. The first is about the minimum and maximum extensions of a semiosphere; the second concerns whether the semiosphere is to be considered an objective (material) substance or an abstract concept. Even though Lotman described individuals as logically framed by the notion, this does not seem particularly productive; a better example is that of a museum as a space where different levels interact, such as those of the exhibition, usually including objects of different ages, verbal texts in different languages, booklets by curators, museum maps, rules of conduct, safety regulations, etc. Regarding the problem of a maximum extension, the answer is simpler. Since Lotman’s model is based on a dialogical principle, any semiosphere needs at least one partner: in isolation, it cannot mean anything, nor can it produce any information.

Therefore, if a global model such as world-systems is inconceivable, this does not prevent the semiosphere model from being applied in the case of small towns or transnational institutions.¹⁹ Further, the extension of a semiosphere depends on the existence of micro and microcultural boundaries, so it is not difficult to conceive human groups (geographically, linguistically, politically, or religiously speaking) as semiospheres, nor transnational institutions, such as maritime law, voluntary or compulsory teams and crews, such as academic research groups or the ensemble of the prisoners of a detention camp, or even cultural practices and rituals, such as microelectronics, carpet manufacture, or funerals.²⁰

18 Semenenko, *Texture of Culture*, 115.

19 According to Kull and Torop, the semiosphere is a metaconcept, a “construct of semiotic method” that takes an holistic approach to culture, and as an object it refers to a given semiotic space that is studied in the analysis. Somewhat paradoxically, it is possible to say that the “semiosphere is studied by the means of [the] semiosphere.” Kalevi Kull, “Semiosphere and a Dual Ecology: Paradoxes of Communication,” *Sign Systems Studies* 33, no. 1 (2005): 184; Peeter Torop, “Tartuskaia shkola kak shkola,” in *Lotmanovskii sbornik 1*, eds. Evgenii Permiakov and Roman Leibov (Moscow: IC-Garant), 231. For that reason, one might distinguish between *the* semiosphere, the precondition of semiosis, and *a* semiosphere, a specific semiotic space that is described or reconstructed in the analysis. Semenenko, *Texture of Culture*, 120.

20 “The semiosphere as a multidimensional space that produces equally multidimensional messages always emphasizes the situation of dialogue between different ‘dialects’ of culture. The national context is a traditional delimiter of a given culture,

However, the key issues of Lotman's model lie elsewhere with regard to its focus on the dynamic change of cultural systems. Firstly, the semiosphere model comes with a pattern of boundaries. This issue is so striking that some see the whole theoretical framework as a model of boundaries. The division between the center and the periphery is a manifestation of the fact that the semiotic space of culture is permeated with boundaries. The periphery is not "the end" of a system but a transition point between different systems and structures. Here, Lotman seems to take the system as a medium-large scale notion, approaching the world-system foundations. He argues that the boundaries between systems are not exact but quite vague, subject to constant fluctuations, and resemble not an impenetrable wall but rather a filter or membrane. The function of boundaries "is to control, filter and adapt the external into the internal," and they also serve as catalysts of communication. "Because the semiotic space is transected by numerous boundaries, each element that moves across it must be many times translated and transformed, and the process of generating new information thereby snowballs."²¹

The dialogic principle presupposes a constant dynamic tension on the boundaries not only of different systems but also between different levels of any semiotic system. If there is no tension on the border, no translation occurs, and therefore no new meaning can occur either. The tension is thus essential for the culture's sustainability and is created by two tendencies: the given incomplete mutual translatability and the need for full translatability. The immanent development of culture and the production of new culture cannot be realized without the inflow of external elements. "The outside" can be represented by any element that is extrinsic to the normative frame of a given structure, whether it is genre, tradition, or culture as a whole:

Thus, from the position of an outside observer, culture will represent not an immobile, synchronically balanced mechanism, but a dichotomous system,

but it is quite a crude criterion because national boundaries often presuppose cultural monoglotism and therefore may neglect other phenomena that do not fit the culture's self-description. Apart from that, semiosphere transcend national borders (e.g., film noir, or art nouveau architecture) as well as 'microcultures' of various groups or even 'individual cultures.' From the methodological point of view, such a flexible concept turns out to be more accurate than the historically and politically laden concepts of 'national culture,' 'subculture,' or 'mass culture.'" Semenenko, *Texture of Culture*, 124.

