



10th International LAB Meeting - Winter Session 2008

European Ph.D. on  
Social Representations and Communication  
At the Multimedia LAB & Research Center, Rome-Italy

Social Representations in Action and Construction  
in Media and Society

"Developing Meta-Theoretical Approach to  
Social Representations Literature:  
the contribution of Italian Scholars belonging to  
the International So.Re.Com THEMatic NETwork"

From 26th January - 3rd February 2008

[http://www.europhd.eu/html/\\_onda02/07/12.00.00.00.shtml](http://www.europhd.eu/html/_onda02/07/12.00.00.00.shtml)

Scientific Material

European Ph.D

on Social Representations and Communication

International Lab Meeting Series 2005-2008

[www.europhd.psi.uniroma1.it](http://www.europhd.psi.uniroma1.it)

[www.europhd.net](http://www.europhd.net)

[www.europhd.it](http://www.europhd.it)

Icon and symbol :  
Two sides of the coin in the investigation of social representations.\*

*Annamaria Silvana de Rosa & Robert Farr*

“We know more and more – through psychoanalysis, sociology and anthropology and through reflections on the media – that the life of man and of society is linked as much to images as to more tangible realities (...). The images are not only those embodied in iconographic and artistic productions, but extend to the universe of mental images (...). There is no thought without image. The images that interest the historian are collective images mixed up with the vicissitudes of history : they are formed, change, are transformed” (Le Goff 1985).

The “monotheistic” option of discursive psychology : “In the beginning was the Word”.

In the last ten years great emphasis has been given to the “*rhetorical aspects of social thinking*” (Billig 1987, 1991) and to “*discourse analysis*” (see Potter & Wetherell 1987, Potter 1996) even though such labels include many and various methodological approaches such as the analysis of texts and repertoires, recording of radio and television programmes, transcriptions of interviews or conversations, etc. Paradoxically this field of studies – starting from an interesting critique of the ontology of cognitivism – has generated a new form of ontology, based on a language-centred monotheism. This is not simply a question of method, but – according to these authors – a more substantial theoretical option.

---

\*A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the 3rd International Conference on Social Representations (Aix-en-Provence, 27-30 Sept. 1996) together with Andrew Smith. Since then, the first author has had several opportunities to discuss the chapter with Robert Farr. Unfortunately due to ill-health it has not been possible for us to complete the paper together, so as first author I take full responsibility for the final version.

The extreme consequence of the discourse analytic thesis is the tautological identification between discourse, reality and subjects : a perspective which implicitly adopts an ontological and dogmatic presupposition based on the religious statement “In the beginning was the Word” (Word = God). Although on several occasions we have maintained – and still maintain – an interest in a constructive integration of the theoretical and methodological prospects of discourse analysis in the wider framework of the Social Representations theory, we hold this “monotheistic” option to be excessively limiting. If within the human species the word is a privileged channel for defining, objectifying and constructing reality, nevertheless reality cannot be exclusively defined by means of the word : images, sounds, conducts, rites... are other ways of generating and communicating “multiform” aspects (not necessarily complementary and, in some cases, antagonistic) of social representations.

In this paper, among the many expressive-communicative media (which include also the various systems of gestural communication, oral language, action, rituals, sounds, etc.), reference is made solely to the image and to the word-text, in order to highlight their specificity and to suggest that the study of social representation should not be limited to listening to the words and texts, but should also be open to the discovery of meanings and symbols communicated through images.

*The prevention about the image as “master of error and falsity”.*

This interest of ours springs from the awareness that, despite the fact that the image can form an important source of communication, Western thought has often undervalued it considering it as “master of error and falsity” (Durand 1960). The cultural and academic world's persistent prejudice against the image is proved by the scanty attention given to it by philosophy (see Durand 1960, 1964 ; Dagognet 1996), by sociology (Barak 1987), as well as by our particular sector of studies, namely social psychology. \*

*\*(add as footnote)*

**There are obviously interesting exceptions. It suffices to mention the contributions of the historian Jean Claude Bonne (1996) and of the researchers of the E.H.E.S.S in Paris working in the Group studying Historical Anthropology of the Western Middle Ages, of authors engaged in the sphere of visual anthropology (e.g. Durand, 1964, 1969, 1994; Mead, 1980; Edwards 1992; Faeta 1995) and of visual sociology (e.g. Goffman, 1979; Gauthier, 1996; Mattioli, 1991), of art historians and intellectuals concerned with iconological studies, especially cultivated at the Warzburg Institute (e.g. Panofsky, 1955; Gombrich, 1956; Saxl, 1957; Baxandall, 1972) and, finally, with regard to the disciplinary sector closest to our social psychology interests, the contributions of Moscovici (1984a,b;**

