

Lisa Stine

Dr. George Jensen

RHET 7311: Rhetorical Theory

1 May 2017

### Signs of Signs: Analyzing Protests Through Peircean Semiotics

The last year in the United States has been marked by political unrest. As Donald J. Trump emerged as the Republican nominee for president in the 2016 election, opposition mounted, but it did not prove enough to prevent his win in November. Instead of abating after his successful election, opposition to Trump continued to increase, and as of his first 100 days, he has “the lowest early approval ratings of any President in modern history,” 43% according to a April 27, 2017 Gallup poll (Johnson). Since his election, several nationwide marches have been organized, including a Women’s March on January 21, a Tax March on April 15, and a March for Science on April 22. While only the organizers of the Tax March mention Trump specifically as a motivator in their mission statement, these gatherings of several thousand people worldwide serve as clear evidence of strong opposition to Trump and his policies. However, each of those individual participants bring their own agendas to the events, and those agendas and opinions vary widely from one participant to another. Also, the interpretations of the events by onlookers and bystanders vary widely, with some sympathetic, some opposed, and some apathetic. Given the complicated nature of gathering thousands in an attempt to project a message, analyzing the effect of that gathering can be difficult. However, the semiotics of American pragmatist Charles S. Peirce provides a method of examining these protests that offers a clearer picture of their complexity.

Charles Sanders Peirce, born in 1839, was an American pragmatist philosopher who wrote extensively on a variety of subjects, “from mathematics and the physical sciences at one

extreme, to economics, psychology, and other social sciences at the other” (Burch). He was an interesting character--he married his second wife Juliette, a “Gypsy” (whom he had already been cohabitating with) merely two days after divorcing Zina, his first. As a result, he lost his job at Johns Hopkins University. While he supported himself through work with the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey (founded by his father, Benjamin), he was occasionally destitute throughout his life and was supported by family and friends, such as philosopher William James. However, despite his peculiar nature, his ideas are valued, especially his ideas about logic and semiotics.

Peircean semiotics differs from the semiology of Ferdinand Saussure, which is more widely-recognized, perhaps since it is more accessible than the work of Peirce. While Saussure identified just two co-dependent elements, the *signifier* and the *signified*, Peirce’s semiotics involves three essential elements: the *sign* (or *representamen*), its *object*, and the *interpretant*. Peirce’s *sign* is similar to Saussure’s *signifier*, and his *object* is similar to the *signified*. A convenient metaphor for considering the difference between the two theories is that if Saussure’s *signifier* and *signified* and Peirce’s *sign* and *object* are two sides of the same coin, then Peirce’s *interpretant* is the coin itself (Ogden).

For Peirce, a *sign*, or *representamen*, can be “any thing or phenomenon, no matter how complex... from the moment it enters into a process of semiosis” (Everaert-Desmedt). The *object* is what the sign represents, and a sign can have one of three relationships with its object. It can be a *symbol*, which means that it has an arbitrary, assigned relationship, such as the relationship between the word “cat” and a cat itself. They have nothing in common, but language has developed in such a way that the written and spoken word “cat” represents the animal. It could also be an *icon*, which means that it has a sensory relationship to the object, such as the relationship between a drawing of a cat and a cat itself. The drawing of the cat

shares visual characteristics with an actual cat, allowing for a connection. The third type of sign relationship is an *index*, which is a causal relationship--for example, a mouse could be an index for a cat because of the widely-recognized prey and predator relationship they have. The *interpretant* is the third element of the process, which is how we make sense of the relationship between the sign and the object. Using the previous example, if the sign is a mouse and the object is a cat, then one way we make sense of the relationship between the two is using our knowledge of predator and prey, which has been supported by cartoon television shows such as *Tom and Jerry*, which can then be viewed as yet another interpretant. The process of semiosis is recursive in this way, since the interpretants of any given sign and object can then become signs in themselves, and the process begins again.

There are many semiotic layers involved in a protest or march. While each event can function as a sign in itself, there are also individuals participating who create literal "signs" containing various messages as part of the experience, which become *signs* in the Peircean sense. The photos that are taken at the march or protest are also signs, and when they are shared on social media, those posts are signs. Each of these signs has a relationship to one or many objects, and the relationships between those signs and objects are understood differently by anyone who encounters them, leading to an almost infinite number of interpretants. Examining marches and protests through this process of semiosis allows for a peeling away of layers of meaning and leads to a deeper understanding of the issues involved.