21 Jurij Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, trans. Wilma Clark (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), 140.

the “work” of which will be realized as the aggression of regularity against the sphere of the unregulated and, in the opposite direction, as the intrusion of the unregulated into the sphere of organization. At different moments of historical development either tendency may prevail. The incorporation into the cultural sphere of texts which have come from outside sometimes proves to be a powerful stimulating factor for cultural development.²²

It follows that a semiosphere is essentially polyglot and consists of a diversity of semiotic systems that are not equivalent to one another but, at the same time, are mutually interprojected and have various degrees of translatability.

Secondly, Lotman claims that the tendency toward isolation is quite frequent in cultures. Accordingly, cultures’ boundaries are intrinsically associated with ideology, the metalevel of culture, which, as we will see below, is oriented primarily toward the delineation of borders.

Neo Nazi groups, totalitarian sects, football hooligans, and many others are oriented toward maintaining rigid and explicit boundaries. ... The oppressive regimes and ideologies always attempt to introduce a specific discourse that from a semiotic point of view defines the dialogic principle of communication: repressive ideological discourses adopt ontological categories of own and alien, right and wrong. Thus, most texts here become reaffirmation of the established hierarchies.²³

Some further specifications frame the opposite case, which frequently occurs, of an active reception of foreign material. Lotman sees gradual processes as complementary to what he calls “explosions,” and both are required for the dynamic development of culture. Cultural explosions coexist with gradual processes because different layers and elements of culture develop at different rates (for example, language, chemistry, and fashion all move at various “speeds”).²⁴ An explosion may remain local, influencing only a specific cultural process, but other explosions may affect all levels of culture. The gradual and explosive tendencies can be presented in terms of continuity and discontinuity: the former represents “a perceived predictability,” and the latter is perceived as an abrupt change, an explosion. A cultural explosion is defined

22 Jurij Lotman, Boris Uspenskij, Viacheslav Ivanov, Vladimir Toropov, and Alexander Pjatigorskij, “Thesis on the Semiotic Study of Culture,” in *The Tell-Tale Sign: A Survey of Semiotics*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Lisse: Peter de Ridder Press), 60.

23 Semenenko, *Texture of Culture*, 62–63.

24 Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, 12.

as a moment of drastic change in the state of a system when its conventional balance is disturbed. For example, Lotman employs the notion of the explosion as a social cataclysm to deal with the history of Russia, seen as a model of evolutionary processes marked by continuous revolutionary jolts.

In terms of the core-periphery dichotomy, the explosive moment can be imagined as a gravitational collapse: centripetal forces make peripheral elements burst into the core and virtually destroy the balance of the system. The normative core becomes vague and “shaky,” ceasing to be the tentative point of departure in texts’ comprehension, interpretation, and/or creation. At the moment of explosion, the information load of the system drastically increases, and unpredictably increases proportionally. Like a virus that provokes the immune system to respond, the new elements occupy a significant part of the system and make it deploy counter mechanisms in order to accommodate the system to a new, changed state. The difference is that for the organism’s survival, the virus should be destroyed, whereas culture transforms (changes in structure) every time it receives something foreign, slowly and gradually or rapidly and radically. “The metaphor of explosion should not be understood literally, as something that happens very quickly with an immediate effect; it may last several months or decades.”²⁵ Furthermore, explosions inevitably provoke dampening processes, which are especially evident in technological revolutions (e.g., the invention of printing, the technology of travel and air travel, new weaponry, and the Internet). “Every abrupt change in human history releases new forces. The paradox is that movement forward may stimulate the regeneration of archaic cultural and psychological modes, may give rise both to scientific blessings and to epidemics of mass fear.”²⁶ Fear and disorientation often follow cultural explosions because explosions break the chain of causality, violating temporal boundaries and creating a field of unpredictability:

Each time we speak of unpredictability we have in mind a specific collection of equally probable possibilities from which only one may be realized. In this way, each structural position represents a cluster of variant possibilities. Up to a certain point they appear as indistinguishable synonyms. However, movement from the point of explosion causes them to become more and

25 Ibid., 46, n. 8.

26 Jurij Lotman, “Technological Progress as a Problem in the Study of Culture,” *Poetics Today* 12, no. 4 (1991): 798.

more dispersed in semantic space. Finally, the moment arrives when they become carriers of semantic difference.²⁷

