

# Public indicators as multi-modal discourses: a semiotic approach<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The concern with environmental sustainability on one hand and the blurring of the relation between economic growth and human wellbeing on the other hand have recently worked at putting new indicators on the political agenda. Even if we are already accustomed to indicators with some oldies such as the GDP, the unemployment rate or the price index, these newcomers are putting the question of nature, role and limits of public indicators to the foreground. They are at the core of the political debates; first through the process of their construction and acceptance by political actors and secondly through the publication and discussion of their current values. In both circumstances, various non-linguistic semiotic resources such as paintings, diagrams, maps, images, etc., are enlisted to communicate about them to the public. The article is intended to contribute to fill up two gaps in the literature about policy making and indicators: the first one is the lack of analysis of the rhetoric of indicators and, in particular, the role non-linguistic signs play in the communication of indicators and the framing of public opinion. The second is the gap between the more and more – but, as we will see, not as new as we could think – extra-linguistic mode of communication on public affairs and the mainly text-oriented scientific literature on policy analysis, the interpretive one not being an exception. This is done by comparing two outstanding examples of multi-modal discourses on well-being: a very ancient and a very recent one. The ancient example is Lorenzetti's frescoes on the effects of good and bad government; the recent one, the OECD Better Life index.

## Keywords

Communication, icon, index, indicators, public policy, rhetoric, semiotics, symbols, well-being

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## Introduction

If you “google” “Better Life index”, you are driven to the address <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/#/1111111111> and here is what you can see.

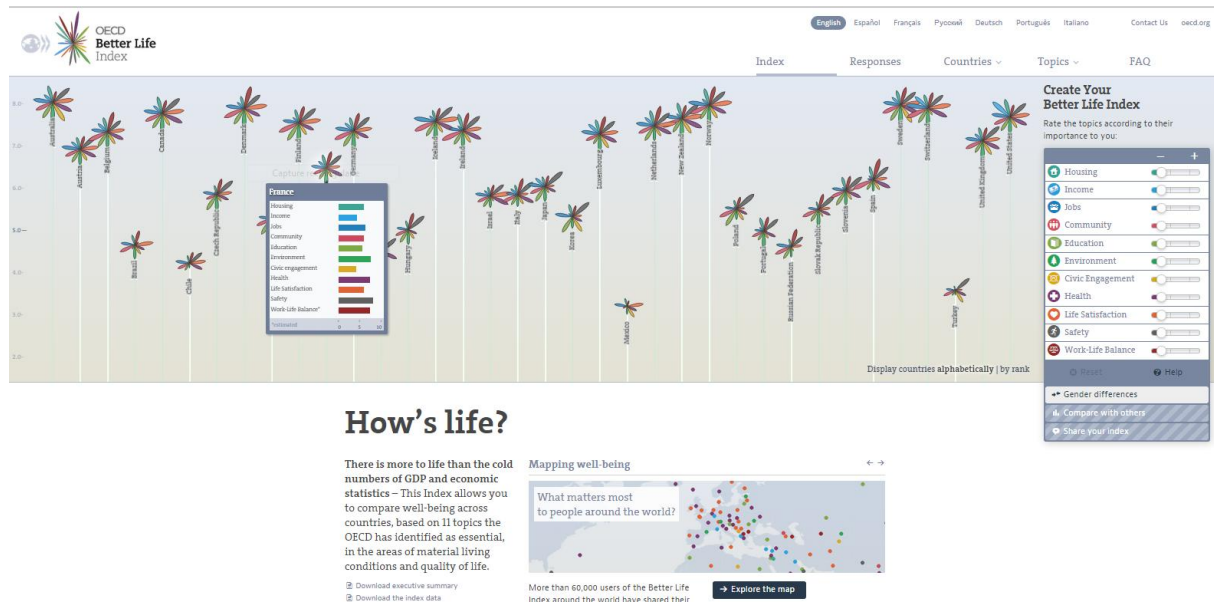


Fig. 1. Home page of OECD web page on the Better Life Index

You see words, images looking like flowers, tables with colored bars, displayed across the page to form an attractive layout. All these elements are (individual or composite) signs and together they constitute another enclosing sign, what Kress (2010) calls a multi-modal semiotic ensemble. All individual signs are “semiotic resources” selected and arranged by someone(s) in order to communicate something to the people who will visit this web site. They have been combined by a designer on behalf of an author with the aim of generating into the visitor a given reaction, the reaction expected by the author of the message. Obviously, the author is spending an impressive amount of (semiotic and behind them, human and financial) resources to be sure to trigger the “right” (from his point of view) reaction from the visitor. If rhetoric is, as Aristotle put it, “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion »” (Rhetoric, 2.1<sup>3</sup>), we are contemplating here an

