Semiotic Methodology For The Analysis Of The Cultural And Individual Dynamics Of Social Representations: A View From Cultural Psychology

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This paper presents a view of semiotics that provides some theoretical elements for bridging some of the gaps between post-Vygotskian cultural psychology and social representation theory. This is done, firstly, through an exploration into the concept of 'representation' and, then, by exploring how semiotic action (semiosis) is able to produce signs of increased complexity which ultimately result in representations capable of supporting and communicating shared views of the world within a cultural community. A semiotic model of the shaping of social representations and some methodological procedures borrowed from semiotics are suggested as tools for the formal description and explanation of both personal experiences and social representations.

Keywords: Cultural Psychology, Methodology, Semiotics, Social Representations.

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CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATION THEORY

Social Representations Theory is one of Social Psychology's contributions that seems more in line with a post-Vygotskian Cultural Psychology. Both approaches share a similar sensitivity about how cultural products and subjective experiences become intertwined when people understand their environments and act according to this understanding. Both approaches are also concerned with the dynamics of historical change. A quick look at some excerpts taken from the literature produced within each of these approaches will show coinciding elements, but also highlight/bring out some areas where further elaboration may be required to illustrate the similarity between them.

Cultural Psychology claims to be a discipline. As Shweder views it:

Cultural psychology is the study of the way cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express, transform, and permute the human psyche…[It] is the study of the ways subject and object, self and other, psyche and culture, person and context, figure and ground, practitioner and practice live together, require each other, and dynamically, dialectically, and jointly make each other up (1999, p. 1).

It is the sociocultural environment which provides the meanings and resources for human beings to act and stabilize the world they experience through the semiotic mediation of sign-systems and systems of activity (Valsiner, 2007).

Social Representation Theory is usually presented as belonging to the wider discipline of Social Psychology, and its focus is to "study psychosocial phenomena in modern societies. It maintains that social psychological phenomena and processes can only be properly understood if they are seen as being embedded in historical, cultural and macro social conditions" (Wagner, Farr, Jovchelovitch, Lorenzi-Cioldi, Marková, Duveen, & Rose, 1999, p. 1). Social Representation is the key concept of the theory. Moscovici defines it as a :

system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function: first to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication (…) by providing a code for

social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their worlds and their individual and group history (1973, p. xiii).

Denise Jodelet (1998) includes more elements in this concept:

Social representations appear as varied phenomena of different complexity – images condensing a set of significances; frameworks which allow us to interpret what reaches us, even to make sense of the unexpected; categories useful for classifying circumstances, phenomena, individuals we get acquainted with; theories which allow for order to be established on all of the above; often when taken in the concrete reality of social life, they are all of that at once.

The notion of social representation is at the interface between the psychological and the social. It primarily concerns the way in which we, social subjects, apprehend the events of common life, the data of our environments, the information circulating there, people from our close or distant environment. In sum, the 'spontaneous', 'naïve' knowledge that holds so much appeal for current social sciences, that which usually is called *common-sense knowledge*, or even *natural thinking*, as opposed to scientific thinking. This knowledge is built from our experiences, but also from information, knowledge and thought models received and transmitted through tradition, education, social communication…In other words, it is *practical knowledge* (p. 364, our translation).

Jodelet's description of Social Representations, full of semiotic terms (*code*, *images, significance, interpretation*), seems not very far away from Shweder's concept of *intentional worlds*.

Cultural Psychology is the study of intentional worlds. It is the study of personal functioning in particular intentional worlds. It is the study of the interpersonal maintenance of any intentional world. It is the investigation of those psychosomatic,

sociocultural, and, inevitably, divergent realities in which subject and object cannot possibly be separated and kept apart because they are so interdependent and need each other to be (Shweder, 1999, p. 3).

These quotations show a coincidence of objectives, but also differences that are not negligible. On the one hand, intentional worlds seem somehow close to the ecological idea of cultural *Umwelt* (n.d.r. environment or surroundings), and therefore primarily concerned with how individuals act and interact in what they perceive to be the world, while social representations are concerned with how such a world is made to appear in the interface between the social and the individual. On the other hand, cultural psychology, by introducing the concept of 'intentionality', emphasizes the role of individual action in such a world making. In contrast, social representation theory, even if it does not deny the importance of intentionality, it rather mostly focuses on the specific shape that intentional worlds take in particular representations.

REPRESENTATION AND/OR SEMIOTIC MEDIATION?

Representation is an important but controversial issue in Psychology. It can hardly be doubted that individuals have the ability to somehow make the absent present, so they can consider their previous experience when acting. However, there are important differences concerning what is represented, how it is represented, and how the process of representation works.

Views about representation range from making it a redundant concept – as it happens when only associations of stimuli and responses, habits or functional systems established in the nervous system, are taking into account (as the Pavlovian, behavioural and Lurian traditions do) – to acknowledging the existence of symbolic (e.g., Kosslyn, Thompson & Ganis, 2006; Pylyshy, 1986) or subsymbolic (Rumelhart, McClelland & the PDP Research Group, 1986) units of information stored and processed in a virtual realm called "mind". The latter position, placed under the umbrella of cognitive psychology, holds that these representations are supported by schemas, images, propositions, or a combination of them. Some of these views go as far as to deny that conscious phenomena may play any role in the processing of information (Churchland, 1986).

It is probably because of the symbolic nature of the units of information assumed by some cognitive views, that mental representations are sometimes understood as compatible with Vygotsky's concept of semiotic mediation (e.g., Frawley, 1997). However, representations and signs cannot be seen as equivalent, nor can we take for granted that processing and semiosis are directly equifunctional. The reasoning behind this is a lengthy discussion in itself that falls well beyond the goals of this paper (see Rosa, 2004). A careful consideration of semiotic mediation is needed in order to account for the role of representation in cognition.

