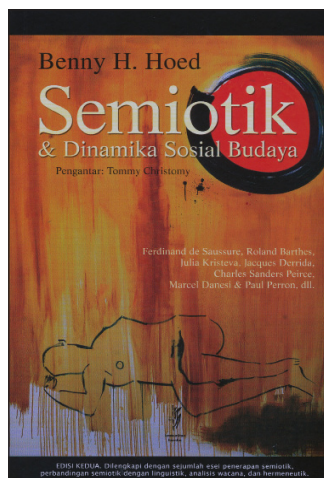


Benny H. Hoed, *Semiotik dan dinamika sosial budaya*. Second Edition. Depok: Komunitas Bambu, 2011, xxvi + 317 pp. [First Edition 2007, Depok: Fakultas Ilmu Pengetahuan Budaya Universitas Indonesia.] ISBN 979-3731-87-7. Price: IDR 70,000 (soft cover).



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A person perceives his environment as a series of signs and acts accordingly. We live in a world of signs made up of natural elements or of our own making. The meanings of our lives are also bound by conventional rules on values enveloped by signs, which circulate, evolve, and are being manipulated and processed. Signs so to say have a life of their own because of people's endless reinterpretations. Yet whatever happens in the

world of signs, their meanings have structure, whether framed by the dualistic relations between signifier and signified (de Saussure) or the triadic relations between representamen, object, and interpretant (Peirce). Thus, for semioticians the meaning of signs can never be settled and each personal or societal interpretation is just a short repose in a certain place at a particular time, only to be abandoned to move on.

Semiotics is the complex discipline of the study of signs. Yet the author is able to discuss his subject clearly and in simple wordings. The book is thus a gift for those engaged in cultural studies and related fields where so many vague terms (signs) circulate. This work may provide readers with a more critical and balanced attitude towards news, political slogans, spectacles, and virtual space.

Having studied at the Sorbonne University in Paris, France, where the discourse on semiology at the time was at its peak, Professor Hoed has succeeded to digest this difficult discipline and to present it to his readers clearly and simply by using familiar cases out of every-day life. The book thus serves as a guide to interpret media messages by tracing the hidden meanings of signs in politics, news, and advertisements.

The author writes masterfully and in detail about such French thinkers as Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes and he included their succinct biographies in his book so that readers may comprehend their biases. Yet it might have been more complete when he also had provided some detailed background of two other thinkers in the field, Charles Sanders Peirce and Umberto Eco whose thoughts he discusses in Chapter 9 on eroticism. Peirce and Eco indeed significantly contributed to semiotics and Peirce even wrote on semiotics and its relation to formal logic in 1860 when de Saussure was still a boy.

This second edition has two parts. Part One contains five chapters and is about the theoretical development of semiotics and they can be read sequentially or independently. Part Two consists of fourteen chapters about the application of semiotics.

In the first Chapter, the author clarifies his position by using Marcel Danesi and Paul Perron's work and by explaining various other currents in semiotics including Peirce's work. In this Chapter, the author also introduces Jacques Derrida's difficult concepts as related to semiotics in a clear way.

Chapter 2 explains the concepts of structure, system, and structuralism intelligibly in order to make it easy to follow for beginners in semiotics. Here the ideas of European thinkers dominate. It is fair to say that it is difficult to find structure in Peirce's work as he oriented his thoughts more to the fields of logic and categories. Yet, implicitly, Peirce's semiotics has a structure of its own.

Chapter 3 is important for those who want to learn more about structuralism and post-structuralism. It successfully raises and clarifies Derrida's objection to the preoccupation of the oral-language-based philosophical arguments of his predecessors. The author introduces the development of meaning by taking account of Barthes' views on denotation and connotation and the feminist views of Julia Kristeva. He proceeds to discuss Derrida and Barthes' concepts in Chapter 6 to open our views about myths, which often have been applied but seldom have been questioned. He also introduces in Chapter 3 the concept of unconscious language as proposed by Lacan.

Chapter 4 extends the scope of semiotics to the analysis of literature and language. It analyses Peirce's method, followed by Umberto Eco's thoughts after discussing the relations between semiotics and hermeneutics, which deal with textual interpretation and were born much earlier than semiotics. It would have been even more complete if the author had devoted more space to introduce Eco, as his method is used without being accompanied by sufficient information.

