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Narrative, Memory and Social Representations

A conversation between history and social psychology

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relations between narrative, memory and social representations by examining how the architecture of social representations expresses the ways in which communities deal with the historical past. Drawing on a case study of social representations of the Brazilian public sphere, it shows how a specific narrative of origins re-invents history as a useful mythological resource for defending identity, building inter-group solidarity and maintaining social cohesion. Produced by a time-travelling dialogue between multiple sources, this historical narrative is functional not only to transform but also to stabilise and give resilience to specific social representations of public life. The Brazilian case shows that the historical past loads the central core of social representations and makes them recalcitrant symbolic systems because of its polyphasic and mythological nature. It suggests that historical narratives, which tend to be considered as part of the stable core of representational fields, are neither homogenous nor consensual but open polyphasic platforms for the construction of alternative, often contradictory, representations. These representations do not go away because they are ever changing and situated, recruit multiple ways of thinking and fulfil functions of identity, inter-group solidarity and social cohesion. In drawing attention to history as a driving force in the internal organisation of social representations the paper probes the problem of stability and change in representational fields and questions the idea of a central core as consensual and stable.

Key words: social representations, cognitive polyphasia, collective remembering, narrative, social psychology and history, Brazilian public sphere

Introduction

Apprehending time in its lived and experiential dimension is a long standing psychological problem, one which has been central to the scholarly debates linking psychology and history. Putting emphasis on time underscores the historical character of all psychological processes and the manner through which the past holds its ground in our present and future lives. For psychologists of a socio-cultural orientation the problem of time is the problem of historical development, of which the development of the human child is only one instance. Vygotsky (1997) was adamant that the development of higher mental functions is a historical process and inability to see them as such explained 'the one-sidedness and erroneousness of [psychology's] traditional views". Paying attention to genesis and transformation is essential to avoid the fragmentation of psychological structures and capture their contextual and time-dependent nature (Duveen, 1990; Cole, 1995). History is a central method to understand the individual and collective mind as it is to appreciate why the discipline of psychology has been itself reluctant to take the historical dimension into account (Farr, 1996). As Marková notes (this issue) treating phenomena as dynamic, situated and historical implies a relational epistemology that threatens psychology's aspirations to be a positive science.

The historical approach places time at the core of human experience and seeks to render visible the social and cultural processes that constitute our psychological makeup in past and present public spheres. It teaches the psychologist to 'feel with' distant others, to imagine what was like to be a person living in different times and lifeworlds and to turn the disjunctions between the lives of predecessors and contemporaries into sources of understanding. It calls into question the idea and practice of essential psychological truths (Knights, this issue) and brings context back into the explanatory framework of psychology. It substantiates the now classic view of social psychology as a form of history (Gergen, 1973), whose findings can themselves be seen as a form of historical record of how people think, feel and behave at particular times and places. This is particularly clear in the work of

narratives and social representations which express how common sense elaborates history and remembers the past. For the past, as well as that which we feel, perceive, think and talk about in the present, can only come to being through the stories we chose to remember and the manner in which we tell them.

It is the humanity of the historical record history that any psychology worth its name would seek to emphasise in a dialogue with historians; the fact that history has a subject and that in the apparently ordinary and inconsequential everyday experience of ordinary men and women are the modalities of thinking, the behaviours and imaginations that also make and define history. Communities create history through the ways in which they remember the past, a process regulated by social psychological processes such as identity, belonging, inter-group relations and social cohesion. Listening, systematizing and understanding the human stories of history is the aim of social psychologists while connecting the large narrative of history and the stories of life each day the challenge driving the conversation between historians and social psychologists.

In this paper I would like to extend this conversation, with particular attention to how the narrative architecture of social representations articulates the ways in which communities deal with the historical past. I use a case study of social representations of the Brazilian public sphere to show how a specific narrative of origins re-invents history as a useful mythological resource for defending identity, building inter-group solidarity and maintaining social cohesion. My aim is to show that historical narratives, which tend to be considered as part of the stable core of representational fields (see Sammut, Tsirogiani and Wagoner, this issue), are neither homogenous nor consensual but open platforms for the construction of alternative, often contradictory, representations. Historical narratives fix meaning in the central core of social representations, are resistant to change and endure over time but they are neither frozen nor stable: as I will show it is their very flexibility and imaginative characteristics that gives them resilience. The Brazilian case shows that the historical past

loads the central core of social representations and makes them into recalcitrant symbolic systems precisely because of its polysemic and polyphasic nature. Produced by a time-travelling dialogue between multiple sources, this historical narrative is functional not only to transform but also to stabilise and give resilience to specific social representations of public life. These representations do not go away because they are ever changing and situated, recruit multiple ways of thinking and fulfil functions of identity, inter-group solidarity and social cohesion. In drawing attention to history as a driving force in the internal organisation of social representations my intention is to probe the problem of stability and change in representational fields and question the idea of a central core as consensual and stable.