Social Representations

Social representations should not be confused with mental representations. As Wagner et al. (1999) say:

> [a] social representation is a collective phenomenon pertaining to a community which is co-constructed by individuals in their daily talk and action [...] Instead of imagining representations within minds it is better to imagine them across minds, resembling a canopy being woven by people's concerted talk and actions" – it is because of social representations that – "people's actions are often concerted and coordinated by bearing on shared conceptions of the world (p.1).

The key lies in what those "shared conceptions of the world" are made of. According to Wagner et al. (1999):

> [t]he phenomena composing the local world of a group are *social objects* (emphasis added), which, in turn, are constituted by representations, i.e. by *discourse* and *concerted action* of the members of the group without which there would not be an *object* which can be addressed by the people (p.1, emphasis added).

Following such a view, social representations only appear in groups, and become more visible when groups differ in their interpretation of the world. Social representations are made of social objects, each of which is "social not by virtue of some immanent characteristics, but by

virtue of the way people relate to it" (Ibid., p.1). Such a view seems to present each social representation as a sort of virtual entity that does not present itself as a phenomenon apparent to the senses or the mind; on the contrary, it has to be carefully grasped by applying methodological operations to turn it into communicable scientific forms. In other words, social representation is a construct which cannot be made apparent just by observing "talk and action *which is related* to a social phenomenon or object" (Ibid, p.1; emphasis added). This implies that theoretical and methodological concepts are needed to make apparent the ways in which *talk*, *action* and *social objects* get related in particular instances.

Several concepts of the theory of social representations serve this purpose. *Objectification* is proposed as a mechanism for showing a specific instantiation of a social representation, and *anchoring* is presented as the process of assimilating a novel phenomenon to something already familiar, so that this phenomenon can get conventionalized within the available ways of picturing the world. The *figurative nucleus*, made up of icons, metaphors or tropes standing for the idea represented (very much related to objectification), is also presented as a way of grasping the essence of the representation.

After reviewing some of the key contributions of the Theory of Social Representations, Wachelke & Camargo (2007) concluded that it resembles more a research paradigm than a theory in the strict formal sense of the term, since it defines a phenomenon to be studied, and offers concepts and processes for guiding research. As pointed out by the authors, when actual empirical contributions are examined, many developments based on different methodologies can be identified, hence the difficulty to gather such developments into a coherent corpus of knowledge. Whatever the case, Moscovici (1988) pointed out that scientific theories progressively refine their tools of knowledge as the research program develops. As Duveen (1998) puts it, "clarity and precision in conceptual argument are the products of scientific activities, and not the precondition for its production. […]. Phenomena need to be brought to light before they can be rendered intelligible" (p. 457).

There are elements in the above quotations that we believe deserve to be highlighted in view of our later discussion. First, social representations should not be considered as "phenomena", at least not in the sense that is usually used in epistemological language, but rather as "constructs" to be elaborated by the researcher, even if they are dynamic entities that change

through time. Second, social objects are the substance social representations are made of. Third, these social objects can be identified by examining discourse, talk and action. Fourth, social objects and social representations are neither merely individual nor exclusively social – they are both, since they occur, operate, and appear precisely during occurrences of acting and talking.

These points do not exhaust all the elements that will be brought into the discussion. If social representations represent social objects, what kind of entities are those social objects? Are they also representations of something else? And, going slightly further, how do representations represent? Before turning to the discussion of these issues, let us take a look at how cultural psychology addresses the issue of representation.

Semiotic Mediation Of Action

At a first glance it may appear that social representations could be easily hosted within a post-Vygotskian cultural psychology in so far as they are simply one kind of meditational means employed for the semiotic mediation of action. We believe, however, that an examination of how representation and semiotic mediation can be related between each other is needed before such a move can be theoretically legitimated.

Post-Vygotskian cultural psychology does not seem to be very enthusiastic about the use of the concept of representation. When representation is mentioned it is subordinated to the notion of action mediated by artifacts. Semiotic mediation is presented as a consequence of the use of meditational artifacts for social communication - words (Vygotsky, 1934), utterances, narratives, or speech genres (Bruner, 1990; Wertsch, 1991). Representations, if mentioned at all, are understood as scripts or schemas for action (Cole, 1996; Rosa, 2007a; Valsiner, 1997) which are nothing else than the result of the internalization or appropriation of patterns of action mediated by tools, words, utterances, metaphors, social speech or literary genres. It is the cultural nature of these meditational means, and the sociocultural character of the practices and activities performed by the agents, that makes it possible for these representations to present some specific contextual sense, in addition to produce meanings shared by a group.

A rather alternative view is the further development of Kurt Lewin's field theory to account for how semiotic means can produce fields and boundaries that constrain and promote action

(e.g., Boesch, 1991; Valsiner, 2007). But, again, action appears much more prominently than representation, although fields and boundaries render it easier to produce a more integrated account of the social and individual character of action.

In any case, representation is understood as something that belongs to the realm of the individual mind, which can be of no surprise since it results from individual action. However, mediational means of action are taken from the socio-cultural realm, as is also the case for the patterns of individual action which always appear embedded in social practices. Semiotic mediation of action is a device for the explanation of how individual senses and social meanings are co-constructed through time. Meaning is the key issue to be addressed, and its production could be pictured, in very basic terms, as resulting from the joint work of signs and action. Signs are tools which permit to steer oneself through the uncertainties of life. It is the need for stabilizing reality which leads us to search for meaning and to the "intentional conception of 'constituted' worlds" (Shweder, 1990, p.1). That is why Valsiner & Rosa (2007) say that the task of cultural psychology is "the description and explanation of experience and how it influences action" (p. 34), also pointing out that experience is not something hidden in individual consciousness, but rather something that appears in all kinds of actions and in addition is always canalized by social discourses and practices.

