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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

"Identity and Social Representations:
Cultural and Mythical Dimensions"

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Key Lectures

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Symbolism

The metaphor of the four Ls

In so far as social representations are considered as symbolic processes, we need to elicit the different meanings associated with the notion of symbolism in human sciences. These meanings are relevant to analyse the functions of social representations as well as all forms of cultural products, among which myths.

The metaphor of four Ls refers to the starting letter of the four terms which cover the primary and generic, but often dissociated, senses in which the notion of symbolism is employed. These terms are LIEU, LINK, LAW, LEAVEN.

L like LIEU: The symbol is in lieu of, takes the place of something else. This refers to the vicarious status of the symbol and the representation. That is the semiological relationship which they, as signifiers, maintain the signified; their function of evocation, of expression. It is also the sense in which symbolism is most commonly referred to and which involves the least difficulty or need for explanation. The flag is the symbol of the Nation, the image of the balance is the symbol of the justice, etc. In the same way the representation is not the pure reflection of the object, it gives an image of it. The vicarious function gives place to an autonomous play of the signifier as is the case of theatrical or political representation: the actors give an interpretation of the dramatic personae they play; people delegate their power to their elected representatives which are allowed to defend their wrights and negotiate in a manner adjusted to the political of local situations.

L like LINK: This refers to the etymology of the term symbol: an item (a piece of metal or pottery) divided in two which both parties keep in order to recognize one another. It implies recognition, unity, participation, social bond. This is also the significance conferred on the symbolic, via communication, by theories as different as those of Durkheim and Mead. This notion of link can also be found in the idea of relation which is fundamental to the structuralist conception of the systems of expression which constitute culture, or in the idea of social identity related to the sharing of common ideas and values.

L like LAW: This designates the ordering function of the symbol as it has been formulated by authors such as Lévi-Strauss and Lacan. It is a logical, structuring function which extends from the organization of language, to the regulation of family and social relations, and the establishment of social order. This function can also be seen in the flow of symbolic interactionism with the idea of a « negotiated » social order which emerges from the interaction between social agents.

L like LEAVEN: This image allows to designate the creative character acknowledged in symbols, in the line of Cassirer analysis. That is to say, the capacity of symbols to reveal new significations or invest with meaning, notably in the case of language and myth, and their performative character within rituals and institutions. Such a potentiality is in direct relation with the imaginary dimension and vicarious function of symbols and representations.