

Conditions and implications of participation in semiotics (and elsewhere)

Original study

Sémir Badir
Université de Liège, Belgium
semir.badir@uliege.be

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Abstract: This paper examines the conditions of possibility for semiotics to engage with the notion of participation and, through it, with participatory sciences. After tracing the genealogy of participation as a concept—from participant observation and action research to actor-network theory—the paper analyses the political requalification of this sociological notion into an institutional project for science. It then considers the specific epistemic position of semiotics, arguing that, as an “undisciplined” body of knowledge, it is largely foreign to the applied research model that underlies participatory sciences. The paper concludes that semiotics may nonetheless find a meaningful connection with participation understood as a methodological condition, particularly through the educational missions it assigns itself, as illustrated by recent developments in social semiotics.

Keywords: semiotics, participation, citizen science, gnoseology, interdisciplinarity, actor-network theory, action research, participant observation.

The theme of this dossier is eminently forward-looking: to my knowledge, there are no studies on the connection between semiotics and participation. What is meant by participation is, moreover, subject to interpretation. The hypothesis I will adopt to explore this connection is to invoke “participatory sciences and research” (*sciences et recherches participatives*), as the phrase appears in a report drafted in France “at the request of the ministers responsible for national education, higher education and research” (Houiller, Merilhou-Goudart 2016, 2).

The connection that semiotics may have with these “participatory sciences” is to be imagined rather than observed. My own approach will consist of considerations on the organisation of knowledge. I will not therefore seek to consider what “participation” might mean in the field of semiotics, but rather to identify the reasons that allow it to be posed at present.

This organisation of knowledge clearly has practical conditions that a research policy can address, at

whatever level it is situated — an individualised policy embodied in a certain “ethical relationship” to knowledge and society; a community-based policy agreed upon by the members of that community, at the level of a discipline or a university; or directive policy emanating from a national government (as illustrated by the report mentioned above) or an international institution. It also has “ideal” or “rational” conditions, commonly referred to as “conditions of possibility”, which can be supported by epistemological discourse, whether this discourse is produced by knowledge actors, based on the reflexive aspect inherent in all epistemic discourse, or assumed from a more distant position, such as that of a philosophical epistemology.

It is these general conditions of possibility for semiotics to engage with participation—and, through this notion, with “participatory sciences and research”—that I propose to reflect on in this paper.

1. MODELS OF KNOWLEDGE ORGANISATION

The ideal or rational organisation of knowledge is traditionally the domain of gnoseology, i.e. a theory that begins by compartmentalising knowledge before organising it by ranking and grouping fields of study. Gnoseology is thus responsible (in an *a priori* or *a posteriori* manner) for the organisation of knowledge into *disciplines* and *disciplinary groupings*.

One senses that calling for “participatory sciences” does not mean envisaging a new disciplinary grouping that would be on the same level as, for example, the humanities and social sciences (whose grouping has a direct impact on research and teaching policy) or the experimental sciences (whose grouping mainly concerns epistemology). The reason for this is simple: for no science considered as a *discipline* does there exist a general condition of possibility capable of determining whether or not it belongs to the participatory sciences. Participation is rather a way of approaching science, in the means it employs and the functions assigned to it, regardless of the discipline in question.

As such, the singular would be more appropriate: we could talk about “participatory science”, just as one talks, in much the same sense, about “citizen science” or “open science” to refer to a way of doing science with the “participation” of people who are not professionals in the field and who, in this respect, are considered non-specialists. I will return to the question of terminology later, but for now, let us try to understand what model of organisation participatory sciences contribute to.

1.1. Models of interdisciplinarity

Since the end of the Second World War, the traditional gnoseological organisation into disciplines, although still widely established in both epistemological debate and institutional research policies, has been counter-balanced by other models of knowledge organisation. Since participatory sciences seem to consist primarily of a model for organising knowledge, it is useful to recall, albeit briefly, the existing models, in addition to the disciplinary model.

