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Towards a social semiotics of geo-cultural identities: theoretical foundations and an initial semiotic square[*]

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Abstract: Embedded in our efforts to develop a social semiotics for the study of 'geo-cultural identities' – i. e., collective identities grounded in a specific geographical materiality or fact – this article presents the theoretical foundations for such an account and, by employing the tool of the semiotic square, proposes an initial typology of the objects of study that it could deal with. After advancing what a semiotic approach to collective identities could look like, the article focuses on the specific case of geo-cultural identities as a distinct subtype of the former and proposes a typology based on the semiotic square. This typology stresses the semantic categories of continuity and discontinuity and is composed of four positions: national, transnational, subnational and supranational identities.

Keywords: collective identity; geo-cultural identity; national identity; semiotics; cultural geography.

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, Semiotics has broadened its scope of interest by embracing the study of a wide array of phenomena that are not textual *stricto sensu*, such as practices (Floch, 1990; Fontanille, 2008; Dondero, 2017; Demuru, 2017; Oliveira, 2013a), interactions (Landowski, 2006; Oliveira, 2013b), passions (Greimas & Fontanille, 1991; Pezzini, 1991), memory (Demaria, 2006; Violi, 2014), forms of life (Fontanille, 2015; Perusset, 2020), cultural styles (Demuru, 2015) and social structures (Calil, 2020), amongst numerous other phenomena that imply dealing with meaning-making processes that are not fixed, closed or easily manageable, but heterogeneous, extended in time and not so easy to grasp in a unitary fashion (Landowski, 2014). Nevertheless, following a methodological tenet developed within the semiotic tradition during the second half of the Twentieth century (Lotman, 1990; 2009; Lotman & Uspensky, 1975; Marrone, 2011; Violi, 2014), these can now be constructed as *semiotic objects* and read *as if they were texts* when approached as articulations that convey a given content – an ordinary everyday life practice, for example, can be meaningful in ways that are invisible to whomever carries it out, as Jean-Marie Floch (1990) argued when presenting a typology of the possible trajectories that the users of the Parisian metro might follow. That study constitutes a milestone in the programmatic expansion of Semiotics to encompass the study of the broader human experience (Landowski, 2012).

This expansion has given place to the consolidation of Semiotics as a discipline interested in the social domain – that is, in studying how meaning emerges, circulates and is consumed in the webs of significations that constitute any culture (Geertz, 1973). Hence, even if the roots of the discipline are to be found in the study of language, nowadays some of its products are closer to the social sciences such as anthropology (Landowski, 2012). Over the last two decades, the socio-semiotic approach has gained traction in various academic circles around the world, even if its practitioners do not always necessarily share the same theoretical tenets within the semiotic tradition. Curiously, the study of identities, and specifically of collective identities, does not seem to have been of much interest for semioticians in their attempts at studying how individuals make sense of the social realm[1]. Given that the focus of our research is set on

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[1] There are, however, a handful of exceptions (Andacht, 1992; 2017; Demuru, 2014; Leone, 2018; Makolkin, 1992; Manning, 2009; Moreno Barreneche, 2019; Reichl, 2004; Sedda, 2019). The semiotic process by which actors playing actantial roles transcend from the individual to the collective level is traceable in the works of A. J. Greimas. In *On Meaning*, Greimas (1976) proposed a semiotic square that defines this transformation. According to the model, individual actors are initially considered *integral unities* – an individual person, who co-incidentally has a nationality, such as being Uruguayan, or who displays passions, like loving football – and can be recognized as *partitive unities*, i.e., as members of a wider collective group – for example, when stating that "every Uruguayan loves football because football is a national passion". Once this belonging of the individual is expressed in discourse, an existence of a *partitive totality* is also implied, meaning that the collective agency can be divided into discrete components, such as when one proclaims that "all three million Uruguayans love football". Finally, if this

studying from a semiotic perspective those collective identities that are anchored in a given geographical materiality, it should be regarded as a contribution to the development of a social semiotics of collective identities.

Concomitantly to the expansion of Semiotics' scope to also embrace phenomena of a dynamic nature that are not bounded to a closed materiality that is easy to manipulate, within the scholarship on geography and nationalism studies there have also been certain developments that have led researchers to focus their work on signification and meaning. In geography, scholars have begun to use these categories to shed light on how people make sense of space, landscape, and territory (Jackson, 1989; Jones, 2008; Johnson et al., 2011; Paasi, 2009; 2011; Cosgrove, 2008). In the field of nationalism studies, the work of Michael Billig (1995) on banal nationalism, of Catherine Palmer (1998) on 'flags of identity' and of Aansi Paasi (1996) and Michael Skey on nationalism in everyday life (Skey, 2011; Skey, Antonsich, 2017) go in this direction as well. These recent lines of research open the door for an interdisciplinary dialogue of Semiotics with other social sciences whose objects of study require dealing with meaning-making and signification. This is the case because national identities – which, as we will argue, are only one form of what we will call 'geo-cultural identities' – can be conceived from a semiotic perspective as specific *semiospheres* (Lotman, 1990) or forms of life (Fontanille, 2015) – that is, articulations of meaning that are systemic, unitary and coherent, and that comprise the basis of what individuals believe about themselves and others, of how they act and how they attribute meaning to the surrounding reality.

