

**COMMENT ON M. BANCHS' "DESCONSTRUYENDO UNA
DESCONSTRUCCIÓN ..."**

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Maria Banchs' paper is a true exercise in intellectual honesty and rigour and I share a great part of her concerns regarding the misinterpretations that have surrounded the theory of social representations. I think she does a fine job in identifying the relevant issues to be debated and, in my opinion, setting the record straight. These issues are part of an integral, and I would hope genuine, process of debating how our constructs can account for the perplexities and the slippery realities of our societies. For us in Latin America this is particularly true, and nowhere would I agree more with Banchs than when she keeps alive the memory of Ignacio Martín-Baró. For all of us who had the privilege of knowing Ignacio, of knowing his fury and his tenderness about what psychology was and about what it should be, about what Latin America was and about what it could be, he shall remain a main source of inspiration and guidance.

In this brief comment I will single out one aspect of the discussion proposed by Banchs which I believe can take a very much needed dialogue further. It relates to what she indicates as a shared agenda for both social constructionists and social representations theorists. I think that by taking up this discussion we can understand better where the misunderstandings are between the theory of social representations and social constructivism, and where they actually differ. And I shall say with no fear that both - the acknowledgment of misunderstandings and differences in our practices - are part of an agenda that Maria Banchs and Ian Parker would be happy to share.

Social Constructionism and Social Representations: a Shared Agenda?

Banchs identifies the epistemological and ontological assumptions that would be part of a shared agenda for the theory of social representations and social constructivist rationality, the constructed dimension of all experience, be it objective or subjective, the inherently social nature of the various forms of knowledge that humans construct - where scientific knowledge is a part, susceptible of being interrogated as a historical construction. I agree with her and I have no doubt that we owe to our social constructionist colleagues a radical critique of many of the underlying assumptions that operate in scientific knowledge, guiding - often unconsciously - our codes of practices, our urge to know, to explain and in the most extreme and illusionary cases, to predict (Ibanez,1991; Gergen,1985; Parker & Shotter, 1989). These assumptions comprise the stuff that all of us, to some extent, have been made of in our courses of psychology. To understand their full implications for what we do and how we do what we do is part of any exercise in reflexion and self-reflexion.

However, I think that a more careful examination of the accounts our social constructionist colleagues are constructing will show that differences do exist. Differences

that do not - as Banchs has shown - reside in the fact that social representations theory may be individualistic or positivistic. This gross misunderstanding of everything social representations theory is about demands, quite frankly, a bit more effort from our colleagues. An effort that would require the reading of Moscovici's work beyond what has been translated into English. An effort that would require a serious re-appraisal of the ovular work done by Denise Jodelet on madness. An effort that would also require a bit more dialogue and a careful reading of those signs that constitute a different intellectual tradition, a completely different way of doing science (one just has to compare Popper and Bachelard), a different way of writing science, a different relationship to academia and its imperatives. This effort perhaps would lead to an understanding of what Moscovici has proposed during the course of a life time. Should we be able to meet at a genuine crossroads, we would enlarge the space of understanding of the differences between us. Some of these differences, I believe, are in how we conceptualise the subject and her relationship to the world, what representations are and what discourse is, and how they relate back to the subject and to the world. In what follows I try to contribute to the clarification of these differences.

The imperative of consciousness, as we know, has been one of the main cornerstones of psychology and, therefore also, of social psychology. It has been around this imperative that the unity of the subject has been constructed: a subject identical to herself, stripped of contradictions and comfortably centred into herself. A centre signifies: a privileged point around which all else is organised. Around its own privileged central point, the subject has been sovereign and everything else surrounding her could only be understood as *external, as other*. When John Watson launched his behaviourist manifesto in 1913 he created a cleavage which, during the history of psychology, has set in opposition social reality to both the individual and mental processes. A mind without a history and a history without a subject seem to be the joint outcomes of an over-sharp distinction between a psychology of behaviour and a psychology of the cognitive subject. By postulating that behaviour is public and consciousness is private, Watson was not only calling for a psychology without introspection. He was also providing the foundations of a psychology without a subject that, following the example of the natural sciences, sought its status as a domain of science by rejecting subjective categories. Classical cognitive theories - where a representation is a mere reflection of the outside world in the mind, or a mark of the mind that is reproduced in the outside world - are fully embedded in this cleavage and the weight of this inheritance certainly cannot be easily dismissed. However, it seems to me that our social constructionist colleagues are still trapped in that cleavage. Let us take one example from Gergen's account of the social constructionist movement in modern psychology:

"This movement begins in earnest when one challenges the concept of knowledge as a mental representation. Given the myriad of insolubles to which such a concept gives rise, one is moved to consider what passes as knowledge in human affairs. At least one major candidate is that of linguistic rendering.(...) These renderings to continue an earlier theme, are constituents of social practices. From these perspective, knowledge is not something people possess somewhere in their heads, but rather, something people do together(...) In effect, we may cease inquiry into the psychological basis of language (which account would inevitable form but a subtext or miniature language) and focus on the performative use of language in human affairs."(Gergen, 1985,p.270)

Or:

"The mind (Coulter,1979) becomes a form of social myth; the self-concept (Gergen, 1985) is removed from the head and placed within the sphere of social discourse."

