

Ideology behind Ecological Design

LILL SARV

University of Bari (Italy)

Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate the messages that are carried by ecological design. More precisely under review are ecological products and movements which advertise their usage. One of these movements is called «Bright Green Environmentalism» and its aim is to introduce already existing solutions to environmental problems. For this scope they have quite well known web-journal called «Worldchanging» which promotes the usage of ecological and sustainable products and they have published a book called «Worldchanging: a practical guide to 21 century». The message which this movement is communicating is that it is not necessary to renounce modern comforts and consumerism while being ecological. They believe that the solution to environmental problems can be found in sustainable design. The journal «Worldchanging» is supposed to be a combination of «socially conscious capitalism» and idealism. They declare that their approach is at the same time the one of activists and the consumerists.

It is possible to analyze this interesting combination of ideas from the viewpoint of ideology. Italian semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi has classified the conceptions of ideology under eleven headings. In this paper we are going to analyze the case of Bright Green Environmentalism and try to discover under which one of these eleven types of ideology we could place it.

Below we are going to approach the phenomena of commercial green design from semioethic viewpoint. Semioethic theory suggests that human beings should be thought of not as «res cognitae» but as «semiotic animals» because humans hold immense responsibility towards the surrounding world as they are able to reflect over their actions, plan and suspend or change them. The ability of imagination that allows us to feel for the others puts us also in a position of no alibis. The scope of semioethics is to unmask the hidden ideologies that surround us and which we ourselves help to create.

Keywords: ecological design, ideology, semioethics

1. BRIGHT GREEN ENVIRONMENTALISM

There are several green movements that are dealing mainly with the problems like green-design, fair trade and with ecological production issues. In this article we are going to profound one of them which is called Bright Green Environmentalism (BGE) or Worldchanging. It originates from United States and is mostly Internet based community. Alex Steffen, a founder of BGE is also an editor of the book «Worldchanging: A User's Guide To 21st Century» that collects articles which «offer you insight into the best, most innovative solutions for tackling the world's biggest problems» (publishing text on the cover of the book). The book is supposed to equip you with the tools «whether you want to shop more responsibly, improve your community, fight poverty and disease, or launch an ethical business» (Steffen 2006). As a bonus Worldchanging «shows you that changing the world doesn't have to be in conflict with living the life you want — that being a smart consumer, improving the lives of others, and being a kinder to the planet can lead to a healthier, happier, more exiting life» (ibid).

BGE promotes ecological design that creates products which should be just as well durable, good looking and comfortable as not ecological products and in every way compatible with the latter. BGE considers economics as an important part of sustainable society. They support the development of sustainable technologies which help to increase economical growth and don't oppose or diminish the growth. Their scope is to «nudge the whole economy toward a bright green future» (Steffen 2006: 43).

In the introduction Bruce Sterling claims the worldchanging crew who composed this book, is not ideological, but pragmatic and empirical. Therefore it seemed an interesting material for a research on ideology. Sterling writes:

The worldchanging people are not commissars. They never talk ideology; instead they talk uncommon sense. They don't spin; they are pragmatic empiricists. They don't do mysticism; they forecast. They don't do lobby; they anticipate. (Steffen 2006: 14)

He describes the members of worldchanging as a new renaissance, people of new enlightenment era. As Rossi-Landi argues (1990: 34) the claim of neutrality represents an extreme ideological position. Neutral science does not exist, especially in the field of ideas and their formation.

Sterling adds to his description of worldchanging crew:

The worldchanging crew, the core people who supply the organizational impetus for this ongoing labor, are widely scattered global cluster of journalists, designers, futurists, technicians — and very often these renaissance people fulfill all those roles at once. (Steffen 2006: 13).

Here it seems a just moment to make a reference to Rossi-Landi again, as he writes that while trying to describe the present, we are describing it as we would like to see it in future. So it is actually a way of wishful thinking. For example while describing ourselves we are not objectively describing who we are but what comes out is a description of how we would like to be.