**1994), Bélisle (1984), de Rosa (1987, 1995b), Gilman (1988), Schurmans (1990), Farr (1994), Schoeneman et al. (1994), and Ullan (1995).**

The disrepute of the image in the sphere of the specialised disciplines highlights a paradox : in a society where visual information is winning more and more ground from the written and spoken word, studies devoted to the communicative specificity of this expressive medium are very rare. In fact, although the clouding of the “Gutenberg galaxy” by the “civilisation of the image” is before the eyes of us all (Cohen-Séat 1962, Eco 1964, Durand 1994), most specialised research in mass communications and social psychology shows the existence of a deep-rooted verbal-centrism.

Exemplary in this respect is the theoretical and methodological approach of the authors who are identified as theorists and practitioners of *discursive psychology*. Focussing their attention solely on analysis of discourse, these authors, in fact, deny that images can fulfil any communicative function that may be even remotely compared to that of language, and, consequently, also deny that they can constitute a specific form of communication and objectification of thought processes that are developed within a society.

Moreover, reference is made to the image in different and, at times, non specific ways. The image is used mainly as a synonym of “mental image”, as an “*overall impression of diverse factors of information which produce a judgement about a social object*” (Doise 1978 : 42). This “mentalist” conception at times links the notion of image to that of representation under a purely “ideational” profile (image-based thinking) and has made possible a smooth transition of many researchers in the 60’s and 70’s from the construct of image, then very popular in psycho-social research, to the more dynamic and multidimensional one of social representation. It also recurs frequently in the writings of Moscovici : both in the form of his explicit recognition of the inspiration received from the contributions of developmental psychology and of psychoanalysis (in particular the studies of Piaget on the representation of the child's world and of Freud on the theories of infantile sexuality) in the reflection on the processes of “collective ideation” (see Moscovici 1984d) and as a declared interest for that iconic dimension that is beyond the word, but which is also always a way of thought, even if a way of “thinking by images”. A more recent exemple of this sense of the image (anchored to the ideative side only) can be found in the work of Emiliani and Molinari (1996) on social representations as reciprocal images of children, mothers and teachers.

Reference to the image not in purely ideative terms, but as the exteriorised figurative language, and the *product* of social representation is much rarer : though see, for example, Farr's contribution (1994). In this study, the author uses posters produced by various organisations of volunteers to investigate the reification-objectification of social representations of handicap, limiting its interest to decoding the figurative-textual messages, without enlarging the study to their reception by the target and to the possible representations activated. In a later contribution

(Farr 1998a), images of the Earth, as perceived from the Moon produced by the astronauts of the Apollo 11 mission, have been presented. These images are used as interesting instances of the process of “objectification” in term of Moscovici’s theory of social representations in the light of different cosmologies (Einstein’s *versus* Newton’s conception of the relationship between time and space).

In other, equally sporadic, cases recourse is made to the image as the expressive *vehicle* of social representations. In the study of representations of illness and mental disease (de Rosa 1987), for instance, or the study of new emerging representations, such as the nuclear question (Nigro, Galli and Poderico 1988) or again in the study of representations linked to history, as in the study of Uzzell and Blud (1993) of the representations that children form of Vikings through museum and school visits.

Only a few studies adopt a dialogical model of social representations and communication : for example, in her study of social representations transmitted and activated by Benetton's advertisements, de Rosa was interested to the image both as *source* and as *product* of social representation (de Rosa 1998, de Rosa and Smith 1998).

Verbal-centrism prevails in the literature on social representations no less than in the wider scenario of social psychology, which has delegated interest in figurative language to developmental or clinical psychology, to the studies of perception, or the psychology of art. However, such research has generally been limited to a more perceptive than semiotic type. This tendency has a harmful effect for two kinds of reasons :

a) The first is that images and words are communication systems provided with different properties, and should, accordingly, be considered as specific channels of the genesis, transmission and objectification of the social representations. If social representations are “as much in people's minds as in the media” (Farr 1994), if the study of the ways of communication allows the reconstruction of the nature, structure and dynamics of social representations, then the scholar's duty is to consider all the possible channels of communication and not only the verbal one.

b) The second is that the verbal-centric approach implicitly denies the impact of the new communication technologies, based on an “hypertrophic” use of images (audio-visual and multi-medial technologies, internet, etc.) and of their sphere of application (advertising, video-games, work-video, etc.) on our socio-cognitive processes of representation of reality (to an ever growing extent of a purely “virtual” reality). Although these technologies can not be considered as a pure vehicle of social representations, the possibility must not be undervalued of their effect on the development of new forms of rationality and on the genesis of new ways of social representations, like that which Moscovici (1995) recently defined as “cyber-representations”.

