DECONSTRUCTING REPRESENTATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF DECONSTRUCTION: ON MOSCOVICI AGAIN, AND BANCHS

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Abstract: This paper responds to Banchs' (1994) critique of my deconstruction of the Social Representations Theory (SRT) literature in Britain (Parker, 1989). Banchs identifies some ambiguities in that deconstruction, and offers some useful corrective elaborations of some of the more progressive aspects of SRT. Nevertheless, Banchs' critique should be understood as an interpretation of the theory as it is represented in a particular context, and my original deconstruction should be read as it applies to the dominant representation of the theory in another.

María Banchs (1994) provides a robust defence of Social Representations Theory (SRT) against my critique (Parker, 1989), and marshalls a number of useful quotes from Moscovici and colleagues to support her characterization of the theory as thoroughly social and politically progressive. Something of the context for my critique, and for the reception of SRT in social psychology, is lost along the way, however and Banchs slips, at points, form a simple rebuttal of my attack into a defence of what Moscovici really intends (or what Banchs would want him to intend). This is unfortunate, because the context is crucial to the 'deconstructive' reading of SRT I presented. Perhaps it would be helpful to say that I hesitated before my original critique of SRT's borrowings form sociological theory (Parker, 1987). Why?

Moscovici has been a source of inspiration for many radical writers in British social psychology, and his contributions to the 'crisis' literature (e.g., Moscovici, 1972), which insisted that we should look to processes in ideology and culture, provide a valuable corrective to North American social psychology which has, and still does, cast its baleful shadow over our work here. I hesitated over the possibility of working within the social representations framework, pushing its radical potential to its limits and working with Moscovici's proposals to legitimate the study of ideology in social psychology. My feeling at the time though was that the problem with this option was that SRT was just too attractive to a segment of traditional British (and some North American even) social psychologists, and was already being recuperated (neutralised and absorbed) within mainstream experimental and cognitivist research. The opportunities that SRT offered were being squandered, and it was important to move fast and take the other option, which was to show this recuperative process was happening and what threats it posed to those who had wanted to take the new social psychologies in a radical direction.

It should be said that despite some sympathy with 'new' social psychologies (e.g., Gauld & Shotter, 1977; Harré & Secord, 1972), the thrust of my work has been internal polemical critique (e.g., Parker, 1989), and the turn to 'deconstruction' and 'discourse' has been a

tactical engagement with frameworks which open up the discipline. It has been as important to reflect upon the ways in which avant garde theory closes down a political engagement with ideology as it has been to take what is useful from them. Even in Deconstructing Social Psychology (Parker & Shotter, 1990), then, we included a feminist attack on deconstruction as our final chapter (Burman, 1990), and we have anxious to subject discourse analysis, a version of which we use in Manchester, too to a sustained critique (Parker & Burman, 1993).

SRT still provides an arena, in the pages of this journal for example, for critical reflective work. The discussions of 'methodology' in recent years have continued, albeit in muted, cautious and coded form, the radical impulse of the crisis debates in this area. Qualitative methods in particular in SRT keep alive the hope that theoretical approach could be genuinely inter-disciplinary and different from mainstream positivism (e.g., Flick, 1992; Spink, 1993). However, despite the optimism of some writers who have been taking SRT in a qualitative research direction (e.g., Augustinos, 1993), and the occasion it provides for a consideration of cultural processes without the SR conceptual baggage (e.g., Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992), the theory is still sliding bit by bit into the mainstream. It has been argued that SRT's 'versatility' makes it peculiarly susceptible to different readings (Allansdottir, Jovchelovitch & Stathopoulou, 1992). I agree, and mainstream social psychologists can be very versatile when they want to assimilate a new theoretical system to the discipline.

Social representations theory as text

The crucial question that Banchs fails to take seriously throughout the course of her defence of Moscovici is 'What is the nature of the text that Parker (1989) subjected to a 'deconstructive' reading?' I was not concerned with what we would like Moscovici to mean, what he really things, what he has said, or what he has written in unpublished mimeos in France. Despite her promise not to re-phrase the relevant points in her own words ('nos hemos puesto como norma no resumir en nuestras propias palabras', Banchs, 1994, p. 55), she resorts to this at several points in the paper (e.g., in the words of Kaes on p. 60, of Jodelet on p. 62). From now on in this reply I will simply give page numbers from Banchs' paper when I cite her text.

