

Contributions of Socio-semiotics and Linguistics of Enunciation to  
Communication Research

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*Las contribuciones de la sociosemiótica y la teoría de la enunciación a la  
investigación en comunicación*

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**Abstract:**

The objective of this work is to show the contributions of socio-semiotics and linguistics of enunciation discourse analysis to communication research. The articulation of operative categories from both perspectives allows, on the one hand, to analyze the thematic, rhetorical and enunciative orders and, on the other, to specify the two possible positions to study the media discourse. The applicability of this methodology is shown from the analysis of an example.

**Keywords:**

Sociosemiotic; Linguistic of enunciation; Communication; Linguistic markers; Context

**Resumen:**

*El objetivo del presente trabajo es mostrar las contribuciones de la sociosemiótica y la teoría de la enunciación a la investigación en comunicación. La articulación de categorías operativas provenientes de ambas perspectivas permite, por un lado, analizar los órdenes temático, retórico y enunciativo y, por el otro, precisar las dos posiciones posibles para estudiar el discurso mediático. Se muestra la aplicabilidad de esta metodología a partir del análisis de un ejemplo.*

**Palabras clave:**

*Sociosemiótica; Teoría de la enunciación; Comunicación; Marcas discursivas; Contexto.*

## **1. Introduction**

The aim of this article is to highlight the operative categories and the type of analysis made possible by socio-semiotics and enunciation theory for communicational studies.

To begin with, despite their differences, not only are both perspectives a reflection on meaning, but also a qualitative methodology of analysis, which allows us to describe media discourses in their semiotic specificity (among many others, Barthes, 1980; Eco, 1983; Steimberg, 1993; Verón, 1993).

In this article, the media is conceived as a producer and a disseminator of discourses about reality. In this sense:

They are often the location of developments in culture, both in the sense of art and symbolic forms, but also in manners, fashions, styles of life and norms. They have become a dominant source of definitions and images of social reality for individuals, but also collectively for groups and societies; they express values and normative judgements. (McQuail, 1987, p. 3)

According to Steimberg (1993) the three orders of production of meaning are thematic, rhetorical and enunciative. Discursive genres arise from the questions why (thematic level) and how (rhetorical level), and from the effect of meaning (enunciative level). Such genres are relatively stable sentences associated with spheres of language use (Bakhtin, 1982).

When it comes to the thematic level or order it is necessary to differentiate the theme from the thematic motives. While the first one designates the semantic category that runs through the entire text, the second ones are the minimum or minor units that, when articulated, configure the subject (Segre, 1985).

The rhetorical level or order refers to how something can be said or shown (Zecchetto, 2002). It comprises the mechanisms of configuration of meaning that give certain kinds of discourses some characteristics and not others. This includes the forms and styles of expression that are manifested through rhetorical operations, order and parts of the text, composition of place, time and story. The level or enunciative order is analyzed after the other two. In this order, the meaning effect of a text and the enunciative modality are considered, and the enunciator (who says something) and the addressee (to whom) are also included.

The analysis of these orders allows a comprehensive analysis of the genres as well as the understanding of the variations and regularities of their characteristics. To analyze the thematic, rhetorical and enunciative levels, the enunciation theory is retaken (Benveniste, 1999). Emile Benveniste was a French linguist who, like others of his generation, is heir to Saussure's binary model (1945). Yet he was interested in language as a discourse and not as a system of signs.

From his perspective, communication exceeds the transmission of information between an enunciator and a recipient since it also provides data on the interlocutors and the situation they find themselves in. This is why one of the ways to analyze the various products of communication is by differentiating two levels of functioning: the enunciation and the statement. In a first approximation we can say that the statement is the product of the enunciation process. As a realization, enunciation can be defined as an act of individual appropriation of the system, which is language. The speaker appropriates the formal apparatus of the language and enunciates their position as a speaker, both by means of specific (deictic) indices and by means of accessory procedures.

Every locution (broadcast) implicitly or explicitly postulates an audience (receiver). On the other hand, the speaker, through enunciation and speech, refers to the world. Consequently, the reference is an integral part of the enunciation. In each instance of discourse there is a center of internal reference. This happens mainly through deictics, whose function is to constantly put the enunciator in contact with his enunciation. In this sense, Benveniste (1999) proposes a methodological theoretical approach capable of reconstructing the meanings that originated in each enunciation, starting from the statement. To do this, certain mechanisms of the language, such as deictics, subjectivities and enunciative modalities, are analyzed.