<sup>3</sup> All references to Aristotle’s treatise on rhetoric are to the online version available here : <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.mb.txt>

excellent example of contemporary rhetoric where all the resources of the new information technologies are enlisted. But to persuade us of what, exactly? Though we are trained since infancy to make sense of non-verbal bodily expressions and to understand the intentions lurking behind verbal and written discourses, nobody taught us (at least, most of us) how to decode and uncover the rhetoric of multi-modal discourses. What we need here is, semiotics, the discipline Umberto Eco (1976:7) once defined as “the discipline studying everything that can be used in order to lie”. From a semiotic point of view, rhetoric can be defined as the selection and use of signs-vehicles in order to generate a specific “interpretant” in the mind of the receiver or interpreter of the message.

These terms ask for some clarification. They refer to Peirce's theory of signs and of semiosis which will constitute here our toolbox for understanding what is going on when we contemplate a web page like the one reproduced here.

### Peirce's semiotics in a nutshell

Charles Sanders Peirce<sup>4</sup> is the founding father of both the pragmatic turn in philosophy and the modern theory of signs. He developed a triadic conception of the sign as a structure connecting three elements: the sign properly said or “*representamen*” (that we will call hereafter the sign-vehicle or signifier), an object and an “interpretant”.

"A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen." (C.P. 2.228).

Drawing on his conception of the semiotic relation as involving three elements, he showed that there are also three different lenses for looking at it. One can look at the specific relation between the *signifier* (S) and the Interpretant (I), at the relation between the Interpretant (I) and the object (O) or at the relation between the signifier (S) and the object (O). The first trichotomy “*Qualisign-Sinsign-Legisign*” refers to what makes a sign what it is. It is a monadic relation since it links the sign to itself. A “*Qualisign*” is a quality which is a sign. A “*Sinsign*” is an actual existing thing or event which is a sign and a “*Legisign*” is a law (generally

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<sup>4</sup> Most references to Peirce's writings are in the usual notation based on the « Collected Papers » in 8 volumes published by Harvard University Press in Cambridge:Mass. The site <http://www.commonsonline.org> or « Digital Companion to C.S. Peirce » is an invaluable resource for the people who have no direct access to the printed collected papers.

established by men) that is a sign. Another trichotomy refers to the relation between the sign and the interpretant, more exactly to what the sign tells about the object to the interpretant and how it orients its representation of the object. Here Peirce distinguishes the “*Rheme*”, the “*Dicent*” and the “*Argument*”. The first refers to a possibility, the second to a fact and the third to a reason. Though Peirce explored the three of them in depth, it is the relation between S and O that remains the most famous with its now classical distinction between icons, indices and symbols. An *icon* is a sign whose relationship with its object stands in some resemblance and in some quality they share together. Because of that resemblance, S evokes the quality of O in I. Examples of icons are pictures, schemas, diagrams, metaphors, etc<sup>5</sup>. The *index* and its object are linked by an existential, dynamical connection. Examples of indices are the weathercock, the sundial, the footprint of an animal on the ground, the smoke produced by a fire, etc. Finally, *symbols* are linked to their object through a law, a habit or a convention. For instance, the wedding ring is a symbol of marriage because of a tradition. Words, whose meaning rest upon conventions or habits are symbols. The three trichotomies taken together generate 27 possibilities of semiotic relations of which only 10 are actually valid. For instance, formally, a complete characterization of a concrete, existing moving weathervane would be as a “*indexical dicent sinsign*”. These distinctions are purely analytical. Real signs in general are combinations of iconic, indexical and symbolic attributes even if one generally dominates. For instance, as a representation of a rooster, a weathercock is also an icon but the kind of interpretant it alludes to is most generally the direction of the wind rather than the animal. Furthermore, it can also function as a symbol according to its size, material, location and so on. It is important to keep in mind that many of what we call “symbols” in ordinary language are in fact closers to what Peirce considered as “iconic signs”. Metaphors were for him essentially iconic as well as diagrams or images. It follows that allegories like for instance the allegory of Justice (which we will meet later in one of Lorenzetti’s fresco) as a blind woman holding a balance is fully metaphoric and therefore iconic more than symbolic, more precisely it is an iconic sign that became habitual and therefore, symbolic. Table 1 illustrates the main differences between the three classes.

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<sup>5</sup> Actually, for Peirce, actual paintings or photographs are « hypoicons » or « iconic signs, not icons properly said.