This thesis of an outset of any explosion where probabilities are equally probable brings to mind the concept of “bifurcation” coined by Ilya Prigogine in his works on reversible processes in thermodynamics. This same “bifurcation” inspired Wallerstein’s theory. Bifurcation is a point of development of the system when it reaches the point of “choice” between two possible scenarios; this is a random process that can be compared with a coin toss. So, effectively, Lotman refers to Prigogine’s theory, but he also mentions Isabelle Stengers and Ross Ashby as congenial to his antideterministic view of history and emphasizes the role of unpredictability at the moment of instability.²⁸ After remarking that Lotman’s notion of the semiosphere as a cultural system is not integrative, unlike Wallerstein’s world-system since “capitalism was always a world system based on the primacy of the economic over the political and cultural,”²⁹ a last crux is provided within the notion of metalevel of culture. The highest form of the structural organization of a culture is the point of self-description, which any developed culture inevitably reaches.³⁰

Self-description demands the creation of a metalanguage for the given culture. On the basis of the metalanguage there arises the metalevel on which the culture constructs its ideal self-portrait. [...] The appearance of an image of culture on the metalevel signifies the secondary structuration of this very culture. It becomes more rigidly organized, certain aspects of it are declared to be non-structural, i.e. “non-existent.”³¹

27 Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, 123. See also Jurij Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (London: I. B. Tauris, 1990), 231.

28 Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, 14. The way Lotman refers to Prigogine is radical compared to Wallerstein. While the former assumes entropy and unpredictability as fundamental within the notion of the semiosphere, the latter is ultimately grounded on a general determinism, partly later corrected by Prigogine’s bifurcation. However, the relevance of unpredictability also involves the issue that capitalism can take advantage of explosions; we need only think about COVID-19 in this respect.

29 Aronowitz, “A Metatheoretical Critique,” 505.

30 Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, 128.

31 Jurij Lotman, “Culture as Collect Intellect and The Problems of Artificial Intelligence,” in *Dramatic Structure: Poetic and Cognitive Semantics*, eds. L. M. O’Toole and Ann Shukman (Colchester: University of Essex), 92.

Encyclopedias, dictionaries, grammars, chronicles, criticism, and research, among which are Lotman's works and this paper, are all manifestations of culture's self-awareness and its attempt to comprehend itself as a whole. The metalevel of culture, together with the norm, is located in the center. That is why, on the metalevel, culture always describes itself as more logical and organized than it is in reality. Moreover, culture may proclaim some of its elements nonexistent if they do not fit its ideal self-portrait.³²

The Role of the Semiotic Boundary and its Connection with Migration

Wallerstein explored the problem of self-description on many occasions,³³ and this stands at the basis of his criticism of universalism as a moral value disclosing universalistic criteria as operative in legitimating capitalist cadres of the world-system. On further examination, however, a closer connection between the two models can be seen, albeit with several important discrepancies. Therefore, a possible merge of the two in relation to the issues of immigration and nationalism can be distinguished.

Some have proposed that Lotman's vocabulary can be used to replace the vocabulary of another leading figure of Marxist studies within a cultural

32 Paolo Fabbri points out how, until 1930, Italian pedagogy fought hard to discourage the use of sign language in deaf-mute children learning in favor of lip reading. This was because even though sign language is an actual language, with its own syntax and full chance of abstraction, it is based on gesticulation. Consequently, as gesticulation was linked at the time to apes' communication, sign language simply could not exist as a human language. Paolo Fabbri, "Tra scritto e immagine," lecture given at the University of Siena, November 14, 2007, <https://www.radiopapesse.org/frontend/index.php?path=it/archivio/lectures/paolo-fabbri-tra-scritto-e-immagine>.

33 For a focus on universalism in international law, see Helen Stacy, "The Legal System of International Human Rights," In *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture*, eds. David Palombo-Liu, Bruce Robbins, and Nirvana Tanoukhi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 187–201. Furthermore, Wallerstein argues how the "invention of the housewives" and traineeships was a powerful means by which capitalism turned women's and young people's work into "non-work". Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism with Capitalist Civilization* (London: Verso, 1995), 23; Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class. Ambiguous Identities*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2010), 35.

frame, Ernesto Laclau,³⁴ however, we suggest, following Schönle, Steedman, and Restaneo,³⁵ that there is an opportunity to compare the world-systems theory and Lotman's model, hitherto considered solid and unitary paradigms.