Semiotic mediation is an idea with a high explanatory potential, but such a potential can only be realized by explaining how signs operate when they mediate action. This requires the elaboration of some kind of synthesis between theories about signs and meaning and theories about actions performed with the mediation of signs. This is what Rosa (2007a; 2007b) did by bringing together Gonzalez's (1997) theory of praxis with elements of Peirce's semiotics. The result is a theoretical framework on the development of the semiotic function, and how it becomes transformed by the use and transformation of cultural symbols. Tools, signs, practices, and actions co-construct not only new abilities, cultural groups and intentional worlds, but also transform the landscape we live in.

We believe this framework may be instrumental in building bridges between the psycho-social theory of social representations and cultural psychology at large. We also think that, complemented with further elements borrowed from semiotics, it can provide some methodological tools for research on social representations.

The rest of this paper will be devoted to the presentation of contributions from semiotics that we believe are useful for these purposes. To some extent, it may be said that what follows is no other than a re-description in a different language of issues which have already been presented. This may be accurate, but we also think that such re-description will not be devoid of interest, since bringing a fresh look into well-known matters may help to highlight some particular points, in addition to offering suggestions for possible developments.

Semiotics, Semiosis And Signs

Meaning is often claimed to be a key issue for the explanation of action and cognition, but psychologists do not very often go into explicit discussions of what meaning means, and even more rarely into the examination of how the contributions of semiotics may be instrumental for psychological research. However, when delving into the literature of semiotics one may be surprised by the interests it shares in matters which are also of concern for some of the psychological literature. The following quotations from Juan Magariños de Morentín[1] (2008) are eloquent enough.

> I understand Semiotics, as a discipline, as a set of concepts and operations addressed to explain how and why a particular phenomenon achieves a particular significance within a particular historical moment and what that significance would be, how it is communicated, and what are their possibilities of transformation (p. 12).

> The goal of Semiotics as a discipline is to explain the process through which a particular phenomenon is identified through a set of concepts operative within a particular society. This set, as it appears in texts, is what is called its 'meaning'. In addition, Semiotics should also explain the efficacy of a particular utterance vis-à-vis its capacity to attribute ontological existence to a particular phenomenon, its referent. Such capacity is what is meant by the term 'significance' (Ibid, p. 137).

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[1] Quotations from this book are our translation.

When presented in this way, the resemblance between the task of semiotics and that one of the theory of social representations is striking. Both present an interest in the same kind of social phenomena, acknowledging their social and historically dynamic nature. However, Magariños focuses on how social phenomena get embodied in texts and how they can hold *significance* and *meaning*. The latter is embodied in texts, while the former refers to the capacity for creating an entity out of the use of semiotic means.

> Significance is not within the inner privacy of a subject, nor an entity belonging to the minds of the members of a particular society, but is the *representation* of a particular social phenomenon *materialized* (or susceptible to be materialized) *through a particular semiosis* (as a perceptual proposal, about a possible form of its existence, addressed to the community) *which lends a particular cognitive existence* to that phenomenon (Ibid., p. 137).

Significance is then not too far from objectification. It requires some material instantiation (perceptual form) of *a particular semiosis* referring to a social phenomenon so that the latter can reach cognitive existence. Thus, semiosis becomes the key for the explanation of significance and social representations.

Semiosis, Signs and the Semiotization of Objects

The term semiosis refers to the use of signs; it is the basic process of sense-giving and a corner-stone for the understanding of Peirce's semiotics[2]. We should bear in mind that Peirce's semiotic logic addresses the study of the conditions for something to act as a sign. Peirce's definitions of sign abound, but all of them treat the concept of sign not as a fixed entity, but as a set of relational functions. The consequence is that many kinds of signs are to be considered. Let us

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[2] Peirce's *semiotics* has features very different to Ferdinand de Saussure's *semiology*. The latter is well-known for its dyadic approach to the meaning of signs through the differentiation between *significant* and *signified* established by social convention. In contrast, Peirce's conception of sign, as explained in the text, is triadic and recursive. Peirce's view conceives meaning as a dynamic process, rather than the property of a structure.

take a look at a couple of Peirce's most general definitions. "A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (C. P. 2.228; Peirce, Charles S., 1965/1931). According to this definition, anything can be used as a sign of something else in so far as there is some *respect* or *capacity* that relates the sign with its object. In any case, when something plays the function of a sign, it is because somebody makes use of that function for some particular purpose.

A sign is "anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*." (C. P. 2.303). Semioses, then, are recursive. The ultimate product of a semiosis is something (the *interpretant* – the situated interpretation that somebody does of the way the first sign refers to its object) that can become a sign (a new representamen) for the next semiosis. Semioses are triadic, they include something (that has the capacity of acting as sign – a quality, a presence, or a habit) which acts as *representamen* (first); the representamen has the capability to refer to the *object* (second) because both (the representamen and the object) have something in common (form for *icons*, presence for *indexes*, or some conventional value for *symbols*), so that the relation between representation and object can be interpreted (third) as a possibility (*rhema*), a fact (*dicent*) or a habit or reason (*argument*). Semioses, so viewed, are triadic and cannot be reduced to a dyadic sign-object referential relation, particularly because what the object is (or may be) cannot be taken for granted.

Objects are not directly accessible for cognition. We can think about objects only because they are presented by signs. Any semiosis has an immediate object standing *to somebody* (the interpreter) *for something in some respect or capacity* (this is allowed by the kind of relationship the *representamen* has with the object), which requires another kind of sign that Peirce called the *ground* of the semiosis (e.g., a raven can act as a [iconic] sign of a stove, because of their shared 'blackness' – the *ground*). The last element of the semiosis is the *interpretant* (the sense of the relation between all the others), which then becomes a *representamen* for a subsequent semiosis. This does not mean that the knowledge of the object is exhausted in one semiosis. The object appears in every semiosis as an *immediate object*, but beyond what appears in each semiosis the *dynamic object* appears in different manners as it is presented by another semiosis (the stove can also be represented by different signs referring to its heaviness, hardness, hotness, etc.). The

object itself cannot ever be directly accessed outside a semiosis. It may have a transcendental *ontic* nature or not (e.g., ravens, stoves, goblins, elves, phlogiston, obscure matter), but its *ontology* is provided by semiosis.

