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Nothingness

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editors

With a foreword by Jaan Valsiner

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Contents

6

The Gift of a Rock: A Case Study in the Emergence and Dissolution of Meaning

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Abstract: How does meaning arise? How can something without meaning become intensely meaningful? We advance a social theory of meaning, exploring how things come to have symbolic significance for humans. Drawing upon the work of Peirce and Mead we argue for a triadic and temporal conception of meaning, in which meaning originates with the response of others, and develops through the introduction of new significant others in associated contexts. In order to illustrate this theoretical approach we examine a case of the emergence and dissolution of the meaning of some Chilean rocks. The Chilean President, Sebastian Piñera, toured Europe in late 2010 bringing gifts of rocks to European political leaders and monarchs. These rocks were taken from the mine where thirty-three miners were trapped for over two months. Before the accident and rescue these rocks were worthless rubble. After the event, they became gifts suitable for world leaders. Our analysis examines how this hitherto unimagined potential meaning of otherwise worthless rocks came into being, and then dissipated back into nothingness.

Keywords: Meaning, Nothing, Case study, Peirce, Mead, Chilean miners

In the natural sciences it is well established that everything has a cause, that everything comes from something. As Lucretius (1995) wrote in the first Century BC: "nothing from nothing ever yet was born." We see this in the law of the conservation of energy, from mechanical to quantum physics. Energy

cannot come from nothing, it is only transformed, and it never fully disappears. However, in the human sciences it is more complex for two reasons.

First, human meaning does not follow any equivalent of the conservation of energy: something seemingly trivial, can become hugely important. Objects, initially "meaningless" can obtain meaning in the course of human activity, passing through social settings and historical events. When objects have a social trajectory, their meaning grows through history, having both moments of emergence and dissolution.

Second, in the human sciences, nothing itself can also be something. Shakespeare's play *King Lear* begins with the elderly King dividing his land between his daughters according to "who doth love me the most". Cordelia, his most devote daughter, refuses to play the game, and says nothing. The King responds: "nothing will come of nothing." She remains silent, and thus the tragedy unfolds. "Nothing" in response to the King's question is most definitely "something." But what is this "something?" Out of Cordelia's "nothing" comes the entire plot of *King Lear*. We see the same importance of nothingness in Sherlock Holmes' observation of the dog that did not bark and John Cage's 4:33, a "performance" of silence (which foregrounds unintentional noises from the audience). Nothingness, is, in human terms, impossible: it is always only conceived against a background of potentiality, of what could have been.

Our aim in this chapter is to explore how meaning is made, how meaningfulness can grow out of meaninglessness. Our theoretical approach is based on sociocultural psychology, and our empirical approach is a case study of meaning arising. Specifically, we will analyze how rocks from the depth of the earth, without mineral value, can become gifts fit for a Queen. The case study concerns the Chilean mining accident of 2010, and how, following the miners' remarkable rescue, rocks from the depth of the mine became meaningful to the international community. To this end, we begin with a theoretical discussion about the emergence of meaning, focusing on the work of Charles Saunders Peirce which we complement with the work of George Herbert Mead; we thus propose a model which we use to conceptualize the case study.

Sign and Signified: Dyadic Conceptions of Meaning

It is commonly assumed that signs "stand for" specific signified meanings. This basic idea is found in the work of structuralists such as Saussure and analytic philosophers such as Frege. We will introduce each of these traditions, arguing that this common understanding of signs is inadequate.

According to Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1972) a linguistic sign is a link between a concept and a sound pattern. The sound pattern is the material element (signal) while the concept is the more abstract element (signification or content). The signification, or mental content, is a mental trace of an experience of the signified object. The signal and the signification are connected at a psychological level by an associative link, and this link is so established

that "each triggers the other" (Saussure 1916/1972, 66). Simply put, the sound of the word and the meaning of the word become fused. Within this scheme, understanding linguistic communication entails linking incoming sounds, manifesting in the brain as sound patterns, with the appropriate concepts.

However, language, for Saussure, is not simply a collection of isolated significations. "Language," Saussure (1916/1972, 112) insists, "is not to be reduced to a mere nomenclature." The value of signs comes from the relation between signs. Signs gain their value because of their similarity to and dissimilarity to other signs. It is this emphasis on the relation between signs, or the position of a given sign within the system of language, that instigated the structuralist movement in linguistics and beyond. Thus from a Saussurean point of view the relation between the sign and that which it signifies leads us to a consideration of the structural relation between signs, with meaning being derivative of this structure. This structure de Saussure called *langue* (which he called speech less speaking) and he opposed this to *parole*, which is the actual manifestation of language in spoken utterances in various contexts. Meaning, for Saussure, thus arises at an abstract level in the structural positioning of a sign in relation to other signs.