According to their website, the mission and vision of the Women's March is to "stand together in solidarity with our partners and children for the protection of our rights, our safety, our health, and our families - recognizing that our vibrant and diverse communities are the strength of our country" (Women's March). The sign of the Women's March points to the object that Trump has disdain for women, one interpretant being the recording released of

Trump in which he bragged about his sexual prowess and claimed that he could just “grab ‘em by the pussy” (Transcript). Participation was historic according to political scientists at the Universities of Connecticut and Denver, who found that “somewhere between 3.3 million and 4.6 million marchers made their presence known across the United States” (Broomfield).

In this photo from Gulfport, Mississippi by Justin Mitchell, a woman participating in



Justin Mitchell/The Sun Herald, via Associated Press

the Women's March applauds with her sign reading “Nasty Women Unite.” There are many semiotic messages embedded in this sign. When the woman writes for women to “unite,” the sign points to the object that women are not united and must come

together to achieve the goal of equality. Interpretants for this relationship between sign and object include the stereotype that women typically do not get along well, and also the idea that women are often quiet rather than outspoken when they are negatively affected. The sign also includes the term “Nasty women,” which points to the object of women who supported Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election. The interpretant here is the moment in a debate when Trump referred to Clinton as “such a nasty woman” (Guardian). Clinton's supporters seized upon the term, and while the term “nasty” typically has a negative connotation, when the women apply it to themselves, they reject Trump's insult and use it positively to mean the kind of woman who sticks up for herself against men like Trump. However, to an unsympathetic viewer, this sign could point to the object of women who want to cause trouble, and the interpretant would be that Hillary is “crooked,” as Trump typically refers to her. The composition of the

photo itself is also functioning as a sign, pointing to the object that the woman in the foreground has many people who agree with her. The interpretant is that the more people who are present at a march, the more credence is given to their message. If the photographer had taken the photo at an angle that only displayed the woman and not the crowd, it would be easier to undermine the strength of her message.

In this photo by Stephen M. Dowell taken at the Women's March in Orlando, Florida, a woman's clothing serves as a sign. She wears a purple shirt with a heart and



Stephen M. Dowell/The Orlando Sentinel, via Associated Press

text that reads “#OrlandoUnited” and a rainbow tutu. One object these signs point to is that gay Americans should have the same rights as everyone else. Possible interpretants include that rainbow colors are a symbol of gay pride (which is a sign/object

relationship), and also that #OrlandoUnited is a hashtag created in response to the Pulse gay nightclub shooting that occurred in Orlando on June 12, 2016 (another sign/object relationship). Her exuberant posture is also a sign that demonstrates pride in her message, the interpretant being that body language with the arms extended rather than closed indicates positivity and openness.

The Tax March was held on April 14, 2017, which was also the day that taxes were due to the IRS in the United States. This date is a sign, chosen since the organizers of the Tax March wished to bring attention to the fact that “President Trump is the first president or

major-party presidential candidate in four decades to refuse to release his tax returns to the public,” the object. They demanded that “the president release his returns, as he has repeatedly promised, but failed, to do” (Tax March). According to organizers, over 125,000 people participated across the U.S.



In this Reuters photo, marchers in New York hold signs, including one that reads “This Mexican is college educated and pays taxes.” This sign points to the object that if this marcher pays taxes, then Trump should release proof that as the President of the U.S., he pays taxes to support his country as

well. The interpretant is that all responsible citizens of a country should do their part by paying taxes. The word “Mexican” on the sign can be further analyzed. That the creator of the sign includes the fact that he is “Mexican” points to the object that he is the kind of person that Trump doesn’t like, and if he can pay taxes, surely Trump can too. The interpretant is that Trump has insulted Mexicans on many occasions, even going so far as to call them “drug dealers... criminals... [and] rapists” (BBC).



In this Reuters photo, also from the Tax March in New York, a marcher carries a marionette doll wearing a blonde wig. The doll’s appearance is a icon for Pinocchio,



the character immortalized by Disney whose nose grows longer when he lies. Since the marcher is carrying Pinocchio (wearing a blonde wig to resemble Donald Trump) at the march, the object of this sign is that Trump is lying about paying taxes and should release his returns to prove it. This relationship is only understood through the interpretant of the Disney film. Another sign/object relationship here is the sign of the marionette doll, pointing to the object that Trump is a “puppet” being controlled by others. The interpretant for this relationship is the current investigation to determine whether Trump colluded with the Russian government in order to win the 2016 election (Broomfield).