Let me acknowledge, as we turn to the specific critical points that Banchs makes, the following errors in my reading of SRT that I would now want to distance myself from.

First, there is a strong implication in my text that Moscovici is a modern writer, and therefore bad, and that the progressive alternative would be to fall into the arms of the postmoderns, the good guys ('un cierto maniqueísmo según el cual el modernismo es malo, y casi que podríamos decir que los modernistas son los malos de la partida, y el postmodernismo es bueno y los postmodernistas son los buenos', p. 71). I did see postmodern arguments, as part of the post-structuralist package, as progressive, and do still think that they are preferable to much that passes for a serious social psychology. SRT is, in its dominant form in Britain today, still tied to a particular conceptual disciplinary frame work that is 'modern' (that is, it is, among other things, individualist and cognitivist). My mistake was to imply that a postmodern Moscovici would be better.

Second, I slide, at times, from treating the text of SRT, specifically that which represents SRT to British social psychologists, into some claims about what Moscovici has said. Banchs notices that I accuse Moscovici of failing to follow through the implications of his appeal to a notion of 'communication', and she points out that Moscovici does show how it is only in interaction that sense is given to a representation ('Moscovici explica que sólo en la interacción se da sentido a la representación', p. 64). This I should not have done, and my

only defence is that the parameters of my critique were clearly outlined at the outset, and that a characterization of Moscovici's position should be understood as 'Moscovici' the signifier of SRT text that was my concern. Banchs, then, is right to pick me up on this.

Third, there are clearly contradictions between different texts that I have signed. Banchs focusses on five contradictions between the introduction to Parker & Shotter (1990) and my own chapter in that book (Parker, 1990). No doubt there are contradictions within each of the texts too, and, as an advocate of deconstructive and discourse analytic readings (Parker, 1992), I would not be surprised if this was the case. The fifth 'contradiction' she itemizes is one I take seriously, and with some embarrassment, I retract the position I took in 1989. Banchs points out that my vagueness over the notion of ideology appears to be the same as that which attends definitions of social representations ('Frente a esta vaguedad conceptual, podríamos decir de su definición de ideología lo mismo que Parker critica en la definición teórica de representaciones sociales', p. 68). As Banchs notes earlier in her paper, the concept of ideology poses serious problems for constructionists ('El concepto de ideología plantea serios problemas a los construccionistas', p. 63). The use of post-structuralism at the time led me to be very critical of the notion of 'false consciousness', for example. Now I would want to use that notion, but in a way compatible with social constructionism: social reality is constructed, and the oppressed would tell different stories about their position under different circumstances, circumstances in which they were empowered to make history rather than be subjected to it (Eagleton, 1991). However, the question this poses to SRT is still as cogent, 'how do social representations operate as ideology, and what is so empowering about 'consensus"?

The other four contradictions can be rendered accountable. Banchs objects, in particular, to the double-standards that seem, to her, to be used to evaluate Moscovici and those that appear to underly our own work. On these points she is mistaken.

(i) Why, she asks, do Parker & Shotter (1990) propose to give voice to the oppressed ('se proponen dar voz a los oprimidos', p. 66) when they object to the way Moscovici wants to study consensual universes where individuals freely express themselves ('estudiar los universos consensuales donde los individuos se expresan libremente', p. 66)? The difference is that we were not proposing that such types of talk should be sentimentalized or theorised as something separate and different from that 'scientists' or 'professionals'. The problem is one of position and power, not of identifiable, essential properties of talk.

(ii) When Banchs asks why it should be that social representations should be attacked specifically for leaving the way open for taking cognitions seriously, she complains that if we want to give voice to the oppressed we cannot neglect what may be going on inside their heads ('si queremos devolver la palabra y darle voz a los oprimidos, no podemos negar sus contenidos mentales', p. 67). The problem, again is the power that social psychologist have to attribute cognitions to people, to treat them as complicated mechanisms, not what they say about themselves.