Narrative, Social Representations and Cognitive Polyphasia

Bartlett was the first psychologist to suggest that narratives do not rely on the individual story-teller alone but are the product of social and historical life (Bartlett, 1923; see also Sammut, Tsirogiani and Wagoner, this issue). They develop and grow in “the open spaces of public squares, streets, cities and villages, of social groups, generations and epochs” (Bakhtin, 1981: 259). They convey, and by the same token produce and reproduce, the traditions, the practices, the mythologies and the accumulated wisdom of human communities. They live in our collective memory and in the institutionalised rituals we draw upon to reproduce our social and cultural lives. They can differ in content and in how they are told, but they are an ever-present human activity and the first form of complex cultural discourse that young children learn and enjoy. As Barthes (1993) noted “there is not, and there has never been, a people without stories, they are just there, like life itself”.

The idea of narrative as a cognitive instrument and cultural tool has been extensively discussed by socio-cultural psychologists (Bruner, 2004, 1990, 1986; László, 2008; Wertsch, 1998) and with some contention captured by a historian (Mink, 1978; for the debate it

generated see Mitchell, 1981 and the special issue on narrative of *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1). Stories allow us to retain and understand information (László, 2008), to deal with time (Ricoeur, 1990; Carr, 1991), and give us at least the illusion of a stable identity (Arendt, 1958). Narration is essential for our sense of self and our cultural history; indeed the organisation of experience in terms of a plot shapes the very structure of our thinking (Bruner, 1986) and our sense of reality.

Bruner argues that narrative constitutes the very architecture of human thinking because human thought is organised and patterned by story-telling (1990). From the late eighties onwards he pioneered work that uses narrative theory and practice to rethink mind, psychology and the very nature of knowledge and truth. His main effort has been to show that our reality, the source and parameter for what we call truth and knowledge, has its properties defined by narrative principles. Narrative seeks beginnings, middles and ends, which comprise the basic structure imposed by the act of telling on real life experience. In telling through a structure that positions events by pulling them out of life as lived, stories do not produce identical copies of what happens. Real life does not have a beginning-middle-end structure; real life flows. Establishing beginning-middle-end structures is an act of mind and society. As happenings in the real world, events can only give off 'scrambled messages' (communications brouillées) to use Barthes' (1993) terminology. They only acquire sense and structure through the process of being told and articulated through a plot (Ricoeur, 1990). All narration is produced *a posteriori* and in various degrees plays with events, characters and chronology. To disentangle these happenings from the flow of real life and put them into a story by necessity reconstructs what for the here and now is now a past. Story-tellers actively construct past and present life, a life only known and understood when it is remembered, represented and narrated.

In this disjunction between narrative and life we can fully observe the formidable set of operations engaged by the human mind to construct, make sense and narrate the world. To

master life, to make it comprehensible and psychologically close, to familiarise what is not infrequently an inhospitable and hostile world, to create a shared understanding: this is probably what Jameson (1981) referred to when he called narrativity the 'central function or instance of the human mind' and this is what enables social psychologists to pursue narrative as a central inroad for the study of situated psychological phenomena. László's (2008) psychology of stories retrieves the process of story-telling as central to the making of social representations and social life. Wertsch (1998, 2002) suggests that narratives are cultural tools that shape thought and belief about the past while enabling collective remembering. Elsewhere I have drawn extensively on narrative theory to explore the transformation of social representations in the public sphere and more particular to show how narratives close down meaning in representational fields (Jovchelovitch, 2002). Common to this work is the idea of narratives as a medium of cognition that conveys and structures the diversity of emotional, social and cultural logics embedded in both social representations and public spheres. From this perspective, narratives are a modality of thought, a mode of operation of mind and a constructive collective tool for remembering and defining reality.

As the essential medium of social representations, narratives articulate what Millstone (this issue) calls social cognition in motion. Stories are always told by someone to someone else in a practice that involves an intersubjective context where self and other engage in communicative action (Habermas, 1989, 1991). Story-tellers are intersubjectively bound to a community of tellers, to a shared set of values and representations and to a specific vision of the world (Liu and László, 2007; Liu and Hilton, 2005). The intrinsic dialogicality that makes social representations commands a site of analysis that is located at the intersection between active agents and socio-cultural contexts, at the point of which socio-cognitive systems relate to the complexity of inter-group relations, social divisions and relations of power making up the reality of any given society and historical time. The plurality of social life creates and sustains the diversity of logics, registers and ways of thinking that

characterise representational processes. Juxtaposing a social representation to a single public is neither direct nor straightforward; there are complex mediations between different publics and their social representations, with new forms constantly emerging in-between (Wagner,). Exchange and dialogue between representational fields produce new forms of social representations by views, logics, behaviours and emotions of different publics in plural, at times fractured and divided, public spheres. Combining alternative representations and mingling science, religion, common sense, street knowledge, art, amongst other modalities of representation, these exchanges are pushed back into parenting knowledge systems and generate states of cognitive polyphasia, which provoke psychological, social and historical processes of transformation in knowledge.

