

Images Of Old Age

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Aging is examined as a new social issue emerging from the ever increasing of longevity which is triggering a new salience to the oscillating stereotypes towards elderly people pervading the history of humankind. An attempt is here made to anchor the ageism, as a negative stereotype, within Moscovici's thematized distinction between stigmatized versus symbolic social thinking, concluding that aging as well as ageism could be better understood as an instance of what Moscovici called paradoxical social representations.

Keywords: Aging, ageism, stigmatic versus symbolic thinking, thèmes, paradoxical representations

*"Age is (...) age is when - old age I mean (...) if that what my Lord means (...) is when... if you are a ...man...were a man... huddle...nodding...the ingle...waiting [violent thump of club]
(Becket 1986, p. 289)*

Images play a significant role in the theory of social representations, although it is not always clear the extent to which images and representations actually differ. Both mediate percepts and concepts but, as I was able to understand, there would be some academic consensus that

representations are more digital, analytic, verbal and closer to the concept, whereas images are more analogical, synthetic, iconic and closer to the perception. The present paper addresses the issue of the constitutive role of the imaginary, another slippery distinction, in the social representation of the process of getting old. The imaginary is here invoked to underline the inter-subjective semiotic processes at work in social representations.

The argument is developed in three segments. In the first one I recall ancient mythical as well as more scholarly narratives to illustrate how the process of getting old seems to be an enduring lived drama across the times. The second section returns to the notion of the imaginary, examining how its role in the construction of social representations is dialectically linked with the symbolic. In the third and last section, borrowing from Serge Moscovici, I attempt to apply the distinction he has introduced between stigmatic versus symbolic thinking, to illustrate how both are they intermingled in our fleeting images of old age.

OSCILLATING IMAGES FROM THE PAST

In ancient times, in a mountain village on the island of Bali, the elderly, according to the legend, were offered in sacrifice and eaten. No one elder was spared and, as a consequence, traditions were not known and people lived without the memory of the past. People decided to build a house for the Council of the Village to assemble and eventually deliberate about collective problems, but nobody was able to distinguish which would be the upper parts of the tree trunks to cut down for constructing such a building. If the trunks were wrongly chosen a cataclysm would certainly take place. A young boy offered himself to solve the problem under the condition that the villagers would no more eat the older people. The conditions were accepted and then he went to search for his grandfather that he had hidden and who knew how to distinguish the lower from the upper parts of the trunks.

The central message of this myth, recalled by Belmont (1997) in a chapter about *old age*, is clearly related with the idea that the function of the elderly is to preserve the tradition, the social memory of the community. Another feature that is also found in many other narratives is the link between grandfather and grandson, the latter considered as a double of the former, and to the close affective relations and complicity that spontaneously arises between them. The image of

the complacent grandfather is, most likely, one of the most frequent ways of objectifying how elders are positively represented in western societies.

But the myth also suggests that elderly had always faced uneasy acceptance of the next generation they gave birth, to whom they become first a threat and latterly a burden, notwithstanding the memories and experiences that they were supposed to have preserved.

The representation of the elderly, as documented in the myth, is ambivalent and ambiguous. Mythical narratives may appear rather fanciful if not ridiculous, but they do not radically differ from the reflections of the philosophers of how to deal, either individually or collectively, to this uneasily acceptable finitude of the human predicament. Along the history of philosophy, at least in its western version to which we are more familiar, one can find a sustained debate between those who look at the positive features of aging and those who put on the foreground the inevitable losses and impairments both physical and psychological correlated with the process of aging.

In the first pages of the Republic, as a sort of introduction to a treaty on wisdom, Socrates pays a visit to Cephalus, the father of Polemarchus, telling him that

There is nothing which for my part I like better, Cephalus, than conversing with aged men (...) who have arrived at that time which the poets call the *threshold of old age* - Is life harder towards the end, or what report do you give of it? (Platão 1993,328e, p.4).

The answer of Cephalus is mixed. He acknowledges that when he gathers with other friends of the same age

Some complain of the slights which are put upon them by relations, and they will tell you sadly of how many evils their old age is the cause (...). The truth is, concludes Cephalus, (...) he who is of a calm and happy nature will hardly feel the pressure of age, but to him who is of an opposite disposition youth and age are equally a burden. (329,d).