(iii) Banchs objects that we attack Moscovici when he proposes to look at formal aspects of thought and language ('nos preocupemos por los aspectos formales del pensamiento y lenguaje', p. 67) when we too (Parker & Shotter, 1990) say that we should look at literary and rhetorical forms ('preocuparnos por los dispositivos literarios y retóricos', p. 67). The difference here is that SRT once again puts other people, 'everyday talk' under the microscope and discovers formal properties of their speech whereas the deconstruction we are advocating is one which turns back upon the professionals who do the categorising.

(iv) Banchs (pp. 67-68) discovers that at one point in my text I say that 'the 'representations' are imagined to operate inside the individual's head' (Parker, 1989, p. 99),

but that at another point I say that 'Even if social representations are not seen as 'deposited in the brain of each individual' (Saussure, 1974, p. 24) as semiology argued, it appears that the key to enlightenment is that the should be (ibid., p. 104). The issue here revolves around the sentimental prescriptive part of SRT which attempts to do that work of locating representations in the head, and to glue the person into a 'consensual universe', when they may otherwise be experienced as outside the head, when the person is seen as participating in a 'reified universe'.

Deconstructing representations

The pervasive problem that I want to draw attention to is that the SRT 'text' - the translations, empirical examples and elaborations of the framework - which is operating in Britain, and which then becomes effective further afield, is one which gives sustenance to mainstream cognitivist approaches in social psychology. My deconstruction of SRT homed in on the way certain statements by Moscovici warranted a certain reading of the framework, and the danger that his work would become part of the internal reaction to innovative ideas in the crisis debates in the discipline rather than a progressive response which would work with them. I say, then, for this reason, and these among the quotes Banchs' selects that 'supporters' of the theory look to sociology (Parker, 1989, p. 91), that there is a 'licence for individualism' in Moscovici's work that can 'only too easily read as an invitation to continue the incorporation of sociology' (ibid., p. 96), and that 'some of Moscovici's own statements warrant this retreat, and the fault lies not simply in the vagueness of the theory which permits different interpretations, but in the inconsistency, and even occasional mischaracterization of the research' (ibid., p. 99).

I am careful to distinguish between some empirical examples of social representations research, and the use that is made of it. When I cite Herzlich's (1973) study of health and illness, for example, I claim only that it 'slides into' a distributive view of social representations. Jodelet's (1992) work on madness is another case in point that operates as an example of social representations research only insofar as its progressive qualitative approach and collective framework is ignored. the issue here is how the research is absorbed by a dominant view of what SRT is, and how it should be interpreted.

SRT, the SRT which we have to contend with here, does warrant a separation between the social and the individual, and the reproduction of cognitivist notions in social psychology. Whenever a certain psychological process is advertised as 'a genuinely universal principle' (Moscovici, 1982, p. 12) we ought to beware, and when we are invited to see SRT as an approach to 'social cognition' that is 'different from, and complementary to, recent North American research (Moscovici, 1981, p. 182), the alarm bells should be ringing. The most important introductory volume on social representations in English (Farr & Moscovici, 1984) included, without any attempt to take editorial distance, the statement in the foreword that the approach seems 'more akin methodologically and theoretically to cognitive psychology' (Deutscher, 1984, p. xiv) and there were chapters on experiments which manipulated individual's 'representations' (Abric, 1984, Codol, 1984). The formalising of central structures of social representations enhances this trend, as does the separation of 'central systems' from 'peripheral systems' of representations (e.g., Abric, 1993) and attempts to connect social representations with cognitive development (e.g., Molinari & Emiliani, 1993) takes like risks. We let this tendency in SRT go unnoticed at our peril.

Now, the various sources of error that Banchs lists dry up. One of the first presentations of Moscovici's theory in the English-speaking world, in Forgas (1981), and so one of the

important components of the SRT text I was concerned with, explicitly looked to Durkheimian and Weberian sociology (with all the dualism that such a double borrowing carries) to warrant a new approach to 'social cognition'. I do not, as Banchs says in her point one, attribute to the theory of social representations one single source of theoretical inspiration: Durkheim's orthodox sociology ('Atribuirle a la teoría de las representaciones sociales una sola fuente teórica de inspiración: la sociología ortodoxa de Durkheim', p. 56). The dualism that the double-debt to Durkheim and Weber in this early manifestation of the SRT text here invites then supports the dicotomization of the interior and the exterior (contra Banchs' point two), and individual-social dualism (contra Banchs' point three). The social is treated as separate from individuals, with social representations seen as things to be collected (contra Banchs' point four) and used by individuals (contra Banchs' point five and six).