In his study on the reception of psychoanalysis in France, Moscovici (2008) proposed the hypothesis of cognitive polyphasia to explain the relational, plural and plastic nature of social thinking. Defined as the 'dynamic coexistence – interference and specialisation – of distinct modalities of knowledge that correspond to definite relations between man and his environment' (Moscovici, 2008: 190), states of cognitive polyphasia open the way to conceptualising cognitive systems as continuously developing systems. They express how the dynamics of social interactions and cultural contexts shape processes of social knowledge and shifts the emphasis from equilibrium to process, from knowledge as given to knowing as social encounter: a dynamic and continuously emerging form capable of as many rationalities as required by the sociocultural situations that characterise human experience. In this sense cognitive polyphasia is an asset of human cognition, a tool that enables adaption to context, the expression of multiple identities, the forging of cognitive solidarities and importantly, communication between cognitive systems as the motor that adjusts, corrects and transforms knowledge.

Social psychologists tend to see the historical past as a source of cohesion and homogeneity, a consensual and finished account of events that stabilises cognitive systems.

This is true for mainstream psychology but can also be identified in the ways social representations theorists dealt with the problem of modernity. In many respects this critique can be levelled at my own work and part of what a dialogue with historians allows is a more precise understanding of the contested, polyphasic nature of the historical past (see). Narratives of the historical past exemplify well the socio-cognitive heterogeneity of representational fields and the multiple voices and cultural logics linked to the processes of knowledge construction that make history. Multiple voices, registers, modalities of knowledge and sources co-exist and circulate in representations of the past. They materialise in cultural artefacts, history books, folktales, institutional practices and rituals of everyday life. These polyphasic resources are selectively brought forward and appropriated, discarded or emphasised through logics that responds to different needs and fulfil different functions. History is itself made of careful historiography and social representations of the past; these distinct, at times oppositional, modalities of knowledge coexist and communicate in social life. There is a struggle of sorts between formal and lay histories, which far from being a negative conflict is a necessary reminder of the faulty line that entangles history, memory and social representations.

This is a point Tileagă (this issue) compellingly makes when discussing how Romanian society deals with its communist past. Social representations of history interact imperfectly with the reliability of sources or the need to construct an accurate historical record. Made of social memory and regulated by identities, belonging and community cohesion, they offer to historians the 'human, too human' legacy of life as lived: the sorrows, denials, distortions and deceptions that inhabit the human condition and thus all human cognition (Arendt, 1958). "He cannot escape from his compulsion to repeat; and in the end we understand that this is his way of remembering" noted Freud (p.50) when discussing the dynamics of remembering and forgetting. The allegiance of historians to capture the past as 'truth' can only be an aspiration but remains a necessary and ethical one as it offers to social representations a source of reflexivity and critique.

Collective Memory and the Narrative Organisation of Social Representations

Historical periods are not made of bare facts and events but also of outlooks and cosmovisions, modalities of thinking and behaving that together configure the social representations of an epoch. Once constituted and established these social representations become frameworks for defining what is accepted, valued, rejected or forbidden, systems of thought and action that guide communication and institute historically the background horizon defining what becomes possible and real for a group of people at a particular time. They offer a framework for the behaviour, the attitudes and the values of historical agents as well as for the identity of individual and collective actors (Condor, 2006). This historical experience results in the formation of a societal ethos and outlook (Bar-Tal, 2000) that is transmitted by narrative templates (Wertsch, 1998; 2011) and lived as historical charters (Liu and Hilton, 2005).

Halbwachs (1992) noted that all social beliefs have a double character. They are collective traditions or recollections, but they are the ideas and conventions of the present: historical and present day ideas exist side by side. This corroborates the view about the polyphasic nature of socio-cognitive systems by adding the way in which multiple dimensions of time coexist in social thinking. Social thought, Halbwachs argues, is essentially a memory and its content is made of recollections and remembrances. But the memories that subsist (and insist) are only those that a society, working from the perspective of its present, can reconstruct. Societies make choices about how social thinking carries or discards what once was. Collective remembering is selective in carrying representations that are important for the identity of a social group, for legitimising specific arrangements and for dealing with situations in the present. As a cognitive and cultural tool (Wertsch, 2002), memory is not a system for processing information that freezes what once was; as with all our psychological operations it is responsive to its socio-historical grounding so that in remembering from the

perspective of the present we reconstruct – or at least have the possibility of reconstructing – the past.