This does not even mean that objects cannot be conceived. The objects, as we conceive them, are the results of a series of semiosis which go on until the interpreter fulfills his or her goals or gives up. The *final interpretant* so produced is the conception that one gets of the object, which then becomes a *semiotised object*. Semiotised objects always result from chains of particular semioses.

Interpretants are the end product of a semiosis. But what can be an interpretant? How do interpretants appear? If semiosis is a process, interpretants are the final outcomes of that process. They can be as private as a state of consciousness or a body reaction, or appear overtly as behavior, gestures, and performances (drama, music or dance); alternatively, semiosis may even end by producing an utterance (either verbal or written), a physical tool, a drawing or a picture. The latter are material outcomes of the interpretant, and so can be taken either as objects or as symbols of something else. In both cases, they must have been semiotised previously.

One may wonder where the first sign comes from, so that semiotisation can commence. Peirce's answer to this question takes us straight into the consideration of the most elemental kinds of experiences within individual consciousness: qualities (firstness), sense of resistance, sense of factuality (secondness), and feeling of relation between the other two (thirdness). So viewed, meaning-making starts within the consciousness of an active agent, and cannot proceed unless that agent moves within the environment and feels affected by the results of his or her encounters with the environment itself, so that these three kinds of experiences are combined into a semiosis. It is action that produces new signs which in turn become meditational means for further action. The signs so produced are capable of signaling towards something else: they can be *icons*, if they share some formal quality with the object, *indexes* if they point out the presence of the object, and *symbols* when they stand for something else, and so become capable of representing the absent.

Symbols are semiotised objects which get their representative power from observed regularities (habit) and by a previous social convention (like the lion and the unicorn representing

England and Scotland, and together the United Kingdom). It is through the use of symbols in semiosis that representations of objects (either material or imagined) can be shared.

Semiosis is a device for the production of both signs and semiotic objects. 'White' is a verbal conventional sign for the sensorial quality of 'whiteness', but any of the two (the word 'white' and the 'experience of whiteness') can also be taken as signs of snow, chalk, peace or innocence. The 'experience of whiteness' (an *icon*) can also be interpreted as a sign of the possibility or the presence of any of the others (i.e. snow, chalk, peace or innocence) and so be incorporated as an element in an argument within a text, a picture or a figurative display. Innocence and peace are also examples of objects produced by semiosis, but so are snow and chalk, which can only get their particular cognitive identities, as a kind of reality, if they have been semiotised first. As Magariños (2008) says:

> ...everything we *see* (i.e., perceive, know, feel, have an insight into, dream of, etc.) *is seen* because *it is semiotised*...When acknowledging that semiotisation is a necessary condition for the identification of the entities of our environment, we are also admitting that there are two kinds of objects: *those capable of semiotising others* and *those which are semiotised*. In other words: *signs and semiotic objects* (p. 13, our translation).

As shown in the example above reported, anything can be a sign or a semiotic object, because there are no immanent characteristics which are able in and of themselves to make entities signs or objects. They may take on one role or the other depending on the function they are having within a semiosis. What was once a sign (a final interpretant) can be later turned into the object of a subsequent semiosis. The consequence is "that utterances are made of signs and what is uttered is nothing else than a semiotic object" (Ibid, p. 14).

Semiosis, as they recursively proceed ahead, can change from the use of one kind of sign to another (e.g., from body reactions, to gestures or verbal utterances). This makes it possible to appropriate conventional symbols as means for understanding and communication. When a semiosis shifts from using one kind of sign to another, and so produces materialized interpretants of a different kind (e.g., a gesture, an utterance, a picture), the latter can be termed a *substitutive*

semiosis. Intentional communication is carried out through substitutive semiosis, since it requires the use of a system of conventional symbols (see below figure 2).

A SEMIOTIC RE-DESCRIPTION OF SOCIAL OBJECTS, SOCIAL PHENOMENA AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

As the reader has surely already noticed, Magariños' conception of *semiotic object* is not different from the concept of *social object* as presented in the theory of social representations. Semiotic objects appear instantiated in some vehicle for communication (symbols) which in turn are historically contingent products of semiosis (interpretants), and therefore result from action.

Once we have elucidated the kind of entities that (social) semiotised objects are, as well as how they are represented by interpretants and by the material products that in turn result from interpreting actuations which combine symbols (utterances), we can go into examining what can be taken as a *phenomenon*.

A [social] phenomenon exists for knowledge to the extent to which it has been uttered in a particular semiosis, so that such utterance attributes *relational values of difference and identity* which permits its perception, and in so far as those relational attributions have been interpreted by somebody (Magariños, p. 334; emphasis added).

Social phenomena, then, require at least two parties: one that produces an utterance (the phenomenon for the other), and a second one who interprets that utterance as a sign (phenomenon) of something else (a social object). Magariños understands the term utterance in a very general way; it does not only refer to a verbal utterance, but to any kind of final interpretant openly displayed for communication – it can also be a set of behavioral movements, a performance, or a material artifact (a manufactured tool, a picture or a graph). According to this view, a social phenomenon is the interpretation an observer makes of some materialized display, so that it can be taken as sign of the possibility (*rhema*) of a previously semiotised object. It is because of the interpretation of such possibility that the reality of that object, presented by the phenomenon, could eventually be accepted. This is what makes it possible for social phenomena

to act as signs of the presence of social objects. Whether this would eventually happen or not in a specific situation depends on the significance the interpreter attributes to the phenomenon.