In sociological terms, these articulations of meaning, which are of a discursive nature and hence are cultural artefacts, become part of the *habitus* of individuals, thereby having an impact on their subjectivities (Bourdieu, 1980; Loyal & Quilley, 2017; Appiah, 2018). The *habitus* is conceived as "a set of dispositions to respond more or less spontaneously to the world in particular ways, without much thought" (Appiah, 2018, p. 21). Billig's conception of a 'banal nationalism' or Palmer and Paasi's examination of how nationhood becomes manifest in everyday life each have a clear semiotic component, given that they are focused on how a given content – 'nation-ness' or 'nationhood' – is expressed through multiple semiotic devices and resources, which can vary in their nature. According to Billig (1995, p. 93-94), nationalism is better appreciated through the use of pronouns rather than political claims, like how utterances such as "*our* weather", "*our* national team" or "*their* President" reflect an us/them divide between national communities. Jacques Fontanille's (2008) distinction between a number of dimensions for semiotic analysis – signs, texts, objects, practices,

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collective belonging is discursively treated as an indistinct mass with a single, shared narrative program, one could speak of *integral totalities* and, in doing so, enable statements such as "the Uruguayan people love football" or "football is a key component of Uruguayan-ness".

strategies and forms of life – can certainly help with better understanding how nationhood is expressed, while at the same time how it is constructed, informed and enacted by those very same expressions.

Nevertheless, national identities are not the only type of collective identities that follow this logic. In this article, we elaborate on the analytic category of 'geo-cultural identities' that we introduced in a recent publication (Montoro; Moreno Barreneche, 2021). By using this category, we intend to refer to a family of phenomena of a discursive nature that, just like national identity, also have the pragmatic effect of helping individuals identify with categories of meaning that induce some order and schematics into the perceived reality (Maalouf, 1997; Appiah, 2018). As such, geo-cultural identities can be national, but can also be of a regional, supranational, transnational, urban, continental nature, or even linked to a city's district or neighbourhood. As this article is our first attempt to approach the subject systematically, its goal is to come to terms with some basic issues that might allow us to develop the conceptual building that we envisage. Therefore, besides the theoretical argument with regards to the foundations of a social semiotics of geo-cultural identities that is presented in the following two sections, our aim is to introduce an initial (and provisory) typology of possible objects of study, which is a necessary step in the construction of a methodological approach allowing for an empirical study of the multiple geo-cultural identities that can be found embedded in the social fabric as units of meaning that serve for identification. To achieve that goal, we utilize the tool of the semiotic square (Greimas, Courtés, 1979; Floch, 1990), as it will provide a visual representation of the semantic category of our interest based on the opposition between continuity and discontinuity.

1. A semiotic account for the study of collective identities

The analytical category of 'identity' poses several theoretical challenges that have been extensively addressed by the social and human sciences, with some scholars even proposing to abandon it arguing that it brings more confusion than clarity to conceptual debates (Brubaker; Cooper, 2000). However, it is undeniable that the category has been of interest for several disciplines, such as social psychology (Burke, Stets, 2009; Tajfel, 1982; Mead, 1934), sociology (Eisenstadt, 1998; Berger, 1966; Goffman, 1959; Somers, 1994), anthropology (Levi-Strauss, 2010), philosophy (Appiah, 2018; Ricoeur, 1990), political theory (Fukuyama, 2018; Laclau, 1994; Huntington, 2004; Malasevic, 2006; Parekh, 2008), sociolinguistics (Bucholtz, Hall, 2003; Edwards, 2003; Fishman, 1991; Trudgill, 1984), geography (Hooson, 1994) and cultural studies (Hall & Du Gay, 2011; Morley, 2000; Ang, 2003), amongst others (Wetherell, Mohanty, 2008; Gayon, 2020), particularly since the middle of the Twentieth century.

In spite of the non-clarity regarding the semantic field of the contested analytical category of 'identity', we argue that it is one still valid to refer to – and make sense of – certain social and psychological phenomena of a semiotic and discursive nature that on many occasions are *reified*, i.e., wrongly seen as if they were something given or essential. We argue that identities exist, even if only as cultural artefacts of an intangible nature that have an impact on subjectivities and behaviours. That said, we do not exclude the possibility of abandoning the tag in the future and replacing it with specific terminology taken from the semiotic toolbox, such as 'forms of life', or from human geography, such as 'place-based identities'.

Given that identities have been an object of interest for a myriad of disciplines, it is important to emphasize what would be specific to a semiotic account. For Semiotics, identities are discursive constructs of an intersubjective nature – i.e., they are not anything given, essential or pre-social, but rather depend on agreement and the negotiation of meaning. In this sense, identities are not only something meaningful for people to make sense of the world, but also units that are socially constructed in multiple interactions and contacts with other individuals (Arfuch, 2005; Escudero Chauvel, 2005). As Kwame A. Appiah (2018, p. xiv) argues, identities "shape not just other people's responses to me but also my thoughts about my own life". On her part, Lucrecia Escudero Chauvel (2005, p. 54) argues that there are 'identity strategies' through which individuals "defend their existence and social visibility, at the same time that they seek their own coherence".