Table 1. Differences between signs with respect to their object.			
Examples of signs	INDEXICAL	ICONIC	SYMBOLIC
SIGNIFIER	Smoke	A drawing of a dog	Red roses
OBJECT	A Fire	A dog	Passion
RELATIONSHIP	Contiguity Correlation	Resemblance	Convention Habit

### Peirce's theory of the interpretant<sup>6</sup>

The “interpretant” is not the interpreter but the effect of the sign on the interpreter. For Peirce, this effect can be of three different kinds: it can be logical, affective (or emotional) or energetic. In the first case, the interpretant is a rule-governed or habitual thought, in the second an emotion, in the third an outer or inner movement, an expense of muscular or mental energy. For explaining the energetic interpretant, Peirce gives the example of the officer shouting “Ground arms !”: The muscular effort (the movements of the soldiers in response *to* the words of the officer) is the "energetic interpretant" of the order<sup>7</sup>. However, when a sign triggers a process of inner dialogue in some mind, this interpretant is to be considered energetic because some energy is expended in the process. In contrast, the logical interpretant being the product of a habit or rule doesn't develop energy.<sup>8</sup> The different interpretants are not exclusive one of the other, quite the contrary. A sign can induce first an emotional interpretant, which is then followed by an energetic or logical one.

It is possible to establish a relation between kinds of interpretants and aspects of the sign, as table 2 shows. Note that its full justification would need a presentation and explanation of

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<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I take some personal decisions of interpretation of what is notoriously the most obscure part of Peirce's theory of signs.

<sup>7</sup> Actually, Peirce wrote that it was « the thump of the muskets on the ground ».

<sup>8</sup> « If a sign produces any further proper significate effect, it will do so through the mediation of the emotional interpretant, and such further effect will always involve an effort. I call it the energetic interpretant. The effort may be a muscular one, as it is in the case of the command to ground arms; but it is much more usually an exertion upon the Inner World, a mental effort. It never can be the meaning of an intellectual concept, since it is a single act, [while] such a concept is of a general nature. (CP 5.475).

Peirce's categories of firstness, secondness and thirdness which are omnipresent and absolutely fundamental in his work, something we cannot do here.

Table 2. Apparent correspondences' between different Peircians catagories.				
Category	Signifier (relation to )	Object (Relation to )	Interpretant (relation to)	Interpretant
Firstness	Qualisign	iconic	Rhematic	Emotional
Secondness	Sinsign	indexical	Dicent	Energetic
Thirdness	Legisign	Symbolic	Argument	Logical

In parallel with this classification, Peirce worked out another classification of interpretants as immediate, dynamical and final. The immediate interpretant is the quality of impression the sign is likely or designed to produce and corresponds to the first impression it generates upon the interpreter.

« I understand the [Immediate Interpretant] to be the total unanalyzed effect that the Sign is calculated to produce; *and I have been accustomed to identify this with the effect the sign first produces* [my emphasis] or may produce upon a mind, without any reflection upon it. » (Peirce, 1909. Letters to Lady Welby.SS 110-1).

The dynamical interpretant is the actual semiotic effect of the sign but distinct from the first impression. As Bergman (2009:120) puts it: “the dynamical interpretant is the concrete effect or interpretation produced by the sign or that which the interpreter is able to draw from the sign.”

The notion of final interpretant is much more difficult to seize. For me, the most usable way to consider it is by starting from the following quotation:

« Suppose I awake in the morning before my wife, and that afterwards she wakes up and inquires, “What sort of a day is it?”[...] The *Immediate Interpretant* is what the Question expresses, all that it immediately expresses, [...] The *Dynamical Interpretant* is the actual effect that it has upon me, its interpreter. But the Significance of it, the *Ultimate*, or *Final, Interpretant* is her *purpose* in asking it, what effect its answer will have as to her plans for the ensuing day. » (Peirce, 1909. Letter to William James, CP 8.314) It is important to stress that, in the statement above, the final interpretant doesn't denote what Peirce's wife has in mind but the clear understanding by Peirce itself of his wife's intention and concern behind the question. This is, for me, the most truly pragmatic way to understand the idea of final

interpretant. The interpretant is itself generally a sign and therefore the semiosis process is possibly infinite as the former interpretant becomes a signifier for a further interpretant and so on. However, this is only partly true for emotional and energetic interpretants, which can sometimes put a halt to an ongoing semiosis.