The deictics give an account of the enunciation situation, and the main ones to consider in a text are those of person, time and place. They allow the enunciator and the recipient to be identified, as well as generating additional meanings to mere referentiality. What is more, “to refer to contextual coordinates, spatial and temporal deictics are used” (Domínguez, Elizalde & Ferratto, 2021, p. 197).

Subjectivemes are adjectives, adverbs and nouns used to name and account for the assessment of the objects of the world made by the enunciator. Recognizing what is the lexical choice of the enunciator allows the analyst to notice from which place they are speaking and what evaluations they are making.

Regarding the modality in enunciation, Parret (1983) points out that it is ego-fugal. This means that it is oriented from an enunciative community or community subjectivity. In the field of discourse analysis, the modality is related to the enunciative strategies that cause effects of meaning.

At this point, it is pertinent to differentiate between the modality of enunciation, the modality of the statement and the modality of the message. The modality of enunciation refers to the relationship that, in the text, the subject of the enunciation establishes with the enunciator. There are three types of modalities: assertion (statement), interrogation, and intimation. The modality of statement is linked to the way in which the content is presented in relation to the truth or falsehood, or according to appreciative judgments. Modalizers, such as adverbs or modal verbs, restrict or strengthen the scope of the assertion.

The modality of the message refers to the statement focused from the point of view of its organization as a message, and this comprises the distribution of information, the connectors and the orientation of the reading, etc.

This work picks up a methodology oriented towards the analysis on the ways in which the social practices of production and reception of meanings in a given context affect the construction of the discourses that circulate socially.

Verón (1993) makes a fundamental theoretical distinction on the research of social discourses, which is about production and recognition. This differentiation specifies the two possible positions of discourse analysis. The author affirms that the relationship between discourses and their production and recognition conditions must be represented in a systematic way. For this reason, the analyst must consider generation rules and reading rules that they will call, respectively, production grammars and recognition grammars.

The rules that make up these grammars describe operations to assign meaning in the significant matters (...). These operations are reconstructed (or postulated) from marks present in the significant matter. In other words, these are always underlying operations, reconstructed from marks inscribed on the material surface (Verón, 1993, p. 128).

An important consequence of this distinction is that a discursive set cannot be analyzed in itself and expresses theoretically - always according to the author - the non-linearity of the discursive circulation, since the analysis of the properties of a discourse, explainable by the rules of its production, does not allow the deduction of its effects of meaning in recognition.

Verón's perspective is indebted to the ternary thought of signification and proposes a separation / rearticulation between the discourse theory and linguistics, and a conceptual reformulation of problems that the latter, according to him, had rejected in its history and that semiology had ignored. "I have already pointed out two that seem more important to me: the materiality of meaning and the construction of what is real in the network of semiosis" (Verón, 1993, p. 123).

The notion of discourse in this theory is related to what is important for Verón to describe and explain: social semiosis, understood as the significant dimension of social phenomena, in other words, is related to giving an account of the way in which meaning is produced, circulated and socially recognized. As semiosis is an infinite process, whoever investigates it cuts out a fragment of that network, which the author calls discourse, and it is a product in which marks that remain serve to reconstruct the process of production and / or recognition of meaning.

The products or textual packages that Verón refers to are the already mentioned speeches. The meaning is materialized, takes shape in them and it is where, in addition, it manifests its determinations and social phenomena reveal its significant dimension. For this reason, this approach is known as socio-semiotic.

The writing is organized as follows. Firstly, an informative unit is examined to show the type of analysis that the proposed methodology makes possible. Secondly, recent studies that take up semiotics and discourse analysis were surveyed to exemplify their contributions to the communication field. Finally, in the conclusions, the potential of the articulation of operative categories from the perspectives is synthesized to study media narratives in a particular way.

## 2. Methodology

In the next point, an opinion article published on the website of the newspaper *La Nación* will be analyzed. To proceed with its study, the methodology explained in the previous points will be applied.