Going back to an earlier consistent connection, let us recall Lotman's idea of semiospheres inserted into one another, like matryoshka dolls. That is precisely the figure Chase-Dunn uses to explore the micro-structure of the world-system in detail. "The core/periphery hierarchy is a system-wide dimension of structured inequality, but at the same time it is also a regionally nested hierarchy." As such, far from being an ideal homogeneity of national state or international market interests, "many of the developments which we study at the level of the world-system also occur within countries."³⁶ In much the same way, Shapiro applies and extends an idea of Wallerstein, who considers the factor of multilayered hierarchies within identities:

For each kind of identity, there is a social ranking. It can be a crude ranking, with two categories, or elaborate, with a whole ladder. But there is always a group on top in the ranking, and one or several groups at the bottom. There rankings are both worldwide and more local, and both kinds of ranking have enormous consequences in the lives and in the operation of the capitalist world-economy. ... Ethnic rankings are more local, but in every country, there is a dominant ethnicity and then the others. ... Nationalism often takes the form of constructing links between one side of each of the antinomies into fused categories, so that, for example, one might create the norm that adult

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- 34 "[I]f we substitute the vocabulary of 'logic of equivalence' in Laclau with Lotman's idea of 'continuous coding', we will not lose the point that Laclau is making by his theory. And the reason is that these two notions bear the same functional role in each theory." Ventsel and Selg, "Towards a Semiotic Theory of Hegemony," 168.
- 35 Schönle argues that Lotman's "analysis of the relations between center and periphery echoes the infatuation with the margins of culture in cultural studies. They shared a concern with ways that people acquire their 'conception of the world' in relation to dominant groups." Steedman underlines that "in similar ways, Lotman's work parallels Gramsci's." Andreas Schönle, "Lotman and Cultural Studies: The Case for Cross-Fertilization," *Sign System Studies* 30, no. 2 (2002): 431; Marek D. Steedman, "State, Power, Hegemony, and Memory: Lotman and Gramsci," *Poroj* 3, no. 1 (2004): 83; Pietro Restaneo, "Il concetto di potere nel pensiero di Ju. M. Lotman," *Studi filosofici* 34 (2013): 209–234.
- 36 Christopher Chase-Dunn, *Global Formation: Structures of the World-Economy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 209.

white heterosexual males of particular ethnicities and religions are the only ones who would be considered “true” nationals.³⁷

Shapiro seems to cross the input of Chase-Dunn (about the nested structure of core-periphery) and that of Wallerstein (of identity social ranking), projecting both on an urban dimension.

Individual nation-states have their own internal corelike and peripheral zones (north/south and urban/agrarian divisions), and they often have a “city-system,” where some cities dominate others. Cities likewise have their own “Manchester-effect” of class-differentiated regions, such as the core sectors where elites live and work and the peripheral slums housing the manual labor force.³⁸

Since the notion of the core differs from the world-system and Lotman's semiosphere because it corresponds to a number of geographical places in the former and has the status of a methodological position in the latter, we argue that just as the world-system lacks the provision of a pattern of boundaries, Lotman's model discloses a possible solution. His idea of the periphery as a filter, together with the claim that, in many cases, the periphery is oriented toward the center,³⁹ allows us to describe migration as a phenomenon with some consequences and a general pattern. Migration, mainly mass migration, occurs at the boundaries of each of the micro-systems described by Chase-Dunn and Shapiro: what takes place is a filtering process by which new human groups are embedded in the cultural space. But it does not have any natural course, and this is where world-system and semiosphere match again. Migration (a) thickens the boundary, since the filtering process is conflictual and articulated, (b) usually reinforces the center, increasing the distance between the core and periphery, and (c) can also redouble the periphery, creating new zones close to the boundary, graduated in terms of extension and orientation (toward the center or the boundary).

Seeking to display some possible different structures of such a “live boundary,” able to generate other new peripheries, let us look at four kinds of cultural

37 Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis*, 39.

38 Stephen Shapiro, *The Culture and Commerce of the Early American Novel: Reading the Atlantic World-System* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2009), 33.