These conceptions of identity as something crafted and negotiated is based on a constructivist account of social reality (Searle, 1995; Berger, Luckmann, 1966; Wendt, 1992; Gergen, 1999; Halbwachs, 1952; Verón, 1988), which is valid both in terms of personal identities – linked to an individual that is somehow unique due to a set of characteristics that define them *and they alone* – and collective identities – linked to a group of individuals that are imagined as a sort of *kind* by the assumption of sharing certain characteristics. The constructivist premise implies that individuals are not necessarily such and such – be it Uruguayan, male, Catholic, middle class, etc. – in a fixed manner due to a set of structural facts and belongings such as their place of birth, sex, beliefs, income, etc.; rather, they *become* such and such in a process of meaning-making that is dynamic, open, extended in time and strongly based on the projection of the self and its recognition by others (Goffman, 1959). Even if one might be tempted to state that a baby born in Uruguay from Uruguayan parents *is* Uruguayan (not in legal, but in identity terms), the meaningful identification of the baby with that specific national/cultural identity – a cultural artefact of a discursive nature – will be constructed and made sense of through multiple processes all throughout their life, starting at home, then in school, and so on.

Identities are therefore the result of a process of socialization, a process of meaning-making that consists of incorporating specific aspects linked to an individual's multiple belongings that shapes their *habitus* (Appiah, 2018).

The analytical category of 'collective identity' serves in reference to phenomena of a discursive nature that, even if they cannot be easily grasped as an object of study, can nevertheless be hypothesised when examining multiple manifestations of meaning that refer to an underlying unit that is regarded as being different from other units. These configurations can range from what Ortner (1973, p. 1338) called 'key symbols' – i.e., "key elements which, in an ill-defined way, are crucial to [a culture's] distinctive organization" – to practices (Fontanille, 2008), traditions (Hobsbawm; Ranger, 1983), shared beliefs, and so on. As an example, the Spanish guitar, flamenco dancers, bull-fights, and other objects, practices and symbols, even if they are the result of stereotypical ways of thinking, are regarded *as manifestations* of something deeper: a 'way of being and living' that is "Spanish". This assumption, which refers to a fictional or cultural artefact of a purely discursive nature – but that nevertheless has an impact on what people do – is what we would call "Spanish identity" or "Spanishness".

The underlying unit of meaning – an identity – is conveyed by various semiotic configurations and resources and encompasses multiple individuals who are assumed to share certain characteristics, usually linked by a shared sense of belonging – in this case, to a nation, but it could also be to other types of collective identities, such as gender, class, ethnic groups, religions, political affiliations, etc. As such, there are multiple types of collective identities, depending on the object that triggers the identification between individuals. In this sense, while some of those identities such as gender, class, political ideology and religion might be more articulated – even in the form of juridical organizations –, others, such as being a skater or a fan of the Rolling Stones, might be not so clearly defined: their identity (in the sense of 'being the same') is grounded in assumed equivalences that are looser. Moreover, as Appiah (2018) points out, some of these identities might even be highly situational, even if in the long term they might form the basis for a new collective identity, as has recently taken place with the Yellow Vest movement in France – a collective identity expressed by the wearing of a yellow vest.

In short, a semiotic account of geo-cultural identities will contribute to identifying, analyzing, and putting in relation the defining features of collective identities, both generally and particularly. Why is there a theoretical need for a semiotic account for the study of collective identities? What can Semiotics add to the extensive efforts to grasp the phenomenon of identity? Why are we developing an account that is embedded in a semiotics that is *social*? Appiah (2018, p. xii) argues that exploring identity implies dealing with "the ways in

which narratives […] shape our sense of who we are". In dealing with identity, then, sense and meaning are central categories. As a result of its expansion to encompass signifying practices and experiences that go beyond the study of texts *stricto sensu*, Semiotics has managed to cultivate a conceptual toolbox that might shed some light on the nature of identities, and collective identities in particular, as artefacts of a semiotic nature with an impact in 'real' life, i.e., on what people do, as is the case, for example, of an individual that is willing to hurt or kill another in the name of a belonging, which can be national, but also regional (for example, in cases of separatism) or even sportive (unfortunately, in Latin America, this type of murder is not uncommon).

In semiotic terms, as cultural artefacts, collective identities could be conceived as semiospheres with a specific core and certain imaginary boundaries. For Yuri Lotman (1990), a semiosphere is a sort of space in which the circulation of meaning is possible. Every semiosphere has a core encompassing characteristics and elements that are regarded as defining the articulation of that space, while others are placed, following a specific hierarchy, either closer or further from it. The content of that core can be of a different nature. Certain collective identities, for example, are grounded in the physical features of individuals, such as their biological sex, skin colour, age, or the size of their body, let alone bodily marks like birthmarks that might lead to stigmatization (Goffman, 1963). As Appiah (2018, p. 26) argues, "the colour of hair and skin and other aspects of physical appearance play a role in determining what sorts of people are grouped together". Others, however, are grounded in beliefs, preferences, taste, and normative views, amongst many other non-physical features. Political identities (Berezin, 2001; Hogget, 2015; Moreno Barreneche, 2020) are a good example of this second type, to which in general individuals might enter and exit more fluidly than in the first cases.