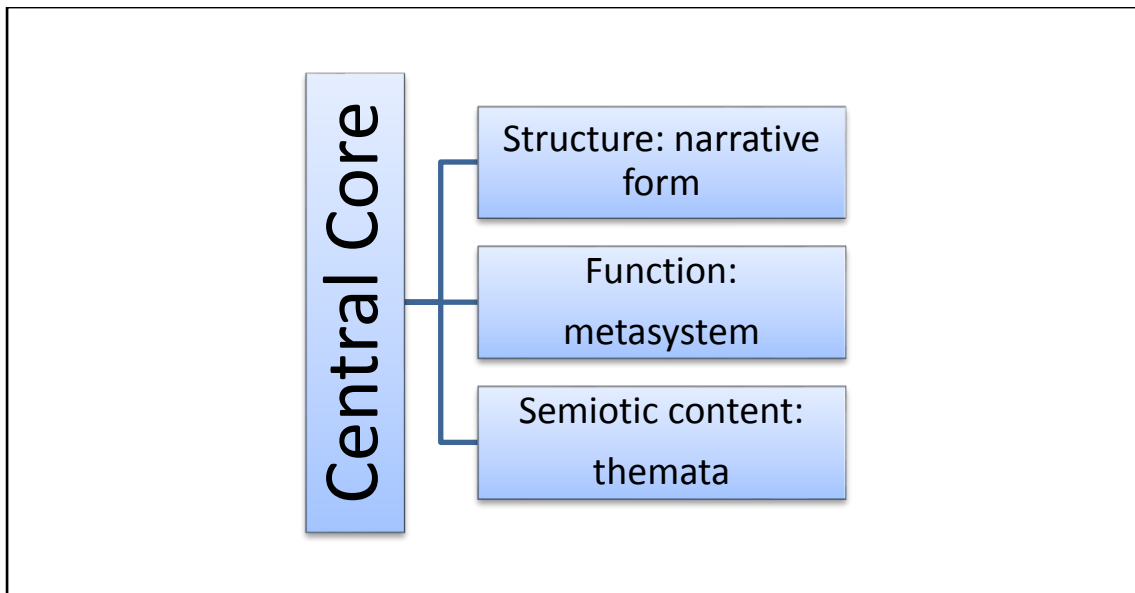
This is clear in the way specific narrative devices shape the internal organisation of social representations and define the continuity of specific stories in public spheres. The stories that survive are the ones communities chose to remember, a charged and selective process determined by disparate interests (Lira, 1997), identity (Leone and Mastrovito, 2010; Liu and László, 2007), and intense collective emotions such as guilt and shame (Klein, Licata and Pieruci, 2011; Licata and Klein, 2010). The work of narrative and memory makes the organisation of representations fields contested and unresolved battles, where competing versions of the past clash for providing the account that becomes recognised as the legitimate and true one (Brockmeier, 2002; Jovchelovitch, 2002). Social memory selects and disposes, picks and discards, enables and disables the multiple voices and the manifold events that will make up the plot and the way stories are told.

A question that has received a great deal of attention from social representations researchers is how specific stories can be effective in making some representations stick with us and others disappear. Remembering some stories and not others make them stick over time (see Sammut, , this issue). The stickiness of stories over time relates to the internal architecture of social representations and to how specific patterns of signification are arranged for mobilising commitment to imaginations, projects and courses of action (Bauer and Gaskell, 1999). Abric (2001) proposed that social representations are organised through the relations between a central core and a peripheral system that express the contradictory features of social representations: they are stable and dynamic, consensual and yet marked by strong inter-group and inter-individual differences. In this double system, the central core expresses deep-seated, difficult to change, historically-laden ideas while the peripheral components refer to a more mobile, flexible and adaptive set of meanings, responding to situational needs and linking the central core to the present. As much as this

work has proved useful, it has also been criticised for its over-eagerness to measure and the danger of sliding into too rigid a framework for studying the dynamic of representations (Parales, 2005). Once we abandon exaggerated concerns with measurement and integrate concepts from a socio-cultural approach we are in a better position to study how processes of continuity and change impinge in the socio-cognitive structure of representational fields.

László (1997) has shown that stories organise representational fields. In the same way that narratives contain a plot that organises events and semantically connect disparate elements of a story, the narrative form provides a core structure to a representational field, bringing together and investing with meaning the various notions, values and practices it contains. It plots themes, categories, characters and events into a bounded whole integrated by the force of themata, defined as “all those modes of thought which everyday life sustains and which are historically maintained over more or less long durées” (Moscovici and Vignaux, 2000:159). Via the selective repetition of meanings that strongly resist change and occupy the centre of a semantic field, the narrative core of representations pulls “all other signs into its cognitive and practical domain” (Moscovici and Vignaux, 2000). In doing so it functions as a metasystem (Doise, 1990; 1985), providing normative regulations which check, govern and drive social representations. Stories enforce rules, prescriptions and moral codes. Narratives not only list events but plot them into a meaningful architecture that gives shape to social thinking and inscribes itself in cultural artefacts and rituals of community life. The distinction between listing events and plotting a narrative makes salient the distinction between episodic and semantic memory, which are inter-related and regulated by the symbolic function inherent in all human communication. Thus the central core of representational fields is organised as a story that functions as a metasystem drawing on the semantic content of themata. This model is depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: A socio-cultural approach to the central core of social representations



Structured as narrative, drawing on the semiotic content of themata, functioning through the normative power of a metasytem, the central core of social representations consolidate meanings that do not go away, that remain in our systems of thinking and acting, making up the present and our contemporary experience. They provide anchors and socio-discursive cohesion for capturing new social thinking and at the same time fulfil functions of identity protection, social cohesion and social differentiation (László, 2003, Liu and László, 2007, Bruner, 1990).

However, this should not mislead us into thinking that the central core of representations is rigid, homogenous or consensual. As Marková, (2003) has shown, themata are constituted dialogically through sets of fundamental oppositions that guide the meaning of representations throughout history. And the regulatory power of a symbolic system relies in the microgenetic processes of interaction that scale up the roles and institutions that guarantee the authority and legitimacy of propositions (Table 1).