The first to be proposed as an alternative to the discipline-based tradition were *interdisciplinary* models, which promote the breaking down of barriers between disciplines. Three main approaches emerge from these interdisciplinary dynamics¹.

Firstly, methodological transfers give rise to new ways of conducting research within a discipline, often accompanied by the development of new “objects”, i.e. new research objectives in the field in question (for example, biolinguistics exhibits an interdisciplinary dynamic whereby concepts, methods and questions from biology are transferred to the field of linguistic research²).

Secondly, convergences around a common set of issues promote the exchange of data, the comparison of perspectives and methods, and the synthesis of information for a wider audience that includes specialists from other disciplines and non-professional scholars; this is the case, for example, in *environmental studies*.

Finally, guiding hypotheses can bring together interdisciplinary research with a view to a general reorganisation of knowledge (as was the case with the structural hypothesis and as is still the case today with the cognitive hypothesis³).

The so-called “participatory sciences” do not fall under any of these approaches, even if they tend to favour interdisciplinary dynamics. In particular, they also promote convergences of epistemic interests around a common set of issues. But participation does not define this set: the participatory sciences do not, obviously, have participation as their object of study but rather as a methodological concept. Since none of the known approaches to interdisciplinary dynamics are applicable to the participatory sciences, is it not conceivable that they could constitute a fourth, fully-fledged approach? To claim so would be to undermine their significance: interdisciplinarity is not the driving force behind the participatory sciences, as we shall see.

In fact, models of interdisciplinarity are still very dependent on traditional, philosophically inspired gnoseology. It is indeed disciplinarisation that each of them ultimately points toward: the creation of new disciplines either through methodological transfer or through convergence on a subject, and the reorganisation of disciplines according to an emerging paradigm.

When it comes to reflecting on models of knowledge organisation and their very constitution (on the “conditions of possibility” that serve as definitions for bodies of knowledge), the sociology of scientific knowledge has been competing with the philosophical approach for nearly a century⁴. The development of “relativist epistemologies”, “constructionist epistemologies” or simply “epistemologies of the humanities and social sciences” was not initiated by philosophers but by researchers affiliated with the social sciences in the broad sense. In other words, epistemology has become a field where ideas and points of view related not only to rationalist argumentation but also to different disciplinary positions come into confrontation. The same is true for that part of epistemology which relates to the organisation of knowledge. Thus, there are sociologically inspired gnoseologies competing with philosophical gnoseologies.

1.2. Actor-network theory

Participation is precisely one of the concepts put forward in the sociology of scientific knowledge that posits a

1 For an overview, see Klein (1996).

2 See Ltr13 (2024), in particular chapter 4, “Programmes et imaginaires de la modélisation. Le cas de la biolinguistique” (Programmes and imaginaries of modelling. The case of biolinguistics).

3 See Miller (2003).

4 For an historical introduction to the sociology of scientific knowledge as an alternative epistemology, see Shinn and Ragouet (2005).

different method of organising knowledge from disciplinary compartmentalisation, and is distinguishable from interdisciplinary remediation. In the 1980s, Madeleine Akrich, Michel Callon and Bruno Latour developed a new model for organising knowledge, which they call “actor-network theory”⁵. The fact that this gnoseological proposal draws on the concept of *actant*⁶ could be a way of showing how narrative semiotics has helped to establish a meeting point between participation and knowledge, but this is not the path I will follow here. What I would rather emphasise is that actor-network theory is a theory rooted in sociology and applied to the study of scientific research chosen as a field of observation. One of the case studies that made it famous relates to both marine biology and the fishing industry, thus at the crossroads of science and industry. It concerns scallops fished in the Bay of Saint-Brieuc near Brest (in the region of Bretagne, France). Scientists sought to understand, explain, and ultimately solve a problem: namely, the decline in the scallop population, as this led to a decline in economic resources for the human communities that had turned it into an industry. Michel Callon (1986) shows that the problem was in fact solved on two levels: at the scientific level, in the field of marine biology, the aim was to understand and explain the causes of the decline in the scallop population, which required studying their environment in order to propose solutions to fishermen; at the epistemological level, it was necessary to understand and explain the interactions required to resolve the scientific problem between biologists with different specialities, fishing communities and even, depending on their reactions to the solutions tested, the population of scallops.

