

SOME CRITICAL COMMENTS ABOUT THE THEORY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS - DISCUSSION OF RÄTY & SNELLMAN

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I enjoyed Rätty and Snellmann's paper. The authors summarize clearly the basic features of the Theory of Social Representations (T.S.R.), and they scrutinize acutely the main Anglo-Saxon criticisms to the theory. Furthermore, they give an interesting interpretation of these criticisms ("talking cross purpose", "anchoring processes"...) and they come to some aspects of the sociology of scientific knowledge when they allude to the "struggle for positions" in the discipline. All that results in a quite valuable contribution to the ongoing discussion about Social Representations.

Their main concern is to turn T.S.R. more "social" and they make some propositions in that sense. Their suggestions bear heavily upon Billig's point of view (i.e. scientific theories are precisely the kind of abstract material which can be objectified and give rise to social representations). This point of view stands very close to Moscovici's own conceptions (see Moscovici and Hewstone, 1984). Finally they plead for a return to the roots of the theory (Moscovici, 1961).

I am fully congenial with the authors concern to enhance the "sociality" of social psychological theories, as well as with the importance they grant to scientific productions in the shaping of modern consciousness. No doubt that the study of "the relationships of scientific and everyday conceptions in modern consciousness" is one of the most important phenomena that social sciences should investigate. Moreover if the power effects which are embedded in these relationships are also taken into consideration.

But I am not sure at all that the T.S.R. is the best tool to handle this kind of phenomena, nor am I convinced that the focus upon this "specific aspect of reality" would help to enhance the "sociality" of the T.R.S. Is this more sufficient to face successfully the main criticism addressed to the theory? My impression is that the authors are fairly aware of the flaws of the T.S.R. but that they stop half way in the task of making clear the implications of the criticisms, and that they shift too quickly to a conservative position.

Anyway, the mixture of agreements and disagreements with their text has been highly provocative for me and I will try to expose some of the reflections it helped me to develop.

T.S.R. conveys both a general conception about the nature of social thinking and a set of specific propositions about the processes at work in social thinking. If we focus on the more general statements they appear as fairly acceptable, but they are hardly original at all. We are not faced with the need to turn the unfamiliar into a familiar perspective just because there is a *complete lack of unfamiliar aspects*. Indeed, there is now a long time ago that a good deal of social psychologists (basically from the sociologically oriented social psychology) are claiming that people construct collectively and actively their beliefs, knowledges and feelings about the relevant issues which are of concern to their society. There is also a long standing

agreement about the fact that these societal knowledge, beliefs and feelings are tied to specific group membership, that they originates in every day communication (conversations and mass media talks), and that they serve to give sense to the social surrounding and to guide actions. At this general level the assumptions of the T.S.R. do not bring anything new.

If we focus now on the more specific propositions about the nature and the mechanisms of social thinking they can be considered, for sure, as an original contribution, but a strongly questionable one. The danger here is not so much to distort the unfamiliar when turning it familiar, as to be fascinated by the success of the T.S.R. in the field of European Social Psychology, and to abandon a critical stance.

But let me handle, one by one, some of the main points which seems problematic in the T.S.R.

First,

the question of the all-encompassing formulation of T.S.R., its well acknowledged conceptual ambiguity and its methodological laxity.

What bothers me is not that a "good" theory should be conceptually precise, should offer unambiguously operationalizable concepts and that it should define strictly the adequate methodology to be used. All that pertains to the kind of exigencies put forward by an old and disabled paradigm. The question is that the type of theoretical formulation which presents the features of T.S.R. should be used basically as an *explanatory device* to account for specific realms of social reality (namely social thinking in this case). Its strength and weaknesses should be argued at the level of rigorous theoretical debate, and the acceptability of the theory should be a function of its capacity to increase our comprehension of what is at stake in the processes of social thinking.

What is not compatible with such a kind of theoretical formulation is the pretention to establish it as a *strong generative device for doing empirical research*. The growing number of empirical applications of the theory can not be alleged to asses its value. Both games can not be played simultaneously. One can not gain, at once, the explanatory benefits of *imprecise but rich theories*, and the benefits of rigorous empirical applications of the theory.