Finally, we should not confuse the distinction between immediate and dynamical interpretant with the distinction between immediate and dynamical object. The immediate object is that which is present in the sign-relation; the dynamical object is the real object independently of any representation of it. The trichotomy icon-index-symbol refers to the dynamical object, not the immediate one. The immediate object of the better-life index as a sign is the construction of the index with its eleven dimensions, etc., its dynamical object is the “real” quality of life in the OECD countries. The dynamical object determinates the signifier (sign-vehicle) which in turn, determinates the immediate object, but, as Colapietro (1989:17) puts it: “It is only within a context that a dynamic object of any sort can determine its sign; thus, the determination here is always by the object-in-context, the object as part of a field;[...] A sign is always part of a system of signs (see, eg., 4.55); in turn, a system of signs is always embodied in some region of the world. The being of this region is not exhausted in its being an embodiment of signs.”

### The rhetoric of the Better Life Index

With the Peircian categories of semiotics we are now sufficiently (?) equipped to interpret our web page. Note that our interpretants will be different from that of the typical visitor of the site. On the one hand, we have necessarily different “collateral experiences”, on the other hand, she/he is not expected to deconstruct the discourse in order to form her/his own interpretant. It is precisely the function of a semiotic analysis or semiotic criticism to decipher what “effectual interpretant”<sup>9</sup> the semiotic ensemble is planned to produce on the audience of the web site. This boils down to highlighting the rhetorical function of the signs displayed. As a sign-complex, the better-life index web page can be divided in three levels.

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<sup>9</sup> The notion of « effectual interpretant » has been introduced by Peirce in an unpublished draft with the notion of the « intentional » and « communicational » interpretants. « There is the Intentional Interpretant, which is a determination of the mind of the utterer; the Effectual Interpretant, which is a determination of the mind of the interpreter; and the Communicational Interpretant, or say the Cominterpretant, which is a determination of that mind into which the minds of utterer and interpreter have to be fused in order that any communication should take place. This mind may be called the commens. It consists of all that is, and must be, well understood between utterer and interpreter, at the outset, in order that the sign in question should fulfill its function. » (Peirce, 1906, Letters to Lady Welby, E.P. 2. 478).

On the top of the screen, we find a white banner with, on the left, an icon representing a kind of flower and the symbols “OECD. Better Life index”, and, on the right, a menu for navigating in the web site. All the items on the menu are affordances<sup>10</sup> intended to trigger energetic interpretants which correspond to mouse clicks. The sign on the left is a combination of symbolic (“Better Life Index”), iconic (the logo) and indexical (“OCDE”) elements.

On the second floor, we find a sky blue banner with flower-like icons identical to the one on the left of the menu banner. If we look carefully, we see that even if all of them look identical at first sight, they are actually different. They all have eleven petals displayed in the same way, pointing in the same direction, of the same color but differing in length. They are also located at different heights on the banner. Just below each flower, one reads the name of a country so it can be supposed that each flower is telling something about the country whose name lies below and that this something has to do with the length of the petals and with the horizontal position of the flower. The flower-with-a-proper-name sign is composite of iconic and indexical signs. The indexical function is taken on by the name that directs our attention to an existing country. It is to be noted that the indexical function is imperfectly fulfilled since there is no reference to any moment so we don't know for which year(s) the relation is supposed to stand.

The petals whose length differs from flower to flower have a similarity relationship with something about the countries, which is not crystal clear from start. It becomes clear when one notices that the eleven colors of the petals correspond to the colors of the headings in the window headed “France” opened below one of the flowers. There is therefore a one-to-one mapping between the length of the petals and the length of the bars in the corresponding window which themselves have an iconic (similarity) relations with the real conditions of housing, income, etc., in France. On the other hand, there is also an iconic relation between the height of the flower on the banner and the overall score of the country in terms of well-being. The higher the flower, the higher the country's overall well-being score.

The symbolic dimension holds in the fact that in almost all cultures, flowers have a highly symbolic value. They play a role in almost all social rituals and are associated to positive values and virtues. The shape of the flower represented here evokes the daisy, which is associated to maternal love, gentleness and innocence. There is also a symbolic dimension in the layout of all the flowers on the banner. The whole picture is not without evoking a

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<sup>10</sup> Affordance is a concept introduced by the psychologist James J Gibson to designate an action possibility available in the environment to an individual, perceived or not as such by the individual. As used by Norman In « The Psychology of Everyday Things » (1988) it refers to the design of an object that suggests how it should be used.