Actor-network theory thus concerns the organisation of knowledge by virtue of the concept of network. Whereas traditional gnoseology aims primarily at vertical and hierarchical structuring (with interdisciplinarity simply instilling a dynamic of transformation), actor-network theory advocates horizontal organisation, levelling differences to the point of placing human actors of knowledge on an equal footing with the non-human things and actors they study. It is therefore a radical rejection of the essentialisation inherent in philosophical gnoseology and, with it, disciplinary institutions⁷.

1.3. Action research

Now, as I mentioned earlier, actor-network theory did not come out of nowhere. Its novelty stems mainly from its application in a field, the study of science, where sociological concepts were then marginalised. The concepts of this theory are, however, part of a sociological tradition dating back at least to the 1940s, namely the method of action research. It is in this context of sociological methodology that the concept of participation

also emerges, which is therefore first and foremost a sociological concept.

What sociologists in Anglophone scholarship call “participatory action research” (Kemmis et al. 2014; Burns et al. 2021) or “community-based participatory research” (Wallerstein et al. 2018) are social actions in favour of disadvantaged communities, such as farmers, ethnic minorities in urban areas, populations in impoverished neighbourhoods, and people at risk. In all cases, the aim is to improve their living conditions by making a rationalised diagnosis using standard scientific techniques (systematic opinion polls, ongoing learning, empirical verifications, etc.). The partnership between sociologists and the communities concerned, or, if you like (one leading to the other), between science and society, is established on an equitable and contractual basis. In this sense, everyone “participates” in a social objective informed by a scientific method: scientists take part in problem-solving (first by identifying the problems, then by organising the necessary means to solve them); communities engage in implementing the means, mobilising their members and setting the objectives to be achieved.

As is to be expected, such a social objective is rarely achieved without methodological problems arising in the implementation of the actions to be taken, so that any particular action research contributes to the general understanding of the conditions and implications, thereby fulfilling a specifically scientific objective.

1.4. Participant observation

Action research itself stems from a method in which civil communities intervene in research in yet another way. This method is that of *participant observation*, as promoted by ethnologists such as Malinowski since the 1920s. In the context of ethnological studies of non-Western societies, participation is unilateral: in order to best fulfil their objectives of understanding and description, ethnologists must participate in the life of the society they are studying. Methodological and epistemological questions consist in determining how far ethnologists are required to participate: if they participate in rituals and practices, should they adhere to the representations that give them meaning?

These questions of method become more crucial when participant observation is carried out in North American or European communities, for example in a Boston neighbourhood occupied by Italian immigrants where William Foote Whyte, then a newly minted sociologist, participated in the activities of a street gang, using their language and attending their rackets. A reflection on the degree of observer involvement is developed in the appendix to *Street Corner Society*, originally published in 1943, which Whyte later reformulated as “participatory action research” (Whyte 1991).

5 The model was institutionalised after the fact. For an overview, see Akrich et al. (2006).

6 Simply put, in semiotic narrative theory, the *actant* replaces the *character* by extending the agents of an action to non-human and even inanimate entities. See Greimas and Courtés (1979, 3).

7 Further studies in semiotics are dedicated to actor-network theory. For an overview, see Peverini (2024).

One can see that this conceptual genealogy is quite obvious. Participation as a general organisation of science, applied by Michel Callon to a non-sociological field, stems from action research, which is used as a method in sociological research fields. This action research is itself a theoretical translation better suited to the fields of urban anthropology than the method of participant observation from which it draws inspiration but which was developed for the study of ethnographic fields (targeting so-called “traditional” societies, i.e. non-Western societies).

From one to the other, in over fifty years of development, participation has gradually seen its status evolve. Without denying the somewhat schematic nature of my presentation, this evolution should be marked by simple epistemological concepts.