39 Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, 41.

mergers that a semiosphere can enact: assimilation, exclusion, segregation, and admission.⁴⁰

In the case of assimilation, the semiosphere is centered on a centripetal force, and the attraction towards the core prevails in the creation of further interstitial spaces. Leaving aside some self-evident historical cases – like the British Raj or the Australian policy concerning Indigenous Australians in the first half of the 20th century – assimilation processes are those where, in a Lotmanian sense, the center attracts the periphery to create a sort of “skating corridor” to the core values, interests and way of life. In these terms, we agree with the analysis by which Benedict Anderson compares Chulalongkorn’s kingdom in Siam during the late 19th century to the contemporary situation of South Arabia.⁴¹

Exclusion is the way in which the boundary itself is reinforced: because of the complete denial by the core of the existence of something external that has penetrated the inner space, here exists the maximum distance between the periphery and the core, and everything happens close to the boundary. In terms of economic issues, exclusion favors the creation of the underworlds of illegal hiring, drug microtrafficking, and prostitution. It is also where phenomena of expulsion are at work, sometimes through the activation of other boundaries, external to the system, that create more places to be crossed to reach the inner periphery. The agreement signed between Italy and Libya in 2017 on the management of migrant flows is one such example.

Segregation is where, unlike the previous cases, the periphery grows and eventually redoubles itself. An extreme example of a contemporary periphery that in western Europe is placed somehow inside the center (also in a Wallerstein sense) is that of the Sinti and Roma. The fact that “antiziganism is one of the most acute problems for many European societies”⁴² is hardly in doubt. Cervelli argues that the contemporary segregation phenomena in the center of Europe could also be described by the use of time rather than space. More precisely, there are countless strategies by which systems create inner peripheries as temporary spaces of indefinite duration. Such vague, often multiple

40 Eric Landowski, *Présences de l'autre: Essais de socio-sémiotique II* (Paris: PUF, 1997), 78. See also Pierluigi Cervelli, *La frontiera interna: Il problema dell'altro dal fascismo alle migrazioni internazionali* (Bologna: Esculapio, 2020).

41 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 95–96.

42 Cervelli, *La frontiera interna*, 165–196.

dimensions are usually subject to bland and fitful control by the center so that, in some cases, they may re-organize themselves in new micro-systems with a center-periphery structure.

Admission is probably the trickiest case of cultural merging. It is the most productive process in terms of results, but it is also the most varied. The acceptance is conditional, and the conditions, regularly expressed in legal terms, differ from one semiosphere to another. In their study on contemporary European legal norms on migration, Rebecca Hemlin and Hillary Mellinger argue: "Perhaps the largest lesson gained from a focus on the relationship between courts and migration in Europe is that it is difficult, even unhelpful, to make sweeping generalizations about the role of courts in migration. Ultimately, the impact of courts can depend on the type of non-citizen, the place, and the moment."⁴³ However, it seems possible to interpret such processes as those where the core is seen by those on the periphery as the most attractive since the embedding unfolds with the promise of achievable, full inclusion.

From a Lotmanian perspective, the case of more than one structure operating at the same time cannot be excluded, neither when the basis for a cultural self-description is very different to the reality, nor where a potential series of structures successively alternate.⁴⁴ Moreover, since Lotman's model does not

43 Rebecca Hemlin and Hillary Mellinger, "The Role of Courts and Legal Norms," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of Migration in Europe*, eds. Agnieszka Weinar, Saskia Bonjour, and Lyubov Zhyznomirska (New York: Routledge, 2019), chap. 8, Kindle.

44 This proposal is not an overall framework. With respect to migration, Eco traces another distinction between immigration and migration that would require to consider a fifth structure to describe his view of a massive change of a semiosphere driven by a penetration from the boundary. Eco argues that immigration occurs when a group of individuals, "even many individuals, but in numbers that are statistically insignificant with respect to the indigenous stock," move from one country to another. Such a movement may be controlled politically, limited, or encouraged according to the needs of the receiving country. Migration, on the other hand, is comparable to those found in nature: "They occur, and no one can control them. We have migration when an entire people, little by little, moves from one territory to another, and what matters is not how many remain in the original territory, but to what extent migrants change the culture of the territory to which they migrate." Eco gives the examples of some great past migrations: that of the people who moved from East to West, "as a result of which the peoples of the Caucasus changed the culture and biological heritage of the natives"; those of the so-called "barbarian" peoples who invaded the Roman Empire, creating new kingdoms and new cultures; and that of Europeans to the American continent. This too is considered a migration "because European whites did not adopt the customs and the culture of the natives, but rather founded a new civilization to which even the

separate economic features from cultural ones, it presents itself as a way to accomplish Wallerstein's task of "abolishing the lines between economic, political, and sociocultural modes of analysis."⁴⁵ It also highlights the risks involved in the deployment of some theoretical shortcuts: if, in a preliminary discussion on the interrelationship between nationalism, world-systems, and migration, we found it useful to investigate the notion of a "world migration system," a thorough consideration discloses its uncertain theoretical validity. Because of its traits as a theory, including its being a totality and being provided by a set of crucial and fundamental actors, it is implausible to conceive it as a model available to be applied, recursively, to specific phenomena.