But, as replies Socrates, perhaps ironically, Cephalus is a rich man and “wealth is well known to be a great comforter” (329 e). Cephalus agrees, but only to a certain extent. Richness helps but it is not enough - “for the good poor men old age cannot be a light burden, nor can a bad rich man ever have peace with himself” (330 a).

About four centuries later, Cicero, writing in the year 44 of our era, is an obligatory reference, maybe because he did not limit himself to some casual reflections but dedicated instead a full essay - *De Senectute*, arguing that aging is not necessarily an evil, and refuting the four most serious accusations directed against the older age: that it enfeebles the body, that it withdraws from active employments, that it deprives us of nearly all physical pleasures, that it is the next step to death.

For Cicero, echoing Plato, “the most suitable defenses of old age are the principles and practice of the virtues, which, if cultivated in every period of life bring forth wonderful fruits at the close of a long and busy career”. (Cicero 1923, III, 9, pp. 17-19). “It is probable that Cicero could only convince the converted, old people already happy to be such, and such people doubtless did exist” (Minois 1989 p. 111).

More favorable views were espoused for example by Rousseau (1959, p. 1011) who, in the third of the *Rêveries*, written on his later life, also invokes the liberating power of cultivating the letters reminding the Solon’s maxim – *I grow old ever learning many things* (Plutarch, 1914/75, chap. 31). The literature is rich on this sort of oscillating images between a compassionate acceptance if not a certain glorification of the old age and the inconsolable regret aroused by the decline and the unavoidable ending that looms behind the aging process.

TIMES BECOME INCREASINGLY GREY

The issue of aging has acquired a new momentum in our present times due to the demographic revolution catalyzed by the progress of science and technology. The figures are well known and always repeated, sufficing here to recall that in one short century 30 years of life, an entire generation, was added to the average life expectancy. For the first time in the history of the human species, the majority of those born in the Western world will survive into old age. A new stage has been added to the life cycle introducing however new problems and new perplexities to

which scientists, policy makers and common citizens try to find some acceptable consensus. This is the typical juncture that triggers the process of getting familiar the unfamiliar which, as suggested by Serge Moscovici, characterizes the construction of social representations and challenges the collective imagination to reshape their cultural identity.

The notion of life stages in itself is not, however, unproblematic. More easily acceptable when we refer to the period from birth to adulthood, notwithstanding the multiple criteria for establishing sub-stages, it becomes much more controversial when applied to the middle and later stages of the human life cycle. It could be, and it has been argued, that the proposal of introducing age categories with their boundary conditions is rather ideological and not supported by the scientific evidence on which it claims to be grounded. (Gullette, 2009). Listen to Baudrillard:

Third age well means what it intends to mean - it is a sort of Third World. It amounts to the liquidation of old age (...). The longer they live (...) the higher the *gains* over death, the lesser symbolically recognized they are". (Baudrillard, 1976, p. 249) [my translation and my emphasis].

A less gloomy view was introduced by Erik Erikson (1968), the first author to propose a chart of the human development covering the entire arch from birth to death, distinguishing successive stages that could be positively or negatively achieved in function of the way the individual responds to the critical dilemmas that arise in each one of those stages. The eighth and final stage, which nowadays became longer, is described, in Erikson's terms, as *integrity* - whenever crowning a balanced life trajectory, or as *despair* - when, on the contrary, the individual has the feeling that her or his life was a failure. We are not far from the tradition of our paradigmatic classic philosophers such as Plato, who highlighted the positive pole of the dilemma, or the more common sense views of Aristotle, who seemed more aware of the shortcomings of later stages of our lives. What in Erikson's first formulation was still a bit speculative and scarcely supported by the qualitative analysis of some outstanding biographies, became much more systematic with Paul Baltes and associates (1999), who developed a new

branch of the human development studies - the *lifespan psychology*, integrating evolutionary and ontogenetic perspectives on cultural and human development across several levels of analysis.

Medical progress has greatly contributed to gradually close in life expectancy to life-span potential, not only in terms of longer lives, but also in terms of quality of life. Such progresses lead people, namely in western developed societies, to anticipate long, active and healthy lives. However, as remarked by Katz (1995, p. 69)

The features of post-modern aging also derive from cultural industries that distribute pleasure and leisure across an unrestricted range of objects, identities, styles and expectations. In so doing, such industries recast the life-span in fantastical ways, in particular, the making of age and the fantasy of timelessness.