- 1) In participant observation, participation serves as a method, i.e. it sets out the epistemic conditions for the practice of knowledge.
- 2) In action research, it clarifies the objectives for sociological research by highlighting the *social* issues at stake in the research.
- 3) Finally, in actor-network theory, it intervenes in the debate on epistemological ideas. At this level, it contributes to the formulation of *epistemic* stakes relating particularly to the organisation of knowledge.

Depending on the development of the concept of participation, “participatory science” (in the singular) would thus mean, until the 1990s, either research conducted on a participatory basis (unilateral or balanced) in sociology, or research conducted on a balanced basis according to a gnoseological model favoured in the sociology of scientific knowledge.

1.5. The “participatory sciences”

According to Houllier & Merilhou-Goudart (2016, 6 *passim*), the “phenomenon” of “participatory sciences” (in the plural) is experiencing a “remarkable boom”. It could be seen as the resounding success of the sociology of science. Indeed, it is thanks to this field that this methodological concept — forged for the needs of the social sciences (from ethnology to sociology and anthropology) — was extended to the whole of knowledge, as a model of organisation.

But, in fact, this is not quite how the participatory sciences are sold to us. I say “sold” because it is largely the initiative of political authorities and the institutional structures that support them. Their existence under this label depends mainly, or at least did until recent years, on reports written at the request of governments. These include the document known as the “Houllier Report” (2016), named after the CEO of the French National

Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA) to whom this request was made⁸, as well as the “Charter for the Participatory Sciences and Research in France” (2017), signed, it is stated, by “around thirty institutions of higher education and research (ESR), NGOs and associations” and published on a Sorbonne University Alliance website. More recently (2021), one may also cite the report by the National Institute for Agriculture, Food and the Environment (INRAE), published as “special issue #01” of NOV’AE, an online journal on “Innovative Engineering and Know-how” on the INRAE website⁹.

It is true that this issue of *Linguistic Frontiers*, or, previously, the issue of *Études de communication* devoted to “The participatory sciences through the lens of information and communication sciences” (Pascual Espuny et al. 2021) testifies to the consideration that researchers who *are not a priori concerned* — I will come back to this point — give to these political and institutional requests. The future will reveal how disciplinary communities position themselves, taking into account, of course, the considerable social changes facing Western societies.

I return to the marketing of the participatory sciences in reports and charters. On the one hand, it is claimed that the participatory sciences have existed, if not since the beginning of time, then at least since the institution of science itself (Fages 2021, 7). Since interest in knowledge predated the institution of science, the latter obviously had to contend with these societies of amateurs. What is referred to here are botanical, astronomical and ornithological societies, some of which were founded several centuries ago and remain active to this day. On the other hand, at the turn of the millennium, new technologies reconfigured the possibilities for interaction between scientists and amateurs, not only in these long-established fields (botany, astronomy, ornithology), but also in others more closely linked to social concerns, such as climate and environmental change. The “mass participation of citizens” (Fages 2021, 12) would thus take place through practices made possible by digital media, such as crowdsourcing and gamification (Houllier, Merilhou-Goudart 2016, 11).

This presentation of the participatory sciences as a “phenomenon” that can simply be observed and referenced using sociometric tools (Houllier, Merilhou-Goudart 2016, 9) actually requires a redefinition of participation. The methodological principle that it formulates in the social sciences, with specific social and epistemic stakes, becomes a notion devoid of any disciplinary conception. The author of the Houllier Report may well conclude the overview by stating that “the participatory sciences come in many forms” and that “the great diversity of disciplines, subjects, actors, methods and purposes cannot lead to the development of a single,

⁸ This report was actually written by one of his advisers, Jean-Baptiste Merilhou-Goudard, who had a degree in biology. It is referenced on HAL under the dual authorship of the director and his adviser.

⁹ INRAE is the result of the merger of INRA with another institute. Although dated 2021, it appears that this issue was released at the beginning of the following year.

consensual definition” (Houllier, Merilhou-Goudart 2016, 12¹⁰). But this lack of distinction, this conceptual cloud, implies that participation has been extracted from the conceptual field in which it originated (sociology) and then naturalised in the flow of scientific activity reduced to the status of “phenomenon”.

