Values, Leaders and Social Representations

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Abstract
When referring to values as “general principles of desirability” or as “social cohesion binders”, one should bear in mind that such notions contribute decisively to the shaping and crystallization of social representations. It would be improper to believe that there may be in-depth (“exhaustive”) studies upon people, ideas and events, as this approach disregards the fact that social representations have the capacity of being strongly anchored in the dynamics of relational processes, to the symbolic relationships specific to a given social field, to the values that constitute the eloquent expression of this dynamics and this specific field of research. An eloquent example in this respect is the way in which the social representation of leaders appears; data show that there is harmony between the image of power the leaders have or could have and the axiological dimensions of the group participating in the elaboration of such an image.

Keywords: values, social representations, leaders

As generally acknowledged, values occupy a special position in the emergence and evolution of social representations. In their absence – as evidenced in the studies of S.Moscovici or D.Jodelet, J.-C. Abric or W.Doise, J.-P. Codol or M.-L.Rouquette –, to discuss both about the mental reproduction of objects, people, events or ideas” and the establishment of some “sui-generis collective sciences for the interpretation of the surrounding world”, or about the realization of “a corpus of themes or principles characterized by some unitary approach and applicable to
different areas of existence and activity” is useless.

Where does this conviction come from? What makes specialists initiated in issues of the social field believe that “the preferences or principles defining the main orientations and rules of social action\(^1\) contribute considerably – or even decisively – to the establishment and development of “the networks that estimate and build up reality”. How amenable is the insistence they manifest when sharing such an interpretative outlook? In our opinion, the assertions highlighting the existence of a close relation between what one considers the meaning of value and what is social representation are entirely natural. Or, if the first construction expresses, as already mentioned, “the preferences or principles defining the main orientations and rules of social action”, then it goes without saying that, by the manner in which it imposes itself, this structure is perfectly susceptible to have a massive involvement in the “biography” of the second construction which – repeating the idea – is particularly expected to characterize what had been expressed by A. Neculau as “a manner of conduct, a modality to communicate with the external world, a certain orientation in the world of objects and actions, an operation of its classification”. Especially important is that, as constitutive elements of the ideological level\(^2\), values describe the type of psychomental compositions which, as stated by P.B. Smith and S.H. Schwartz, two important analysts of axiological structures (1997: 80), appear as “selection and evaluation standards of social behaviors and events” or – in other words – as “general principles defining what one should appreciate in life and the manner in which people should behave and value social or natural situations, events, persons, objects”. As a consequence, by the type of psychomental compositions here referred to, “in the spiritual-symbolic universe of the society and in the structure of individuals’ personality, generality and centrality emerges”, while, “at the level of actions with mass character” – a “dictate of the evaluation criteria”.

As a matter of fact, it is values which, once internalized, act as *sui-generis* motivational factors, shaping – endlessly – various styles of thinking, interpretation and manner of life. Ascribed either to a group, class, nation or, generally, to mankind, they define “efficient operators of self-conservation/autoexceeding” susceptible to act as “cohesion binders” and/or as ”stimulative factors for various categories of actors involved in
social actions”. This idea is acknowledged – directly or less directly, to a higher or lower extent – by all or almost all those who dedicated their career to a systematic study of the factors that help people distinguish between what is fundamental and what is unimportant in life. The examples given below support this assertion:

W. I. Thomas & F. Znaniecki: value is a datum with an empirical content, accessible to all members of a social group, and a significance which determines or not an activity (1920/1927: 37);

J. Nuttin (1968: 47): values, concentrated/understood as a philosophy of life, grant unity and firmness to human persons, making possible prediction at the level of inter-individual and intra-group relations;

A. Mihu (1967: 33): [deeply] /rooted in individuals, values provide evaluation criteria in the daily relations among persons;

J.-M. Duprez (1995: 217): values express preferences or principles which define the main orientations of human actions, indicating and justifying the rules of social life;

P. Ilut (2003: 367): values express general principles on what is desirable, orientating and organizing the actions and mentalities of individuals, groups and communities.