The March for Science was held on April 22, 2017, which was also Earth Day. This choice of date serves as a sign, pointing to the object that the principles of the march coincide with the protection of the planet. The interpretant is the idea that science leads to conclusions about the earth and climate which help us sustain the environment. According to organizers, “we unite as a diverse, nonpartisan group to call for science that upholds the common good and for political leaders and policymakers to enact evidence-based policies in the public interest” (March for Science). According to Mother Jones, “tens of thousands of people all over the world” participated in the march.



Buttons for sale near the Washington Monument. Hillary Swift for The New York Times

This photo by Hillary Swift of The New York Times depicts buttons for sale at the March for Science in Washington, D.C. The center button includes a polar bear in an arctic landscape holding a sign that reads “Impeach Trump.” The polar bear is an icon that points to the object of

actual polar bears living in the arctic, who are currently endangered. The sign that the polar bear holds points to the object that impeaching Trump would help save polar bears. The interpretant is that Trump's environmental policies value business and profit over sustainability, which could lead to the polar bear's extinction.



Luciano Vitale, 5, of Burlingame, Calif., came dressed as Albert Einstein.  
Jim Wilson/The New York Times

In this photo from the Burlingame, California March for Science, taken by Jim Wilson, five-year-old Luciano Vitale holds his sign while dressed as Albert Einstein. The icon of the well-recognized mustache and wild hair point to the object of the scientist, Albert

Einstein, who has come to serve as an index for the field of science overall due to his important contributions. Vitale's sign, "It doesn't take a genius to know that science matters," points to the object that Donald Trump is not a genius and should recognize that science is important. The interpretant here is that Trump is well-known for his disregard of academic "elites" and education and is often regarded as unintelligent by those who oppose him.

This examination of photos from the Women's March, the Tax March, and the March for Science through Peircean semiotics demonstrates the level of context required to understand participants' messages and motivations. Without the historical and cultural knowledge that allows for interpretation, the meaning is lost, as well as any hope that these participants might have of persuading others to adopt their perspective. This suggests that robust education, awareness of current events and shared cultural artifacts are essential for a shared understanding and interpretation of messages among people in a society. For example,



without knowledge of Albert Einstein, the message of young Luciano Vitale at the March for Science in Burlingame, California is meaningless. Without an understanding of the events on June 12, 2016 at the Pulse Nightclub, the message of the woman depicted at the Women's March in Orlando cannot be communicated. And without an understanding of the character "Pinocchio," the New York Tax March participant's message about President Trump cannot be accurately interpreted. In order to persuade and be persuaded, we must "speak each other's language," and Peircean semiotics makes it clear that that reaching that goal is much more complicated than simply speaking English.

## Works Cited

- AP, Source: Reuters /. "Trump Calls Clinton a 'nasty Woman' during Final Debate – Video." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 20 Oct. 2016. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.
- Broomfield, Matt. "UK Government Was Handed Dossier on Donald Trump Links to Russia Last Year, Court Papers Reveal." The Independent. Independent Digital News and Media, 29 Apr. 2017. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.
- Broomfield, Matt. "Women's March against Donald Trump Is the Largest Day of Protests in US History, Say Political Scientists." The Independent. Independent Digital News and Media, 23 Jan. 2017. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.
- Burch, Robert. "Charles Sanders Peirce." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, 12 Nov. 2014. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.
- "'Drug Dealers, Criminals, Rapists': What Trump Thinks of Mexicans." BBC News. BBC, 31 Aug. 2016. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.
- Everaert-Desmedt, Nicole. "Peirce's Semiotics." Peirce's Semiotics. Signo: Theoretical Semiotics on the Web, 14 Jan. 2015. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.
- Garfield, Leanna. "Thousands March across the Country Demanding Trump Release His Tax Returns." Business Insider. Business Insider, 15 Apr. 2017. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.
- Johnson, David, and Maya Rhodan. "Trump 100 Days: President Has Lowest Approval Ratings." Time. Time, 28 Apr. 2017. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.
- "Mission." March for Science. March for Science, n.d. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.
- "Mission & Vision." Women's March on Washington. Women's March, n.d. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.
- Ogden, Liana. "Answer to 'What Is the Difference between the Semiotics of Saussure and Peirce?'" Quora. Quora, 1 June 2016. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.
- "Pictures From the March for Science." The New York Times. The New York Times, 22 Apr.

2017. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.

"Pictures From Women's Marches on Every Continent." The New York Times. The New York Times, 21 Jan. 2017. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.

"Principles for the D.C. March." Tax March. Tax March, n.d. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.

"Tens of Thousands of People All over the World March for Science." Mother Jones. Mother Jones, 22 Apr. 2017. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.

"Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women." The New York Times. The New York Times, 08 Oct. 2016. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.