This is one of the reason for assuming the peculiar *mediated* nature of interaction in virtual reality as a privileged field of studies for social scientists interested in communication studies. They should abandon the traditional linear theories of influence, focussed on a source influencing

a specific target, and try to identify new scientific paradigms useful for understanding how communication develops within the nested nature of the world wide web, the hyper-textual character of its contents and the flexible strategies of their users-co-producers, who are in most cases also self-learners.

On the basis of the considerations expressed so far, the image can be considered at one and the same time :

- as a source able to activate social representations or favour the development of new social representations ;
- as a product of social representations, i.e. an iconic-symbolic synthesis, a condensed materialisation of one social representation, a direct expression of the objectification process, in other terms as itself as a social representation ;
- as a medium, a specific form of transmission, linked to differentiated channels (traditionally the visual arts, but also television, cinema, photography, new audio-visual technologies, internet etc.), through which new or pre-existing social representations are conveyed.

This distinction is, however, merely of a didactic character. The image has a multiple nature and implies jointly occurring and simultaneous processes of genesis, transmission and objectification of social representations, indissoluble even in the bonds highlighted by the various theories of communication. Precisely, due to the structural indissolubility of these three modalities implicit in the image, any empirical research that wishes to have recourse to them, in the paradigmatic framework of social representations, must take into account the complexity of this interlacement and, therefore, integrate research models and theoretical-interpretative prospects which exist as separate domains of knowledge ; for example, research centred on the analysis of the structure and content of the image (semiotics), on the procedural constraints of the various transmission channels with regard to the cognitive processes activated in the subject's mind (cognitive psychology), on the short and long term effects on mass and social groups (sociology of communication), or on the study of the image as source-stimulus of systems of opinion and attitudes in the target (psychosocial researches).

*The different properties of the iconic and textual communication systems.*

This analysis of the literature shows the existence of two trends of interest : one mainly centred on the ways with which meaning is expressed in the two communication systems ; the other, tending to demonstrate that the differences concern, not only the properties of the medium, but also the type of meaning expressed. As the medium's nature and principles of functioning vary, so, at least potentially, does the range of meanings that can be expressed. In short, the first approach is focused more on the “transmission” side, whereas the second is focused mainly on the “content” side and on its interactions with the “transmission channels”. This distinction is

devoid of meaning for scholars of social representations interested both in the content side (and of their symbolic range) and in the processes present in the various communications systems. It is precisely this double register of simultaneous interests that differentiates and identifies the theory of social representations from the various micro-paradigms elaborated by cognitive psychology (even when these employ the denomination of social cognition).

Various studies show that the two expressive *media* have different properties. For example, a peculiar characteristic of the iconic code is that of possessing a privileged link with emotion and with memory (Paivio 1971, 1986, Lutz & Lutz 1977). In addition, although it is perhaps an exaggeration to assert that the image has a “universal” character, it is, nevertheless, evident that it possesses, in comparison with the word, the gift of a greater intelligibility linked to its capacity for crossing, even if relatively, geographical and cultural frontiers. In fact, whereas the image is, at a certain level of conventionalisation of signs (see for example pictograms), understandable to all, independently of nationality and education, understanding of words is, as Saussure noted (1916), very closely linked to context. The Curse of Babel acts against the word.

This effect of greater interpretability stems from the paradoxically conventional and referential nature of the image. Although it reflects the existence of a cultural code, it is, nevertheless, bound by the characteristics of the object contrary to the linguistic sign.

Also from a phylogenetic viewpoint, iconic language is older than written language. The paintings of Cro Magnon (the population that precisely due to its capacity for developing social communications systems survived, whereas that of Neanderthal, although better equipped physically, disappeared) “represent perhaps the first attempt at storing information, a sort of anticipation of writing” (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1989). A key factor in this communication system, which marks a crucial breakthrough in the process of civilisation, is represented by the development of a shared system of the meanings of images (heralding hieroglyphics), socially understandable, communicable and learnable by heart.