From Migration to Nationalism: An Overview of the Matter of Self-Description and Semiosphere Structure

It may be noticed that Wallerstein occasionally seems to understate the matter of migration or take it for granted. In a 2010 article, while deconstructing the commonsense assumption that capital would benefit from free circulation, he

natives (those who survived) have adapted ... It is immigration only when immigrants (admitted according to political decisions) largely accept the customs of the country to which they immigrate, and it is migration when migrants (whom no one can stop at the borders) transform the culture of the territory to which they migrate. As long as it is a matter of immigration ... people can hope to contain the immigrants, so that they don't mix with the native population. When it is migration, containment is no longer possible, and the métissage becomes uncontrollable." In his view, the movements that Europe has attempted – and continues – to manage as immigration are actually cases of migration. "The Third World is knocking at the doors of Europe, and it will enter even if Europe does not consent. The problem is no longer to decide, as politicians pretend to believe, whether female students will be admitted to the universities of Paris if they wear the chador, or how many mosques may be erected in Rome. The problem is that in the next millennium – and since I am not a prophet, I cannot specify the exact date – Europe will be a multiracial continent or, if you prefer, a 'brown' continent. Whether you like it or not will not change the outcome." Umberto Eco, *Five Moral Pieces*, trans. Alastair McEwen (London: Verso, 2001), ch. 5.

- 45 Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis*, 21. We must stress that he seems to think that there is simultaneously, on the one hand, a "cultural base" compared to which, on the other, is an "economic base" that is to be preferred, and here we discuss such an approach critically: "In their insistence on total history and unidisciplinarity, world-systems analysts refuse to substitute a so-called cultural base for an economic base." Ibid.

highlights how, conversely, the “protector state” plays a key role in the protection of the market’s interests and links the circulation of people to the circulation of commodities and capital:

The free flow of labor is in some ways the most interesting issue in the long history of *laissez-faire* as an ideology. Few of the strong advocates of *laissez-faire* normally are enthusiastic about the free flow of labor. A truly free flow of labor would mean no rules whatsoever about individuals crossing state borders, and those who cross might then choose to remain in the state into which they have moved either temporarily or permanently. Formal barriers to movement (requiring passports and visas) are a relatively recent phenomenon, scarcely known until the twentieth century. And people have always moved. But the advance of transport technology has made it easier as time went forward. The basic starting point for any analysis is to recognize that states vary in (a) wealth and standard of living, (b) demographic density, (c) environmental attractiveness, and (d) political structures. Any of the four may provide an explanation of why individuals choose to migrate to particular countries. [...] Still, economic difficulties or ambitions as well as political difficulties in the birth state lead many to seek to migrate. Actually, migration seems often to be a ladder phenomenon – rural persons moving to urban areas in their birth state, urban persons moving to a relatively stronger and/or wealthier state, and then to a further, still stronger, still wealthier state. The basic political issues surrounding migration are well known. The receiving state has various motives for welcoming migrants. [...] In times of higher unemployment, however, unemployed workers and potentially unemployed ones may see migrants as competitors for jobs or as persons who will undercut wage levels. [...] In addition, whereas open frontiers for migration from poorer/weaker states to richer/stronger states may seem desirable from the point of view of the poorer/weaker states, they may hesitate to endorse a general principle of open frontiers, for fear that migration in the other direction may hurt them. If wealthier individuals move to poorer states – as settlers, or even as persons in search of retirement homes in warmer climates and lower costs of living – the net effect can be negative for the receiving states, which might see thereby a loss of land rights by indigenous persons and/or an inflation in home prices, making it more difficult for indigenous persons to retain and/or obtain housing they need. Let me thus resume what I have been arguing. Capitalists need states to protect them. Workers need states to protect them. Consumers need states to pro-

tect them. But what is protection for some is often harm for others. If one wants to argue against the harm that is being done to you by the protection offered to others, one can invoke the ideology of *laissez-faire*.⁴⁶