According to Verón (1993), the analysis should be focused from the point of view of its production conditions. These will be analyzed considering the categories of the enunciation theory: the thematic, rhetorical and enunciative levels or orders.

The selection of the example is based on the following criteria. Firstly, the opinion piece is a textual type that facilitates the analysis of the marks that the enunciation process leaves on the enunciation since the writer expresses a point of view on a matter. The enveloping textual sequence is the argumentative one, therefore, it is a genre in which a series of discursive strategies are displayed to defend the perspective raised while seeking to move and convince the interlocutor. Secondly, it deals with a current issue on a global scale and conveys a controversial point of view. Thirdly, it is a limited example that shows the application and scope of the proposed methodology for the concrete study of the media discourse within the limits of this writing.

### 2.1 Analysis of an opinion piece

#### 2.1.1 Production conditions

In March 2020, 90% of the news was about coronavirus, and in the third week of March the highest peak took place. This tendency went on until the second week of April. Then it began to decline, reaching 76% in May 2020. In the second week of June, the month in which infections increased, only 39.4% of the information was about COVID-19 (Zunino, 2021). The proximity to the official announcements on how the preventive and compulsory social isolation (PCSI) would continue, increased the relevance of the issue in the agendas of the main digital media in the country. Considering what has been said, it is clear that the greater or lesser presence of information units on COVID-19 was not linked to the contagion curve (Zunino, 2021).

Although this predominance of the topic on the news agenda displaced police news related to insecurity, there was an increase in information units on crime towards July 2020. Among the reasons for this increase, two aspects should be mentioned. On the one hand, the probable fatigue coming from readers fed up of COVID-19; on the other, news published on July 17, 2020 about a retiree who murdered a 26-year-old man after he broke into his house to rob him. This information was included in the informative

series on insecurity and updated the debate on the negligence of the State and taking the law into one's own hands.<sup>1</sup>

The opinion piece that will be analyzed next is titled *Insecurity, the most perverse face of the other epidemic*. It is signed by Félix Lonigro, professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Buenos Aires, and was published on the website of *La Nación* on July 27, 2020.

*La Nación* is one of the main newspapers in the country. Its level of influence can be seen in the fact that not only does the newspaper produce news, but it is also considered a reliable source of information, as its news are reproduced by the rest of the media. At the same time, since its foundation in 1870, it has become a relevant actor in the social and political debate in the country.

Throughout its history, according to Sidicaro (1993), the newspaper kept certain guidelines: its coincidence with the points of view of the economically and socially predominant sectors, the interpellation of governments and other interlocutors with decision-making power; and its attachment to the liberal-conservative tradition in Argentina and positive assessment of the democratic institutions, which is a contradictory postulate as it accepted military interruptions that limited the power of the sectors that the newspaper itself, according to the context back then, did not consider democratic.

This article was published four months after the establishment of the preventive and compulsory social isolation (PCSI) in Argentina, at the same time the national government was about to announce a phased opening in areas with lower population density.

### 2.1.1 Thematic level

Since March 2020, COVID-19 had occupied the centrality of the social, political and mediatic agenda in Argentina and had taken the spotlight away from insecurity - crimes against people and / or private property -, the dominant criminal model on the local police agenda since the 1990s.

During the month of July, before the Argentine president announced a phased quarantine opening, crimes once again gained importance on the news agenda after the case of the retiree, which took place in Quilmes, a town in Buenos Aires.

In the opinion piece analyzed here, the topic is insecurity. The main thematic reasons identified in the article are the negligence of the State, the tiredness of the population coming from the fear of suffering a robbery, and the action of taking the law into one's own hands.

1. Self-justice is a notion that alludes to: "one or several violent behaviors outside the law, exercised by one or more persons, with the purpose of executing the alleged perpetrator or perpetrators of a crime, thereby propending the compensation for the damage perpetrated against the legal assets protected in the head of the victims, relatives or acquaintances". (González Caro, Gutiérrez Simbaqueva & Reyes Pinilla, 2018, p. 25).

It is important to explain that “crime” is a historical category and that is why it is likely to change (Ludmer, 1999). This means that each situation has its own crime patterns and predominant crime styles. Since the 90s, the problem of crime and violence in relation to security has become one of the main issues in the public, political and media agenda. The problem of security emerged as a central political issue that questioned the ability of the State to accomplish some of its functions: conflict resolution, promotion of citizen coexistence, crime prevention and reduction of violence. Insecurity refers to crimes committed against private property and / or people.