For different reasons, their greater intelligibility in comparison with the word does not concern only images of “denotative” character, but also “symbolic” images. Notwithstanding that a certain polysemy of the image on the side of connotations is undeniable – to the point that Barthes (1982) attributes to the verbal portions of multi-modal texts the function of “limiting the projective power of the image” – it is, nevertheless, equally undeniable, even without having recourse to theories that go back to the archetype concept, that some representations (highly codified) are able to convey, independently of the spatial and temporal context, an easily recognisable common meaning. One thinks, for example, of the symbol of the dove carrying the olive branch from the biblical episode of Noah’s Ark, as an expression of peace and harmony. Or one can think of the books of emblems, very widespread in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whose images “could easily cross the linguistic frontiers, even when not written in an international language like Latin” (Ginzburg 1986 : 115).

*The transcultural nature of the image.*

The transcultural nature of the image would seem to bear out (at least from certain aspects) the superiority of this medium over the textual one. It is not by chance that some communications strategies directed to culturally multiform targets are characterised by the prevalent use of images. One thinks, for example, of the strategy of Benetton's advertising which, to fuel a positive representation of its trade mark, has almost exclusively used symbolic images. The logo of the company can become associated with photographs and images about controversial global issues such as race, AIDS/HIV, pollution, death penalty, etc. (see de Rosa *forthcoming*).

As Giddens (1990) has suggested, the principal characteristic of the late modernity is the speed with which global issues become global and local issues become global. In the case of multi-national companies the question arises of creating a corporate culture out of diverse national cultures. It was Hofstede (1980) who first drew attention to this problem and, more specifically, to individualism and collectivism as cultural consequences. In the case of IBM Asian forms of collectivism are more important than the collectivism of the late Cold War. For a multi-national company to become a truly global company it too, like the trading in shares, needs three key centres roughly eight hours apart in terms of time. One such centre will be Asian (and hence, likely to be collectivist), another European (and, hence, likely to be individualist) whilst the third might be either individualist or collectivist depending on whether it is located in North or South America. Hofstede's study is of practical relevance to the needs of multi-national companies in the context of a global economy. To create a corporate culture it is necessary to incorporate both individualism and collectivism. (This is consistent with Farr's (1998b) treatment of Bronfenbrenner's *Two worlds of childhood : US and URSS*).

There are a number of strategies whereby a company which is national can become global. We have already mentioned the Benetton case, which has become a cultural phenomenon in advertising. We may provide two other less controversial cases : the new corporate image of British Airways and the advertising campaign of the San Pellegrino Italian mineral water, evoking multi-national scenarios.

About the first example, it is evident that it is highly appropriate that an airline should have a global strategy. The British Airways advertising campaign about being the world's favourite airline follows more or less conventional advertising wisdom and prepares the ground for its claim to be a global, rather than merely a national, airline. The novelty of the change in its corporate image arises from the requirement of removing the Union Jack from the tailplanes of their fleet of aircraft. It makes no commercial sense, in the late twentieth century, to be flying the flag around the empire. The ethnic art from around the world which the airline commissioned is replacing the flag on the tailplanes of their fleet. The message is that the airline is no longer a national airline, but a global giant which is sensitive to the ethnic diversity of the world in which it makes its profits. In some cases the "local" dimension not only reflects the culture of a people



or a particular area, but it may be individualised for celebrating the talent and the imagination of one of his artist. All that remains of the Union Jack are red, white and blue streamers on the tailplane of Concorde which is an Anglo-French joint venture and which could be taken also as the French tricolour.

The second example – taken from the San Pellegrino Italian factory – shows the similar strategy of achieving a global commercial strategy by integrating local multi-cultural scenarios. These are represented by the selection of the exclusive restaurants clearly labelled with their name (Maison d'Alsace, Paris ; Le Cirque Restaurant, New York ; Tenmasa Restaurant, Tokyo ; Kables Restaurant, Sydney ; Le Select Restaurant, Havana ; etc.) associated with the beautiful landscape and prototypical landscape of the famous capital cities in different continents. These international places appear in the transparency of the pure mineral water in the typical San Pellegrino green bottle, which is also clearly marked with its brand including the historical location of the factory (San Pellegrino Terme, Milano) and its date of foundation (1899), associating the local product with the intercontinental symbols for a global market. Contrary to the Benetton phenomenon, in this case the form of advertising is quite traditional : the advert combines the image of the product itself with images and short text useful for inducing the “connotative transfer” effect identified by Barthes (exclusive restaurants may induce the idea of being an exclusive person in consuming this Italian/international product in any part of the world). However the self-explaining evidence of the images make the text purely redundant and the meaning of the adverts would remain the same without the text.