According to many analytic philosophers signs also have "stand for" values, except instead of "standing for" a position within the structure of language they "stand for" a correspondence to the external world. Gottlob Frege (1892/1952) and the early Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922/2001) maintained that meaning comes from the logical proposition of an utterance. Propositions, they argued, mirror the world more or less accurately and thus can be either true or false. From this point of view, the proposition is the source of meaning, and consequently an utterance with a fallacious or illogical proposition is meaningless. Decoding meaning thus entails working out the propositional content of an utterance, which usually hinges upon quite precise definitions. Simplifying somewhat, we could say that all one needs to understand an utterance is logic and a good dictionary. According to this tradition we are able to communicate because we have been taught the appropriate definitions of words. Although the analytic philosophers have a much less structural perspective compared to Saussure, both assume that meaning arises through a correspondence (signal and signification or proposition and truth). The social, in these conceptions, is reduced to sharing meaning. Social processes are not intrinsic to meaning itself. In contrast, the work of the early American pragmatists, reveals a much more social and deeply intersubjective conception of meaning (Gillespie 2010), in which meaning is irreducibly triadic (Zittoun et al. 2007), entailing self-sign-other. The other is central to meaning in two senses: First, all meaning can only be understood within a situated set of social relations, because it is within people engaged in a project that actions and words have meanings. Second, and more radically, meaning comes not so much from the speaker or actor, but from other people for whom the words and actions come to have significance.

Peirce and Mead: Semiosis as a Social Process

Charles Saunders Peirce developed a triadic and processual conceptualization of meaning. According to Peirce (1884/2007, 1998) signs comprise three parts: the object, the sign vehicle, and an interpretant. It is this latter addition of an interpretant which makes Peirce's model distinctive, creating a genuinely social component to meaning. Basically this implies that meaning is always for a sign system, and that sign system is often (but need not be) in the mind of another.

The interpretant is any sign or system of signs which create a relationship between object and the given sign for someone. While one might be tempted to equate the interpretant with Saussure's concept of langue, this would be to miss out on the human aspect of the interpretant. The interpretant is not simply an "interpreter" (Dewey 1946) because the interpretant, as a system of signs, can be either in the mind of someone observing the sign usage or the sign user themselves. What is important is that the interpretant is always in a mind and that it is connected to the person's previous knowledge of a social and cultural world and to their interests which in turn give the sign human significance:

> Thus if the Sign be the sentence 'Hamlet was mad,' to understand what this means one must know that men are sometimes in that strange state; one must have seen madmen or read about them; and it will be all the better if one specifically knows (and need not be driven to *presume*) what Shakespeare's notion of insanity was. All that is collateral observation and is no part of the Interpretant. [. . .] But that which the writer aimed to point out to you, presuming you to have all the requisite collateral information, that is to say just the quality of the sympathetic element of the situation, generally a very familiar one - a something you probably never did so clearly realize before - *that* is the Interpretant of the Sign, - its 'significance.' (Peirce 1998 493–4)

Signs become significant in a pre-existing web of meaning, under a certain aspect of their relation to that web of meaning (Peirce 1998). Hence, signs are relational, implying something for some interest (i.e., being "significant" for someone). Signs are necessarily relevant for, or in Buhler's (1934) terminology have "appeal" for, another set of signs or interests. Meaning arises when a sign points something out about a phenomenon for someone or some set of interests.

Peirce (1884/2007) made a distinction between three types of signs, each of which is connected to its object in a different way. Icons are connected by similarity, indexes by causation, and symbols by convention. An *icon* is a sign that is related to its object via a relation of similarity (for example, a drawing of a dog is an icon). For an icon the interpretant establishes a similarity between the sign/icon and the referent. An *index* is a sign that designates an object in terms of proximity (the pointed finger for the direction, the fire for the smoke) or causation. A weathercock is an index which points to the direction of the

wind by causation. There is a link between the weathercock and its object. An index is always "linked" to its object by some physical process. A *symbol* (such as a word) is related to its object by convention; it is related simply because other people relate the symbol to the object. Thus symbols are necessarily shared. A symbol is directed at an interpretant: it has addressivity.