Finnish green marketing and consumer research specialist Johanna Moisander writes about the illusion of objectivity of economics as follows:

The social and cultural embeddedness of marketing knowledge is often denied on the plea that economics is based on the use of mathematics, metaphors, and the «rigorous» style adopted from the natural sciences. To politician and ordinary people such a «scientific» style of research may appear objective but it can, in fact, reflect hidden values, norm and beliefs. (2001: 37)

Therefore the work of BGE or worldchanging crew seems to offer a vast material for a research of hidden ideologies even more as they have declared to be free from it. Economics and marketing seem to be objective, because their discourse is based on mathematical facts, but this by far does not mean that they don't contain ideology.

2. DEFINING HUMAN BEING AND ITS REALITY

It is important to discuss the influence of the Cartesian definition of human being as rational animal to the modern society. At the time of enlightenment the problematic definition of human being as rational being was invented and the science was declared to be a new spring of objective truth. With enlightenment the former truth that parted from the god and religious beliefs were discarded and scientific fact was declared to be the new truth.

What was lost here was the understanding that human being is a product of social reproduction and therefore also the illusion that science is objective, was erroneous.

Reality, according to Rossi-Landi (2006: 176) is made of: 1) social practice — work that is done by human beings in society; using as material the man itself and the nature which has been already modified by human beings, in other words the passed history 2) social reproduction — mechanism invented and created by human beings for producing history, and this mechanism consists of man and nature 3) history: is a product of the social practice achieved by social reproduction that includes men and nature as products.

Social reproduction consist of 1) work as social practice 2) a mechanism for producing history 3) history as a product (Rossi-Landi 2006: 179). There is no objective nature; the term «nature» itself is a human invention, a product of social reproduction. Rossi-Landi does not want to claim there are no external objects but if an object has entered into human discourse it has become a part of social reproduction. In other words it has entered into human Umwelt (Uexküll 1992) and semiosis. Therefore, as writes Rossi-Landi, all the theories about nature, society etc belong to social reproduction (that uses and produces the different theories and not vice versa). According to Rossi-Landi our reality is what man has created adding together social and natural phenomena's while producing and reproducing itself, always in the more complex and conscious forms (2006: 179).

The problem, which the comparison of human being to machine, created was that it was believed to be possible to analyze the processes of the mind and body separately. Even today the assimilation of human being to a machine is widely spread, especially comparing human being with computer and the holistic approach is lost.

The definition of man as a rational being has influenced the way in which we see our society (the modern communication-production era, where we find ourselves, is based on it). This definition also influences the composition of research questions which again influence the results of the research.

Johanna Moisander writes:

... the constitutive values of mainstream marketing, with the emphasis on explaining behaviour with causal laws or law-like generalizations, have guided researchers to rely on a transcendental, disembodied and machine-like Cartesian subject, whose moral capacity is ensured by his capability of rational deliberation. Such an individualist conception of the subject may be argued to have a tendency to objectify and provide implicit support for individualist ideology and institutions. Therefore, adhering to such assumptions, the predominant discourse of green consumerism in consumer research may well serve to reproduce discourses or systems of representation that hinder the pursuit of sustainable development. (2001: 53)

Even though Moisander is analyzing consumer research practices, her arguments are valid also while talking about the book of «Worldchanging» of BGE. From the former citations of Bruce Sterling's introduction to *Worldchanging* we saw that he was emphasizing the enlightenment and renaissance aspect of the worldchanging crew and therefore it is quite reasonable to assume that their definition of human being is based on the same enlightenment discourse. Now this, according to Johanna Moisander, can mean that their work, instead of helping to create more sustainable environment, is to reinforce the individualist ideology and institutions discourse, which is one of the main reasons for the environmental problems we are facing today.

This reveals the need for a new definition of human being. Susan Petrilli, Augusto Ponzio and John Deely have come out with a definition where human being is seen as a semiotic animal who should become in the future semioethic animal (2005).

3. SEMIOETHICS AND HUMAN BEING AS SEMIOETHIC ANIMAL

Semioethic theory suggests that human beings should be thought of not as «res cognitae» but as «semiotic animals» because humans hold immense responsibility towards the surrounding world as they are able to reflect over their actions and plans and therefore suspend or change them. The ability of imagination that allows us to feel for the others sets us also in a position of no alibis.

Johanna Moisander pointed out in her research about green consumerism the need for a new definition of human being because the «rational animal» divides the body and the mind, reducing the body to a mere container of the mind.