The very concept of fantasy clearly suggests how the cultural context emotionally arouses our collective imaginary.

THEMATIC DYNAMICS

The focus on continuity versus discontinuity is likely to be related to the notion of *thêmata* proposed by Holton (1975) for characterizing the research styles of scientists, and also a central concept in the theory of social representations. (Moscovici & Vignaux 1994, Markova 2003, & Jesuino 2008). Similarities and differences are both essential for a full understanding of the phenomena under study. Scientists, as well as lay observers, may have personal preferences for one or the other alternative.

Thêmata operate at a meta theoretical level and allow better clarification of what could be some of the basic assumptions of the theories in use, in this case the theories invoked to explain the human development. The notion of *thêmata* helps to better understand the role of images in the representation processes of issues, like old age, either switching from opposite gestalts or eventually achieving a synthesis, as a sort of *third included*, whatever such an oxymoron could mean. As a matter of fact, in their seminal text, Moscovici and Vignaux consider *thêmata* as *concept images*, as primary conceptions profoundly anchored in collective memory, as *notions*,

that is to say, as “potential places of meaning as generators of conceptions, which are virtual because these *places* can only be characterized through discourse, through justifications and arguments, which *nurture* them in the form of production of meaning” (Moscovici & Vignaux 2000, p. 177).

The extent to which age, and particularly old age, is *thematized*, can be illustrated by the common stereotypes, as images, whose content might change with the *Zeitgeist*, although maintaining the persistent perplexities *anchored in collective memory*. Images anchored in memory are what some authors consider the field of the *Imaginary* (Simondon 2008; Banchs, Guevara y Astorga 2007). Although pre-symbolic imaginary can already be traced, namely at the level of preverbal dyadic affective bonds, it is with the emerging of the symbolic function, linking a *signifier* to a *signified* that enlarges the conversation to a higher level of social communication, as well as social thinking and social invention. Social processes of stereotyping are well known in cognitive social psychology, and have since acquired new developments within the theory of social representations

Similarly to sexism and racism we are now in the process of defining another *ism* - the *ageism*, a negative attitude consisting in treating older people not as individuals but as a homogeneous group which can be discriminated against. Derogatory perceptions or negative stereotypes of old people are now an object of a more systematic study by the mainstream cognitive social psychologists. Brewer, Dull & Lui (1981), used the Rosch’s theory of the organization of natural categories to experimentally identify three major prototypes: (1) the *grandmotherly* - type-loves animals and children, and spend most of the time in the kitchen; (2) the *elder statesman* – a high status position in society; it could be a contemporaneous Cephalus; (3) the *senior citizen*- inactive elderly persons who live alone or in residential institutions.

More recently Cuddy & Fiske (2002) applying the Fiske’s criteria of the two dimensional structure of stereotypes- *competence* and *warmth*, have proposed to map the Brewer’s subtypes, as basic natural categories of a more inclusive super ordinate category ironically characterized as *doddering but dear*. But the very concept of *prototype* or the metaphoric labels that social psychologists use shows how the symbolic imaginary is invoked to mediate the communication of scientists with a wider audience. It could be added that such types and subtypes, once metaphorically dubbed in widely shared catching images, could be considered as *objectified*

social representations, as consensual common sense beliefs feeding the current conversational exchanges.

Such an appeal to the concept of social representation and its underlying theory could be seen as a violation of the Ockam's criterion of parsimony. Are attitudes not enough for describing the content and processes of social perceptions and how are they related with behaviors? What do social representations actually add? As already suggested in evoking the notion of *thêmata*, what the theory of social representations has contributed seems to be the paradoxical idea of the *concept image* expressed as an internal tension between a percept and a concept at the core of the social imaginary. Although not always duly emphasized the image is at the center of the theory of social representations introduced by Moscovici, something already suggested by the title of his work on Psychoanalysis.

As it may be recalled the basic architecture of the construct of social representation is constituted by three dimensions: (1) *information* - what is known, (2) *attitude* - how is evaluated, and (3) *the field of representation*. This latter dimension is the one that introduces a new turn on the traditional social psychology centered on attitudes. The *field of representation*, as proposed by Moscovici,

Suggests the idea of an image (my emphasis) or social model with a concrete and limited content of propositions relating to specific aspects of the representations' object.... The notion of "dimension" forces us to conclude that there is a field or representation or an image wherever there is a hierarchical set of elements. (Moscovici 2008/1976, p. 24).