This long quote showcases how, while entirely acceptable as a critical hypothesis against *laissez-faire* ideology, the analytical frame is somehow unbalanced. Indeed, the economic level of the description presents a magnetized character, displaying a force field with attraction and repulsion, while any other issue concerning migration turns out to be neutralized.⁴⁷

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- 46 Immanuel Wallerstein, "Free Flows and Real Obstacles: Who Wants Laissez Faire?," in *Mass Migration in the World-system: Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Terry-Ann Jones and Eric Mielants (New York: Routledge, 2016), chap. 1, Kindle. However, it must not be forgotten that some specific kind of migration falls within such a perspective. Jones and Mielants deal for example with the traffic in girls and woman for sex work: "As noted by many authors in *Global Woman* these migrations are driven by global inequality [...]. Women in poorer peripheral countries, even women with a substantial education, find they can make more money taking menial jobs in core countries." Terry-Ann Jones and Eric Mielants, eds., *Mass Migration in the World-system: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Routledge, 2016), chap. 2, Kindle. See also Saskia Sassen, "Global Cities and Survival Circuits," in *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, eds. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003), 254–274. This is precisely the case that was linked with the semiotic processes of exclusion before.
- 47 Aronowitz states: "Since in *The World System* there is no concrete examination of daily life within core or periphery societies, but merely an account of various economic, climatic, geographic and demographic factors that operated on a fairly high level of abstraction, Wallerstein could not explore the specificity of politics and culture within the underclasses to find how and why they acted, or whether their actions severely modified or constituted an aspect of the determination of the direction of history." Aronowitz, "A Metatheoretical Critique," 515–516. We do not agree with every aspect of Aronowitz's critique. For instance, he challenges Wallerstein's theory on the grounds of social history and Marx's core concept of social division, stating that Wallerstein substitutes it with a "technical division". Conversely, the fundamental issue here is not to oppose the cultural and economic levels, but rather to fine-tune world-systems. We are in this sense closer to Étienne Balibar's critique discussed below. However, Aronowitz also argues smartly that "it may be asserted that the dominant tendencies of all twentieth century science, including the social sciences, has been to resolve the apparent indeterminacy of social and natural phenomena by positing a higher level of abstraction in which the historicity of things is explained by their failure to fulfill determinate goals." *Ibid.*, 506.

Five years later, Wallerstein dealt with the European debate around the massive population outflow from Syria, as well as with immigration into Europe from Iraq and Eritrea, arguing that the issue calls to trace a clear distinction between the consequences of migrants for 1) the global and national economies, 2) local and regional cultural identities, and 3) the national and global political arenas. His conclusions about the first aspect are that “for the world-economy as a whole, migration merely shifts the location of individuals and probably changes very little.”⁴⁸ Conversely, cultural and political problems are seen as inextricable and a cause of insoluble problems. Wallerstein highlights the close connection between political issues and those about identities to conclude, tautologically, that political decisions are driven by intensive attempts to reach popular consensus. It is “an absolute impasse” since European debate is contended between Merkel’s perspective, in favor of open access to Germany and firstly to Europe, and Orban’s perspective, which challenges the idea of an invasion of “Christian Europe.” Since “[institutional] actors have to maneuver in a national, regional, and world political arena,” Wallerstein concludes, the outcome is uncertain.⁴⁹ We state that such a vision somehow makes it quite difficult to deepen the relationship between migration, the world-system, and nationalist/populist movements.

In substance, we face a double contradiction. On the one side, migration is considered a phenomenon caused by the expansion of capitalism – and is thus irrelevant to its own development as a driving force of the world-system – but able to generate international/global strategies enacted by capitalist institutions. This leaves, as emphasized above, the question of how migration matches the theoretical notion of “identities” and/or “households.” The problem seems as crucial as avoided by the theory. On the other side, contemporary nationalist/populist movements are seen as an answer from the center to migration – an attempt to reaffirm core national interests – but are also discussed for their nature as anti-systemic movements, namely, as the main obstacle to world-system structure and ideology.⁵⁰ Étienne Balibar broadly reflects upon these topics in his preface to *Race, Nation, Class*.⁵¹ He questions whether Wallerstein’s thesis does not impose on the multiplicity of social conflicts a formal –

48 Immanuel Wallerstein, “Passions About Migrants,” *Immanuel Wallerstein*, September 15, 2015, <https://iwallerstein.com>

49 Ibid.

50 Hopkins and Wallerstein, *Age of Transition*, 216.

51 Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*, 6–7.