Other collective identities, which somehow lie between the two extremes of the physical and the purely intangible, are related to units of meaning that are anchored in the geographical reality: those are the *geo-cultural identities*, which are ideational constructs, albeit to some extent *motivated*[2] – the source of identification is grounded in a geographical fact, just as gender, race and age are grounded in physical facts. In all these cases there is always something that is imagined as binding people together in a profound manner that transcends a merely circumstantial grouping: as Ernesto Laclau (2005) points out, it is in this sense that a crowd does not constitute a collective identity[3].

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[2] 'Motivation' should not be understood in political, but rather in *linguistic* terms, i. e., as opposed to 'arbitrary'. Saussure (1916) argued that linguistic signs are arbitrary since there is no motivation – i. e., conditioning – between the sensitive (the signifier) and the intelligible (the signified) faces of the sign.

[3] A simple example might help to visualize the difference: a crowd that has gathered to watch a Justin Bieber concert does not necessarily constitute a collective identity, as that group coming together is highly circumstantial. Nevertheless, part of those who are interested in or regularly attend such shows

Moreover, every semiosphere has certain boundaries, even if they are not easy to identify. Boundaries constitute a central category in Lotman's thought (Vólkova Américo, 2017) and they seem to be of particular use when dealing with collective identities. Theorizing about nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1983, p. 7) argued that nations are imagined communities that are sovereign and *limited*. Regarding the second aspect, the author writes that "even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations". This elasticity is a fundamental feature of the establishment of (imaginary) boundaries between identities: as Appiah (2018, p. 10) stresses, "there's usually contest or conflict about the boundaries of the group, about who's in and who's out". As we will see in the following section, state borders – which are human-made, contingent and historical facts (Grimson, 2005) – might play a key role in the *setting* of boundaries between geo-cultural identities, while at the same time they *reflect* them: they serve the purpose of being an arbitrary limit between an 'us' and a 'them', thus reflecting a discontinuity that is fundamental in meaning-making.

To conclude this section, we would like to indicate an issue that might shed some light on what Semiotics could do in the study of collective identities. In *The Lies that Bind*, Appiah (2018, p. xvi) writes that he finds the supposition that "at the core of each identity there is some deep similarity that binds people of that identity together" to be "not true" and "an error". He is right if one assumes that identities are essences, which is the point that the author is trying to make in the book. But his claim is not accurate from a constructivist perspective, for which identities are conceived as discursive packages that have a pragmatic function: here, identities consist precisely of cores embracing certain similarities that are *imagined* as binding people together. With this in mind, instead of understanding these similarities as 'lies' that support 'fake' collective identities, we should conceive them as historical, discursive and cognitive processes of collective imagination that are not likely to fit into notions like truth, essence, pureness or authenticity.

2. What are geo-cultural identities

Embedded in the general account on collective identities presented in the previous section, the category of 'geo-cultural identities' refers to a specific subtype of the former. From the myriad of multiple collective identities that exist and circulate in the 'webs of signification' that constitute the socio-cultural domain (Geertz, 1973), due to their characteristics, some of them can be grouped under this overarching analytical category. The same occurs with other

might identify themselves as fans of the Canadian singer and even refer to themselves as 'Beliebers', which is a tag that reflects some sort of collective identity with a core grounded in liking (the music of) Justin Bieber.

forms of identity, such as political identities, which subsume a wide array of specific identities that, notwithstanding their particularities, share certain traits that the observer might be capable of identifying.

What are geo-cultural identities then? A provisional definition could be the following: a geo-cultural identity is a discursive configuration of meaning that is anchored in a geographical materiality or fact, i.e., it takes a geographical materiality or fact to be constitutive of a semiotic core that binds people together. That is why we have maintained the reference to the geographical and cultural dimensions in the label. Although these identities are cultural (as every identity is), the cultural aspects – symbolic, discursive, narrative, imaginary, etc. – are linked to a geographical reality that can be either physical, such as mountain ranges, rivers, cardinal points, climates, or biomes – like tropical, temperate, or polar ones – or conventional, such as borders, states, provinces, municipalities, etc. To understand what these two groups of features have in common, a detour into philosophy is necessary.