She writes «... marketing and consumer researchers have typically conceptualized people as fairly rational or at least cognitively guided, disembodied decision-makers, making choices among available alternatives» (2001: 43).

We could call these choices indifferent differences, an expression used by Rossi-Landi (1977) to describe a situation when it is not possible to make a choice between things that are really different, there is no real otherness, what remains is just an alternative of something that is basically the same.

Here I would like to emphasize the possibilities which a new definition of human being as semiotic animal could offer. John Deely, who was one of the first semioticians with Augusto Ponzio and Susan Petrilli to use the term «semiotic animal», considers it wrong to speak about semiotic animal «until it is realized “the keystone of the life of the mind is the sign” (Maritain 1957: 3), and the consequence of this realization begin to surge into consciousness... [a semiotic animal] is an animal that lives with the awareness of the action of signs as more fundamental to the constitution of human experience than are either objects or things» (J. Deely, S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio 2005: 213). Definition of *homo sapiens* as semiotic animal re-establishes the relationship between human being and its environment, restoring the place that humans have always had among the other living organisms as has noted as early as 1926 Mihhail Bachtin in his article «Contemporary Vitalism» (published under the name of Kanaev) and later also J. Hoffmeyer, who emphasized the importance to resolve the dualism that governed modern science, where the world is divided into cultural and natural spheres, and to seek for a boundary to establish a link between the two alienated sides of human existence and by doing so give back humanity its place in nature (1996).

Moisander concludes «An alternative approach would be to suggest that humans do not start thinking about knowledge from representations, but rather that representations come last in the account, assuming that all knowledge is essentially social» (2001: 45). Everything that is social is also based on signs as the human Umwelt is constructed of signs (and of ongoing semiosis).

When understanding that the «keystone of the life of the mind is sign» and that today's people are the products of the historico-social situation, then it would be possible to critically approach the green movements and green consumerism. Action without thinking can be (and usually is) harmful for the society and environment even though the motivation for the action could have been noble.

Ponzio and Petrilli write:

As a unique semiotic animal, therefore, the only animal capable of reflection upon signs and communication, the human being has a singular responsibility toward life (which of signs and communication is made), which also means the quality of life. More than limited responsibility, that is, responsibility with alibis, the type of responsibility involved is unlimited responsibility, responsibility without alibis, absolute responsibility. Our responsibilities toward life in the global communication-production phase of development in late capitalist society are enormous, indeed but all of life throughout the whole planetary ecosystem, from which of course human life cannot be separated. As the study of signs semiotics cannot evade this issue. (2004)

The human being understood as semiotic animal cannot escape from the responsibility which comes with the ability to feel for the others, to be able to imagine oneself in the shoes of

the other person. Our ability to fantasize, to think beforehand about the results of our actions, place us in the situation where we can not hide our heads under the sand and pretend not to understand what we are doing just because it suits us better like this.

Ponzio and Petrilli write:

A single type of market dominates over the whole planet, a single type of production and consumption system that leads to homologation not only in human behavior, habit, fashion [...] but also in the life of the imaginary. With respect to the overall social reproductive system as it dominates and englobes the entire planet today, we could make the claim that difference understood in terms of otherness is in the process of being replaced ever more with difference understood in terms of alternatives. (2004: 118)

The problem is in the capitalist system, which has created the environmental problems we face today. It seems naïve to hope the same system which has created the problem could solve it. Therefore the alternative offered by green design becomes just another alternative and is not making a real difference in the sense of otherness. For example no one is closing the old energy plants because there are new alternative energy plants existing and so all the alternative energy that we are able to create becomes just an addition to the already existing energy and we can use even more energy than before. In the end alternative energy offers nothing else than another indifferent difference — another alternative.