Once the values – as “evaluation standards”, “general principles expressing what is valuable in life”, “cohesion binders” or “stimulative factors for the authors of social actions” – represent constitutive elements of the ideological level which, in its turn, expresses – as already mentioned above – a factor laying at the basis of the formation of social representations, it is perfectly natural and well-grounded to remember that any social representation reflects most faithfully the axiological profiles of an individual and/or group. To paraphrase A. Neculau, one may say that social representations influence the whole range of inter-personal relations, they “circulate”, cross each other, take over values from the environment, are fed by the specific character transmitted by our society and our culture; the peculiarity of these representations is that they “do not operate a breach between the external and internal universe of either individual or group structures”, the main objective being imposed exclusively “by the significance given to it by the persons which valorise it”.

Therefore, each time one discusses the notion of values, viewed as
“general principles about the desirable”, “standards of evaluation of behaviors and events” or “binders of social cohesion”, one should not forget that they contribute decisively to the sketching and crystallization of social representations. It is wholly unreasonable to believe – as W. Doise asserts (1997a: 155) – that thorough (“exhaustive”) studies devoted to people, ideas and events, ignoring the idea that social representations are deeply anchored in the dynamics of relational processes, in the symbolic connections specific to a certain social field, in the values which constitute an eloquent expression of this dynamics and of this field, might be elaborated. Similar ideas have been expressed by numerous other famous psychosociologists, such as:

Jodelet (1997: 88): social representations are based on values which vary from one social group to another;

J.-C. Abric (1997: 116): social representations are determined by the systems of values and norms which form the sociological background of the moment and of the group;

G. Mugnu & F. Carugati (1985: 183): social representations are structured and evolve in a compatible manner with socially and historically determined systems of values;

A. Neculau & M. Curelaru (2003: 303): social representations interpret and justify values, their role being of maintaining the ideologically substantiated values.

Aiming at providing a convincing example related to the above assertions, mentioned in the following will be the results of a horizontal research done upon successive independent samples, developed along several years (1998, 2008, 2017), for the identification of the specific characteristics of the process of leaders’ social representation.

The first objective of the research was to reveal the extent of significance of values’ impact upon the spaces within which opinions, attitudes, representations are disseminated, the same spaces in which decision-making processes occur. Considering the assertions of S. Moscovici, W. Doise, A. Palmonari, R. Boudon, F. Bourricaud and S. M. Rădulescu, the following details should be mentioned:
As a form of favorable evaluation upon what one should be considered as positive or negative, functional or disfunctional in the organized life of a group, values represent the main critical hallmark, as a function of which various ideas, representations, feelings and/or behaviors are organized. Appearing as fundamental sources of the motivation of daily activities, they express symbolic evaluations of maximum generality of social actions and scopes, ideal behavioral standards, experienced as individual obligations by each of us.

Assuring the functional unity of a community, values express the essential moment of the studies devoted to such themes. Or, the valoric options a certain group relies upon are eventually responsible for the orientation of its actions. The appeal to the concept of value should be understood as a _deus ex machina_ structure - that is a key factor providing the most favorable solutions for solving the multiple aspects of human type - not only for sociologists, but equally for psychosociologists.

There followed the demonstration of the fact that the social representation of leaders, fully suitable in relation with the parameters of an authentic socio-cognitive process, can be understood only in close connection with the systems of values and norms forming “the sociological background of the moment and of the group”. Sharing the ideas exposed in one of the best known works of W. Doise – _Social representations: definition of a concept_ (1997: 155) –, the observation was made that, inside any social field – be it, according to the words of P. Bourdieu, “Parisian haute-couture, linguistics or diplomas provided by the education system” – _the stake of all struggles_ (for the supremacy of certain ideas, opinions, styles of reception and interpretation) results from the _hierarchical positioning of values_, and not from their simple display ”in space and time”.