> Owing to a symbol being essentially a sign only by virtue of its being interpretable as such, the idea of a purpose is not entirely separable from it. The symbol, by the very definition of it, has an interpretant in view. Its very meaning is intended. Indeed, a purpose is precisely the interpretant of a symbol (Peirce, New Elements, MS 517 (1904); EP2, 300–24; par. 4)

The symbol is qualitatively different from the icon or index. Icons and indexes have properties (likenesses or causal relations) which connect them to the object. Symbols, on the other hand, are only connected to the object by a convention that is recognized by the interpretant. Symbols by virtue of being less directly connected to the object can operate at a higher level of abstraction. For example, one can state an argument using symbols, but one cannot state an argument using icons or indexes.

The interpretant of a sign is invisible to the sign itself, rather the interpretant is that which gives the sign significance. If one begins to talk about or theorize the interpretant, to use symbols to refer to the interpretant, then the interpretant has become an object in a new sign process, which itself is constituted by a second (invisible) interpretant. To reflect on that second interpretant requires turning it into an object in a subsequent sign process, which again has a new interpretant. In this way analyzing the sign process entails never-ending semiosis. The interpretant is itself a symbol (word, sentence, idea, sign/symbol complex, or perspective), and thus has its own interpretant (or interpretants). This (in early Peirce) makes semiosis unending and self-perpetuating, as any sign/symbol can become interpretant or object in a further triad.

Thus, in contrast to Saussure and Frege's proposition, Peirce does not consider the meaning as a two-sided entity whose meaning is given a priori because of its location in a given structure. Rather, meaning is triadic and dynamic, always evolving as it is mobilized by a mind, or a person with a history, within a specific situation, oriented toward a certain goal.

George Herbert Mead (1925) further conceptualized the role of other people in meaning making. Mead, like Peirce, argued that something becomes a symbol when it informs someone about something (or someone). Whereas Peirce's analysis was at the abstract level of sign structure in time, Mead (1925) studied sign processes within situated interaction taking place between persons. His argument is that signs first have meaning for receivers not for senders. That is to say sign processes are initially unintentional, and it is through

understanding the responses they elicit from others, that signs become under the control of their senders. In this way Mead argued that the meaning of a gesture is the response it elicits, and that someone knows what they are communicating when the gestures elicit the same response in the sender as the receiver.

Mead, following Peirce, situated meaning in the realm of human actions, what he added to interaction, however, is that he considered other people's interpreting activities as these unfold in specific social interactions as part of the constitution of meaning. Or more specifically, Mead could be said to consider meaning emerging in the movement from one person's way of interpreting to another person's interpretation. Conceptualizing Mead within the language of Peirce we could say that the interpretant begins as another person, interpreting the meaningful actions of another organism. Subsequently, this can become the person interpreting their own actions as meaningful.

If we now combine Peirce and Mead, we can consider the construction and evolution of meaning over time within a social space. We can first examine how, in a given social situation, people interacting with an object are both engaged in interpreting that object, the broader setting, and the meaning they attribute to each of the other interactants and their relationship. This is the intersubjective aspect of meaning (Gillespie and Cornish 2010). As the same object moves from one social situation to another, other people will apprehend it (and other people's interpretations) within their own knowledge of the history of the object, thus adding another layer of meaning to the object, which may itself be apprehended by the original actors.

This works of Peirce and Mead are good at conceptualizing the development of meaning, how meaning changes and "layers up" as it moves through social relations. However, the authors' writings are abstract and theoretical, and it is something of an open question as to how these ideas can actually inform an empirical analysis. Our aim, in the following, is to try and ground these ideas in a concrete case study of the emergence and dissolution of meaning. Specifically, we want to use their theoretical insights to describe the emergence, transformation, and dissolution of the meaning of an object as it moves through social relations.

Methodological Strategy

The following analysis is a case study, which allows a close and in-depth analysis of the growth and dissolution of meaning within one historical event. The data we use for the case study is public, and as such, it is in line with the basic principles of science, guaranteeing transparency and inviting secondary analysis (Cornish, Zittoun and Gillespie 2007; Zittoun et al. 2007).

The case study is from the 2010 Copiapó mining accident in Chile. The mine, in Mina San José, was focused on extracting copper 700m below the desert. On the 5th of August thrity-three miners were trapped, the men were evacuated from their underground shelter sixty-nine days later, emerging into the bright light of international media attention. The detail of interest

to us is how rocks from the depth of the mine, initially debris to be thrown away, became meaningful enough to be given as gifts to international leaders. The data we use are newspapers, comments, pictures, videos, and published materials (Aronson 2011; Franklin 2011).