4. THE ELEVEN CATEGORIES OF IDEOLOGY

The words which are wholly or partially synonymous with the word «ideology» for Rossi-Landi are ‘false consciousness’ and ‘world-view’ or ‘theory’ and ‘derivation’ (2006: 21). He has divided ideology into 11 categories according to their established meanings:

- 1) Mythology and folklore (false thinking minimally developed and also in part false consciousness) —. This kind of ideology may be a result of natural phenomena or our social histories, but also other kind of sources and interpretations are possible. Here we are dealing with unconscious and spontaneous inventions that belong under false consciousness as they have some claim to the reality
- 2) Illusion and self-deception — for the purpose of self-justification, concealment or evasion. It means to entertain ideas and beliefs different from those that would be entertained as soon as the illusion vanishes and one succeeded in seeing things as they really were
- 3) Common sense — mixes myths with self-deception/illusion and generalizes their material. It has a negative valuation, being in binary opposition with scientific thought and is considered as a set of attitudes, ideas, and convictions, value judgments the «victim» has received and has not accepted voluntarily. It is more general than mythology and folklore.
- 4) Lies, falsification, obscurantism — an illusion that serves an interest, being at the same time half conscious or half unconscious web of self-deception, self-justifica-

tion and deception of everybody else. The operations performed begin to manifest themselves semi-articulated above the threshold of consciousness. They are organized with a view to social ends that can be precisely identified by an exercise of demystification. It is socially induced falsification of reality that has become automatic for the individual

- 5) Fraud or conscious deception — premeditated, planned fraud for the scope of obtaining some advantage in the expense of the others, their values and interests. Very important is the distinction between an individual and a social group. The ones who practice this type of ideology know that they are describing things as they are not.
- 6) False thinking in general — inadequacy of human thought in general and it is connected with the problem of truth.
- 7) Philosophy — maximum of seriousness, consciousness, and generality; a blend of false thinking and world-view (a mixture of 6. and 8.)
- 8) World-view (conscious and free from false thinking) — is something that acts as a practical guide for life, its principles are conceived consciously and clearly, it is expressed in a set of convictions, behavioural patterns, ideas and ideals.
- 9) Intuitive view of the world — is different from systematic world-view because it is not all-inclusive, even though they can overlap partly or coexist, characterizing the duality or multiplicity of our attitudes and orientation. Intuitive view of the world can liberally exclude or «leave out of account» large parts of reality. It is super-structural and even though it is problematic as it creates social conflicts that are hard to solve, it does influence our everyday life and offers diverse dimensions that allow us to find answers to our different needs.
- 10) Behaviour pattern — The behaviour pattern may be based on a system of values or, in extreme cases, on a single value assumed to be basic and the source of other values. Person's behaviour pattern can be at the same time connected with more than one ideology just as a person can have more than just one world-view.
- 11) Sentiment — false thinking minimally developed and also in part false consciousness like in the case of 1. Mythology and folklore. Sentiment is an inclination and not a clear idea. World-view is just a background for this kind of ideology and there is no need to express this sentiment or inclination linguistically. It is more some kind of vague idea or emotion that makes us to chose to act in certain way, in an intuitive manner. There is no trace of false thinking in the ideology in the form of sentiment and there is no claim for truth

5. THE IDEOLOGY BEHIND ECOLOGICAL DESIGN

5.1 Bright Green Environmentalism and Worldchanging

Ecological design seen from the viewpoint of ideology can of course belong to more than one category of ideology at the same time. It is not the objects themselves that belong to the ideology; it is the meaning that they are carrying and the associations and behaviour patterns they evoke. As the title itself says — the ideology is behind the ecological design. We can

probably find traces of ideology behind the general scope of these products (the reason why they are called ecological). Another important thing is that a person, who decides under what kind of ideology one or other social phenomena belongs, is also a product of social reproduction and therefore it is possible to trace the ideology which is behind of this person's actions and decisions. There can not be objectivity, as different worldviews make us see the reality and future in different ways.

The Bright Green Environmentalism is openly and clearly reinforcing today's economic system. They don't conceal it and therefore we can fit it with either the ideology in the form of falsification and obscurantism — an illusion that serves an interest, being at the same time half conscious or half unconscious web of self-deception, self-justification and deception of everybody else; or in the case if we agree with the idea that it is possible to save the future of our planet by green consumerism then we can consider BGE as a systematic worldview, the 8th type of ideology. If we put BGE under the systematic worldview then we can consider their book «Worldchanging: A Users Guide to 21st century» sincerely as a practical guide for life. Its principles seem to be clear; it is expressed in a set of convictions, behavioral patterns, ideas and ideals. The marketing literary style of the book can be forgiven as it could be regarded as a publicity to attract more people to join its cause. Their idea is to attract «the generation of everyday heroes, people who — whatever their walks of life — have the courage to think in fresh ways and to act to meet this planetary crisis head-on» (foreword by Al Gore).