Employing semiotics to analyse space in Chapter 5 is appreciable. Not discussed as comprehensively as the other theories in earlier chapters, it should perhaps be considered a work in progress. Space and place are defined as (by, not as, Building defines space and place) buildings and thus the approach is closer to architecture. Here Eco's work, which is lacking, would have been particularly relevant. Eco wrote a seminal paper: "Function and Sign: The semiotic of architecture" (in *Signs, symbols, and architecture*, edited by G. Broadbent, R. Bunt, and C. Jencks published by John Wiley & Sons in 1981), which links architecture to communication. Eco differentiates architectural denotation from architectural connotation, and thus he appears closer to Peirce and Barthes than to de Saussure. Peirce, for whom everything in this world is a sign, liberated written language as the object of semiotic analysis. Works of architecture are materially loaded and perceived through our visual sense as collections of signs, the objects of semiotics. What further may be analysed is virtual space as a specific category of space, which has not been discussed.

The second part of the book guides the readers in how semiotics is applied to analyse social and cultural phenomena. The author analyses various signs in chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 15, and 19. Chapter 6 and 7 are about the deconstruction of myths. Chapter 7 claims that the myth of globalization as popularly understood needs a critical response. These two chapters should be read carefully by policy makers as their policies on national character building are severely criticized by the media.

Chapter 8 analyses fashion and Chapter 9 discusses Eco and Barthes' concepts on text. Referring to Eco, Chapter 12 demonstrates textual analysis and how the meanings of a sign can endlessly change. Here Professor Hoed provides the background how to interpret texts. In Chapter 15, Barthes, Peirce, and Eco's concepts are employed to analyse advertisements. It awakens us about how, in our modern society that has gradually abandoned ethics, messages of advertisements have turned into totems.

Decision makers of national development policies should read Chapter 13. Cultural transformation in rural areas plays a key role in economic and human resources development. Development targets easily can be changed if only an external [etic] approach is applied. The author raises the issue on the important role of the *camat* (sub district head) in the development of rural areas in Indonesia and that they need to employ the internal [emic] approach as discussed by academic society. Policy-makers often observe the objects of their decisions from their academic backgrounds and seldom treat the objects of their policies as subjects who need to be understood from within their own societies. The question that arises here concerns rapid social and cultural disruption and urban lifestyle, which increasingly takes over rural ways of life and how long the regional and territorial based management can be sustained? Perhaps it is time we critically need to come up with effective strategies to cope with the increasingly ineffective management of the social and cultural change from rural to urban.

The problem of national identity discussed in Chapter 16 is relevant to the fields of medicine and architecture. The younger generation of professionals is questioning the national identity of professions. The discourse may never end as it is mirrored by signs whose meanings continue to develop and by culture that always interacts with this discourse in order to produce new meanings.

The problem of professional competency and certification in Chapter 17 is not only relevant to the field of medicine. Countries that earlier set standards continue to dominate the field and put pressure on developing countries under the label of competency's "universal values". Indonesia is in a weak position to counter such pressure. Here Professor Hoed touches upon the essence of universal values and points to the misuses of this label.

It is relevant to raise the issue of ethics, which gradually are being ignored in Indonesia. Chapters 14 and 15 leave vital messages to the entire range of national public policy makers for acting and taking ethical decisions prior to looking at cost-and-benefit considerations. Rather, the essence of human life is elevated to a level of fairness to provide guidance about what is good and

what is bad for what ought or ought not to be done. Economic policies will achieve their targets only after an ethical foundation has been drawn that has positive impacts for, and the full support of the entire society.

Chapter 18 discusses the upheavals of the recent political situation. It utilizes Fernand Braudel's idea of mentality as the difficult to change core of culture, and Anthony Giddens's concept of structurism as analytical approach. Here it becomes clear that Indonesia's democracy will require a long journey because the nation's mentality has not yet changed.

The final and closing chapter is quite moving and is not only good for international but also for interethnic and interregional relations. The author demonstrates the effectiveness of semiotics in analysing the role of soft power in international relations. These relations are observed through syntagmatic and paradigmatic lenses. The result offers a way out for nations under pressure through the empowerment of culture's soft power.

This work's contribution is that it covers a wide range and is highly interesting, especially because of the strength of its analysis of social and cultural dynamics.

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