The analysis follows the story of the rocks, interrogating the meaning of the rocks at each stage in the crisis and its subsequent resolution. Our focus is on the transformation of the meaning of the rocks from worthless rubble into gifts suitable for a Queen. Central to this transformation, we argue, is the role of other people in bestowing value or "significance."

Our analysis had four steps. The first step was to identify each time when the rocks changed hands, that is, the social situations in which stones became the objects within a social interaction, and was done with them. The second step consisted in analyzing, in each of these social interactions, what the rock meant for the person acting with a stone. Hence here we made hypothesis about the interpretant for the person initiating the action with the stone: What did they do with it? What meaning did it have for them? The third step was to examine how the other people engaged in each situation responded. We thus analyze what meaning these significant others took from the action of focal person acting with the rock. Doing so, we realized that the responses of the others (step 3) are anticipated by the first person's action (step 2). As the responses change, so do the anticipations, and thus the field of meaning changes. The fourth step was to reconnect these situations, and thus to retrace the trajectory of the rocks through different social situations. In other words, we propose here an analysis of the social trajectory of a social object (Wiener et al. 1979).

The analysis identified five main transitions in meaning, each corresponding to the rocks entering a new context. Our analysis is organized in terms

Table 6.1. Chronology of events.

5th August 2010: The San José mine collapses and 33 miners are trapped 700m below the surface
13th October 2010: After sixty-nine days underground, all the miners are rescued with media fanfare. Mario Sepulveda gives gifts of rock to his rescuers
18th October 2010: President Piñera is in London, and gives gifts of rock to David Cameron (PM) and Queen Elizabeth II
20th October 2010: Piñera is in France, and gives a rock to Bernard Accoyer, president of the National Assembly
21st October 2010: Piñera meets with Sarkozy
22nd October 2010: Piñera meets with Angela Merkel, again giving a rock from the mine as a gift
23rd October 2010: Piñera meets with German President Christian Wulff and wrote "Deutschland über alles" in the guestbook
3rd March 2011: Piñera meets Pope and gives a gift of a "silver censer"

of these five contexts: (1) before the accident, (2) as gifts after the rescue, (3) as gifts from the President of Chile to international dignitaries, (4) as public relations objects within a media campaign, and (5) after the episode, when they are no longer used as gifts.

(1) Before the Accident

What was being taken out of the San Jose mine before the accident? Two things were coming out of the mine since its foundation in 1957. First, the purpose of the mine was to extract copper and gold, valuable metals, two precious metals with a value of about twenty million dollars per year.[1] Second, the vast majority of the material coming up from the mine was simply "rock" or "rubble" extracted as mean to access the precious metals.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "rock" as "the solid mineral material forming part of the surface of the earth and other similar planets." Rocks are relatively hard and naturally formed. A geologist might be more precise: The rock that the miners were tunneling through was "diorite," a dark gray composite of several metals, produced through volcanic activity, and similar to granite. These "meanings" of the word rock, however, are very abstract and decontextualized. If one entered into the life of the San Jose mine, and the lifeworld of the miners, then the rocks being taken up from the mine were undifferentiated "rubble" ("el escombros")—defined by the absence of copper or other valuable minerals. This rubble was undesirable waste. Indeed, around the San Jose mine one can find huge mountains of such rubble—extruded and left as worthless (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1. Rubble surrounding the Mina San José mine (photograph by: Desierto Atacama, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 License).

Thus, before the accident the interpretant, within the social situation, was a search for valuable minerals, and from that standpoint the rock in the mine was not only "not copper" but an obstacle to finding copper.

(2) A Gift from the Mine

The mine collapsed on 5 August, 2010 and the miners were entombed for sixty-nine days. They were, however, in regular contact with their rescuers. During the last few weeks of their confinement they became increasingly confident of their rescue. The miners were informed about the extent of international media attention and received remote media training in preparation for ascending from the darkness into the dazzling brightness of the world media stage. They were aware of the wider meanings of their rescue. For example, when drawing up the list of the order of men to leave the mine, there was excessive politeness about insisting that others went first. It turned out that the men were aware that the last person out would get in the Guinness book of Records for being under the ground for the longest. The dispute could only be resolved by getting an agreement from the *Guinness Book of Records* that all the men would collectively hold the record (Franklin 2011).