Table 1: A historical approach to the central core of social representations

Central Core	Dimensions	Structures	Social Psychological Functions
	Carrier	Narratives	Collective remembering
	Architecture	Plot and stories	Stickiness
	Process	Dialogical	Communication
	Property	Cognitive polyphasia	Empathy; Solidarity; Endurance
	Semiotic Content	Themata	Signification
	Institutional Regulation	Metasystem	Normative

These are divided, contested processes, whose representational counterpart is *per force* polyphasic and oppositional. The alternative representations (Gillespie, 2008) that co-exist in the narratives of the central core make it stable and fluid at once. In fact its solidity is given precisely by its flexibility, by being able to mobilise different languages, registers and propositions that resonate across a wide range of identities, social groups and interests. As Kane notes (this issue) ‘social representations possess dense histories with few ‘events’ generating entirely novel and oppositional discourses.’ This, as I demonstrate below in relation to representations of the Brazilian public sphere, allows representations to travel across time and establish a wide network of cognitive solidarity across different niches, groups and individuals. The shift from a categorical and mainly cognitive, to a narrative model of the central core reinstates the communicative and dialogical nature of social representations as well as the historicity of the processes whereby they are constituted.

Representations rarely emerge in a perfect sequence and fluid story line, fully conscious and articulated by actors. They are formed by fragments of discourse and collective imaginations, patchworks of different types of knowledge, ranging from myths to science, collective rituals and everyday conversations. Through narratives these come together into a whole: the plot helps to understand each part (or ‘list’ of events) of a story and how, despite non-chronological sequencing or unusual styles of telling, the narrative holds together and makes sense. It is the narration thus that articulates the meaningful totality of a lay theory,

making it a relatively stable heuristic tool while at the same time preserving, through dialogue and communication, the living, unfinished character of all stories and representational processes. In this sense we can understand that reference to real events is not always and necessarily a motivation in cognitive functioning. Even if incoherent from the perspective of detached observers, narrative plots make sense to those who produce and use them because they are fundamentally grounded in social cultural lifeworlds, which they at once express and renew.

Social Representations as Myth

Narrative principles drive and organise social representations by plotting themes, characters, languages, times and events into a coherent core that operates as a metasystem and carries the force of deep-seated oppositional themata in representational fields. The presence of the past in common sense thinking is polyphasic and oppositional because stories mobilise different languages, resources and systems of thinking. They establish wide cognitive solidarities and recruit multiple sources in order to fulfil needs of identity, belonging and social cohesion. Collective remembering links the past, the present and the future in a dialogue between temporal perspectives that adds time to states of cognitive polyphasia. The imaginative use of chronology counteracts the fragility of history in human affairs (Arendt, 1958); it can distort but also reveal by enabling avenues to work through and understand the past.

To travel across time and reappear without reference to events is what characterises myth (Blumemberg, 1985). Mythologies are intriguing for the dialogue between social psychologists and historians precisely because they freely engage events and cultural resources to produce a system of symbolic representations that cares little for the 'reality' of events. Paying virtually no attention to the literal, myth belongs to a register where accuracy in cognition is not required and where the 'world-making' symbolic function of representations is operating at its maximum power. Myths tend to distort and disregard what

is the case, which rather than diminish their force constitutes one of the main sources of their power.

In his study about representations of psychoanalysis Moscovici (2008) made clear that the study of myths provides a heuristic programme to study the genesis of social representations. Mythologies matter because they provide quintessential stories that offer primordial matrices for our 'soul', that space of our lives that is made of thinking but also of our aches and our sorrows, our gut reactions and deepest motivations. Myths thrive in foundational materials, they usually deal with origins and 'why's that explain and comfort, reassure and provide continuity for what is familiar to us (Kalampalakis, 2002). They bind human groups, build nations and establish identity. They are essential components of the patchwork of knowledges that makes representational fields in the contemporary world.

There has been a tendency in the literature to treat myth as distortion – as when we ask myth or reality? – and to link it to the somehow dated but still important debate about 'primitive' and 'developed' rationalities (see for instance Lévy-Strauss, 1978). As a total cosmology myth would describe tribal thinking whereas the rational impetus of science showcases the thinking of developed societies. Elsewhere (Jovchelovitch, 2007) I have suggested that we consider myth through a model that recognises variability in knowledge systems: knowledge is plural because there are different ways of representing the world, which fulfil different functions and respond to different needs. Through a number of questions put to a way of knowing we can identify its form and how it functions in a public sphere: so one can ask 'who' knows, 'how' one knows, 'why', 'what' and 'what for' one knows, in order to recuperate the social and psychological grounding of all epistemic forms and to appreciate that there are transactions and constant dialogues between different knowledges. This is clear in the case of science and common sense (Moscovici, 1992; Jovchelovitch, 2008) as it is in the case of mythologies and history. Myths are systems of

knowing the world that can, just as science, religion or historiography, account for the genesis, development and characteristics of families, institutions, communities and nations.

The point here is to recognise with Blumenthal that 'myth itself is one of the modes of accomplishment of logos' (p.27). Rather than to treat myth as only distortion or as typical of specific societies one should ask what is the type of logos that myth entails? Myth is knowledge of a certain kind and as with all knowledge it proposes a modality of representation of the world that fulfils specific functions and needs. The functionality of myth is related to social cohesion, to identity, to the social emotions of society and to the endurance of invented traditions (Hobsbawm, 1983). Drenched in emotional content, mythologies familiarise the unfamiliar and give social groups confidence to deal with innovation and change. They resist empirical verification because they draw on the world-making properties of symbolic action and are at the service of powerful psychological, social and political needs.