Banchs' point seven, eight and nine present a quite different Moscovici (and not in his own words here either) to the one in the SRT text I deconstructed. Banchs' point ten, eleven and twelve do usefully convey, in Moscovici's own words now, an approach to social representations that is instructive to all social psychologists working with language, and discourse. This useful resumé is a corrective to the problems I was concerned with, and should be read alongside my critique, not against it. Banchs' points thirteen and fourteen also give voice to Moscovici in a helpful way, though it is possible to find other translations of Moscovici in the SRT text that give licence to the interpretation I wanted to draw attention to. Moscovici does say, in that early English text, for example that individuals and groups 'think autonomously, constantly producing and communication representations' (Moscovici, 1981, p. 183). As regards Banchs' point fourteen, however, I do not understand how, when Moscovici uses the word 'genuine' to describe spontaneous conversation ('Moscovici utilice la palabra genuina para calificar la conversación espontánea', p. 65) and the world of consensual social representations, this cannot provoke the reading which sees social representations as better than other forms of talk.

Representing deconstruction

Banchs spends some time towards the end of her paper collecting emotive and ironic words and phrases that I have used. In general, I am unrepentent, and would see in enthusiastic debate and polemic better possibilities for the identification of contrasting theoretical and ideological positions. Much social psychological writing is incredibly boring, and it is only when the language used in the discipline connects with affect (and so with the complex, contradictory investments that researchers have with their work) that it connects with real life outside the academe. The focus on emotive language does also catch me referring to intentions and other internal states in my opponents, and, more unfortunately still, in Moscovici himself. Banchs rightly takes exception, for example, to my claim that Moscovici collapses the European opposition to American Social Psychology into a 'tame proposal' (propuesta insípida', p. 70) and that he is gloomy about the disappearance of the art of conversation ('Moscovici melancólicamente anota que', ibid.) I too slip here again from the text to ad hominem argument. Mea culpa (though I stand by the other seven examples of heated speech Banchs itemizes).

Banchs concludes her paper with a rhetorical flourish which evokes the memory of Ignacio Martín-Baró (Pacheco & Jiménez, 1990) as someone who took a deconstructionist stance ('una postura desconstruccionista', p. 72) in a project for the liberation of the oppressed ('un proyecto de liberación de los oprimidos', ibid.). I had been identified, falsely, earlier in her paper as an advocate of an extreme deconstructive relativism that must believe that reality does not exist ('se debe considerar que la realidad no existe', p. 58), and

since this stance must, she assumes, then blind me to the reality of wars which ravage the world, for example, it must then also put me on the other side of the fence to Martín-Baró. I object. To my knowledge, Martín-Baró was not studying social representations when he died, was not murdered by the Salvadorean military for that reason.

I take pains in the text Banchs attacks (Parker, 1989) to distance myself from such relativism, and to argue that a critical purchase on questions of power and ideology requires some view of reality and history. In my recent writing I have proposed that psychologists should adopt a variety of 'critical realism' that brings social structure and politics to centre-stage in research (Parker, 1992). Recent writings within 'mainstream' deconstruction have drawn attention to the dangers of 'virtual reality' in contemporary politics, for the bankruptcy of liberal pluralism at a time of increasing 'violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression', for the importance to pay a debt to the 'spirit of Marx' to 'produce events, new effective forms of action, practice, organization, and so forth', and for the 'undeconstructability of a certain idea of justice' (Derrida, 1994, p. 54).

Social Representations Theory deserves the impassioned defence Banchs has brought to it, and if her version of Moscovici could be adopted in Britain, many of our problems would be over. It would then make political sense to champion SRT, and to develop this line of research. SRT in Venezuela clearly has a different ideological character to that being developed here (Banchs, 1990). I am grateful to Banchs for drawing attention to errors and mistaken formulations in my critique of contemporary representations of social representations, but I am less optimistic about its deconstructive potential here, unless, that is, it is given a further deconstructive twist.

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