Mario Sepulveda was one of the most media-conducive miners. He was second to come out of the mine. He did so carrying a large satchel, filled with a dozen or so small rocks from the mine. After embracing his wife and child, he then began rummaging in his satchel for rocks and distributing them. The president said "Welcome back to your homeland." Mario, opened his satchel and saying "Wait a minute I have a present, here you go." He handed the President a rock, as a gift, and then proceeded to hand a rock to the Minister for the Mines, and other people present. What new meanings did this "rubble" have? According to Mario, the rocks were simply meant to be a thank-you for the rescue. As he described it:

> I was thinking, 'How can I show my appreciation for the president and all of the people who did things for us?' . . . Suddenly it occurred to me, 'Ah, yes. Rocks! [. . .] Those gifts have a special sentiment that is personal and spiritual, that represent the 33 miners that were in there. (Francis 2010)

It has often been observed that gifts demand indebtedness and reciprocation (Mauss 1966; Schwartz 1967). If being rescued was a gift, then Mario was meeting the demand for reciprocation. That the gift is "only" a rock is secondary to the fact that there was a gift. As Schwartz (1967) points out, with gifts the form (or act of giving) is more important than the content (the gift itself). As such, the gift might be seen to acknowledge and reciprocate the "gift" of rescue.

The rocks, as content, however, also have symbolic value. As Emerson (1936, essay "gifts") observed, gifts come from a biography—"the poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb." We might add, that miners thus entrapped bring

rocks. The rocks are an aspect of the miners' biography, and in this particular case, represent the entrapped miners. The stillness of each rock bearing silent testimony to the weighty, timeless claustrophobia of being trapped under 700m of rock for sixty-nine days. The material impoverishment of the gift (worthless rock) also becomes symbolic (in an indexical sense) of the experience of the miners—who had nothing but rocks for over two months.

Alternative or additional interpretants add more critical meanings to the gifts. Some Chilean Media reported Mario's gift as indicating "desparpajo," that is, cheek or impudence (Cambio21 2010), an interpretation which gained some global traction (BBC 2010; La Voz de Galicia 2010). To give a rock to the President seemed somewhere between flippant and absurd; unsure of whether he was being overly sentimental or disrespectful.

Maybe this "desparpajo" was toward the president and the Government's Minister of Mining was meant to be between an embarrassment and a reminder. Miners had died in the San Jose mine previously. And deaths from mining in Chile are common. The San Jose mine had a catalog of accidents, and the San Esteban Mining Company had been fined for breaching safety standards 42 times since 2004. On the morning when the San Jose mine collapsed, some miners had heard loud noises. The miners asked permission to leave the mine, but it was denied. From this standpoint, or interpretant, the rocks might be symbolic of the long-standing protests of Chilean miners from across Chile for better safety standards. Indeed, the way in which the rocks were given could have emphasized this meaning (i.e., if they were given disparagingly or even thrown). Maybe by depositing a rock from the accident into the hands of the politicians, and the owners of the mine, Mario was giving them something that would act as a permanent reminder, not of the miraculous rescue, but of systemic safety problems. Returning to the idea of the rock as a gift (Mauss 1966), it might be that the rocks were not so much a reciprocation as an initiation, a gift demanding a response. The desired response being improved safety standards. Of course, these meaning are not mutually exclusive, the rocks might have been intended to carry multiple levels of meaning.

(3) A Gift Suitable for a Queen

Five days after the dramatic rescue, at the zenith on international interest in the miners' rescue, Piñera started his trip to Europe which had been planned months before. Riding high on a wave of global media support and enthusiasm Piñera brought gifts of rock from the San Jose mine. The first recipient was Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom. In the grand setting of Buckingham palace, President Piñera handed the Queen one rock on a blue velvet box, as if it were a jewellery in it precious showcase (Figure 6.2).

That the President of Chile could give Queen Elizabeth II a rock as a gift indicates clearly that the rock had ascended in value, becoming an important and internationally shared symbolic marker—becoming much

Figure 6.2. President Piñera gives a rock to Queen Elizabeth II (photograph by Gobierno de Chile, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 License).

more than an icon or index. Indeed, within the United Kingdom giving a rock as a gift would usually be considered an insult. According to common folklore Santa Claus gives rocks of coal to naughty children at Christmas. To give a rock to the Queen in lieu of an expected gift of value, would be to insinuate that she had done something wrong. However, this is not the meaning taken. The story of the dramatic rescue provided the shared interpretant for Piñera, the Queen, and the media which constituted the rock as a valuable symbolic gift.