Historical narratives that make the core of social representations showcase these characteristics of myth exemplary. They play with characters, actions and perspectives to imagine communities (Anderson,1983) out of time and produce the legitimising myths that guide the moral ground in which individual behaviour, inter-group contact and socio-political action occur. They command authoritative power to inculcate values and norms because they repeat themselves continuously and become invariant. Repetition and invariance are dynamic properties that interest us here because in mythologies these are at work deceptively: myths continuously use new languages, ideas and practices, embracing and absorbing novelty just to transform it and pull it into the themata of its basic narrative template. Myth combines and mixes sources, times and genres to repeat the same story and sustain its invariance. They are an excellent example of how states of cognitive polyphasia can produce resilience and continuity in representational process.

Representations of the public sphere in Brazil illustrate well the polyphasia and functionality of myth as knowledge of the world. Everyday thinking about the Brazilian public sphere suggests that a mythical narrative of origins operates as a normative metasystem that draws on a wide variety of sources to carry forward deep-seated themata of Brazilian history and cultural identity. Through an intense conversation between historiography, science, art and social theory, common sense creates a foundational myth whose purposes and effects continue to be functional to Brazilian society today.

Miscegenation in the Tropics: The Brazilian Public Sphere

Studies of lay thinking about the Brazilian public sphere systematically find a semantic field dominated by co-existing contradictory notions unified by the core idea that corruption in social life is caused by 'corruption in blood' (Jovchelovitch, 2000). Containing a number of characters, of which 'the Brazilian' is the most persistent one, lay explanations about the troubles and difficulties of public life are to be found in the central notion of the 'Brazilian self', its being and its identity. The Brazilian is 'essentially corrupt', 'impure', plagued by a 'lack of unity' and characterised as 'lazy'. Corruption, the major reality in politics 'mirrors the streets' and, paradoxically, in spite of all attempts to keep politics separate from the people, the unity is re-established by 'we get what we deserve' or 'every people has the government it deserves': 'we mirror each other'. Recent developments in Brazilian history and its repositioning as a key global player might suggest that there is no place left to this type of social thinking in Brazil. But corruption, as practice and representation, continue to be strong in Brazilian society (Filgueiras, 2009; da Matta, 1991)¹.

Clearly dominated by a long standing narrative of racial formation, where mixture and miscegenation under a tropical sun provide the main signifiers for understanding and

¹ Any Brazilian will recognise the following anecdote: while working in Brazil in 2011, I stopped in a café at Porto Alegre's airport to hear the news about yet another corruption scandal in Brasilia. Sipping a coffee and enjoying the spontaneous conversations that pop routinely in coffee counters in Brazil I heard: "there is no way out for us because corruption is in the blood of the Brazilian".

explaining the 'evils of origin' that plague Brazilian public life, these representations are far from being circumscribed to lay discourses. Throughout its relatively short history Brazilian scholarly self-interpretation and historiography struggled to make sense of what made Brazil a nation and how to understand its people (Bosi, 1992; Castro Santos, 2003, Ribeiro, 1970). Notions of mixture and impurity, which were at the heart of European theories of degeneration throughout the colonial period, were powerfully projected into the experience and self-interpretation of colonial peoples. Authors such as Le Bon and Gobineau found avid readers in Brazil and gave direction to Brazilian elite thinking in the nineteenth century. For example, Gobineau (1990), who was the French Minister in Rio from 1869-1871 (and was said to detest both the city and the country) wrote: "no Brazilian is of pure blood; the marriage combinations between whites, Indians and blacks, multiply to such an extent that the nuances of flesh are too many, and all that produces, in the lower as well as in the upper classes, a degeneration of the most sad nature". Biological and medical theories were linked to social and political ones to suggest that laziness, corruption and failure in sustaining a healthy social 'body' were caused by the racial degeneration produced by mixture (Borges, 1993).

The negativity of early theories of racial degeneration did not go unchallenged, despite their penetration in common sense and the science of the day. Alternative representations (Gillespie, 2008) have been articulated in social thought, science and the arts. Central sources have been the novel '*O Guarani*', by José de Alencar (1857), the Modernist Manifestos of the 1920 (see Andrade, Year 375 of the Deglutition of Bishop Sardinha/ 2005) the publication of Gilberto Freyre's (1987) *Casa Grande e Senzala* (Masters and Slaves) in 1933 and Buarque de Holland *Raizes do Brazil* (The Roots of Brazil) in 1947. Combined these texts have been foundational for defining '*brasilidade*' or Brazilianess. Two in particular travelled far beyond their locus of production: the novel *O Guarani*, written as a historical novel about a forbidden love affair between an Aimoré Indian and a Portuguese white girl in 17th century Brazil and *Casa Grande e Senzala* (Masters and Slaves), an anthropological

and sociological study of the Brazilian manor house and its manifold relations and crossings. One is a novel with historical intentions; the other is a foundational text of the Brazilian social sciences. The *Guarani* dealt with the encounter between the European and the Tupi-Guarani (Brazilian indigenous people); *Casa Grande e Senzala*, with the encounter between the European and the vast contingent of Black peoples who were transported to Brazil as slaves.