1.6. Questions of nomenclature

I would be remiss to dwell on the critical aspect of my commentary, as it is not my intention to reject the political and institutional project of the participatory sciences. However, to give some substance to my objection and, in doing so, clarify its scope, I would like to add two remarks. On the one hand, the term “participatory sciences” is a French invention that has no equivalent in other languages. In English, one refers to “citizen science”, in Spanish “*ciencia ciudadana*”, in German “*Bürgerwissenschaft*” and in other languages either the English term is retained or it is translated literally. Thus, the “participatory sciences” as such exist only in France. Second observation: the corpus of 4,310 entries which, according to the Houllier Report (Appendices, 14), give objective existence to the participatory sciences comes from a query of the *Web of Science* database, but is in no way based on the French term “*sciences participatives*”; these entries use terms (all in English) such as “citizen science”, “participatory research”, “participative research”, “crowdsourcing” or “crowd science”.

It is the role of discourse analysis to highlight how words, through their choice of usage, influence the “state of affairs” and the description of “phenomena”, especially when these states of affairs and descriptions are driven by political projects and concern knowledge, its organisation and its purpose. The discursive epistemology approach that I advocate (Badir 2022), in line with the archaeological investigation initiated by Michel Foucault, seeks to show how ideas emerge and develop in academic discourse according to its own forms of argumentation, independent of the realities it claims to categorise. In this case, it should be noted that participation is a sociological concept that has recently (in the 2010s) been redefined in order to serve as the basis for a political project. This discursive operation can be explained by the characteristics specific to this concept and its use. Firstly, from a hypothesis of knowledge organisation, as put forward by sociologists of scientific knowledge to counter philosophically inspired gnoseologies, participation has been naturalised as an observable phenomenon, supposedly without epistemological “bias” (Houllier, Merilhou-Goudart 2016, 9), in scientific practices (to the point that it is claimed to have always been there). Secondly, this redefinition is of interest to political authorities, who are taking the initiative to promote it, given the semantic features associated with it, namely an institutional framing of *engagement* and a *collective* dimension relating to this action, two features

that define political action itself. In a nutshell, one could say that participation is politics inviting itself into science. This has not escaped the attention of those interested in the subject, as the conflict between, on the one hand, the disinterestedness and autonomy inherent in the institution of modern science and, on the other hand, the interest and praxeological solidarity underlying participation is often highlighted.

However, this diagnosis needs to be supplemented because it does not explain the limited yet palpable success that the political redefinition of participation as a project for science has met with among certain scientists. One avenue to explore in order to account for this success stems precisely from the gnoseological implications that participation makes possible to activate. It will be recalled that to support actor-network theory, Michel Callon used an example relating to marine biology, a field completely foreign to the usual investigations of sociologists. It seems that many scientists identified with this example, which is in fact very often highlighted in the presentation of this theoretical model. It is plausible that many scientists working in the field of applied sciences (such as engineering, but also sectors related to life sciences, including medical sciences) can identify with it. In fact, the compartmentalisation of knowledge into disciplines mainly concerns so-called “fundamental” research, for which autonomy and disinterest make the most sense: mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, etc. The vast field of applications remains in the shadows, assigned to ancillary functions. So, my hypothesis is that actor-network theory, as a competitor to the traditional discipline-based gnoseology, puts applied sciences back at the forefront of science. The political project of “participatory sciences” (perhaps more effective under this name than “citizen science”) enshrines the generality (and therefore institutional legitimacy) of this new gnoseological model. It therefore seems likely that the participatory sciences will gain the support of a large number of professional researchers.

2. SEMIOTICS AND SOCIETY

If the aim here were solely to focus on the participatory sciences, the overview of knowledge organisation models outlined in the first section might seem excessive. However, in order to establish a link with semiotics, this reminder of the ideal conditions for ordinary science, as they still largely support the institutional and professional organisation of knowledge, proves useful because semiotics also finds itself at odds with what is dictated by the gnoseological tradition, including standard interdisciplinary developments.