In a book entitled *The Construction of Social Reality*, John Searle (1995) presents an ontology of the social realm and its institutions through a distinction between *brute* and *social* facts, and among the latter, *institutional* facts. For Searle (1995, p. 1), there are "portions of the real world, objective facts in the world, that are only facts by human agreement", i.e., they exist because there are shared beliefs about their existence. The philosopher lists money, property, governments, and marriages as examples of these facts which, besides agreement, require human institutions to exist, starting with language. On the contrary, brute facts are independent of any human cognition. For Searle (1995, p. 27), then, there are, on the one hand, objective "features of the world that are matters of brute physics and biology" and, on the other hand, subjective "features of the world that are matters of culture and society". To better grasp this distinction, Searle introduces two dimensions in which objectivity and subjectivity are possible: one epistemic and the other ontological. According to him (1995, p. 8), "in the ontological sense, 'objective' and 'subjective' are predicates of entities and types of entities, and they ascribe modes of existence". To illustrate the distinction, Searle presents two examples that are relevant to our purpose in these pages. He writes that

> In the ontological sense, pains are subjective entities, because their mode of existence depends on being felt by subjects. But mountains, for example, in contrast to pains, are ontologically objective because their mode of existence is independent of any perceiver or any mental state. (Searle, 1995, p. 8)

The question that allows an ontological distinction between the objective and subjective facts is the following: "Could the feature exist if there had never

been any human beings or other sorts of sentient beings?" (Searle, 1995, p. 11). That is how the author has come up with the distinction between *intrinsic* features of reality, i.e., "those that exist independently of all mental states" and *observer-relative* features: there is a difference between "those true statements we make that attribute features to the world that exist quite independently of any attitude or stance we take, and those statements that attribute features that exist only relative to our interests, attitudes, stances, purposes, etc" (Searle, 1995, p. 12).

Returning now to the analytical category of geo-cultural identities, physical realities such as mountains, rivers, oceans, islands and so on exist objectively from an ontological perspective, i.e., independently of any human cognition[4]. However, other units belonging to the management and semiotization of space and territory, such as administrative political units, are facts that are grounded in social agreement, and hence, are institutional. Geo-cultural identities, then, are grounded in geographical facts, even if the ontological nature of those facts diverges. In the case of ontologically subjective units, such as countries or provinces within a country, the meaning of these categories emerges as the result of a semiotization of the space in which territory is regarded to be preexistent to social interaction. Hence, because of this historical and contingent reification of these units, identity is articulated around some of the features of that territory, together with other aspects such as the traditions that have flourished there. That is why cultures that are insular, like for example those of the Balearic and Canary Islands in Spain, might share certain geo-cultural traits (being anchored in an island condition) even if they differ in geopolitical and anthropological terms. Additionally, this might explain why nation-states that differ significantly such as Barbados, Samoa or the Seychelles are members of multilateral initiatives such as the United Nations' Small Island Developing States.

Geo-cultural identities then differ from other types of cultural identities, which are usually grounded in differential elements that are of a cultural, historical, physical, or ideological nature, amongst others, without specific geographical anchorages (be it in ontologically objective or subjective terms). Examples of these could be linguistic identities such as the Lusophony (Sousa, 2017) and the *francophonie*, in which there is a sense of belonging to a cultural unit grounded in a hegemonic language even when there is no geographical anchorage or unity, or in religious identities, like Muslim identities, that span from Senegal to Indonesia and from Pakistan and Bosnia to expat communities living in cities such as Brussels or London. In cases like these, the anchor of the

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[4] Nevertheless, the distinction between smaller units among these, such as different oceans, seas, or mountains, all of which have been given a proper name, is the result of human segmentation through the use of language.

identities – that is, the base upon which the discursive construction of identities takes place – is not *physical* geography, but rather an *imaginative* geography (Said, 1978), understood as the space – imagined to be unitary, homogeneous and monolithic – where various collective identities, be they religious, linguistic, political, gender, professional, generational, etc., are believed to function together with sets of symbols and imaginaries regardless of their "objective" geographical reality.

From a constructivist perspective, there is not any kind of determinism in the approach we are proposing: the existence of a rainforest like the Amazonia does not necessarily imply that an Amazonian identity will develop. However, the notion of an identity that is differentially Amazonian requires, as a necessary condition, the existence of this geographical materiality (whose boundaries might not be clearly defined). The same occurs with other geo-cultural identities that are linked to ontologically objective materialities, such as the Alpine and the Andean identities (both being linked to mountains), the Caribbean and the Mediterranean (linked to seas), the African and European (linked to a geographical continent), or those linked to ontologically subjective facts, such as the Uruguayan (a nation-state/country), European (in reference to the EU, i.e., a supranational political union), Bavarian (an administrative unit) and Parisian (a city) identities. This is to say, once again, that geo-cultural identities are discursive phenomena – artefacts of a symbolic nature – with a specific anchorage in certain facts that any member of that group could recognize as such: just as personal identity develops with a strong anchorage in bodily features, geo-cultural identities have a strong anchorage in geographical facts[5].