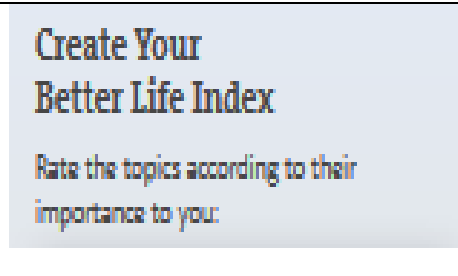
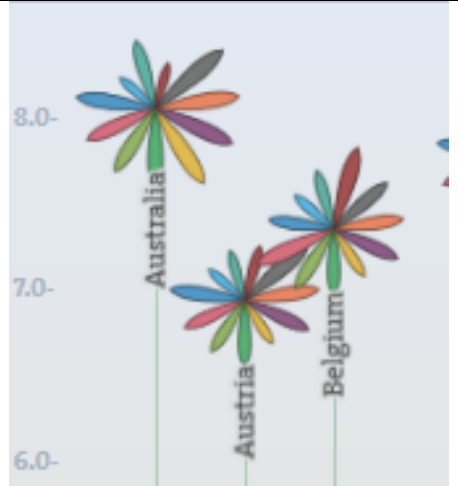


musical stave, each flower-country being like a note in a musical score composed orchestrated by the OECD...

On the same level, at the right of the screen, there is another window with on the top the command "Create your Better Life Index" and below a table of items whose name and color correspond to the ones in the "France" window. They are flanked by what we know to be a "slider" which is an affordance calling for an energetic interpretant.

The first floor is occupied on the left by a column with a text explaining "How's life" and on its right by a changing panel. In this case, it is a map of the world with multiple points of the same colors than the petals showing which color (dimension of well-being) is the most valued in the different countries.

Table 3 summarizes the "semiotic sheet" of the web page.

Table 3. Semiotic sheet of the Better Life Index home page.		
SIGN	REFERENCE	INTERPRETANT
	Symbolic (words)  Indexical ("You")	Energetic
	Symbolic  Iconic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flowers</li> <li>• Vertical spacing</li> <li>• Lengths of petals</li> </ul> Indexical (countries names)	Emotional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Symbolism of flowers</li> <li>• Symbolism of colors (no black or grey)</li> </ul> Energetic (mental)

<h1>How's life?</h1> <p><b>There is more to life than the cold numbers of GDP and economic statistics</b> – This Index allows you to compare well-being across countries, based on 11 topics the OECD has identified as essential, in the areas of material living conditions and quality of life.</p>	<p>Symbolic (words, GDP)</p> <p>Iconic (fonts sizes and styles)</p> <p>Indexical (“you”, “countries”, OECD)</p>	<p>Logical</p>
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In his treatise on rhetoric, Aristotle identified three kinds of means or modes of persuasions (“*pisteis*” in Greek) of the validity of the discourse.

“Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself. Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. » (Rhetoric: 2.3-4.) The personal character of the author that guarantees his credibility is the “*ethos*” (the Greek word for moral character); putting the audience into a certain frame of mind is the “*pathos*” (Greek word for emotion) and the logical proof is in the “*logon*” (language or reason in Greek). Gottweis (2007:242) expanding on this, explains: “...the term *ethos* designates a certain quality of a speaker, but does not refer to any internal attitude or a system of abstract values. *Ethos* is a procedural phenomenon that comes into existence in action; it is a discursive praxis that is based on exchange and interaction and depends on the perception of the audiences.”

I submit we can find the three kinds of rhetoric “*pisteis*” at work in the OECD web page. The *logon* is of course enlisted in the text on “How's Life”. The iconic and symbolic character of the layout of flowers dancing on the blue sky background appeal to emotions and aesthetic feelings of the visitor and correspond closely to what Aristotle called “*pathos*”. The *ethos* dimension is more difficult to identify and the interpretation is here certainly more subjective than for the two others ones. However, I surmise that the invitation to “Create your own better life index” is a way to gain the confidence of the visitor in the good will and faith of the OECD. Such a “participatory affordance” – to make use of Kress’ (2010:144) well worded expression –strengthens the credibility of the “rhetor” by opening the possibility for the interpreter to become co-author of the discourse.

Let us take stock of all this. It seems clear that the OECD is eager to sell us its index and in order to do so, is ready to make use of all the rhetorical potential of the various semiotic

resources and affordances available in the www protocol. This is a sign (again) that its purpose is to generate “dynamical interpretants” that goes beyond the “immediate interpretants” produced by the literal understanding of the discourse. Of course, there can be no “evidence” here but only credible hypothesis. Mine is that the dynamical interpretant the OECD is anxious to produce is something like what follows:

- OECD is not the technocratic institution you may think it is. GDP is not only what matters for it. All of us, the bright people here at OECD we are not only concerned with reducing public expenditures and helping business to make more profit, we are also really concerned with your well-being, of all of you. In order to do so we have worked out a sophisticated index based on 11 eleven dimensions and measured it for all the OECD member countries.
- You don't need to understand how this is done exactly but you can see what comes out. It is easy to grasp. Your country is like a pretty flower, blossoming under a blue sky alongside the other members of the club in the cheerful meadows of OECD.
- As you can see, life is going well for all OECD members (thanks to the wise advices we give to your governments), even if it can be somewhat better for some than for others. Nothing is wrong, only relatively good. As the name we gave to our index makes clear, the problem is not to live well, this is already achieved, but to live still better. This is what we are working hard to bring about.
- This index is yours: it is not only about you, it can be made still more yours by letting you play with the weightings. Of course, you cannot change the hard core (the different indicators used for each dimension) nor calculate the overall score (you don't have the required level of technical expertise for this), but your opinion is welcome.

This is my personal “dynamical interpretant”. I came to it through a process of critical analysis on what I perceived as the “immediate interpretant”, i.e. the quality of impression the signs are likely or designed to produce. Its ironical tone testifies for its emotional character. (That it is also an energetic one is demonstrated enough by the paper you have in hands).

As for the ultimate or final interpretant, it will be revealed to us step by step, through the observation and analysis of the evolution of the “better-life index” and of its political and sociological consequences, a process necessarily led by a community of inquirers.

A final word is in order: even if the object of the whole web site is the well-being as indicated by the better-life index, the object of the opening page which we have considered here is not well-being but the index as such. Actually, the immediate object is the better-life index as it is

presented here, the dynamical one being the real index with all its determinations which is much richer and complex than what is said about it in the analyzed web page.

### The first composite index of well-being in the world

These conclusions get clearer when we compare the OECD better-life index to what can be considered the first composite public index in the world: the Lorenzetti's frescoes known as the "Allegories of the good and the bad government". The six frescoes have been painted on the walls of the "*Palazzo Pubblico*" of Siena by Ambrogio Lorenzetti around 1338-1339, on behalf of the nine officials that were then governing the city.

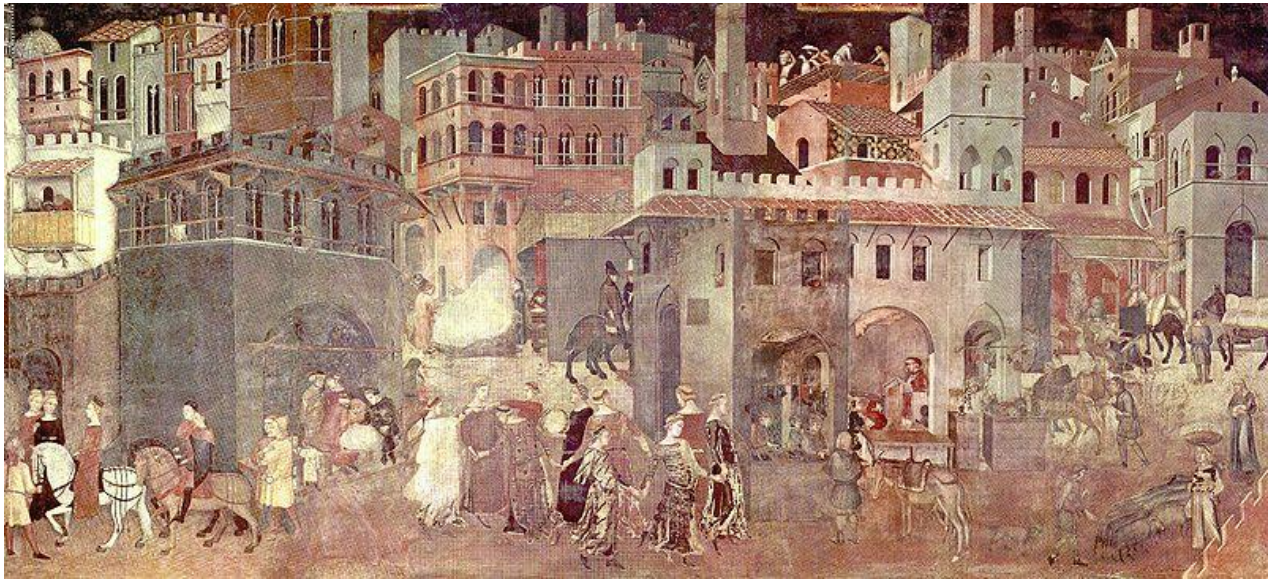


Fig. 2. "The effects of good government in the city". Fresco by Lorenzetti in Siena.