2.1. Undisciplined semiotics

Semiotics is in fact constituted by a double heterogeneity: the heterogeneity of its methods and the heterogeneity of its objects of investigation. When I say that it is

10 A similar argument can be found in the INRAE Report, in which Pierre Cornu and Egizio Valeschini attempt to trace the “complex genealogies” of participatory sciences (Cornu, Valeschini 2021, 13).

constituted, I mean it in the strongest sense of the term: if semiotics had any homogeneity of method or object, it would have disappeared long ago, either because it would have been abolished along with the structuralist movement that gave birth to it (at least from an institutional point of view), or because it would have dissolved among the methodological approaches useful to communication sciences¹¹.

It will be understood that I do not share the opinion of those who would like to see semiotics as a discipline (supposedly “still young and fragile”) or a federating interdisciplinary (described as “little known”). These proposals may serve as institutional positioning strategies and meet the practical conditions for the research and teaching of semiotics, but they are inadequate to account for its epistemic specificities when compared with those of neighbouring knowledge practices.

I have suggested that semiotics would benefit from remaining “undisciplined” (Badir 2022, 75), at least in the sense that the forces that constitute it are *contrary* to those that ordinarily govern disciplines. From this perspective, the example set by other disciplines in terms of their relationship to the participatory sciences may well not be suitable for semiotics. Its relationship to knowledge in general is original, and if there is to be anything in semiotics that could be described as “participatory”, whatever that may mean, it could only be on its own terms.

2.2. Application vs. education

Without wishing to steal the thunder of the other contributors to this dossier, I would nevertheless like to express my scepticism about the value of involving semiotics in the participatory science project in its most widely accepted sense, that of scientific research in which citizens participate. It is not impossible to envisage cases of object collection, or even analysis, that are compatible with semiotic status. One example is the *TeXTures UrbAines* website, initiated by Alexandre Lansmans, which collects and analyses 4,000 signs of writing (collages, posters, stickers, graffiti, epigraphs, banners, etc.) found in the city of Liège. There is nothing to prevent an anonymous citizen from adding photographs of further signs, even gathered in other cities, beginning the analysis by categorising and describing these signs, and thus participating in a general semiotic study, similar to that carried out by Lansmans¹². However, I simply do not see how the participation of non-specialists would bring anything specific to a semiotic study designed in this way. Nothing would be missing from this study without their contribution.

To express my scepticism more frankly, semiotics, like all fields of knowledge in the humanities (philosophy, history, literary studies), and even the broader human sciences (including language sciences and information and communication sciences), is not concerned with the division of research into fundamental and applied research. This is why, in my view, the political and institutional issue of participation is irrelevant here.

One might object that the term “applied linguistics”, for instance, is in use. It would be wise to examine it from an epistemological point of view¹³ but, whatever one may think, it cannot have a radical impact on the professional training of linguists, as is the case with the division of tasks between engineers and physicists, or between doctors and biochemists. At best, the idea of an “application”, for semiotics as for other disciplines in the humanities, marks an interest in issues debated in the media and involvement in problems that concern society. This is one way of looking at the objective of the book edited by Karine Berthelot-Guiet and Jean-Jacques Boutaud (2015), *Sémiotique mode d'emploi* (Semiotics: A User's Guide), which advocates “applied” forms of semiotics; more recently, the collective work entitled *Sémiotique impliquée. L'engagement du chercheur face aux sujets brûlants* (Implicated semiotics. The researcher's commitment to controversial topics) (Alonso Aldama et al. 2021) also expresses a concern to respond to societal needs. These outreach initiatives are commendable, credible and interesting, but they in no way question the mode of production of semiotic knowledge, nor even, or only to a very limited extent, its discourse.