Whoever interprets the materialization of the phenomenon also gives significance to that phenomenon. When individuals attribute significance to the same performance, utterance or artifact by applying the same "relational values of difference and identity", they may also have similar perceptions. To be able to share the same elements of an "intentional world", similar semiosis have to be performed by each individual; this though can happen only if a common toolkit of artifacts, images, symbols and utterances (Wertsch, 1991) is put into socially proficient use within shared cultural practices.

An "intentional world" is a world in which objects appear arranged in ways that make sense to those who inhabit it, so that their actuations can be coordinated. Social phenomena do not appear chaotically, nor are social objects randomly produced in uncoordinated utterances. They get assembled in arguments that present coherent events and scenes which, together, demonstrate an understandable on-going drama. If social phenomena can become signs signaling social (semiotised) objects, the latter can only get some significance if they are related to each other through *arguments* - the most complex kind of sign in Peirce's taxonomy of signs. It is through argumentative semiosis, in which symbols get combined in the manner allowed by the social speech and the cultural genres for communication of a particular group that the social representations that amount to an "intentional world" can be communicated and shared. Arguments are the signs upon which social representations are transported.

Social representations can be semiotically studied by looking at the way they get instantiated in interpretants (texts) of some kind. At this point, it is useful to distinguish between texts and discourses. For Magariños (2008) *discourses* are semantised *texts*, while *texts* are syntactic constructions not yet semantised. This is a useful analytical distinction since it allows to explore the syntactic possibilities that texts may have for producing significance, so that they could become discourses meaningful to somebody. To ascertain what this significance would be like, one needs firstly to examine the texts which show instances of such significance (texts interpreting other texts), and secondarily to move beyond these texts to search for the ways in which they may have resulted from semiosis. This requires looking into the social practices available in the society the texts belong to and into the contexts within which these texts were

produced. It is by putting all these elements together that the semantic operations carried out by the group to give significance to texts can be inferred. Ultimately, this would allow the social objects and representations meant by the social phenomena which appear in discourses to be described and explained.

Figure 1

Figure 1 corresponds to a poster[3] (a text) bringing together a figurative image and several linguistic utterances. The poster presents an ambiguous human figure in a pose typical of Catholic religious imagery. What makes it appears bizarre is that the face is hidden behind a piece of cloth. The phrases superimposed (the shape, position, size and quality of the captions) are also part to the textual material to be semiotised.

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[3] The author of the image is Oscar Luis Alonso. It belongs to a series showed in an exhibition presented at the Argentinean consulate in Barcelona in 2004 under the highly ironic title "God is Argentinean". The exhibition was meant to be a reflection on the current state of Argentina, following the 2001 economic debacle, which had ended the brief period of prosperity after the bloody military dictatorship of the 1970's and 1980's and the Argentina's defeat in the Falklands War. The exhibition was organised by Eric Olivares (Istituto Europeo di Design. Barcelona, España. www.iedbarcelona.es) (curators, Elenio Pico and Luciana Leveratto).

There is little doubt that anybody, anywhere would be able to produce an interpretation of this graphic image, within the limits allowed by the elements gathered, the disposition of such elements in the display and along with the knowledge individuals who are interpreting would have of the symbols presented into the poster. One may also expect that the greater familiarity the interpreter has with the conventions employed the closer his or her interpretation will resemble the communicative intention of the producer of the display. However, even in these circumstances some elements of the text can be viewed as more salient than others and take the lead for the production of phenomena, social objects and social representations.

The interpretation of María, a 43 year old Argentinean business woman (for a lengthier explanation see Lonchuk & Rosa, 2011), is a suitable example of how the process of production of social phenomena, social objects and social representations can go well beyond the concrete materials presented and shows how semiotisation of texts proceeds through abductive thinking and ends up giving rise to quite unexpected social representations.

When I see the image like this, with a mask, the first thing I think is environmental pollution…if you see this as a mask. If you see this as a scarf that hides a face, it sounds like it is saying it is a thief, an Argentinean and fighter thief. This is a bloody message. Because they are telling you, I feel, that that's a saint's face and on the top of everything else is Christ. A saint's face, on which you put something, you say you are a fighter and deep down you are the worst thief. Here they speak of barricades. This is because of blocked roads…Opening paths to where? This is my question. Paths to nowhere good. In truth, those who are really working and have to take bread home are not blocking streets…Sometimes when I am visiting clients, and see people closing off streets, fellows eating mandarin oranges in the middle of the road, they were not looking after the common good. They were blocking, closing off because someone told them - 'you have to block there'. Close there'. This reminds me of the image that WE pretend to be saints but WE really are little thieves.

The cloth covering the face seems to be the pivot phenomenon around which all her interpretation revolves. If it is a mask it is a sign of pollution, if it is a scarf it becomes the sign of a thief; and,

from then on, the rest of the elements displayed are interpreted in a particular way. First, demonstrators[4] claiming for justice are described as puppets in the hands of corrupt unionists, and eventually *we* (*Argentineans and fighters*) pretend to be saints but *we* really are little thieves. It seems that what could potentially have been taken as a sign calling for a fight for justice, is rather rising a bitter and depressing view of one's national identity, which also is a quite widespread social representation of how Argentineans view themselves at times.

A semiotic approach as the one sketched above can bridge mediated action, personal experience and social representations. These are outcomes produced by the same kind of process, i.e. semiosis. The difference between social representations and mental representations is not in what it is represented, but in the means supporting the representations: material means and overt actuations in the former or internalized patterns of actions (which also include internal speech) in the latter. This way of picturing these two kinds of representations suggests alleys for the explanation of the way individual experiences involve social representations, as well as of the way individual semiosis can supply raw experiential materials which, through communication and conventionalization, can end up with contributing to the construction of new social representations.