*The “transhistoric” character of the symbolic images and the role of the iconic code for the social memory.*

A distinctive characteristic of iconic formulae is that of transmitting, in different contexts, relatively unchanged meanings. Often, in fact, images, although arising in specific social and cultural contexts, are presented, relatively unchanged in their meanings, in diverse spatial and temporal contexts.

The “transhistoric” character of the symbolic image (Bonne 1996) offers the researcher a fertile ground for a comparative study of “mentality” and of culture, which would not be possible through the sole analysis of the verbal texts, more sensitive to the immediate historic context and incapable (as we shall see subsequently) of expressing vast portions of meaning expressible, instead, through “carriers” of an iconic type. One thinks, for example of the vast iconographic repertoire that conveys, beyond the temporal and spatial limitations, a representation of madness connoted in stigmatising terms of danger and deviance (see de Rosa 1987, 1995, Gilman 1988, Sheef 1966, Schoeneman *et al.* 1994).

Further the image has been attributed, with the power of a *naturalisation*. Barthes, in *Rhetoric of Images* (1982) maintains that the mechanism of images – in our society – is absolutely similar to that of the myth : it serves to authenticate an ideology, to hide it behind the illusion of a nature.

The image, in fact, as *registration* apparently faithful to a reality, “provides the means for masking the meaning constructed under the appearance of the given meaning” : it “naturalises the symbolic message”, “renders the semantic stratagem of the connotation innocent”, transforming “a system of values into a system of facts”.

The image possess, therefore, the power of *hypostatization*: it transforms concept into substance, the conceived into what is perceived, the abstract into the concrete, the interpretation of the “thing” into the “thing” in itself.

In virtue of this property, *the code of iconic representation can be considered as a specific and privileged means of expression of beliefs and of “irresistible” representations, deeply rooted in our social memory.* It fulfils, as the iconologist Mitchell (1986) and many other scholars uphold, a fundamental function carried out by any system of ideological representation : that of “concealing” its historical and conventional nature under the guise of the evidence and of the objectivity<sup>1</sup>. Contrary to the word, the image, does not *arbitrarily* represent a concept, contrary to argument (eldest sister of the word) it does not establish the validity, in logical or quasi-logical terms, of an idea or of a thesis : the image “shows”, it presents as “*obvious*”, as “*it was always thus*”, what, in fact, is an ideological construction, determined by history and by society. The user of the media image, perceives it naïvely, not as something that refers conventionally to something else, but as a “presence” : as the “natural” representation of an objective fact.

It is not, therefore, by chance that the image, and the objectification process that produces it, occupies so much space in the economy of social representations. Social representations, in fact, express the beliefs and assumptions of society, but conceal their conventional, and arbitrary character, under the attribute of universality and objectivity ; they are, thus, perceived by the groups that carry them as a “natural” representation (we might say “ontologic”) of social reality. The analogic character of the image (the photograph in fact says to us “look how real I am”, and is, at the same time, a mirror in which are written the values of our society), makes it, in fact, particularly adapted to the representation of social stereotypes, of the “irresistible beliefs”, rooted in the deepest dimensions of our collective memory (images and stereotypes share the same paradoxical nature : they are the product of a history, but conceal their historical and conventional origin, under the attribute of objectivity).

Numerous authors sustain that a means of communication is never an “empty recipient” in which to “drop” a predefined content. Among the content and its means of expression there is, in fact, a complex relationship. In addition to variations in the *medium* (of its nature and of its

---

<sup>1</sup>“Ideology is a system of symbolic representation that reflects an historical situation (...) and which serves to conceal the historical character and the prejudices of that system under the appearance of naturalness and universality” (Mitchell 1986).

working principles), there are also variations in the way in which the content is received, and the type of content expressed : the “putting into shape” through language, image or other expressive procedures, is itself a meaning-producing operation ; the *medium*, is not limited to a mere “neutral” function of translation, but intervenes actively in the construction of the meanings (Bonne 1996, Gauthier 1992). The instrument, in fact, does not merely possess communicative properties (it is not, as is often understood, a simple transmission channel), but possesses also the “heuristic” properties of articulating the meaning.

Although the idea of non translatability is not universally accepted in semiotic spheres (Barthes maintains that there do not exist meanings that are not nameable), it is, nevertheless, undeniable, in our opinion, that the iconic medium often makes it possible to convey, inside one and the same communicative context, the semantic contents, antagonistic or complementary vis-à-vis those expressed through words.

