

SOME FURTHER NOTES: REPLIES TO IBAÑEZ AND POTTER & BILLIG

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The comments by Ibañez and Potter & Billig raise, in a stimulating way, some central issues which have engendered a great deal of discussion and which also function, no doubt, as important watersheds of opinion: cognitivism, individualism, language and talk, the concept of science, and, of course, the meaning of the social. To preface our brief remarks below, we would like to reiterate one of the main arguments of your article: The field of scientific discussion is socially structured. The discussion on social representations is no exception.

The theory of social representations has offered a great deal of food for thought, especially for those groups which have gathered under the flag of the social. Our article did not aim at analysing the theory of social representations in itself as much as its reception in the context of the reshaping of the field of social psychology after the flag had been raised. The struggle for positions, characteristic of scientific discourse just as much as discourses in general, is more in evidence in the discussion of the theory of social representations than is readily admitted. This is all the more striking because most participants of that discussion clearly represent the view of science according to which knowledge is socially constructed, also in terms of power, its practices and relations.

We are still inclined to see a definite pattern of argumentation in the reception of the theory of social representations: It starts by praising the theory as a challenger to orthodox social psychology, then moves on to show the conceptual vulnerability of the theory, and finally asserts that the whole business was eventually ruined by massive empirical research - if not before. Our prediction is that empirical research will come to the forefront as an argument in the discourses within new social psychology. Negatively put, 'massive' empirical research is an indication of neglect of theory and of attempts to merely strengthen one's own positions. Positively put, lively empirical research is a way of proving the vitality of one's theoretical orientation.

We may note in passing that the acronyms 'SR' and 'TSR', adopted by both the critics and the supporters of the theory of social representations, are telling symptoms of seeing the boundaries of the theory as well-defined. Not even acronyms are innocent: 'SR' and 'TSR' convey an impression of a sharply defined, established and unambiguous and, as such, no longer problematic theory. The magic has gone.

What is important from the point of view of the original aims and the concept of man ('amateur scientist') of the theory of social representations is its conception of science. Moscovici's conception of science is problematic, which makes, as Potter and Billig stated, the distinction between a reified and a consensual universe rather problematic. Especially according to the post-modern view of science, the authority and legitimacy of the truth is deteriorating. Science is seen as just another language game comprising several discrepant voices, none of which can claim a monopoly over the truth. In this way, science is not

considered to have an increasing influence on everyday thinking, as suggested by Moscovici. Still, the controversies regarding the 'truth' generated by scientific discourses may actually emphasize 'unfamiliarity', thus having the effect of creating further food for thought and argumentation. Thus the post-modern conception of science does not necessarily refute the role of science as a generator of social representations; on the contrary, perhaps.

The amateur scientist may be more prepared than has been believed to respond to the scientific discourse of today, perhaps because the shared dilemmatic conceptions of our culture already contain a notion of the relativity of the truth and of the close relationship between knowledge and power. Research into the social representations of truth might be an interesting and important undertaking in accounting for the complicated relations between science and everyday thinking. In investigating such issues, the new sociology of scientific knowledge offers a relevant point of view, as noted by Ibañez.

We completely agree with the commentators that the debate about the theory of social representations has been exceptionally interesting and has carried the theory-formation of social psychology forward. The liveliness of the discussion is due both to the dynamics of the formation of a new social psychology and, no less, to the manifold nature of Serge Moscovici's theory, which opposes fixation into a theoretically and methodologically rigid fort.

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