A MODEL FOR THE SEMIOTIC STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

Figure 2 (see below) offers a sketch of the semiotic process of shaping social representations as instantiated in a semiotised text. A semiotic analysis of the structure of a social representation is presented both as text and as discourse. It can be understood as a text, because it is made of a set of material instantiations of semiosis within objects acting as signs (body movements, visual displays or verbal expressions) of increasing complexity (symbols get combined to produce utterances and arguments) that have to be arranged according to rules allowed by their formal features. It is also a discourse when it gets semiotised, as its significance is attributed by an interpreter.

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[4] Argentinean demonstrators cover their faces with scarfs when blocking roads to avoid being identified by police.
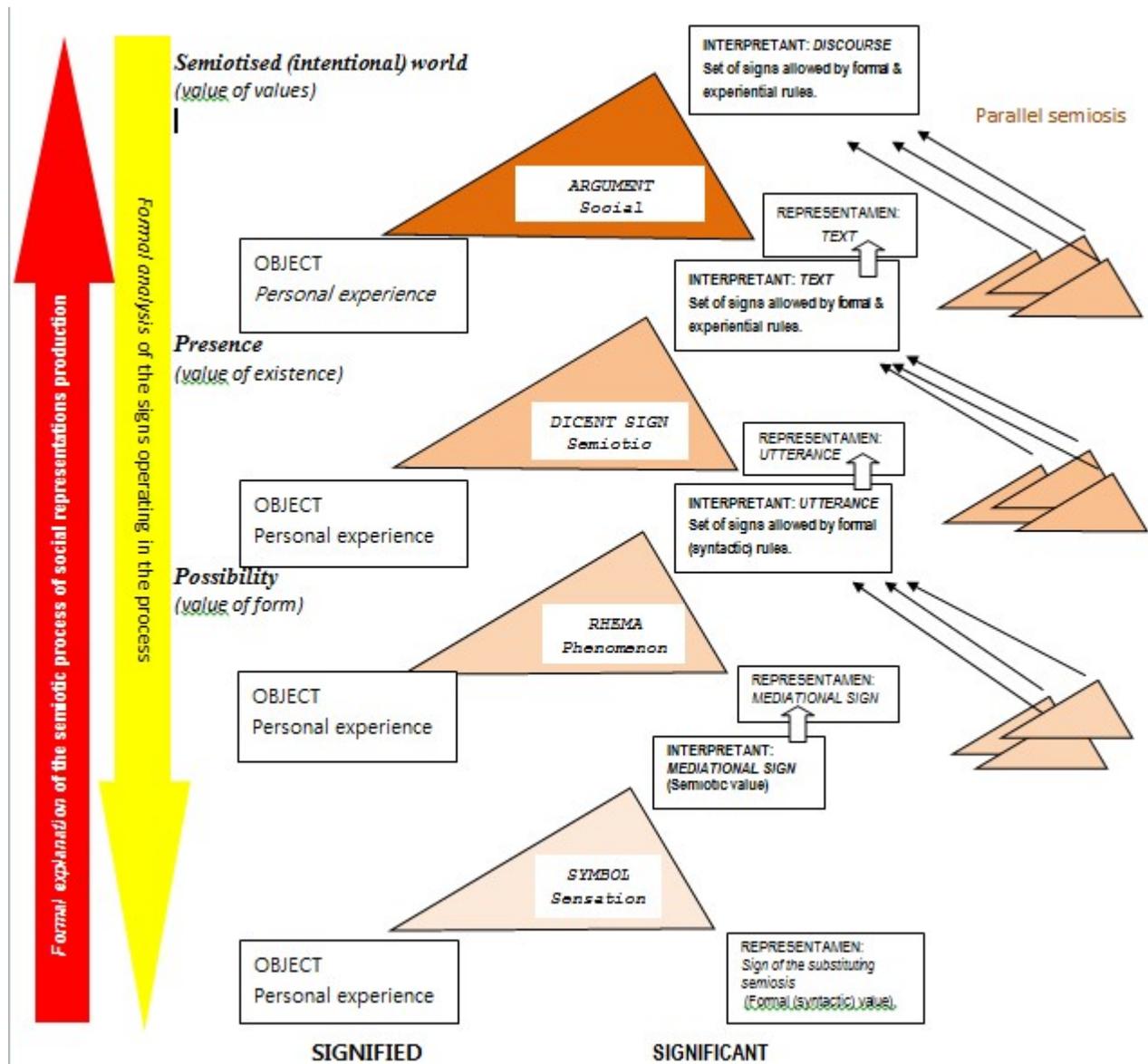
Figure 2: semiotic process of shaping social representations

Signs are always the result of somebody's semiosis. Personal experiences – semiosis mediated by signs of several kinds (feelings, body movements, gestures, private speech, etc.) – are ways of making sense of how events of the surrounding world affect us. An efficient sign-system has to be chosen (e.g., language) to entail any person to share these experiences with other parties so that a common understanding of events can be reached to coordinate everybody's actions upon the shared environment. The resulting communicative actions will then appear in

the form of a text that can be conceived as the product of substitutive semiosis mediated by linguistic signs.

Signs have particular forms that provide them with values for their combination with other signs. The *formal* (syntactic) *value* of a sign (e.g., noun, verb, adjective, etc.) sets constraints and provides possibilities for their combination with other signs, so that some significance (a *semantic value*) can be attributed to the resulting higher-order signs. A text becomes a discourse capable of receiving significance from its producers and users to the extent to which its utterances need to be able to influence action, so that it can also achieve a degree of *experiential value*.