In the next point, rhetorical order will be referenced, that is, the way in which this theme is said and shown.

### 2.1.2 Rhetorical level

The analyzed article was published in the Opinion section. The aim of this type of journalistic notes is to express the point of view or interpretation of the person who writes it, generally an authorized voice (in this case, an expert in Constitutional Law), on a certain circumstance. It is presented as an argumentative discourse since not only does it include opinions, but also reasoning and usually offers more or less reflective analyzes about a specific event.

As Kerbrat Orecchioni (1987) proposes, if objectivity and subjectivity are thought as two poles, the subject of the enunciation faces two discursive options: on the one hand, they could try to erase their traces in the statement to achieve an effect of objectivity or explicitly or implicitly assume their opinion.

In the analyzed case, from the title, whoever states it is implicitly recognized as an evaluative source of the information: Insecurity, the most perverse face of the other epidemic. To start with, with the adjective “perverse”, insecurity is described as something extremely bad, that intentionally damages and corrupts an established situation. Likewise, the comparative adverb “more” indicates that the degree of the property expressed from the subjectiveme “perversion” is superlative.

Also, the title shows the use of a medical lexicon (epidemic) to the detriment of warfare lexicon (combat, war against, etc.), which is what is usually used to refer to crime. The noun epidemic, in this case, has a double function: as a subjectiveme that names and qualifies, and as a metaphor justified by a similarity of aspects or partial semantic coincidences. In both senses, the word epidemic is used to emphasize the growth and expansion of insecurity as a harmful disease for society.

This is continued in the body of the article and, also appealing to the medical metaphor and in a melodramatic tone, the cause of this disease is raised: the “chorrovirus”<sup>2</sup>, a more aggressive virus than SARS-CoV-2. The following quote illustrates the above:

Authorities do not put the same weight on “taking care” of this other epidemic where the aggressors are the “chorrovirus” who, unlike corona – a virus that does not attack us unless we look for it -, get in our privacy, in our home. They

2. This expression cannot be translated into English. It is used to compare robbers with SARS-CoV-2 in Spanish. The term will be kept in its original language throughout the article.

get hold of what we worked hard to get, they rape us, they subject us, they punish us, and eventually they take our own lives, or your children's, or partners', or parents', or friends' (*La Nación*, 07/27/2020, para. 2)

On the other hand, the antithesis is an expressive form used to point out the opposition between the taxpayers' obligation in tax matters and what the State does afterwards with that taking in terms of security:

**Criminals make a true national epidemic, from which the authorities do not protect us<sup>3</sup>**. On the contrary, they charge us taxes to organize a weak security system. (*La Nación*, 07/27/2020, para. 3)

This assertion about negligence on the part of the State is reinforced using the adjective "populist" to describe the current government:

... And if it is also about populist governments, they favor the reduction of penalties, promote the existence of unarmed police forces and justify the offenders on the grounds of ignorance, poverty and lack of education. (*La Nación*, 07/27/2020, para. 3)

This section concludes by confirming the configuration of a discourse that shows a strong subjective load from the use of nouns and adjectives to name, evaluate and qualify. Likewise, medical metaphors and antithesis are used to characterize insecurity as well as to show the contrast between the demands of the State towards the population and the response provided on the problem. In the next point, the focus will be placed on the effects of meaning and some of the appreciations made will be deepened.

### 2.1.3 Enunciative level

The enunciative level is linked to the modalities and the underlying meanings in the discourses analyzed. To analyze this level, the modalities of enunciation or the way in which the enunciator approaches his addressees, the modality of enunciation or degree of certainty the information is presented with and the purpose of the rhetorical figures used (whether they are persuasive, ornamental, or cognitive) must be addressed. Having said all this, it can be argued that an assertive enunciation modality and a statement modality that presents the information with a high degree of certainty prevail in the analyzed article.