Starting from this premise and being convinced that the manner in which values circulate is directly related to the satisfaction of needs³, while leaders, by their manner of action, are essentially situated on a continuum which links autoritarism and liberalism, we finally demonstrated the existence of an organic connection between the character of leaders’ social representation and the valoric profile of the group within which this representation occurs⁴:

a) if the _plexus zone_ present in the hierarchy of a group’s valoric orientations⁵ is dominated, at a certain moment, by assertions expressing
the preference for self-conservation, security and/or safety, then the representations of this group’s members about the leaders they want to have, are organized around a central knot, whose most constituting elements describe the characteristics of some favorites of power of the authoritarian type;

b) if the plexus zone from the hierarchy of the valoric orientations of the group is dominated, at a certain moment, by assertions expressing a preference for belonging and love, esteem and/or appreciation, then the representations of this group’s members about the leaders they want to have are organized around a central knot, most constituting elements describing the characteristics of some favorites of power of the democratic type;

c) if the plexus zone from the hierarchy of the valoric orientations of the group is dominated, at a certain moment, by assertions expressing a preference for knowledge, beauty, development and/or self-realization, then the representations of this group’s members about the leaders they want to have are organized around a central knot, most constituting elements describing the characteristics of some favorites of power of the liberal or liberal-democratic type.

The general conclusion of the present study evidences the concord between the image of the leader or of the candidate to a position of leader and the valoric profile of the group participating in the elaboration of such an image. Having this in view, the leader (or the candidate to a position of leader) will be informed about the strengths and weaknesses, as well as about the modalities through which the former will be consolidated and the latter, - attenuated.

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1 Here mentioned is a definition of value taken over from a volume coordinated by G. Ferréol, professor of social sciences at the University of Poitiers and chief of the famous Laboratoire de Recherche en Sociologie de la Connaissance. See Ferréol G. (coord.), Cauche Ph., Duprez J.-M., Gadrev N., Simon M. Dicționar de sociologie. Preface to the Romanian edition: S. Chelcea, A. Neculau. Iași: Polirom, 1998, p. 219.

2 This aspect has already been mentioned, even if partially, when discussing the peculiarities of the relation manifested between ideology and social representations. To outline the idea, it is worth mentioning that, along the years, an impressive number of researchers devoted special debates to the notion of values and to their statute – as an integral component of the ideological level. A few examples will be given to support the idea:

- L.R. Brown: Ideology may be defined by the term that incorporates the assembly of what psychosociologists call cognitions: knowledge, beliefs, values or opinions (Brown L.R. Ideology. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, p. 28);
- G.S. Jowett, V. O’Donnell: Genuine ideology expresses an assembly of beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors and norms (Jowett G.S., O’Donnell V. Propaganda and Persuasion. Newbury Park: Sage, 1992, p. 15);
- H. Feertchak: The ideological level includes values, norms and general beliefs (Feertchak H. Les motivations et les valeurs en psycho-sociologie. Paris: Armand Colin, 1996, p. 34).

3 In the opinion of specialists – e.g., that of N. Sillamy –, the notion of value is essentially subjective, varying as a function of individual or situation, and being directly related to the satisfaction of one’s needs. Once accepted the existence of various types of needs, one may obviously accept the existence of several types of values. Therefore, according to the Maslowian hierarchical pattern, human values may be divided into: a) values related to the satisfaction of physiological needs; b) values related to the satisfaction of safety and security needs; c) values related to the satisfaction of belonging and love needs; d) values related to the satisfaction of esteem and appreciation needs; e) values related to the satisfaction of the need to know; f) values related to the satisfaction of aesthetic values and g) values related to the satisfaction of progress and self-accomplishment needs.