Arguments are a peculiar kind of sign. They do not only refer to already known phenomena or to social objects; they relate different objects and phenomena to each other, and by doing so they enable new experiences to arise. They are a kind of sign with the capacity to represent what the senses cannot present. They can create imagined entities beyond the reach of direct experience (e.g., a saint). Cause and effect, values and norms, but also atoms and phlogiston, justice and virtue, country and money, angels and devils, majesty or humiliation, are among the creatures born of arguments. The consequence is that, following this, some experienced phenomena could be interpreted as signs of the imagined entities previously created through substitutive semiosis (arguments). *Arguments* then *are able to add new value to the values provided by other kind of signs*. It is through arguments that "intentional worlds" are socially constructed.

Social representations are supported by the arguments populating the cultural space that is inhabited by a group. Arguments create new kinds of social objects, as well as a myriad of relationships between all kinds of social objects. They are able to produce discourses of many kinds, descriptive, as well as prescriptive. But, should social representations be reduced to arguments? To answer this question we must move slightly further into our attempt to develop a sketch for a semiotic methodology for the study of social representations.

TOWARDS A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS.

A Semiotic View Of Scientific Literature

If one looks at science from a semiotic approach, scientific literature can be conceived as utterances of scientists resulting from substitutive semiosis which, first, identify some phenomena as social objects, and then explain how these phenomena relate to each other to produce other kinds of phenomena. What is peculiar to science is that this semiotisation must be carried out through the application of the rules regulating the practices of the scientific community.

Scientific discourses are instantiated in texts referring to the intentional world resulting from the activity of scientists. If one was to produce new scientific objects (social within the community of scientists), one is required to follow the rules of the practice of such community, i.e., to apply conventionalized behavioral and cognitive (semiotic) operations with the received signs and semiotised objects, so that the significance of the scientific texts produced in such a way could be similar to that of the personal experience of the author and the readers; something that is only possible when they (author and readers) share the same representation of the studied phenomenon.

The knowledge communicated in this manner is taken as valid insofar as it fulfills the social functions expected from scientific practice, as specified by the rules of a given scientific community, but also by those of society at large. Such a view of science presents the knowledge produced as contingent vis-à-vis on the functions expected from its practice, and this is the reason why we have chosen to speak of validity rather than truth.

Social Representations As Resulting From Researchers' Semiosis

A methodology for the study of social representations concerns the procedures that are to be followed to enable one specific kind of objects (semiotised within the group under study) to be semiotised in a new fashion (in scientific discourse), so that they can be handled as (social) objects to be used within the community of social and cultural scientists. In other words,

scientific discourse on social representations is the result of substitutive semiosis which turn the social representations of a group into a kind of social object for scientists.

The common-sense knowledge of the group studied surely follows the rules of some kind of logic, but these rules may be different to those of scientific logic. However, scientific logic should contain rules able to explain how these particular common-sense rules are produced and applied, so that social representations can be described and explained.

A methodology needs to specify the operations that researchers should perform in order to describe the social objects and representations appearing as social phenomena within the socio-cultural space of the studied group, which is similar to explaining how they are instantiated in texts. Arguments and semiotised objects are the substance social representations are made of. The patterns of significances produced when arguments are interpreted by their users shape what Magariños (2008) calls "possible semiotic worlds":

> the diverse sets of available options in a particular moment of a particular society for their members to construct the significance of the phenomena of their environment and the possibility of recognizing the creative options capable of breaking and going beyond the received (verbal, visual, kinestethic, etc.) semiosis (p. 20).

Signs, texts and practices change through time, as significances and meanings do. New social phenomena arise, not only because of the change in social practices, but because changes in the use of sign-systems also set the ground for new phenomena to be represented in texts. Possible semiotic worlds are thus dynamic historical entities. The flexibility of the rules governing sign-systems, the tolerance for accepting the infringements on these rules when resorting to novel uses, the willingness to accept the new representative possibilities produced, together with the challenge to render unfamiliar circumstances understandable, set the conditions for the change of social representations, while simultaneously setting the boundaries within which such changes can proceed – a sort of social-semiotic 'zone of proximal development'.

Significance and meaning cannot pre-exist discourse. Neither can they be taken as synonyms. *Meaning* is the concept[5] originated by the interpretation of a sign or utterance materialized in a discourse. Meaning can be ascertained by looking into texts and discourses; however, no utterance exhausts the meaning of a phenomenon. Meaning is an abstraction to be constructed by gathering together all the possible senses attributed to a phenomenon by a particular group and a particular time; meaning is the concept of a semiotised object – something that is believed to exist beyond the specific text and discourse. In contrast, *significance* is attributing meaning to a sign, so that a phenomenon is made to appear as a manifestation of a semiotic object. Meaning relates to concepts, while significance to phenomena (Magariños, 2008). Significance manifests itself in utterances which materialize the attribution of some meaning (the sense it takes in a particular context) to a particular sign; this can be done only by inferring the semiosis carried out within the possibilities and constraints set by the interpretative practices of the community the interpreter belongs to.

Social representations could then be conceptualized as the meaning of the arguments presented in discourses. In this perspective, social representations do not appear directly in any particular text of the group under study – researchers have to infer them. It is by gathering the significances that the users of discourses attribute to arguments – which can be done by looking at the texts they produce – that meaning can be ascertained. This makes social representations constructs resulting from the methodological operations carried out by researchers in their search for the meanings of the discourses circulating in a social space. Social representations are not directly presented in any particular text analyzed. They reside in the meanings of the phenomena that appear throughout the discourses that the group under scrutiny produces and consumes. It is only within the discourses of the scientific literature that social representations appear as social objects to the community of researchers. When these meanings can accommodate the senses that guides the observed actions of the members of the group under investigation, or the texts

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[5] Concepts here are to be understood as cognitive devices that can take different forms as they develop. As Vygotky (1934) conceived them, they progress from complexes to pseudoconcepts and eventually to proper concepts. Valsiner (1998) takes pseudoconcepts (specific unified conglomerates of concept and complex qualities) to be the higher form of human cognitive functioning. Proper concepts are therefore the product of Scientific practice. Pseudoconcepts are particularly well fitted to Bühler's Representational fields and to reasoning by abduction. Such a view of concepts is of particular interest in accounting for the meaning of social objects.

produced by their members, the inferred social representations can be considered valid constructs.