O Guarani places Brazil in a state of original purity at the beginning of all times with its large rivers and dense tropical forests and the constant war between the Portuguese and the Guarani as the background for a love story between one noble Guarani Indian and a Portuguese white girl. Volpe (2002) notes that *O Guarani* carries seven myths that are highly functional to resolving the dilemmas of Brazilian identity. The mythical couple that engenders the nation, the frontier myth that searches for a new world, the myth of the good Indian, the myth of primitive savagery, the myth of purification and the myth of sacrifice are all present in the novel. Travelling through the centuries in school books, films, soap operas, painting, cordel literature and many other narrative media, the love story between Peri and Cecilia discarded the systematic decimation of indigenous peoples in Brazil and made possible the construction of an honourable past.

Casa Grande e Senzala gave Brazil the dream of racial democracy and the end of its illusions with racial purity. The book reveals step by step the creation of the nation as a large, patriarchal house, a protective, varied, multifaced house, a house that housed a multitude of relations and crossings, that was big enough to contain disparity and closeness, master and slave, black and white, dance and mass, plural foods and constant gossip. It presents sexual and social miscegenation as a vibrant and creative psychological force, which harmonised racial relations. While paying some attention to the importance of the Indian in Brazilian culture, the emphasis of the book is in the African contribution, virtually denied until then. Indeed the book's emphasis on the influence of black Africa in Brazil and

all Brazilians without exception provoked a formidable shock at the time of its publication. In the same way that *O Guarani* travelled across time through a multitude of media, *Masters and Slaves* triggered a string of 'responses' from a wide range of constituencies that included not only social scientists and historians but also poets, writers and musicians. Its reception was a major event in the emerging Brazilian public sphere and shook the nation's self-understanding by throwing in the face of the elite that liked to think of itself as 'white', the ineradicable and deep presence of blackness in all things Brazilian.

Through film, opera, novels, 'cordel' popular literature, soap operas, bossa nova, history books, the Tropicalia movement, newspapers, children's books and even samba schools both books engaged the knowledge of historians and the cultural production of musicians, film-makers, poets and the mass media, jumped into everyday life and deeply penetrated common sense. Navigating through historical time they embraced representations that were forged at the time of the conquest, travelled and settled throughout the colonial past and spread through the various arenas of communication and interaction between Brazilian historiography, artistic and cultural production, scholarly social thought and lay everyday thinking (Viana, 1999; Ortiz, 1986). Comprising stories told by both the coloniser and the colonised, involving myths of origin and the powerful blend of fear, anxiety and desire that characterised the contact between the constituting peoples of Brazil, they organise the central core of representations about the public sphere through a mythology of origins that recruits a foundational themata for Brazilians and indeed for Latin America as a whole: the clash between purity and impurity, the mixture of self and other, the desire for fusion and the fear of mixture that mark the development of identities and societies in the continent (Quijano, 1993, Canclini, 1995).

Caught in the anguish and ambivalence of miscegenation, Brazilian history, Brazilian cultural production and Brazilian lay thinking interacted and mingled to construct a foundational myth related to the origins and subsequent development of Brazilian society, its people and its

public life. Utopian and out of time, this mythological space is enclosed by the narrative core of representations of the public sphere, which transform mixture into both corruption and creative potential space for the self and for the nation. It both repeats and redefines the deteriorated identity that has been projected by the colonial encounter by juxtaposing notions of corruption in blood and politics with notions of conviviality and closeness. It is the origin and semiotic drive of a representational field that makes the Brazilian public sphere a contested site where biological metaphors that connect public life to corruption and impurity in blood coexist with a pleasurable sociality where the fusion of different peoples unleashes the creative potential of mixture.

The oppositional and dilemmatic nature of this foundational mythology moves in the Brazilian public sphere through a wide and at times contradictory range of knowledge systems, sources, logics and systems of thinking. This state of cognitive polyphasia builds a wide cognitive solidarity through what Liu and László (2007) called narrative empathy. It reaches a great variety of individuals, social groups and contexts because everywhere, everyone recognises and takes something from it. This wide tapestry of knowledge systems provides anchoring to different social niches, different interests and group projects, showing that polyphasia in cognition grants malleability and communicative flexibility to a representational field and by the same token guarantees its solidity and tendency to endure. Under its many guises and lenses the different and contradictory representations congealed in the mythological core of representations about the public sphere deal with the same problem and do not let it go away: desire and fear of mixture, the immemorial and timeless problem of the relationship between Self and the Other (Todorov, 1992).

