

CONTENT VERSUS STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS – SOME COMMENTS ON P. CATELLANI'S PAPER

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Politics offers a wide and crucial research field for the study of social representations. In a fundamental way, indeed (and it is high time for the credibility and ambitions of our discipline to remind it), politics lies at the very core of social cognition. It is not only an important topic: it is an *essential* one, in the strong sense, because the subject we aim at describing and understanding is basically a citizen, much more than a mere "Information Processing System". Citizenship implies the inheritance of an historical identity and a cultural background, the involvement into a collective situation where different groups are facing each other, and the possibility to act up according to more or less open constraints. In other words, citizenship is precisely located at the problematic connection of individual resources and collective regulations. A great merit of Patrizia Catellani's work is to tackle this domain, which has been too neglected till now by social psychologists. Owing to the development of such investigations, the loose concept of "ideology" could acquire progressively an operational status.

On another hand, it is theoretically and empirically stimulating, as she does, to hold the specific activation of a social representation to be a part in the solution process of an ill-defined problem. We proposed recently (Rouquette, 1989) to consider rumors, as a major form of social thinking, from this standpoint. Thus, it would become possible, and probably seminal, beyond any reductionism, to bridge individual and social cognitive psychologies. Also, this perspective leads to focus on a process, rather than on an indefinitely varied product (in this line, see Abric, 1989).

However, Catellani's paper gives us the opportunity to underline some points related to the general opposition between semantic and formal aspects of a social representation. Most of these points are both methodological and conceptual.

Catellani's choice is to investigate the semantic aspects of a particular representation. I will not discuss this choice. The problem is that she uses for this purpose a fifty-years old technique of content analysis (a coding grid). Moscovici did so in his time and anybody does so for lack of better. But we all know the uncertainties, pitfalls and traps of this kind of procedure, more projective than conclusive, and which only affords first-degree descriptions; as to the judges, they answer for the reliance of the grid, not for its validity. Inside our specific domain, content analysis is valid only when operated by the discourse producers themselves, from their own representations, beliefs and norms (see Guimelli & Rouquette, 1992, for an illustration). And if a social representation is finally a "discursive configuration", as argues Bhavnani (1993), then its study requires a strong conception combining linguistics, epistemology and history, very far from the illusion of immediate transparency attached to content analysis.

A more appropriate technique, based upon an algorithm and providing the Ss with the possibility to build their own semantic categories, would have been the similarity analysis developed by Flament (1981). Similarity analysis allows to characterize the cognitive structure of an object for a population. Catellani's results say nothing about this structure, and we do not know therefore whether the social representations of her two groups differ or not. Moreover, differences in thematic frequencies do not necessarily match with structural differences.

But the main point, to our sense, is the following: the importance of the semantic aspects of a social representation for the subjects themselves does not imply these aspects ought to be the most important for the scholars. In the same way, the actual importance of colours and tastes in our perception of the physical world does not imply the relevance of such qualities to the scientific knowledge of this world. Generally speaking, concept breaks off perception. The physical notion of force, e.g., is not the generalization nor the sophisticated translation of our daily experiences when pulling, drawing, lifting and so on. It is a construct, disengaged from immediate evidence. And this abstraction fits the reality by defining *formal classes* of events. Likewise, a structure can manage a series of activities and processes, while being unperceived or unconceived by those who act and process. The witness directly borne by the subjects is a question, not an answer; a matter to investigate, not a proof. A reasonable postulate to anchor our researches in a rigorous scientific ground is that the formal properties of social representations alone can give access to the progressive construction of a systematic and general knowledge.

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