or at least unilateral – uniformity and globalism and argues how contemporary nationalist movements are not simply transnational but grounded on “local forms of social conflict (whether these be economic, religious, or politico-cultural), the ‘sum’ of which is not immediately totalizable. ... By the same token, I would suggest that the overall movement of the world-economy is the random *result* of the movement of its social units rather than its cause.”⁵²

In other words, Balibar seeks to prevent us from being the “victim of a gigantic illusion regarding the meaning” of our own analysis, which is at risk of being, “in large part, inherited from liberal economic ideology (and its implicit anthropology).”⁵³ From this perspective, which seems entirely acceptable, Lotman’s model shall become a tool both for theoretical clarity and analytical depth. Once established that it does not make much sense to talk about nationalism/populism as a single abstract phenomenon, the issue, in a Lotmanian sense, is not *what* such movements are but rather *where* they are within the space of the semiosphere.

Paolo Demuru and Franciscu Sedda⁵⁴ argue that contemporary populist and nationalist rhetorics⁵⁵ are different from one another in terms of their articulation/assembly⁵⁶ in two aspects: an inner challenge to a dominant group and an external challenge to an Other (immigrant/stranger/foreigner). The first challenge may relate to a conservative party that excludes most folk

52 Ibid., 6.

53 Ibid., 7.

54 Paolo Demuru and Franciscu Sedda, “Da cosa si riconosce il populismo. Ipotesi semiopolitiche,” *Actes sémiotiques* 121 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.25965/as.5963>. See also Franciscu Sedda, “Semiotics of Culture(s). Basic Questions and Concepts,” in *International Handbook of Semiotics*, ed. Peter Pericles Trifonas (Berlin: Springer, 2015), 675–696.

55 For more detailed insights, see, e.g., Marco Revelli, *The New Populism: Democracy Stares into the Abyss*, trans. David Broder (London: Reverso, 2019); Frank Jacob and Adam Luedtke, eds., *Migration and the Crisis of the Modern Nation State?* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2018).

56 On the topic of articulation/assembly as a political framework, see Stuart Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 45–60; James Clifford, “Taking Identity Politics Seriously: ‘The Contradictory, Stony Ground...,’” in *Without Guarantees: In Honor of Stuart Hall*, eds. Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie (London, Verso, 2000), 94–112; James Clifford, *On the Edges of Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2006); Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

from prospects of opportunities, rights, and redistribution of wealth or, on the contrary, may relate to a technocracy making collective decisions for its own gain, indifferent to the concrete needs of the population. In other cases, the dominant group can be identified with a government promoting inclusive policies against racial boundaries, in favor of same-sex civil unions and a human rights framework for the end of life, etc. The second challenge is about an entity that varies from Mexican and African immigrants to Sinti, Roma, and Muslims: from Trump to the French Front National and the Italian Lega, it is only with such an articulation of alterity that populist movements bring out new identities to be defended (America, France, Italy). In a Lotmanian sense, we might say that contemporary populisms often seem to be based on a semiotic spatial rearrangement wherein populist forces place themselves as constricted on both sides: internally (by the core) and externally (by the peripheries). This is not without consequences: not only would it open up the possibility of distinguishing between such populist antisystem movements – where nationalism movements are at the core and many other cases of populist/nationalist movements are on the boundary (notably, many separatist ones) – but also, according to Lotman, it would provide an analytical base for the assumption that the reorganization of the cultural space inevitably goes together with the behavior of the system. The idea of a deflection of the world-system trend here meets the crucial matter of cultural self-description.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to bring together Lotman's semiosphere and Wallerstein's world-systems, with due caution, in order to fine-tune the latter with the support of some notions of the former. The indisputable value of world-systems as *theory* is worthy of providing it with articulated analytical means, and Lotman's semiosphere has turned out to be a powerful intake.

Very briefly, Lotman's semiosphere frames social change in a strongly dynamic perspective in which the concept of the boundary is linked on one side to the idea of a filter and on the other to that of tension. Its contribution to strengthening world-systems, in this regard, is threefold: (a) it enables a theoretical conception of social space that partially overcomes the geopolitical one; (b) for the issue of migration, it displays different structures of "live boundaries" (assimilation, exclusion, segregation, admission), allowing contemporary global migration processes to be framed in more depth; and (c) for the

issue of nationalism, it makes it possible to arrange various phenomena and grasp their differences in various positional configurations within the space of the semiosphere.

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