The value of the rock is closely linked to its authentic participation in the dramatic rescue. Levy-Bruhl (1910/1966) articulated "the law of participation" in which a mundane object (such as a rock) can gain value by having "participated" in a historic event or having physically come into contact with greatness. Consider if the rock given to the Queen were discovered not to have been brought up by Mario Sepulveda, or maybe not even to have come from the San Jose mine. In one sense it would not make a difference, for the rock could, arguably, have the same symbolic function. Yet clearly it would make a difference. The rock is not an arbitrary signifier, rather, it gains a portion of its symbolic potency by virtue of having participated in history.

What impression did Piñera hope to make with this gift from the mine? In order to give the emerging meaning shape, Piñera stated:

> I hope from now on when people around the world hear the word Chile, they will not remember the coup d'état or the dictatorship, they will remember what we've done – all the Chileans together [. . .] I am sure that Chile now is better known, is more respected, is more valued worldwide. (Montalva 2010)

Although the rock is a gift to the queen, it is a staged gift-exchange played out on a very public stage. By giving a rock the president draws attention, within the mass media, to the rescue. It is a message "given off" (Goffman 1959) to the world at large that Chile cares about human rights, health, and safety, and has the most modern technology required for such a rescue. The gift did produce the desired impression in some quarters. For example, the credit rating agency Coface stated: "It provides to international investors an image of a country where you can do safe business [. . .] It gives a good impression in terms of technology, solidarity and efficiency" (Clark 2010). In that sense, this first gift was reciprocated with the highest symbolic value: respect and recognition by valued peers.

(4) Gift Exchange: Cameron and Merkel

The rubble from the mine became more valuable than the minerals being mined, with the great advantage that there is an almost limitless supply of rocks. Accordingly, as Piñera tours Europe, he brought more gifts from the mine. On the same day as meeting the Queen, Piñera presented a rock from the mine to the UK Prime Minister David Cameron. Cameron reciprocated with a gift of 33 bottles of British beer and pint glasses. This gift was intended for the 33 miners, and as such, it acknowledged Piñera's gift, and acknowledged the remarkable rescue.

Later in the month, Piñera met with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel (von Dannenberg 2010). The meeting was more modestly reported in the international press, and when reported, the focus tended to be on the gift that Merkel gave to Piñera or Piñera's gaff. Merkel give Piñera a sports jersey belonging to a Chilean soccer player who was playing in the German national team called Mario Gomez. This soccer player had the same name as one of the miners, and as such, Merkel's gift does acknowledge the mining rescue. Piñera's gift of a rock from the mine tends to get brief mention. Merkel said that she would keep in her office, and that so "the two countries would feel, through small gestures, connected again." Thus the gift of the rock gets a brief mention, and is eclipsed by Merkel's gift, suggesting the declining value of the rocks.

Finally, after meeting the German president the next day, Piñera made what was reported as a gigantic gaffe by writing " *Deutschland über alles*" in a German guestbook (Spiegel Online 2010). This new event overshadows the meaning of the rocks, the mining rescue, or even the role of a messenger, and thus the recent symbolic meaning of the rocks is further diminished.

(5) New Second-Order Interpretants

As the miners' story was carried across the globe, President Piñera made good use of this new found international recognition. The media management of the crisis and rescue thus became thematized, gaining new significance as a media campaign. Here the initial meanings of the rocks and the rescue become

the objects of a new round of interpretation, with the interpretant being the discourse of media management. The interpretant also seems to echo the film *Ace in the Hole* (1951), in which a has-been journalist turns a local mining accident into an international news story in an attempt to return to the limelight. That is to say, this discourse is somewhat cynical. For example, some commentators saw the whole rescue as a staged spectacle, with the gifts and the timing being staged for the international community:

> This is a top-notch 'good news' story [. . .] It has been suggested that the time for the first miner to be brought to the surface was changed and just happened to coincide with peak viewing in the USA. (Ken McEwen Public Relations 2010)

Additionally, the media fan-fare surrounding Piñera's European visit, and his gifts of rock, was so extensive, that some questioned whether the timing of the rescue had been staged:

> Those of a cynical nature might have noticed that Piñera was due to go on a European tour starting on 17 October and it would be neat if the rescue could be accomplished by then. It was. (Mair 2010)

From such an interpretative frame of reference, the rock-gifts gain a completely new signification. They become index and signify inauthenticity, effectively making the rocks worthless as gifts (unless the inauthenticity is acknowledged, in which case, the rocks become authentic signifiers of inauthenticity, Wang 1999). Such sceptical interpretations also became the object of interpretation, finding an interpretant in ideas of hypocrisy:

> It's not that the Chileans are taking advantage, they are simply following the tried and tested public relations exercises Western governments have used for years. (Welsh 2010)

The process of meaning making, of semiosis, is unending, with each new meaning potentially becoming the object of a subsequent interpretant. Thus, the sceptical comments about the media management of the miners' rescue, lead to the accusation that any other country would have managed the rescue in the same way. One could add, that our present analysis, pointing to the fact that these rocks were once meaningless and worthless adds yet another meta-interpretant (our interpretant being the ideas of Peirce and Mead).