They occupy three of the four walls of the "*Sala dei nove*"<sup>11</sup> (Salon of Nine or Council Room) of the Palazzo Pubblico, where the nine ruling officials of the merchant oligarchy of Siena – who commissioned Lorenzetti – used to sit in. The six paintings are the following: Allegory of Good Government, Allegory of Bad Government, Effects of Bad Government in the City, Effects of Good Government in the City and Effects of Good Government in the Countryside. The fresco called the "Allegory of the good government" illustrates with different characters and symbols the private and public virtues: Justice as a blinded woman with a balance, Wisdom holding a book in her hand, Concord symbolized by a carpenter's plane, etc. This fresco has given room for many interpretations, the most renowned being those given by the political philosopher and historian Quentin Skinner. We will not even try to present them here, let alone to discuss them because we will concentrate on the fresco devoted to the effects of good government in the city, as it suffices for our demonstration. On


<sup>11</sup>Also called "*Sala della pace*".





the other hand, we are authorized to do so by Boucheron who, contrary to Skinner who privileges the “allegories” over the “effects”, focuses mainly on the latter and argues that it is the effects that give meaning to the allegories rather than the other way round. The modernity and political efficacy of the paintings lies for him in the exposure of the consequences and outcomes of public policies, more than in the symbolization of principles and maxims.




« L’efficacité réelle du message politique adressé par la fresque de Lorenzetti réside bien dans la représentation des effets. C’est elle qui, par les moyens propres de la peinture dont Ambrogio Lorenzetti joue avec virtuosité, frappe les imaginations, provoque les émotions, impose une vision. Or, cette vision concerne moins les principes du bon gouvernement que ses effets concrets sur la ville et son espace, les gestes et les pratiques de ceux qui la font vivre, les aspirations qui les guident et les dangers qui les guettent. » (Boucheron 2005 : 1198-1199).

Boucheron invites us to consider the four frescoes on the effects as guidelines for do-it-yourself assessments of how’s life in Siena (both in town and in the countryside) and thereafter of how good or bad is the government. Indeed, every Siena’s citizen going to the Palazzo Pubblico for some business was in position to contemplate the frescoes and make his/her mind about the closeness between what was pictured on the walls and what he/she was personally experiencing. So, she/he was in a position not so different of the visitor of the OECD Better-Life index web page, looking for the date and figures for her/his own country.

If we look carefully at “The effects of good government”, we will find many indexical signs pointing to the equivalent of the 11 dimensions of the better-life index. Of course, the signs being images are essentially of an iconic nature but their function is indexical: it is to attract the attention of the visitor to such or such symptom of well-being or of misery. I believe it is not contrived to find a correspondence between the several scenes in the frescoes and the eleven dimensions of the better life index. I try this in table 4.

Table 4. The eleven dimensions of the Better Life Index in Lorenzetti’s fresco.		
HOUSING		Masons and carpenters working on a roof.

INCOME		<p>A goldsmith</p> <p>No beggars (contrary to the fresco of the effects of the bad government)</p>
JOBS		<p>Merchants, goldsmith, masons, a taylor, teacher...</p>
COMMUNITY		<p>« Dancers were common for springtime rituals; they also act as a metaphor for peaceful commonwealth in this painting. »</p> <p>(Wikipedia page on the fresco)</p>
EDUCATION		<p>A teacher in front of his pupils.</p>
ENVIRONMENT		<p>The fresco on the effect of good government on the countryside (<i>contado</i>). To be contrasted to the effect of bad government also on the countryside.</p>
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT		<p>The frescoes as such in the Palazzo Pubblico.</p>
HEALTH		<p>Everybody looks healthy and active. Weddings are indicators of demographic dynamism and a prospect of births to come.</p>

<p>LIFE SATISFACTION</p>		<p>According to Skinner, these are professional dancers. Their dance expresses the victory of joy and happiness (“<i>gaudium</i>”) over sadness and melancholia (“<i>tristitia</i>”).</p>
<p>SAFETY</p>		<p>Contrast with the effects of bad government in the city.</p> <p>The doors of the city are open to the country. They are closed in the two frescoes on bad government.</p>
<p>WORK-LIFE BALANCE</p>		<p>Although the city is busy and active, there is no impression of stress. You find people playing dice in the tavern, a bridal processions, etc.</p>

What makes the discourses of the OECD and of Lorenzetti comparable is the fact that both make a heavy use of non-verbal (iconic and indexical) semiotic resources and also, as we have seen, that their underlying conceptions of well-being are not so far one of the other. Notably, there is no mention of the importance of religion in the OECD index, which is understandable in our age of materialism and secular hedonism but – and this is much more surprising – , there are neither any religious sign in Lorenzetti’s paintings. The “allegories” comprise only secular figures and the “effects” are totally devoid of manifestation of religious life. This would be enough to ascertain Lorenzetti’s modernity. This being said, they are quite different on many aspects.