The polyphasia and communicative flexibility displayed by the historical core of these representations is also protecting identity, inter-group solidarity and social cohesion. The many narratives that in 20th century Brazil responded to the view of miscegenation as degeneration set into motion a huge effort to formulate mixture as a positive force for what a

civilisation in the tropics could be. Out of this effort the country emerged as the embodiment of the new: a celebration of all that is incomplete and unfinished, a visionary ethnic laboratory for mixing cultures and bodies. In this process, the myth of a noble origin entangled with racial democracy has been highly functional for re-working identity and for producing national cohesiveness – Brazil’s territory is vast and its unity in culture and language continues to puzzle and fascinate. It gave Brazilians a great deal: a narrative of origins that integrates its different peoples, redeems the experience of mixture and emphasises the vibrancy and novelty of a new civilization in the tropics. It allowed an imaginary defence against the anxiety of tensions and conflicts and used the imagination to give comfort and reassurance about mixture and racial development (Table 2).

Table 2: The Central Core as Mythology of Origins in Social Representations of the Brazilian Public Sphere

Central Core as Myth in SR of the Public Sphere in Brazil	Dimensions and Structures	The Brazilian Case	SocPsyc Functions
	Carrier (narratives)	Books, film, opera, novels, soap operas, <i>bossa nova</i> , history books, <i>Tropicalia</i> , samba schools, amongst others	Collective Remembering
	Architecture (plots and stories)	Plot: mixture Stories of racial coexistence: love, friendship, conviviality	Stickiness
	Process (dialogical)	Multiple systems: media, art, education, everyday conversation	Communication
	Property (cognitive polyphasia)	Coexistence of Negative and Positive Solutions	Empathy, solidarity, endurance
	Semiotic Content (themata)	Self/Other; Purity/Impurity	Signification
	Institutional Regulation (metasystem)	Racial Democracy/Ego Ideal	Normative

The Brazilian case shows that myth goes beyond distortion as a system for knowing the world; it uses the imagination as a vast resource that can project ideals and unrealised desires. The power of myth also resides in is the power of the human imagination to subvert what is the case, not only to fulfil purposes of domination but also to fulfil purposes of liberation, to construct emancipated narratives and utopian projects for the world. The ‘myth

of racial democracy', which indeed is an idea without solid ground in Brazilian history and present day, is nevertheless important and of value in what expresses about the country's imagination. There is something positive in this imagination, something that constitutes what Bauer and Gaskell (1999) called a representational project that reworks the past and transforms memory to open up a future that is considered better and desired as reality. This empowers the view of myth as a contradictory story that both reveals and denies reality while setting an aspiration to make it better.

Despite negative representations that anchor mixture in corruption and impure blood, the Brazilian public sphere remains contradictory. My recent research in Rio's favelas shows that grassroots organisations and excluded social actors use Brazilian identity and mixture as a positive resource to redraw urban frontiers and produce social regeneration from below (Jovchelovitch, 2012). These groups use the same mythological narratives to emphasise the positivity of otherness, to retrieve playfulness and the intrinsic sociality of everyday relations, to remain hopeful and to put forward a fragile element of truth in the complex ethnic landscape that characterises Brazil.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the relations between the work of narrative, memory and social representations. I have shown that in the disjunction between narrative and life are central operations of mind and social thinking: social representations, collective memories and imaginations that make history the result of a co-construction of polyphasic sources. Working through the historical past, human memory picks and discards the stories that organise social representations and establish its socio-cognitive architecture. Narrative templates and collective memories re-present the past in common sense and consolidate a plot in the central core of representational fields. This core takes the form of stories, functions as a metasystem and draws semantic content from themata. Each one of the

triadic elements constituting the central core of social representations contributes to its dialogicality, expressed in states of cognitive polyphasia.

I have discussed how the central core of social representations can take a mythological function by obstructing temporal difference and producing a narrative of origins that travels through time in a variety of forms and guises. Founding myths impose a strong bond with the past and imaginatively play with chronology, so that the past keeps itself as a permanent presence. Yet, founding myths do not stop finding new means of expressing themselves, new languages and new ideas, in such a way that although they are symbolic systems constructed to repeat and preserve the past they always do it through new guises.

I have demonstrated these processes in social representations of the public sphere in Brazil, which express symbolic and historical battles about what constitutes Brazil and its people. The contradictions embedded in the idea of mixture have congealed in a mythological central core that recruits a multitude of sources to repeat central themata of Brazilian history and cultural identity. The power of these representations lays on their narrative empathy and polyphasic nature, which enable cognitive solidarity across disparate elements of a foundational myth that is ultimately functional to Brazilian society. Through its multiple sources and narratives they open space for an understanding of miscegenation that is positive and negative, that closes down new meaning and at the same time opens stories to new imaginations.

The social psychological processes at work in the construction of social representations offer to the historian materials to think with and against everyday thinking. The focus on how communities remember, connect the past and the present and collectively work through their trajectory, experience and sense of identity requires both understanding and critique, a capacity to elaborate history and confront the deceptions and distortions that are involved in its construction. As a system of ideas, practices and values collectively produced, social representations are the social psychological expression of history, a demonstration that the

psychological constructs are themselves an achievement of history, a history that holds its ground, insisting and inscribing itself in our subjective and social lives. The burden of a past that will not pass remains one of the most challenging psychological aspects of our historical condition; and the struggle between remembering and forgetting, of working through the past to let it go, so that today can be understood and the future can be open, remains a *sine qua non* condition for moving on, for forgiveness, for renewing identities and ways of life. In this space and in this challenge will develop the dialogue between history and social psychology.

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