Texts As Material For Analysis

Particular texts are the materialized support upon which possible semiotic worlds can become instantiated. They provide the material from which the researcher can infer the social representations of the group under study. Texts, whatever sign-system they are made of (verbal, visual, musical or behavioral performances), are the *materia prima* for the researcher to work on in search for their meaning.

We should remember that any perceptible form in which the outcome of an action-semiosis appears can be taken as a text (as used in this paper). Texts are mediational tools for communication. They are materialized products of somebody's *interpretants*, but they can also act as *representamena* for somebody else's semiosis aimed to attribute significance to that text, which in turn produce new *interpretants,* also in some form of text. Semiotic analysis is to be applied to texts elaborated with signs belonging to sign-systems.

The analysis of texts relies on the examination of the possibilities that the signs employed have (at the moment and in the setting in which they were employed) for representing a social phenomenon and for relating that phenomenon to other social phenomena. This requires taking into account the formal features of the signs and the rules of the sign-system employed (their formal value - syntax), so that the phenomenon can be represented and communicated in a meaningful discourse.

There are many kinds of sign-systems which allow the production of meaningful discourses: language, pictures, music, dance, gestures, mime, emotional expressions, etc. However, the syntactic values of these signs, the kind of phenomena they can represent, and therefore the communicative capabilities of each of these sign-systems, are very different. Not all sign-systems are equally suited for producing, communicating or sharing any kind of social phenomena. All of them are employed in everyday life; each of them has rules for use in different settings, as well as being privileged within particular social practices.

Signs could be structurally characterized as icons, indexes, or symbols. However, the structural features of the material support of a *representamen* are not always the best criterion to

use to determine whether something is a sign of one kind or another. One should rather look at the way they are used in a semiosis, the interpretation they produce, and how the latter may lead to further semiosis[6]. A flag, a dance or an utterance, could each be taken as examples of an icon, an index or a symbol, but each of them can also receive uses which may make them change these semiotic roles. A flag on a mast could be an *index* of danger, a dance could be interpreted as a *symbolic argument* of seduction, or an utterance could be taken as an *icon* of a particular pitch of voice.

Personal experience, as it appears in consciousness, is a sort of 'pan-semiotic text' (Magariños, 2008) resulting from the performed semiosis employing all kinds of signs. However, when a particular task is to be performed, as is the case of intentional communication, a specific sign-system has to be chosen so that the interpretants produced can be shaped to compose an understandable discourse (see "parallel semiosis" in figure 2). Symbols and arguments are elements of the cultural toolkit which can be used as means to give personal significance to the iconic and indexical signs supplied by the senses. This makes personal experience full of semiotised objects, norms and values which constitute the intentional world one inhabits. If we look at things the other way around, it is precisely because personal experience is not only mediated by arguments and symbols, but also by indexes and icons, that the phenomena presented in texts can be related to the encounters of the body with the alterities of the environment, and so give social objects acquire an experiential value. Because of the pan-semiotic nature of personal experience the features of the environment that the agent encounters and the socially semiotised intentional world can be taken to be one and the same.

Claiming the importance of working upon texts and taking into account the formal (syntactic) values of the materialization of the signs belonging to a sign-system, leads us to emphasize the importance of developing what Magariños calls "particular semiotics" – specific sub-disciplines of general semiotics, devoted to the study of the use of signs when playing the function of *symbol*, *icon* or *index*. Each of these particular sub-disciplines of semiotics has its own operational rules of method fitted to its particular purposes.

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[6] As previously stated, signs themselves result from semiosis. Peirce's theory of signs elaborates a taxonomy of signs which is relevant in this context. However, space prevents us from going into its full consideration (see Rosa, 2007a).

The formal analysis of communicative texts and the application of semiotic analysis to the discourses that texts support are methodological operations which have the capability of producing reliable results if compatible analytical techniques are employed. The validity of the products resulting from these analyses (the inferred social objects and representations) could be tested by comparing the meanings elaborated in scientific discourse with the significance of the discourses of the agents belonging to the group studied as this significance appears in texts of any kind (verbal utterances, visual displays or motor actions).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Semiotic methodology is a tool susceptible of many uses. It can be applicable to the study of personal experience, overt behavior, social representations, or cultural artifacts such as the products of art or science. Semiotics is a formal discipline, it is about significance and meaning, and how their forms change. It can offer formal explanations, but it cannot explain what fuels change, although it can be helpful in setting the boundaries within which those changes can take place.

Functional explanations are to be found beyond the texts; in the needs, desires, fears and goals of the individuals and groups who produce texts. Texts are outcomes of human action, and discourses are attempts to guide others and one's own self throughout the uncertainties of life, stabilizing an image of the world, and sharing it together with others. That is why we believe that one of the functions of Psychology is to provide functional explanations of what leads individuals to act, and how action changes and develops.

Explanation of action, of its shapes and its products, is also to be found in social structures, in the network of social institutions and social practices, in the distribution of power, in the constraints and possibilities set for the production, distribution and consumption of discourses (Bourdieu, 1991). Moreover, social representations, personal identities, or what is taken to be subjectivity and objectivity, cannot be considered as separate from the process of conformation of historical "discursive formations" (Foucault, 1969).

Social representations are socially shaped entities, but they are also the result of human action mediated by sign-systems. They are virtual entities that fully appear only when instantiated

in texts manufactured by social scientists to attribute meaning to what people do in their everyday life. It should perhaps be noted that the ideas produced by the artisans of knowledge are also their own social representations about the matters they work upon.

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