Let me give an example. The kind of social object which can give rise to a Social Representation is roughly specified by the theory. References are made to such criteria as novelty, strong social implications, effects on social identity or the polemical status of the issues at stake. For sure, these specifications are restrictive, but they still allow to take into consideration a great number of very different objects. Moreover if you can ignore freely one or the other of the criteria, or if you can play with their meaning. It is obvious, for example, that if novelty applies as well to Health, Madness, Marxism or Psychoanalysis, then the range of social objects which falls under the criterium of novelty is largely undetermined.

The same will happen if you refer novelty to changing conceptions about old objects. As we all know, the phenomenon of AIDS is generating just now many empirical researches based on T.S.R. I am afraid that with the kind of methodology used to search for Social Representations of AIDS we could have found Social Representations of the Gulf War as well. Was the Gulf War an object able to generate Social Representations? I do not know exactly even if I would tend to answer negatively. But the bothering question is that *not the theory nor the empirical data* does provide us clearly with elements to decide a given object is

able to generate Social Representations or not. Which is then the status of the empirical findings and of the sophisticated statistical packages used in their production?

It is difficult not being impressed by the strong contrast between high statistical precision on one hand and theoretical vagueness on the other. Of course, standardized questionnaires and statistical treatments are not the exclusive devices used to investigate Social Representations. But I am afraid that methodological laxity generates in this case *the same effects* than theoretical vagueness, that is to *allow a massive production of empirical researches*. That is all okay for "strengthening positions" in the discipline, but does it make sense for the improvement of our sociopsychological knowledge?

Second,

the question of the social/individual split.

Social Representations are constantly opposed to Individual Representations, even if the first ones are substantiated in individuals beings (I don't see how to gain knowledge about a Social Representation without having concrete persons to speak, to write or to debate). Which is the sense of this opposition or differentiation?.

If that means that Individual Representations are not socially generated, that they are lacking of a social dimension and that they are deprived of producing social effects, then I do not understand either where they come from (the so called individual experience is necessarily social), nor how they manage to stay outside the social realm. If this was the intended meaning of the opposition it would be difficult not to suspect that it stands on a set of underlying assumptions which reproduce the old nonsocial conception of the individual and which takes for granted the traditional dichotomy between the individual and society.

Alternatively, if that means that Social Representations refer to what is *held in common* by a more or less structured set of individuals, putting aside the less widespread or the more idiosyncratic aspects of Representations, then I do not understand which is the theoretical benefit of substituting "Collective Representations" by "Social Representations". At least the expression "*Collective Representations*" does not *imply* that there can be non social representations, and it does not reinforce the prevailing non social conception of the individual. I see in the shift from "collective" to "social" several negative implications at a theoretical level but they may appear more clearly if I make a brief and schematic reference to the issue of "collective memory" versus "social memory".

All memory, included individual one, is in some sense *social* (maybe even the remembering of non sense syllables!), but which is the difference with *collective memory*?. Nor the social dimension of both (individual and collective), nor the fact that both are instantiated, at least partly, in individuals. The difference is that collective memory refers directly to *societal processes* in several ways. First in the sense that it is tied to past events which have had strong effects upon large groups in the moment they took place, and which have also effects upon the present situation of large groups of people, eventually several generations after the events. The social strength of the effects and their large repercussions are a joint condition to the long standing traces left in the symbolic framework of society. So, collective memory is tied directly to the collective agents of the historical processes. Second, collective memory deposits in collective productions (narrations, songs, proverbs, etc...). These productions do not need to be actualized in the discourses of any single individual. Some of the aspects can be inferred from putting into relation individual discourses without

any of them mentioning these aspects. They can be reconstructed using fragments coming from very heterogenous proceedings: individual discourses, of course, but also ways of doing things, celebrations and so on. So, collective memory presents features which transcend the sum of its individual instantiations, as Rom Harré would require for defining the social dimension of genuine Social Representations (Harré, 1984). Collective memory can not be understood without a reference to the societal processes which are at work to maintain it and which are also enacted to organize systematically collective forgetting.

The shift from "collective" to "social", besides lending a hand to the individualistic conceptions and to psychologism, turns looser the links between representations and societal processes (large social groups, social structures, power structures, ideological productions, etc...). Moreover it excludes the possibility of thinking seriously about the very possibility to investigate *collective productions*. The term "social" allows us to use exclusively individuals as the source of our data. As an individual I can give a social response, never a collective one. As an individual I can display social behaviors, never collective actions, etc... Which are, actually, the possibilities to grasp collective productions through individual ones? How to pass from a set of individual manifestations to a collective expression?.