4 The sample upon which the investigation was performed includes five distinct groups – students, teen-agers, convicts, retreated people and hospitalized persons.
As any other hierarchies, the ones viewed in the present study evidenced relations between the superior and the inferior positions, between systems of priorities or classifications of some entities in relation with the importance granted to them. Having an interactive, and not a linear character, they were undoubtedly centered on the vertical order of dominants. In this respect, three important formative segments may be distinguished, namely: the upper part [= plexus zone], the middle part and the lower part. In the upper part [= plexus zone], whose beginning coincides with the top of the hierarchic arrangement, the evolution of the degree of valoric orientation develops towards the attainment of a numeric share, which means, figuratively, covering one third of the way, descending from the superior to the inferior classification. In a similar manner, the middle part, following the upper one, provides the space within whose limits the evolution of the extent of valoric orientation reaches a numerical threshold/, symbolizing covering two thirds of the road leading from the superior to the inferior classification, while the lower part, following the middle one, represents the space within whose borders the evolution of the extent of valoric orientation reaches a numerical quota indicating covering the whole distance between the extreme points of the hierarchic order.

Why the plexus zone? How can one explain the inclusion of this syntagm within the conceptual structure of the study?

Derived from the Latin verb plectere [= to weave], the word plexus has been initially utilized in anatomy and medicine, in general, for describing a network of nerves or vessels formed through anastomosis, situated in various points of the human organism (for example, at the level of the gastric or renal system). Most frequently mentioned is the solar plexus, a ”region situated in the upper part of the abdomen, where the nerves which excite it are situated”. According to specialists, this type of plexus symbolizes “an inner sun” or – more exactly – the energetic center of the human body. Or, through it, the diaphragm – a fibrous cupola which, being situated between the thorax and the abdomen, is moving up and down in the rhythm of respiration, about 20,000 times a day, and which, acting as a sui-generis piston, maintains the tonus of all other organs – is activated. In time, the word plexus came to be used not only in treatises of medicine, but also in other spheres of human activity. In this respect, the first to be interested in using it are writers, as they understand its capacity of symbolizing regions with superior position in which nerves inducing excitation are present. A significant example in this respect is the title - Plexus – of the second novel of the trilogy The Rosy Crucifixion, elaborated by H. Miller along more than 10 years (a work forbidden in the USA and published in Paris between 1949 and 1960). What made the famous American novelist – considered as one of the most cultured
representatives of his generation, as the one who imposed a new orientation to the literary genre, recognized as a fervent admirer of life under all its aspects and as an matchless gifted story-teller – to prefer such a title? As far as we know, his motivation was the following: the multiple significance and nature of the term plexus lay at the basis of and permit a thorough description of a morally broken up society (the novel describes the city of New York prior to the beginning of the First World War) or – in other words – the most complete description of the values that may decisively influence the struggle for survival. More than a novel, Plexus is – in the opinion of many literary critics - the confession of a fascinating character, manifested as a turmoil of emotions, ideas, visions and nightmares focused on the human being and on his precarious position in the society of the 20th century. It is the idea of supreme values that mainly interests H. Miller. What can still save the people of our days, who ”are no longer able to feel something, behaving like automata – they eat, sleep, play and make love simply mechanically” – [which appears as] a reflex action of ”our inner chaos”? Love, of course, is the only thing still capable of acting as a magnet, bringing together contrasting existential elements. In the same manner, H. Miller renders perplexed the ordinary spirits: ”no trace of hypocrisy should be permitted, even if, under certain circumstances, common sense is the only powerful justification for cowardice and kindness”. The meanings associated to the term plexus – namely an upper region in which nerves with exciting function are situated, in anatomy and medicine, or a texture of supreme values that may decisively influence the struggle for survival, in literary creation – permit assigning of a psychosociological significance, as well, related to the possibility of evidencing its power to describe the superior part of the hierarchy of value orientations constituted within some group. In our opinion, this part of the hierarchy of valueorientations might be defined as plexus zone or – more simple - plexus.

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