The following example partially shows the above:

Coronavirus caused several deaths and millions of freedoms. It exploded in the world and became a pandemic in which governments implemented quarantines and decreased all kinds of individual rights and freedoms. The Argentine government was no exception, and they did so with the stated purpose of "taking care of us". (*La Nación*, 07/27/2020, para. 1)

3. The bold highlighting is in the original text.



Both the articulation of the appeal as a form of enunciation alongside the use of the medical metaphor and the antithesis are used to demand measures from the authorities and justify the action of taking the law into one's own hands given the defenseless situation in which society finds itself, right before a serious problem of insecurity:

We elect authorities for them to take the lead of the destiny of our Nation; doing so implies pursuing the wellbeing of the community and adopting all necessary measures to protect its members, isolating criminals from within. (...) If what is right does not happen; that is, if the rulers do not protect us from chorrovirus, the inevitable will happen: we will have to defend ourselves whatever it takes" (*La Nación*, 07/27/2020, para. 8).

Likewise, the use of the inclusive we –the enunciative self plus an implicit you– is oriented towards arguing and questioning since, with this discursive resource, the enunciator involves the reader in his statement: we all think the same about insecurity, the role played by the State, populist governments and what we should do.

The enunciative modalities in combination with the medical metaphor, the antithesis and the explicit evaluations through subjectivemes fulfill fundamentally persuasive purposes aimed at moving and convincing. These are also cognitive as they allow conceptualizing and reconceptualizing, from a different perspective, the world while making use of existing terms.

From the succinct analysis carried out, it appears that the discursive strategies portrayed in the opinion piece become favorable to configure a discourse that is linked to the request for greater social control and surveillance (Foucault, 2014).

### **3. The contributions of socio-semiotics and enunciation theory to communication studies**

The institution of the bases for semiotics applied to mass communication is not recent. For example, in *Elements of Semiology* (1968) Barthes proposes that:

In his *Course in General Linguistics*, first published in 1916, Saussure postulated the existence of a general science of signs, or Semiology, of which linguistics would form only one part. Semiology therefore aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not *languages*, at least systems of signification. There is no doubt that the development of mass communications confers particular relevance today upon the vast field of signifying media, just when the success of disciplines such as linguistics, information theory, formal logic and structural anthropology provide semantic analysis with new instruments. There is at present a kind of demand for semiology, stemming not from the fads of a few scholars, but from the very history of the modern world. (p.9)

Around 1970, second generation semiology<sup>4</sup> founds its translinguistic vocation and establishes the possibility of articulating the structural analysis of journalistic discourse with the study of the social conditions of production and recognition of events (Atorresi, 1996).

In order to show the newest contributions of these methodologies within the communication field, ten articles published in academic journals between 2020 and 2021 were compiled. The criteria used to select them were based on the academic quality of the writings and the fact that they have circulated recently. Likewise, the research was carried out in publications from the Latin American and Spanish academic fields.

Each of them deals with a diversity of topics as numerous as they are complex, which go beyond linguistics and the field of language sciences. Consequently, the methods used articulate semiotics and discourse analysis with such disciplines as anthropology, sociology, data science, and others.

Among the articles gathered, three of them address issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the connection between images and the truth during the post-truth era (Serrano, Soler-Campillo & Marzal-Felici, 2021), the mediatization of politics in Argentina during the health crisis based on comparing Alberto Fernández' and Mauricio Macri's social media accounts (Slimovich, 2021), the discursive construction of collective identities in pandemic (Moreno-Barreche, 2020), the imaginaries and representations of the body during the pandemic in Colombia (Finol, 2020)

Other pieces of research are devoted to case studies related to the imaginaries and representations spread in journalism and audiovisual fictions. For example, Garin & Fernández (2021) carry out a visual analysis to decipher the codes of visual representation of the economic sphere in Spain through the qualitative study of the cover photos published in *El País*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia* from 2011 to 2013; La Calle (2021) deals with the reconstruction of historical memory in Spanish television fiction; Bermúdez Antúnez (2020) studies violence in the media, for which he analyzes a short story by Susan Casper and a story of an event that occurred in the city of Caracas. With a gender perspective, Soglia (2020) investigates photography and cyberfeminism; Fouce Rodríguez (2020) analyzes, rescuing what the Greeks called *metis* and the concepts of index and abduction by Charles Sanders Peirce, journalistic practices “as a form of knowledge linked to the deciphering of clues” (p. 77).