1. First of all, while the OECD’s discourse intertwines the three Aristotelian “*pisteis*” of rhetoric (*logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*) on the same page, the separation of Lorenzetti’s discourse between the allegories, on the one hand, and the effects on the other hand, allows him to concentrate all rhetorical artifices in the “allegories”, restraining himself to a purely factual and objective (“indexical”) treatment of the indicators in the “effects”. Therefore, the entire interpreting endeavor is concentrated on the

- “allegories” and this is exactly what so many commentators have been and are still busy doing. On the contrary, there is nothing to interpret in the “effects”: there is no difference between the dynamical interpretant and the immediate one, to speak Peirce’s language. This leaves the interpreting effort to be concentrated on the difference between the immediate objects of the paintings (the representation of daily life scenes, characters and activities) and their dynamical objects: their correspondence in real life.
2. With the OECD index, the citizen can just check whether the quality of life in her/his country is higher or lower than in other OECD countries. With the help of Lorenzetti’s frescoes, the Siena’s citizen could try to locate the city well-being on a scale going from the worst situation (“effects of bad government”) to the best one (“effects of good government”). Siena is not compared to Pisa, Lucca or Firenze, but to positive and negative possibilities. The latter criterion is plainly normative, the former is only relative.
  3. In both case, weightings are attributed to the different dimensions of well-being. In the OECD case, the weighting is optional for the citizen but explicit; in the Siena’s case it is unavoidable but implicit. Likewise, in Siena, it is the citizen who put all the information together to form an overall assessment.
  4. The OECD index can have only positive values. There can be no bad government, but only more or less good ones. On the contrary, life and governments can be bad according to Lorenzetti.
  5. The better-life index makes no difference between well-being in town and well-being in rural areas. For Lorenzetti, even if the dimensions of well-being are the same in both environments, the signs (indicators) are different.

## Conclusion

In public policy, “facts” or “evidence” never come naked. They are always dressed in more or less shimmering clothes, hiding more or less the nudity of their skeleton. Far from being the pure rational scaffoldings of the “logos”, they fully participate in the ethos and pathos aspects of policy rhetoric. As Kress (2010: 45) put it “rhetoric is the politics of communication” and communication on public indicators is as rhetorical as it is political. Because public indicators are elements of the dialogue between policy-makers, experts and the public, their communication involves a blending of logos, ethos and pathos. The argumentative or interpretive turn in policy analysis has rightly highlighted the non-rationalist elements of policy-making. However, they may have given too much importance to language at the expense of others kinds of signs such as images, drawings, or numbers. As Gottweis (2007: 239) maintains : « ...much of the analysis in this tradition pays only scant attention to



phenomenas such as passion and emotions in policy making, probably because of an understanding of discourse and argumentation that reduces argumentation to the operation of logos rather than a tendency to integrate pathos and ethos into argumentation.» What part each of the three “*pisteis*” takes in the process of communication and the reception by the public is a concern for interpretive policy analyzers. Because this process typically makes use of a whole range of semiotic resources, its interpretation asks for more than a “linguistic turn”, it needs a “semiotic” turn. However, in the same way that rhetoric is an art, semiotic analysis or, better, semiotic critique, as the reverse-engineering of multi-modal discourses is one also. Peirce’s theory of semiosis is one toolbox amongst others<sup>12</sup> that can help here but as in all hermeneutic process the “collateral experience” and cultural background of the interpreter will always play a significant role. It is only through the collaboration of a community of inquirers with their own different cultural and disciplinary background that we will come close to the final interpretant, if any.

How subjective and imperfect our own interpretation of these two pieces of communication on public well-being and the way to assess it, we hope it shows that there can be more or less democratic ways to play the game and that the more recent enterprise is not necessarily the more inspiring in that respect. Lorenzetti doesn’t try to persuade the citizens that life in Siena is as good as possible but make use of his talent to help them make their own opinion, based on facts about the city and its countryside observable by anybody. He put his mastery of signs at the service of public participation and citizens’ autonomy. OECD, on the contrary, seems to try seducing us so that our relation with its index is more the one of a consumer than of a collaborator, despite the offered possibility to introduce or own weights.

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<sup>12</sup> We think of Saussurian structural (dyadic) semiology or the more recent « Systemic-Functional-Multimodal discourse analysis” taking its inspiration from M. Halliday’s functional linguistic.

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