"...what is taken to be psychological process at the very outset becomes a derivative of social interchange."

"The explanatory locus of human action shifts from the interior region of the mind to the processes and structure of human interaction." (Gergen, 1985,p.271)

Reading Gergen's text, it is not difficult to understand why he went as far as proposing, along with a post-modern stance, the "death of the subject" (Shotter & Gergen, 1989). In their urge to kill the centric, unified and private subject proposed by the classical rationalism of positive psychology, our social constructionist colleagues ended up killing everybody. From this perspective, psychological processes and the mind cannot be conceptualised, because the only possible conception is the one given by a positive and rationalistic legacy. And strange as it may seem, they *elect a new centre*: discourse. Subjects are nothing but positions in discourses, inhabitants of or embedded within discourses (Shotter & Gergen, 1989). Stripped of any ontological status, the psychological subject is left in a void having to face her performative actions (linguistic actions) as the only possible locus of inquiry. Now, how does this differ from the classical split between internal and external, between subjective and objective, between mind and behaviour? How is this not a new facade for the old and quite modern Anglo-Saxon empiricism? Or maybe we can see here an implicit assumption of an all-encompassing societal reality devouring and defining the ontology of the subject, something of which Durkheim would definitely approve.

Moscovici, however, thought both with and against Durkheim. With Durkheim he understood the power of social reality, its relative autonomy and transcendence over human agency. And against the dominant stream that marked the history of psychological knowledge he sought in Freud, Piaget, and than Vigotsky (Moscovici, 1989) the elements to conceptualise ways in which psychological phenomena construct - and yet are constructed by - social reality. In that, he negated Durkheim. For the theory of social representations the subject and the psyche are not pre-given substances and historical societies are not constraining forces apart from people. Indeed, in the theory of social representations the subject is not in a comfortable position. She is neither defined from within nor from without. Ex-centric in its very constitution and unable to fully coincide with that which she is not, the subject is condemned to search for mediations and under these conditions, desire signifies. Action, Word, and Other constitute - in an intricate relation - these mediations: with them social subjects try to fill the gap. To represent occurs in this space. In it a representation finds its conditions of possibility and its mode of functioning and it is only under the sign of violence or immediate coincidence that it would fail to occur. It is in the meeting point of union and separateness between the subject and the object (object here means others and things) that representations are formed and that is exactly why they retain at once their potentially imaginative character and their referentiality to the world. To suggest that they accentuate the dichotomy between the individual and society is the same as suggesting that the individual and society are either reducible to each other or unrelated to each other. To suggest representations are dead is to suggest the final nirvana: a world of perfect coincidence for everyone and of everything. In this world there is indeed no subject. Everything slides into everything else; similarities, nuances and differences no longer have any meaning and, excuse me, but everything goes. Limits and boundaries are just lost illusions of modernity, any collective normativity loses its *raison d'être*, and because every story is just a good story whatever appears as an attempt to construct a joint account becomes coercive.

Discourse, as much as representations, also operates as mediation. Discourse and representations are constructed by each other, each extending into the domain of the other and yet, paradoxically, the one cannot be reduced to the other. Bakhtin knew that, and he taught us that "discourse lives, as it were, beyond itself, in a living impulse (*napravlennost*)

toward the object; if we detach ourselves completely from this impulse all we have left is the naked corpse of the word, from which we can learn nothing at all about the social situation or the fate of a given word in the world. To study the word as such, ignoring the impulse that reaches beyond it, is just as senseless as to study psychological experience outside the context of that real life towards which it was directed and by which is determined" (Bakhtin, 1981,p292).

That is why positions that claim at once the "death of the subject" and the sovereignty of discourse based on post-modern arguments cannot ultimately be sustained, and are not, in my view, part of a common agenda. I think that here we differ, because for the theory of social representations neither the subject, nor representations, nor discourse are conceived in terms of bipolar oppositions or as entities understood from within themselves, but in terms of contradictory relationships that give them substance and mark their process of constitution.

Against the post-modern deconstruction of subjectivity as pure fragmentation and difference, there is the need now, and perhaps even greater than ever, to continue developing theory and research on the problem of selfhood and identity as social psychological processes. Late capitalist societies do produce pulverization and fragmentation, no doubt. But to equate selfhood and social experience to the historical conditions of their actualization is to reduce their understanding to the level of pure reproduction. As social psychologists, we need to know and to understand those specific forms of social knowledge and action whereby men and women seek to appropriate and to make sense of their vivid experience, struggling to maintain an identity, a sense of belonging and a location in the world. For the right to bear an identity and defend it still holds immense political importance in various parts of this planet and constitutes the call of a multitude of people. This call cannot be just considered another good story. It is one that we must fight for if we are to take seriously the concrete asymmetrical situation of so many excluded peoples.

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