Finally, Gindin, Cingolani & Rodríguez-Amat (2021), following the Veronian perspective, reflect on dataification. What they propose is to deconstruct the idea that data are neutral or compact, to account for the conditions from which these data are provided with meaning.

4. The theoretical journeys developed within the field of semiology are classified, for didactic purposes, in historical stages. First-generation semiology took place in the 50s and 60s and takes the Saussurean perspective as a starting point, while second-generation semiology happened in the 70s when semiological studies underwent a change and the concept of speech first made its appearance.

Table 1 summarizes the information described above using the following data: author and / or authors, magazine, volume and number, year of publication, topic, and methodology.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1**

*Articles collected*

<b>Author/ Authors</b>	<b>Magazine</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Methodology</b>
Rodríguez-Serrano, A. ; Soler-Campillo, M. & Marzal-Felici, J.	<i>Revista Latina de Comunicación Social</i> , (79)	2021	Relationship between images and the truth	Critical discourse analysis
Slimovich, A.	<i>Revista Dixit</i> , (34)	2021	Political mediatization during the COVID-19 pandemic	Socio-semiotics, theories about social networks and platforms, and theories of the mediatization of what is political
Garin, M. & Fernández, AA	<i>Communication &amp; Society</i> , 34 (2)	2021	Photojournalism and social imaginaries	Social semiotics and visual communication
Soglia, A.	<i>Question</i> , 3 (69)	2021	Photography and cyberfeminism	Semiotics
The Street, Ch.	<i>Revista Signa</i> , 30	2021	Reconstruction of historical memory in fictional Spanish television	Discourse analysis
Gindin, I. L; Cingolani, G. & Rodríguez-Amat, JR	<i>Palabra Clave</i> , 24 (3)	2021	Dataification processes	Socio-semiotics and dataification
Bermúdez Antúnez, S.	<i>Quórum Académico</i> , 17 (1)	2020	Violence in traditional media	Semiotics of violence
Finol, J.E	<i>Espacio Abierto</i> , 29 (4)	2020	Imaginaries and representations of bodies during the pandemic	Anthropo-semiotic
Moreno-Barreche, S.	CS, (33)	2020	Discursive construction processes of collective identities during the pandemic	Socio-semiotics
Fouce Rodríguez, H.	<i>CIC Cuadernos de Información y Comunicación</i> , 25	2020	Journalistic practices	Semiotics

5. The complete references of each article can be found at the end of this work, in the point dedicated to that purpose.

#### 4. Conclusions

This article gathered the contributions made by semiotics and the enunciation theory to the communication field by enabling positions and levels of analysis aimed at understanding the way in which the senses are produced, circulated and socially recognized.

To continue with the application of the methodologies presented, a limited example was taken: an opinion piece. Although it is true that it is an informative genre in which the point of view of the writer is more explicit than in others, both perspectives can be used to analyze informative articles in which an attempt is made to construct an objective and impersonal enunciator, since the lexical choices and accessory procedures carried out by the enunciating subject make it possible to reconstruct their own position in the discourse.

Likewise, ten academic articles, published between 2020 and 2021, were gathered with the aim of exemplifying the contributions of these methodologies to the study of various media phenomena (Verón, 2015).

The methodological proposal in this work deals with operative categories of socio-semiotics and the theory of enunciation. The articulation of both allows us to establish two analysis positions –production and recognition– and settle three orders or levels of production of meaning –thematic, rhetorical and enunciative. Therefore, immanentist studies are avoided, as they forget that discourses are always related to something that is outside of them; or purely external analyzes, inseparable from a mechanical conception of discourses and their context.

More than originality, the main value of the proposal lies in its intrinsic relevance. For communication research, socio-semiotics, the enunciation theory, and the positions and levels of analysis that they favor are not new. However, they continue to be useful for the study of media phenomena in their specificity and, more specifically, the discourses of the mass media, which arouse so much interest in the field of communication and social sciences, given the role they play as privileged production and discursive circulation agents. With their actions, obviously conditioned by their ideological position and their business interests, they contribute to the conformation and modification of the frames of reference - historically and socially constructed - through which societies think of themselves, elaborate their past experiences and establish for themselves horizons of possible futures.

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