A good way of visualizing these theoretical ideas in an empirical manner is through place branding, a concept that emerged during the last decade and became pivotal to the promotion of specific places such as countries, provinces, regions, natural parks, and touristic destinations, amongst others. Developing a strategy of place branding implies the recognition of a differential unit with a core and boundaries, and the articulation of its uniqueness in the dimension of the expression by means of the creation of a number of semiotic devices, such as a graphic visual identity, audiovisual campaigns, and stands at international exhibitions. Although the first overt initiatives of branding geo-cultural units was known as 'nation branding', currently there is a consensus within academia and industry to refer to it as 'place branding' as a means to include not only *countries*, but also *cities* and *regions* (Anholt, 2007; 2009; Karavatzis, Warnaby, Ashworth, 2015). Nevertheless, place branding theorists and practitioners still do not agree

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[5] In the cases in which these facts are ontologically objective, it goes without saying that they are named, made sense of, segmented, and delimited by human action, meaning that, despite their ontological objectivity, they are also partially constructed through the use of language. Therefore it is of utmost relevance to examine history to understand the constitution of these specific collective identities which are socially constructed.

on the object of their field, given that a broad array of multiple territorial categories may fall under the umbrella that we refer to as 'a place'. As some scholars have suggested (Aronczyk, 2013; Kaneva, 2011), branding a place tends not only to commoditize individuals, complex scenarios and changing dynamics in which negotiations of meaning take place through outsider-oriented practices of enunciation (Brucculeri, 2014), but also the regimentation of habits and meanings towards the insider (Graan, 2016). In this sense, the semiotic square that we present in the next section aims at shedding some further light on the forms in which sense is made out of territory and how collective identities are built grounded in it.

3. An initial typology of geo-cultural identities based on the semiotic square

The aim of this final section is to present an initial and provisional typology of geo-cultural identities based on the tool of the semiotic square. In the foreword of Greimas' *On Meaning*, Fredric Jameson (1987, p. xiv-xv) argues that one of the key advantages of the semiotic square is that it provides "a decisive enlargement on the older structural notion of the binary opposition" while, at the same time, enabling researchers "to map out and to articulate a set of relationships that it is much more confusing, and much less economical, to convey in expository prose". In this sense, our article should be read as a provisional proposal aimed at initially drawing some basic lines of what will eventually become the projection of a building. Furthermore, if one accepts following recent scholarship within social semiotics (Landowski, 2012) that semiotic objects are constructed by the researchers, this is precisely what we aim to do here.

Floch (1990) believed that one of the most recurrent oppositions in spatial analysis is that of *continuity* vs. *discontinuity*, while Giannitrapani (2013), for her part, argued that using a sheet of paper as a blank canvas would stress its *continuity*, while folding it would stress its *non-continuity*, tearing it into pieces would stress its *discontinuity*, and stitching those previously separated parts back together would stress its *non-discontinuity*. This is a good example of what happens with geo-cultural identities, since most of the modern spatial cognition derives from cartography and its preferred semiotic device – the map. According to Franco Farinelli (1992; 2006), modernity led to the imposition of a 'logic of *space*'[6] that substituted premodern spatial models based on *places*. As a result, units of measurement based on proportions and scales replaced

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[6] It should be noted that, here, 'space' is used as a technical concept. Hence, it differs significantly from other notions like those that define 'space' as being synonymous to territory or 'inhabited places' (De Certeau, 1978).
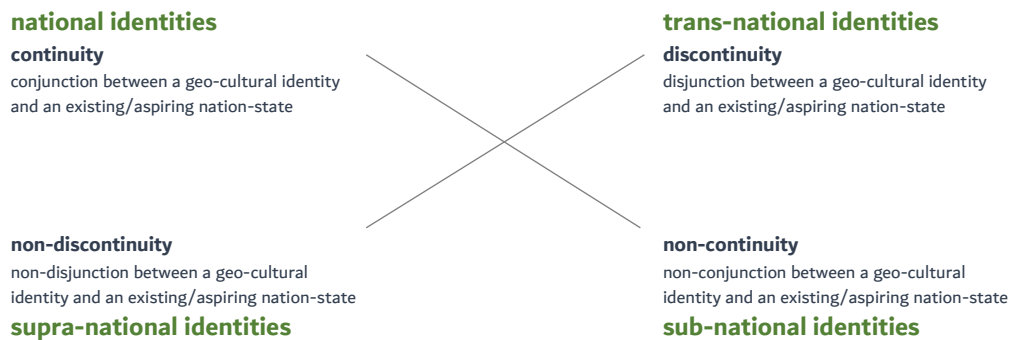
incommensurable notions of territory that were dependent on the observer's point of view. For Farinelli, the logics of maps, scales and *spaces* provided the cognitive and political grounds for creating centralized states that conceived of territory as geometric bodies characterized by being continuous, homogeneous, and isotropic[7].

Given the still dominant centrality of the nation-state in the organization of the contemporary international system, we could assume that *continuity* in its clearest form emerges when the three elements of a modern state – a people, a territory, and a jurisdiction – coincide with a given geo-cultural identity. For this reason, within all the types of geo-cultural identities, *national* identities are presumably the most recognizable ones: as Ernest Gellner (1983, p. 6) argued, people are expected *to have a nationality* just as they have a nose and two ears. Although we acknowledge the fact that nation-states are historically contingent and, therefore, other types of collective identities (religious, linguistic, etc.) have been dominant in the past – and could be in the future – the national level should be deconstructed to provide three other types of geo-cultural identities, adding on to the national: *trans-national* identities, *sub-national* identities, and *supra-national* identities. These are a discursive enactment of the abstract values of *discontinuity, non-continuity,* and *non-discontinuity,* respectively (Figure 1).

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[7] In geometry, 'isotropy' indicates that a body presents the same properties regardless of its orientation. Affirming that a territory is isotropic implies that its qualities – for example, its size – do not change if seen from the South, North, East or West.