(6) The Dissolution of Meaning and Value

Piñera and his team seem to have been aware that the value of the rocks diminished with each gift. Once such a gift becomes perceived as a publicity stunt, it becomes tarnished, and its authenticity eroded. Accordingly, the rocks

cease to become gifts. For example, when Piñera visited the Pope, in March 2011, he did not give a rock or indeed anything related to the miners rescue; he gave a silver censer. This religious object addresses the pope, Catholicism, and religious signification. The meaning of the magical miners rescue has lost its luster on the public stage.

The decline in the value of the rocks is evident in the brief rise and collapse of "The Chilean Miners Shop" on Ebay. The online shop was established shortly after the remarkable rescue, with the idea of selling rocks from the mine as souvenirs. The text stated:

> We are currently awaiting some of the souvenir mine rocks that were brought up by Mario. Queen Elizabeth and Prime Minister David Cameron of England were presented with one of these Chilean mine rocks today by Chilean President Sebastion Piñera. What a great way to raise funds for these miners & their families; sell pieces of rock from the mine site to people all over the world. When there are some of these rocks for sale, they will be listed in the souvenir page of our store.

The rocks from the mine were seen to have value not only because they came from the mine, but also because they were given to the Queen and David Cameron. The trajectory of the rocks through the complex social world of humans, gives them layer upon layer of meaning. The recent gifts, add another layer of value.

However, this online initiative was short-lived. The website was not updated. In June 2011 we emailed the owners of the Chilean Miners Shop, and received no response. The online shop had been abandoned—like an old gold mine. As of 2013, the online shop was no longer being hosted by Ebay. One can only assume that the venture met with limited and declining success, as the rocks' symbolic capital was eroded by time. As history shows, any commodity with a limitless supply tends to lose value. (Davies 1994)

Conclusion: Social Semiosis

In 2010 the San José mine experienced an inversion of meaning. For a brief period the rubble that was usually discarded became more valuable than the copper and gold in the mine. Rocks which had been outside the purview of human meaning, silent within the depths of the earth, were brought into the international limelight, and made pregnant with meaning. How did this transformation occur? How did worthless rocks become suitable gifts for a Queen? And how did jewels for the Queen become worthless stones again?

As the rocks enter the world of human meaning they become part of history. These rocks participated (Levy-Bruhl 1910/1966) in the rescue,

they became part of the historical event, and became meaningful through that narrative. Moreover, at each turn in the narrative the gifts of rocks are acknowledged by its recipients; the givers gain social recognition, and the rocks are socially accepted as signifiers. Piñera accepts the rocks as gifts and symbolic carriers of the Miners' suffering, and then international dignitaries accept the rocks as gift from Piñera as symbols of Chile's modernity, humanity, and shared sense of history (and, in relation to the miners, a shared appreciation of the value of life), and so human meaning grows: because they have all accepted the meaningfulness of the rocks, as symbolic markers of these meanings. If the rocks were not accepted as gifts, they would still become meaningful, but the meaning would be quite different by virtue of participating in an alternative history. The only way in which the rocks can become meaningless is when people stop responding to them, when they cease to be important in human relations, as, for example, when nobody wants to buy them on Ebay.

In the social trajectories of these rocks, we can observe the accumulation of layer upon layer of meaning. Rather than the rocks obtaining a singular definitional meaning (such as the Oxford English Dictionary definition which we began our analysis with), which passed invariant from situation to situation, the rocks accumulate meaning through history, with each new response co-existing with, and reacting to, the prior meanings. The interpretant of one turn becoming the object of the subsequent turn (Peirce 1998). But these new meanings do not eclipse the former. The rocks simultaneously signify: gratitude for the rescue, poor safety standards, modern Chile, a Royal gift, and a public relations stunt. Moreover, each rock or gift is simultaneously an icon (it communicates the mine by virtue of its similarity), an index (it came from the mine, indexing the falling rubble that trapped the miners), and as a symbol (loaded with various meanings and projects).