In fact, the link that stably and efficiently connects the knowledge of the humanities to society is of a different nature than application. For these disciplines, it is simply a matter of *education*—education that manifests itself in three main ways: higher education, continuing education, and science popularisation. If we were to take up Marx's injunction at the end of his *Theses on Feuerbach*¹⁴, according to which knowledge is called upon to transform the world, the transformation that the humanities are working on would be that of knowledge itself, since knowledge is part of the world, or rather, it is an aspect of it.

Research in semiotics is changing the way it is taught, and I believe it should be commended for having made itself useful in a wide variety of teaching and professional training contexts, particularly in art, architecture, design and communication schools, in addition to the humanities faculties where semioticians are usually based. I cannot agree with Jean-Marie Klinkenberg's

11 I summarise here chapter 1 of my book (Badir 2022).

12 A selection of these signs gleaned by “citizens” can be found on the website (<https://texturb.uliege.be/geotag/>), which features photographs taken in Paris, Lyon, Saint-Tropez and Baden-Baden.

13 This term stems from a scientific mindset in which formal linguistics claims to be fundamental research in the same way as physics and biology, which is indeed the case, for example, with Chomsky's generative grammar. Applied linguistics is defined by its interdisciplinarity (where linguistics dialogues in particular with educational sciences, psychology and computational sciences), which further demonstrates its dependence on a model of knowledge organisation that is particularly relevant to the natural sciences.

14 For further discussion, see Badir (2022, 94 ff).

view on the “implicit discredit” (Klinkenberg 2012, 18) that semioticians would cast on the use made of their research in these teachings; there is no “restricted field” and “expanded field” of semiotics in the way that the sociology of fields, from which Klinkenberg here borrows the model, distinguishes a field of restricted literary production (described as elitist and legitimate) and a field of broad literary production (described as popular and lacking legitimacy) for the simple reason that, within semiotics, the division of tasks, research and teaching, is sufficient to explain the coexistence of different discursive registers.

2.3. Semiotics and participation

So, is there really nothing to be gained from participation in semiotics? Perhaps there is. Provided that participation is considered not as an organisational injunction, which in any case would not be appropriate for semiotics, but according to the conceptual proposal put forward by sociological research, the dialogue between social science and semiotics being constitutive of the semiotic research carried out in France under the aegis of Greimas. Provided, therefore, that participation is considered a methodological condition of research, such that the attention paid to it is likely to advance the knowledge that semiotics offers to society through its educational missions.

To develop this hypothesis, I would like to dwell for a moment on the theoretical proposal of a “social semiotics” as conceived by Alexandra Saemmer and Nolwenn Tréhondart (2022), along with other semioticians working in information and communication sciences, notably in the book *Sur quoi se fondent nos interprétations ?*¹⁵ The initiators of this social semiotics aim to run workshops in which a press image or some other media object (series trailer, website home page, etc.) is presented for interpretation by students and adults involved in some way in an educational structure. The interpretation is “free”, meaning that the interpreters receive no prior training (except, of course, the training they are currently undergoing). They are asked to say what they see and to interpret the intention behind the production and publication of the image. For example, in the case of a photo published by the French daily newspaper *Libération* in the context of the Yellow Vests protests¹⁶, the interpreters largely observe a selfie being taken and see in it an intention of self-glorification on the part of the person photographed. On the journalist’s intention, however, opinions differ, sometimes to the point of contradiction. Some see it as a betrayal of the spirit behind the movement (the journalist presents a totally irrelevant image), while others see it as an expression and confirmation of a vulgarity specific to the movement and its leaders (the journalist exhibits the narcissism of an era and a social class). Such interpretations depend on the

degree to which the interpreters support the movement. But that’s not all. Some interpreters detect the absence of women in the photo and attribute the sexism of the image to the person photographed. Others identify the absence of people of colour and attribute racism to the person photographed, while opponents attribute a North African origin to the person photographed and see the selfie as an affirmation of French patriotic values. Based on the same attribution, one interpreter accuses the newspaper of manipulation by highlighting a non-white person in the movement. All these interpretations depend on different personal experiences. Along the way, the work proposed by the teacher consists of locating “visual elements retained as significant” in the image and explaining the “interpretative filters” on the basis of which a particular interpretation has been put forward, i.e. the knowledge, beliefs and representations that inform it.