The term "collective" refers to something which is not reducible to a sum of individual productions and that is precisely what is masked by the use of the term "social" in the T.S.R. In short, the shift from collective to social representations opens the doors implicitly to a whole set of assumptions coming directly from methodological individualism.

Third,

the question of the concept of "Representation".

The choice of this term is, in my sense, a very unfortunate one and it may be held responsible both of the main features of T.S.R and of the flaws which affect the theory.

Nothing represents anything if it is not through a convention (see for example Putnam, 1981), nothing stands for something else if it is not through a decision. What we call "Representations" are *constructions socially mediated* which do not bear any "natural" or "necessary" links with what is "represented". But, a long-standing tradition of thought has objectified "Representation" in terms of a more or less accurate *reproduction* of what is being represented (Rorty, 1979), a more or less accurate *image* of what is *outside the Representation*.

When we use the word "Representation" we put the emphasis on "reproduction" (and its eventual distorting features), even if it is an "active" reproduction rather than on "construction". The result is a tendency to objectify the Representation itself.

To speak of "individual representations" suggests in many cases that individuals have somewhere in their heads a repertory of representations which are activated and which become more or less conscious when the represented object enters into play. To speak of "Social Representations" leads to hypostasize them, and to consider that they have an *independent existence* in the realm of the social reality where they are *located* and through which they *circulate*. From this perspective there is an easy rule toward thinking that if we use the adequate methodology we can almost "*look*" at them.

If instead of being labelled as a "Theory of Social Representations" the interesting theoretical preoccupations of Moscovici had been labelled as a "*Theory of collective symbolic*

productions", no doubt that the whole dynamics and the whole structure of his theory would have been quite different. Maybe the emphasis would not have been put so strongly on the figurative aspects of social thinking and more attention would have been paid to constructive activities as well as to the rhetorical aspects of social thinking. As we know, the choice of words is never innocent.

Forth,

the background assumptions of T.S.R.

I am convinced that this theory can not be fully understood without situating it in the *theoretical Zeitgeist* which prevailed in the moment of its gestation. We have to remember that in the late fifties the intellectual climate was dominated in France by the emergence of *Structuralist movement*, joint with the importance of *Marxist thinking*.

Structuralists revindicate *Durkheim* and his positivistic assumptions to confer scientific legitimacy to their own positions. The emphasis was, obviously, put upon "structures", and Durkheimian influence produced a tendency to reify these structures. T.S.R is marked not only by the Durkheimian reference to "collective representations" but also by the need to *search for "structures"* (a social representation is seen as a structured system, the degree of structuration is even a criteria used to decide if something can be accepted as a Social Representation). More covertly it is also marked by an incapacity to take an unambiguous distance with positivistically oriented methodologies.

Marxism put the emphasis on the dynamics of structures and on *conflict* as the main explicative concept to account for these dynamics. Conflict (cognitive and social) is in fact a central point for Moscovici in his theorization of conversion processes, but we find it also in his T.S.R., for example, under the form of the conflict between the old (the assimilating instance) and the new (what has to be accommodated).

If it is true that the *Zeitgeist* of the late fifties has left its traces on T.S.R. then it is hardly surprising that who identifies with a new *Zeitgeist* (post-structuralist, etc...) finds some difficulties to reach a full agreement with the assumptions of this theory.

Finally, a last word about the suggestion made by Rätty and Snellmann to concentrate on the relations of scientific and lay knowledge. I am in absolute agreement with that. But I am convinced that the complexity of this question requires to adopt a *non disciplinary perspective*.

Social Psychology can not do much by itself and it must integrate, at least, the tools elaborated by Michel Foucault and the knowledges generated by the New Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (Latour, Woolgar, etc...). This integration is indeed the task we should face in the present time.

And yet a final precision. The fact that I take a critical stance toward the Theory of Social Representations is perfectly compatible with the fact that I consider in extremely positive terms the contribution made by this theory to challenge the position of the thought-minded experimentalist and positivistically oriented social psychologists.

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