*Some methodological implications.*

The principle of the close relationship between medium of expression and content expressed, has, for the social representations scholar, important implications on the theoretical and methodological side.

By accepting this principle, it becomes necessary, in fact, to focus attention not on a single *medium*, but on a number of expressive *media*. Each of them has, in fact, at least potentially, the capacity of expressing differentiated (contradictory or complementary) aspects of the social representations. Accordingly, each of these “channels” forms an autonomous source of knowledge for the scholar. The “syncretic” visual-verbal texts proposed by the press, by advertising and by television are, in fact, conceivable as a “stereophonic” spectacle in which the autonomous language of the image often creates a new meaning which is not necessarily written in the verbal text. Gilman (1988), for example, has shown that the iconic portions of journalistic articles and non commercial publicity frequently convey stigmatising representations of the Aids victim that are not expressed through the verbal code. Similarly, Shoeman *et al.* (1994) have demonstrated that the images that illustrate psychiatric texts often convey, unconsciously, a representation of the mentally ill person connoted in stereotyped terms set against a “scientific” and emotionally “neutral” representation conveyed through the verbal text.

Given that both medium and the meanings expressed may vary, and that, as Eco maintains (1968), “*it is a mistake to believe that every act of communication is based on a language similar to the codes of the verbal language*”, it follows that the researchers, to obtain information on the “multiform” nature of the social representation, must use detection instruments based on various codes : for example, including both iconic and verbal. But even when focussing only on the verbal code, it would be necessary, nevertheless, to consider that argument is not the sole medium of expression of a social representation (a thesis implicit in the definition of social representation as a *discursive*

*configuration*) : mental associations, narrations, replies obtained through projective techniques, scales of social distance, etc. are equally valid means for studying potentially diversified socio-cognitive dimensions (de Rosa 1995, Rouquette 1994).

*By way of example : to change the Party's name and image transforming its identity.*

To conclude, rather than refer to one of our past or present studies that have devoted attention to the iconic aspects of social representation, both as *source* and as *medium* and *product*, we would like to draw, from the Italian political-institutional situation, an example that illustrates the heuristic value of the power of symbols, whether verbal or iconic, with regard to a representation of a political identity in transformation. Although no specific research have been made of this argument, it seems to us that the change of the emblem and name of the Italian Communist Party enables, through a concrete case, the need to be demonstrated for an in-depth study on the role of the image and of the symbolic reification in the genesis and in the transformation of a social representation (a role of *objectification* which would be overlooked if attention were focused solely on the study of the discourse).

Before arguing in favour of a thesis, it is, however, necessary to describe the political phases that have characterised the change (probably not yet concluded) of the main Italian left-wing party. Phases that bear witness to a progressive modification of the traditional social representation of the left, still linked to the values of communism, and the “putting into shape” of a new social representation, more fully anchored in the traditions of European socialism.

Starting from the assumption that the institution of a new party, or its radical transformation, can provide information on the construction in progress of a new social representation, we shall briefly describe the most important stages that have marked the birth, out of the ashes of the P.C.I., of new political subjects.

In short, the most significant stages that have led to the transformation of the name, the emblem, and the political trends of the P.C.I. are as follows :

#### **1989 : from the PCI to the “thing”**

12 November. Annual manifestation of the partisans in Bologna : Achille Occhetto, general secretary of the party, proposes the abolition of the traditional name and emblem of the P.C.I.. Before this date numerous newspaper articles (e.g. *La Repubblica* 23/3, *La Stampa* 9/6, *Unità* 10/6) had anticipated the choices of the general secretary.

13 November. The secretariat of the party side unanimously with Achille Occhetto.

14-15 November. The party committee, whose agenda reads “the proposal of changing the names and the symbols of the P.C.I. in order to set up a new political organisation of the left”, approves the party secretary's proposals.

20-25 November : Extraordinary session of the central committee. The discontent among many of the Communist grassroots begins to be noticeable. Important P.C.I. leaders (Cossutta, Natta, Ingrao, Garavini, Minucci, Libertini) publicly oppose the change proposed by the general secretary. The latter, faced with growing internal opposition, affirms the need for a redefinition of the political identity of the left to whose outcome the change of the traditional name and symbol of the P.C.I., in a successive phase, will be subordinated. The “thing” was born, a term used by Occhetto, by the press and, generally, by the mass media, to describe a party coming into being, still devoid of a precise identity. Out of the 326 voting in the CC, 219 (67.2%) approved the general secretary's text, 73 (22.4%) rejected it, and 34 (10.4%) abstained.