The conditions of the study in which these interpretations are reported correspond to the socio-anthropological method of participant observation. Simply put, the researcher’s participation here does not concern a non-Western society or even a detachable community within Western societies, but rather a group of subjects whose sociocultural representations are varied, possibly conflicting, and who are brought together in the context of an educational workshop or university training.

From a theoretical point of view, these social semiotics workshops offer nothing particularly new in semiotics. For example, their principles of interpretation can also be found in the seminar that Barthes (2011) devoted to Balzac’s short story “Sarrasine” as part of his teaching at the École Pratique des Hautes Études from 1967 to 1969. The “interpretative filters” are referred to by Barthes as “codes” and are subject to the same regime of heterogeneity, allowing for interpretative contradiction.

From a methodological point of view, the participant observation promoted by social semiotics has also precedents in semiotics. François Rastier (1989, 150-166), for instance, conducted an interpretation of a passage from literary texts in a school context (lower secondary level), using very simply formulated concepts: the possibility of contradictory interpretations is based on the textual elements selected, and on the pupils’ differentiated cultural representations.

What sets the social semiotics of the previous cases apart in semiotics, however, are the *implications* relating to the workshops and the report on them in the research work. These implications closely correspond to those of participatory action research in sociology: first, workshops establish equality of roles among participants; second, the teacher acts as a facilitator, proposing simple words (“elements”, “filters”, etc.) for dialogue and withdrawing as soon as possible into the role of observer; finally, the workshop experience is supposed to directly

15 A further exploration of this topic can be found in the book edited by Mayeur and Saemmer (2025).

16 A popular and spontaneous protest movement that emerged in France in October 2018 and sparked regular urban demonstrations for over a year.

benefit participants, even if the “transformation of knowledge” is limited to a fleeting awareness:

In social semiotics, the aim is not to transform the beliefs and convictions of participants, to “convert” them to other ways of seeing. It is about creating the necessary conditions for participants to open their minds, even if only for a brief moment, to the views of others (Saemmer, Tréhondart 2022, 161).

The social significance of social semiotics is therefore clearly stated. The extent to which it may also affect the epistemic stake specific to semiotic research is a matter of consideration. It seems clear that social semiotics aligns with the relativist and anti-differentialist position (i.e., no difference in legitimacy between research actors) advocated by actor-network theory. It also exacerbates the political dimension of research. Without seeking to characterise very precisely the political interests that such a research orientation may serve, it seems to me in any case that experience shows that it serves a progressive vision.

CONCLUSION

While the involvement of semiotics in the participatory sciences is still largely exploratory, the issues at stake in this involvement can be illuminated by their respective epistemic predispositions. Rather than conducting a genealogical investigation that would suggest that the participatory sciences already occupy part of the research field, I have sought to show what form of thinking their project points toward, and how, in doing so, they compete with other models of knowledge organisation. The coexistence of these models, while it may well be a reality in educational and research institutions, is above all a matter of gnoseological reflection. Participation places practical application at the centre of knowledge activity, such as the resolution of socio-technical problems and the achievement of technological developments. It is therefore not surprising that its epistemic project responds to political imperatives that are reflected in a particular organisation of research, which in turn influences the organisation of knowledge.

Semiotics, like most bodies of knowledge grouped together in the humanities, is a priori foreign to these issues of application, even if, in research practice, there is nothing to prevent it from collaborating in research with a societal focus—it can certainly find *practical* interests in this, linked to the professional sustainability of its researchers. However, it is compatible with the initial conception of participation, which developed within the framework of anthropological and sociological studies. In its use as a specific method of observation, semiotics meets the aims of citizen science.

Between the participatory sciences, initiated by French policy, and citizen science, which is more marked by its sociological ancestry, there remains the possibility of adjustment. The future will tell us whether semiotics,

and the humanities in general, will take part in the dialogue and on what terms.

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