Figure 1: Four types of geo-cultural identities.

national identities
continuity
conjunction between a geo-cultural identity
and an existing/aspiring nation-state

trans-national identities
discontinuity
disjunction between a geo-cultural identity
and an existing/aspiring nation-state

non-discontinuity
non-disjunction between a geo-cultural
identity and an existing/aspiring nation-state
supra-national identities

non-continuity
non-conjunction between a geo-cultural
identity and an existing/aspiring nation-state
sub-national identities

Source: own elaboration.

Nation-states – and with them, national identities – are typically expected to be geographically scattered throughout a *continuous* territory. That is why phenomena such as enclaves or exclaves are exceptions to the norm, and why policies of cultural homogenization have prevailed in modern history in the cases of mixed populations. National cultures, each with their own key symbols, heritages and imaginaries – be it 'Frenchness', 'Italianness', or 'Uruguayanness', amongst many others – are based on place names that are easily attachable to encyclopaedic knowledge (Eco, 1984): given that the world is organized in those discrete units of meaning, each nation is systematically "inventoried" in catalogues such as the world atlas, the system of internet domains and phone prefixes, ISO codes, etc. Even cultural stereotypes that are traceable across informal speech – "to go Dutch" "the Spanish flu", "Russian roulette" – reduce vast and continuous portions of territory, as well as complex intersubjective experiences and identities, to a single characteristic (Leerssen, 2016).

However, not all national movements have gained sovereignty over the territory they claim for themselves: while many national identities tend to correspond topologically with the jurisdiction that the international community has assigned them, a number of stateless ethnic groups – such as the Kurds in the Middle East, the Roma in Eastern Europe, or the Rohingyas in Myanmar, etc. – can be found around the world, let alone the multiple cases of national identities that have grounded their causes in irredentist claims, i.e., the idea that a significant part of the national territory has been lost and therefore must be recovered. Conceptual projects such as Greater Serbia, Greater Albania or Greater Somalia reflect this position.

Conversely, massive and skilled migrations, border changes and accelerated flows of ideas, peoples, technologies, currencies, and media exports in the global world (Appadurai, 1996) defy the notion that place-based identities should be contained within the limits of existing nation states. Hence, as another type of geo-cultural identities, transnational identities reinforce the territorial and symbolic discontinuities that nation-states put over individuals and groups in order to claim them as citizens of their respective countries, despite the fact their actual feeling of belonging might be rooted in rejecting the correspondence of a single nation state. Hybrid cultures like Chicanos (a combination of Mexican and American), Afro-Caribbeans, Indo-Guyanese and Italo-Americans, amongst many others, demonstrate how identity shifts in individuals with mixed origins. Additionally, expat communities living abroad are part of this type.

In any case, these individuals need to ground their identitarian affinities in a certain geographic materiality. Therefore, it is also possible to find a number of geo-cultural identities that are highly local, albeit structured in a manner that does not adhere to national allegiances, but rather cross-border geographic features, such as river basins – the River Plate culture, the Amazonian identity, Danubian cuisine –, mountain ranges – the Alpine and Himalayan cultures – or climate regions – tropical cultures, a cross-border protected area, etc. If a given geo-cultural identity is the result of the renegotiation of symbolic borders that were once defined by national states, empires, colonial powers, or larger cultural regions, it will then presumably belong to the transnational level. This means that, in many cases, an objective materiality (a river, a mountain range, a wall, etc.) that is usually considered a boundary between two or more units of political administration, may also constitute the basis for the development of a cross-border identity that segments the territory into different units of meaning.

However, if these geo-cultural identities are the result of connecting multiple pre-existent units without conducting a segmentation of national cultures, then it would be more convenient to group them into the type of *supranational* identities, as in this case state borders do not act as boundaries of the collective identity. Examples of supranational geo-cultural identities are geographically anchored in continents like Europe and Africa, cultural areas like Latin America or the Middle East, imprecise cultural regions derived from historical and political affinities like *Mitteleuropa*, or groupings of selected countries based on sub-continental criteria such as the Southern Cone – Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and, arguably, Paraguay and the Southern part of Brazil –, Scandinavia, Eastern Europe – strongly linked with the idea of Slavism – or the Caribbean. In all these cases, the relation between collective identities and spatial units is characterized by non-discontinuity: individual national identities are joined together to create a wider geo-culture identity than that of the members alone, giving place to unifying abstractions such as *Caribbean* and

Slavic literature. In this sense, non-discontinuity emerges given that symbolic boundaries between the constituent cultures of a supranational identity are blurred, as do the differences amongst its members: a supranational identity is grounded in what supposedly all the members have in common. When making sense of what it implies to be 'European', the Schengen area is a key device of how such supranational identity becomes meaningful to individuals, as it enables free movement (non-discontinuity) across several national states.