### **1990 : from the “thing” to the new name (PDS) – emblem (The Oak Tree)**

May-June. Unofficially, Bruno Magno, member of the Party's Graphics Department, was commissioned to design a new emblem capable of representing the political formation being set up (still without a name) without, however, denying its direct connection with the history and ideology of the P.C.I..<sup>2</sup>

10 October. Occhetto announces the new name and the new symbol of the party.

The new organisation (“the thing”) will take the name of “Democratic Party of the Left” (P.D.S.) : its symbol will be an oak tree under whose roots will remain, in miniature, the ex-symbol of the P.C.I. The general secretary thus justified his choice : “We want also to say that in the great tree of the left no root shall be cut and that, in the common experience of Italian socialism, no tradition shall be annulled and humiliated”.

### **1991 : birth of the new party and internal schism**

3 February. Rimini Congress : official birth of the P.D.S.. Cassutta, Garavini, Libertini, Serra, Garavato and other leaders leave the new political formation declining to recognise either its symbols or its political trends The act of foundation of the new party marks the splitting up of the ex P.C.I..

The closing day of the Rimini congress, the leaders responsible for the split filed, with the notary Fabbrani Bernardi, the articles of foundation of a new Italian communist party claiming the legal use of the old communist symbol (the hammer and sickle against the background of the red flag).

---

<sup>2</sup>Source : Bruno Magno (of the PDS Press and Propaganda Office) interviewed by Paola Berteà (master student under de Rosa's supervision at the Faculty of Psychology, University of Rome “La Sapienza”), who is thanked for her kind collaboration.

A week later, in a press conference, the “secessionists” announced the birth to the senate of the “Communist Refoundation” group.

4 September. The direction of the “Communist Refoundation” decides finally, after numerous discussions, the official name of the new political organisation : the “Communist Refoundation Party” was born. The symbol of the new-born party will be the old emblem of the P.C.I., partly modified following the heated legal dispute with the P.D.S. which wanted to prevent (not, however, succeeding to do so) the foundation from using both the name “communist” and the traditional icon with the hammer and sickle against a red background<sup>3</sup>.

### 1996 : towards “thing 2”

D'Alema, secretary of the P.D.S. (succeeding Occhetto), proposes a possible change in the name and the emblem bearing witness to the further “emancipation” of the P.D.S. from the communist ideology and history. The name of “thing 2” might be *Democratic Party of European Socialism* and the new symbol might be characterised by the disappearance of the hammer and sickle and of the initials P.C.I., from the symbol of the oak tree, to be replaced by the rose of European socialism. A current opposed to that of D'Alema (headed by the P.D.S.'s N° 2, Veltoni) is against this further change, proposing the birth of a new left-wing party on the model of the American Democratic Party.



In our opinion, the phases that have led to the transformation of the name and former emblem of the communists into that of the P.D.S. and of the Oak Tree constitute documents which illustrate an attempt, already in progress, to *objectify* and consolidate a social representation of the left, expression of a new political identity, still uncertain and in a phase of reconstruction.

<sup>3</sup>Source : Dormagen 1996.

The transformation of the iconographic guise and of the symbolic repertoire, the radical modification of the rituals and of the political “liturgies” that used to characterise the P.C.I. congresses, joined to the debates on the party's future (defined, until a short time ago, as “the thing”), constitutes an outstanding opportunity for studying the “putting into shape” of a new social representation. A social representation that is not generated solely by discourses and verbal labels (“thing 1”, “thing 2”, etc.), but also, in parallel, by the attempts at *objectification* through the construction of party images and symbols.

If, on the one hand, the debates and the system of arguments and counter-arguments among the political leaders (adequately investigatable through a discourse analysis) reflect an attempt at anchorage, at definition, and at establishing ideologic trends still in phase of evolution, on the other, the modification of the emblems and of the denominations bears witness to the endeavour to reify the party's identity around images and symbols dense with emotive implications and resonances. Anchoring and objectification seem to alternate and spell out the construction in progress of a political identity whose definition does not reflect merely an abstract political debate, but also the use of images and symbolic elements able to materialise the meaning of the transformations already made (“make them clear”) without however denying the party's past and historical roots.

Analysing the stages that have led to the birth of the P.D.S., it is possible to note that the transformation of the party's symbols and emblems has performed two complementary functions :

- to influence the central nucleus (objectified nucleus) of the social representation of the P.C.I., making an evident and radical transformation possible ;
- to form a powerful means of genesis of a new social representation.