Meaning is not given by the binary relation between the sign and the signified, nor is it structural, transcending groups and interests, as postulated by Saussure (1916/1972) or Frege (1892/1952). Meaning, we have shown, is relative to specific and situated interpretants, relative to specific audiences, who are themselves each taking account of multiple interpretations and motives. It is for this reason that the meaning keeps changing. As the rocks move out of the mine, into Piñera's hands, and then into the hands of Queen Elizabeth II, they change context, and each context has new audiences, in which new interpretants rise to give meaning to the rocks. Moreover, each act of semiosis, each gift both attempts to establish a certain meaning, but also creates new unintended meanings—audiences always see something more in the gift than intended. This is the inevitable "surplus" meaning in social relations (Gillespie 2003). Hence, the trajectory of the rock in the social world turns them into signs—and signs, as evolving semiotic processes, as socially situated practices, are always polysemic and multilayered, charged from

the echoes and undertones of their previous uses and social locations (Bakhtin 1984).

Our overarching question has been, how does human meaning arise out of nothing, from the depths of the earth. The magic which creates this meaning, we have argued, is two-fold. The rocks became meaningful when they became, first, associated to specific experiences in the life of people, and thus symbolic for them as they addressed others, and second, acknowledged as such by the latter in specific social interactions. Our more specific questions concerned "before-meaning" and how a thing meaning nothing can come to mean something? And equally, how this meaning can dissolve into nothing again?

The case study suggests some answers to these more specific questions. Many things are meaningless, one could point to all the grains of sand under the oceans that are outside of human contact. Meaning might emerge out of nothing if an object or a thing moves from one social frame to another one, or if there is a substantial transformation in that frame. Hence, the rock means nothing in the working frame of the mine, but everything when miners think they will die, or when they are offered as gifts. It is after such rupturing events, which call for interpretation, that the semiotic process begins. Ruptures in the patterns of social interactions, or in people's daily sense-making, call for new meanings (Zittoun 2006).

Reversely, if trajectories of objects only bring them into more layered meanings, how can these fall out of meaning back into nothingness? First, as Winnicott (1971) described with children's transitional objects that can lose their emotional significance, things might lose their affective value, that is, their biographical anchorage. In our case study one could argue that the emotional valence of being trapped and the rescue has subsided. Second, as our case study suggests, these objects might be denied their social value, for instance if their carriers are denied social recognition, or if they meet neutralizing social meanings. In our case study the second-order interpretants in the media, which viewed the whole affair as a public relations exercise, undermined the meaning of the rocks. Finally, if meaning-making is a response to ruptures, then we need to situate our case study within the domain of 24/7 international news coverage, where this particular rupture has been superseded by countless more recent ruptures. Of course, the dense web of meaning which once sustained these rocks as Royal gifts can be reactivated—as we have done and as, one can speculate, the thirty-three miners might do. Nevertheless, within the larger international spheres of meaning, these rocks are turning back into rubble.

Note

1. http://deportespe.terra.com.pe/shared/pop/noticias/mina-san-jose/mina_san_jose.html

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7

The Nothing That Is: Making Meaning Out of Nothing at All

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Abstract: Human action is motivated, directed, and regulated by shifting fields of meaning. The process of making meaning involves the use of signs and the construction of potentially complex semiotic networks and hierarchies, which are necessary because of the nature of meaning: Every moment of meaning construction produces novel implications and possible connections with other semiotic fields, through which possible transformations emerge and must be managed. In this sense, meaning is created through the duality of what is (A) and also the ever-shifting and indeterminate set of relevant semiotic resources through which further transformation may be possible (non-A). This dynamic system exists against the reciprocally shifting and indeterminate background of semiotic resources which are irrelevant to the present and immediate future transformations (not-A). This theoretical framework for meaning-making stands in contrast to a more classically Cartesian model where the meaning of a symbol is based on the dichotomy of what is (A) and what is not (*not*-A). In the present paper, it is understood that there is a systemic and dynamic interplay between A and non-A. Moreover, given the temporal embeddedness of human meaning, non-A functions not only to help define what something (A) is at the present moment, but also simultaneously creates an imagined field of possible future transformations of the stipulated meaning. This approach to meaning making gives investigators a locus for the investigation of meaning-making, meaning-transforming, and meaning-maintaining processes that is absent from more static approaches. Integral to this approach is a fertile