If the supranational level rejects discontinuity by putting together a group of differential national identities in a shared geo-cultural identity, *subnational* identities reject continuity by segmenting the national level into smaller meaningful units that are subdivided through inner boundaries. Hence, subnational identities oppose the apparent continuity and homogeneity that national discourses offer. They can coincide with a country's administrative units – the *regioni* in Italy, such as Lombardy or Tuscany; the *comunidades autónomas* in Spain, such as Galicia or Andalusia, the *Gaúcho* identity in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul – or be related to 'historical regions' (Paasi, 2011) that are not delimited in administrative divisions, such as Transylvania in Romania, Castille in Spain, Brabant in Belgium or Bohemia in Czechia. In some cases, the opposition between national and sub-national (*continuity* vs. *non-continuity*) might be limited to adding a local nuance to national storytelling – for example, a part of Asturian identity, linked to a region in Northern Spain, is supported by the pride of having been the cradle of the *Reconquista*, a milestone in Spanish foundational rhetoric (Boyd, 2006). In other cases, subnational identities can challenge national discourses so as to seek a clearer distinction with state institutions, and even foster secessionist movements to create their own nation-state – for example Catalonian independentist movement in Spain, Flemish identity in Belgium, etc.

Similarly, smaller areas such as cities, towns, villages, and cultural landscapes – i.e., areas of higher interaction between peoples and natural environments – also arrange this type of geo-cultural identity by virtue of highlighting a series of limits and thresholds that define the extension of an urban/rural scenario: cities tend to be organized into districts, municipalities, and quarters, with differences in value with regards to whether they are situated downtown, uptown, in the city centre or in the periphery. The reader might be in a better position to identify a list of substantives and adjectives to refer to individuals identified as being part of one of their city's districts. Furthermore, capitals and important cities may metonymically represent national narratives – for example, Paris as a prototype of Frenchness or Milan as an icon of *the* Italian lifestyle – or, contrarily, they may propose values opposed to those of their respective national identities, especially if such notions of nationhood are symbolically rooted in rural traditions.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to articulate the theoretical foundations of our project to build a semiotic account for the study of geo-cultural identities. In particular, we have demonstrated why these constitute a specific case of collective identities, a broader object of study that is suitable for Semiotics. If Semiotics, and specifically its social branch, is interested in grasping how meaning is a constitutive part of the human experience, then collective identities cannot therefore be neglected any longer. To achieve this goal, we have attempted to argue not only why Semiotics could shed significant light on the attempts of understanding *how* identities work as substantial pieces within the webs of meaning underlying human action, but also *why* the specific variation of these that we have termed 'geo-cultural identities', i.e., discursive, and cultural artefacts that emerge based on a geographical fact, mediate how individuals make sense of the world.

Multiple ways forward are possible, some theoretical, others methodological. From a theoretical perspective, our next step will consist in elaborating a more detailed typology based on the four positions identified in these pages thanks to the employment of the semiotic square. Moreover, further theoretical discussions should be addressed, especially regarding the link between geography and culture, by examining the relationship between the discursive and material dimensions. This discussion will lead us to reflect on how semiosis is anchored in specific materialities that establish some boundaries as to what is possible at the discursive level. Finally, the dialogue of our account with the existing semiotic tradition seems to be a fundamental step in this theoretical quest. On the methodological side, our aim is to start studying specific geo-cultural identities. For this purpose, an appropriate method should be developed so that we can start conducting empirical work to map out the elements that constitute the core of the semiosphere that every geo-cultural identity is. The semiotic square presented in these pages constitutes a starting point for that goal. Regarding the levels of analysis, we find in Fontanille's (2008) identification of six levels of immanence – signs, texts, objects, practices, strategies, and forms of life – an inspirational starting point for our empirical work.

The empirical dimension presents a series of challenges and questions that will have to be taken into consideration. How can the researcher identify the boundaries of an identity? How should one deal with the diasporas and communities of expatriates living abroad? What happens with the intersections of the different types of geo-cultural identities? How can we start tracking them? Even if semioticians might have come up with initial solutions, for example in the form of identifying signs, texts, objects, practices, strategies, and forms of life

(Fontanille, 2008), a more robust methodological apparatus, specifically dealing with geo-cultural identities, should be developed. For the moment, we are satisfied if the reader agrees with the relevance of dealing with this object of study. ●

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⊚ Por uma semiótica social das identidades geoculturais: fundamentos teóricos e um primeiro quadrado semiótico

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Resumo: Como parte dos nossos esforços por desenvolver uma semiótica social para o estudo das *identidades geoculturais* – as identidades coletivas ancoradas em uma materialidade geográfica específica, ou fato –, este artigo apresenta as bases teóricas para essa perspectiva e, mediante o uso do quadrado semiótico, propõe uma tipologia inicial em relação aos objetos de estudo dos quais um enfoque assim poderia se ocupar. Após a argumentação sobre aquilo no que um enfoque semiótico das identidades coletivas poderia consistir, o artigo se dirige ao caso específico das identidades geoculturais como um subtipo distinto dessas, e propõe uma tipologia baseada no quadrado semiótico. Essa tipologia, construída sobre a base das categorias de continuidade e descontinuidade, é composta de quatro posições: identidades nacionais, transnacionais, subnacionais e supranacionais.

Palavras-chave: identidade coletiva; identidade geocultural; identidade nacional; semiótica; geografia cultural.

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