In this case, if we put BGE under the fourth type of ideology — obscurantism, illusion that servers some kind of interest, that it is organized with a view to social ends. One of these kinds of social end could be the economic growth, making money with new technology considering the fact the natural resources are ending. After the Second World War economic growth was understood as constant increase in employment and income. The influence of religion, ethics and environment on the economics was considered unimportant. When «the Roman Club» published its report «The Limits to Growth» (1972), the old interpretation of economic growth started to change. In this report they pointed out, that if we don't change our lifestyle and continue to consume the natural resources like they were endless, then we are going to face economical and environmental crisis. Defining economic growth in the old way was going to lead us into the problematic future. Even if we define economic growth considering environment and ethics, we are still talking about growth and this was the thing which got us in the trouble first place. Therefore we can say the scope to find a new model still based on the economic growth, which «will let everyone on the planet get rich and stay rich, while healing the planets ecosystem» (2006: 19) as writes Alex Steffen seems an illusion. He adds: «Both chaos and corruption make our work more difficult — so much so that any new model of sustainable prosperity needs not only take them into account, but to actually work to mitigate them. If the answer to our ecological crises does not also lead to grater security for everyone and helps spread democracy, open government, and open business practices, it is in fact no answer at all. We need a future that is bright, green, free, and tough» (2006: 21). Here we can see neo-liberal ideology lurking behind noble scope of creating better future for everyone.

6. CONCLUSION

The combination of semioethics and the classification of ideologies of Rossi-Landi offer multiple possibilities for analysing different environmental movements. It seems that there is a lot of action going on in the field of ecological design and green consumerism but if this action is not based on understanding of the interconnectedness of human being and his/hers environment, the need to care for the other, then this action can remain in the best case just a waste of energy. When I participated in the Lund Summer university course about sustainability in June 2008, one of the professors asked everybody to list the biggest environmental problems we are facing today. I wrote that the biggest problem is that people don't think about their actions and are not having a dialogue with surrounding nature. But this was of course against the philosophy of the people of action — global warming was declared almost unanimously the biggest existing problem. Yet I still disagree with such proposal, as I believe the global warming is just a result and not the reason.

While trying to undo the damage that the modern civilization has done to our planet we should also investigate the reasons which have caused this problem in the first place and try to figure out how to change ourselves and our society to avoid a repetition of these mistakes. For the beginning it would be good to unmask the hidden ideologies that are behind the action or things which are considered to be sustainable but often are not.

REFERENCES

- Bachtin, Mikhail (1926): [Published under I. Kanaev's name] «Contemporary Vitalism». In: *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP
- Deely, John; Petrilli, Susan & Ponzio, Augusto (2005): *The Semiotic animal*. Toronto: Legas.
- Hoffmeyer, Jesper (1996): *Signs of Meaning in the Universe*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Meadows, D. H.; Meadows, D. L.; Randers, J. & Behrens, W. W. (1972): *Limits to growth: a report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind*. New York: Universe Books
- Moisander, Johanna (2001): *Representation of green consumerism: a constructionist critique*. Helsinki: HeSe print
- Petrilli, Susan & Ponzio, Augusto (2004): «The responsibility of power and the power of responsibility: From the 'semiotic' to the 'semioethic' animal». Published in: Withalmm, Gloria & Josef Wallmannsberger (Hg./Eds.), *Macht der Zeichen, eichen der Macht. / Signs of Power, Power of Signs*. Essays in Honor of Jeff Bernard. Wien: INST
- Rossi-Landi, Ferruccio (1977): *Linguistics and Economics*. Hague: Mouton
- (1990): *Marxism and ideology*. Tr. Roger Griffin. Oxford: Clarendon Press
- (2006): *Metodica filosofica e scienza dei segni*. Milano: Bompiani
- Steffen, Alex ed. (2006): *Worldchanging: a users guide for the 21st century*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc
- Uexküll, Jakob von (1992): «A stroll through the worlds of animals and men: A picture book of invisible worlds». In *Semiotica* 89 (4), pp 319-391.