If, on the one hand, the change of traditional symbols has formed a compulsory stage for the implementation of an authentic transformation of the party, and of the social representation associated with it ; on the other, the construction of new symbols has been functional to the genesis of a new social representation (as shown by the scission, on the emotive wave of the symbolic change of the ex P.C.I. into two opposing political formations : the P.D.S. and Communist Refoundation).

The symbols seem to possess the power of materialising the deepest dimension of the figurative nucleus of the social representation. More specifically, the symbols (the flags, the emblems, the logotype, etc.) possess, as Rouquette noted (1994), the following properties : they embody the emotive dimension of the central nucleus of a social representation (dimension defined by the author with the term “nexus”), merge denotation and connotation, reify (objectify) a system of cadences and values, are hard to modify through analysis and rational reflection, and constitute a system of communication relatively independent vis-à-vis that of the discourse.

It is not by chance that, while the revisionistic-ideological changes are taking place in the political trends of the PCI (the abandonment of the “worker-oriented centrality”, the abandonment of marxism-leninism as the official ideology, the acceptance of the role of the market) had produced limited reactions, the “symbolic jump” desired by Occhetto (the transformation of the name and of the traditional emblem of the party) will constitute, as Dormagen noted (1996), “political earthquake”.

The role of symbology in expressing, better than political discourses, the central dimension of the social representation of the PCI is borne out by a poll held in 1989 by the Datamedia company on a sample of 3 600 persons representative of the Italian population<sup>4</sup>. According to this research, a majority of Italians stated they were favourable to Occhetto's proposal (65% favourable, 15% against), though a smaller number of them (59%) approved the change of the name (21% against). These data show, as Dormagen noted (1996), that “it is easier to create a new “thing” than change the name of a political formation”, and that it is easier to accept an ideological change than to give up party symbols.

Two polls, held in February and in November 1989, by SWG, on behalf of the weekly *Epoca*, involving 700 communist electors, bear further witness to the strong resistance connected to the change of symbology : the opponents of the change of the name dropped from 48.7% in February (i.e. preceding the official proposal by Occhetto to change the symbols of the P.C.I.) to 46.2% in the second half of November (after this proposal) whereas the champions of this change, always in the minority, rose from 27.7% to 37%. With regard to the change of the emblem, the resistance was much greater, raising from 59.6% in February to 63.1% in November. It demonstrates the strong emotive attachment to the name “communist”, and, above all, to the Party's traditional iconic symbol. A fact that explains, at least in part, the important electoral success of Communist Refoundation, a political formation born on the emotive wave of the “symbol denied”<sup>5</sup>. In the symbolic order, in fact, “*To act on the symbol of a person or of an object, means to act on the person or on the object itself*” (Lévy-Bruhl 1938 : 225) ; to strike the symbol means to strike directly the entity that it represents (Todorov 1977).

In the light of these considerations, the choice becomes understandable of the PDS leadership to replace the old communist symbol with a new symbol capable of fulfilling two functions : to return, in a relationship of continuity, to the values and to the traditions of the past, highlighting, in the meanwhile, the significance of the ideological change that has recently occurred in the party's history ; to represent a “carrier” capable of constructing, in a powerful way, the social identity of the member, distinguishing the “us” from the “others”.

---

<sup>4</sup>The poll was published in the *Repubblica* 19/11/89, and was reported in Dormagen 1996.

<sup>5</sup>The poll was published in *Epoca* 26/7/89.



The emblem of the P.D.S. in fact, although containing inside it the traditional identifying symbols of the P.C.I. (the hammer and the sickle and the P.C.I. logo), uses new elements able to evoke, at one and the same time, in the syncretism of the image :

- the tree of freedom of the French revolution (by now one of the ideological references of the new party) ;
- the Italian socialism of the beginning of the century (in 1918 the Italian socialist party had the oak tree as its symbol) ;
- Ecology (towards which the Italian left has traditionally shown a strong interest and great sensibility).

*Concluding remarks.*

In conclusion, we do not wish, however, that from the considerations so far developed, to draw a simplistic deduction regarding the banality of reading images. In actual fact, sometimes the higher the symbolic significance (singular in this regard is the case of Dürer's Melancholy) the more it calls for a cultural competence in deciphering the meaning of the various elements of the context and of the picture as a whole. Nevertheless if the images were totally self-referenced it would not even be worthwhile to study them. We consider, instead, that the scholar of social representations can – beside iconology, history of art, sociology of communication, and visual anthropology – contribute to reading the social meaning contained in them and activated by them.