In the case of a complex issue like the discipline and the practice of psychoanalysis, that he chose to examine, such a field is figuratively schematized as a sort of the essence *imaged* by the common sense, as a tension between the *unconscious* and the *conscious* which, mediated by the mechanism of *repression*, account for to the formation of the *complexes*. Such a schema is itself a translation of a spatial structure, a *gestaltized* image where the structuring concepts occupy positions in a space, figuring a dynamic process. The role of the image is here similar to the one of unifying internal tensions also observed in the case of the artistic creation.

On the other hand I would venture to say that we are not here very far from the *transcendental schemes* proposed by Kant, with the same intent of solving the puzzle of relating the percepts, coming from the experience, with the concepts originated by reason (Kant 2001 /1787, pp. 181). Although apparently not far from the Kantian concept of *judgment*, Moscovici remarks that these two sides of any representation, the *figurative and the symbolic*, could no more be dissociated- “than the recto and the verso of a sheet of paper” (Moscovici 2008/1976, p. 21). No less important the reference herein made to the *symbolic* dimension in the sense of *signification*. For Moscovici, as I read him, they are apparently equivalent notions possibly influenced by the phenomenological approach,

Philosophers realized long ago that every representation is a *representation of something* (...). As well as a *representation of someone*. This by itself suggests that it is intentional (...). Here is the source of tension which lies at the heart of the representation, between the facet oriented towards the object – the figure and the meaning chosen and given to it by its subject. (ibid, pp. 20-63).

Representations *represent* an object (the intentional dimension) but also *represent* a subject (the imaginary dimension) in that it is the subject that gives the meaning. In other words such a process implies a symbolic circularity between subject and object, namely when the object is not a natural but rather a social object to which the subject, individual as well as collective, is affectively committed.

No less central, but now less Kantian, is this emphasis of the knowledge as a sort of empathic process involving not a distance between an individual subject and its intentional object, but rather as an interplay of mediating links within an inter subjective network of actors.

In positing the process of knowledge as an internal tension between a plurality of conflicting social as well as psychological views, and in stressing the de-centering move from the subject into the object, whatever it might be, it becomes clear how the image assumes a central role in the process of thinking, either in mediating percepts or in mediating percepts and concepts as well as linking symbolically a subject to an object. This also clarifies what distinguishes social representations, as the thinking of common sense, from the scientific way of thinking. The former

implies a symmetry between the subject and the object - one represents as well as is represented, which is the essence of the symbolism, whereas in science the process becomes metonymic, in the sense of reducing (representing) a whole to a part (See Burke, 1969, & Jesuino, 2011). In this sense the symbolic/signification process underlines the continuity if not the contiguity between a subject and an object.

Dealing with old age in our day to day encounters is not the same thing as studying scientifically the aging process, although it might be difficult to rigidly separate the fields and still more difficult when the issue is examined, in terms of reflexivity, by social scientists. In the same vein we may understand how the stereotypes and subtypes of aging, formerly referred, are anchored through a chain of mediating links, both narrative and iconographic, to ancient *thematic* dichotomies like, *beauty versus ugliness, health versus disease, joy life versus death versus melancholy, strength versus weakness, virtue versus vice*. (Panofsky 1967).

FROM STIGMA TO SYMBOL

An attempt to further understand how *thêmata* are thought, or more precisely, how social representations come to be imaged in polarized pairs, could be found in the text of a keynote address delivered in French by Serge Moscovici in 2000, in Montreal, at an international conference on social representations, under the title *Stigmatic thought and symbolic thought. Two elementary forms of the social thought*. Curious as I am by the issue of aging and particularly by the ambiguities of its imaginary, I found that the reflections herein proposed by Moscovici could be of some help.

The text of Moscovici addresses the issue of discrimination, such as it can be observed against minorities but among the illustrations given no one is made to elderly people. Moscovici anchors discrimination in the abstract figure of the *stranger* – anyone alien to our habitual images of human body. “Discrimination has to do with the body, it is a thought that brings the trace of the body” (Moscovici 2002, p. 21). The salience herein attributed to the body, to the image that it projects and eventually leads to discrimination, often mediated by stereotypes and distorted beliefs, seems to be only too well documented by the *social clock* that punctuates our life-span.

It may be no accident that Moscovici, in a clear mark of his style, full of literary references, might have evoked the Thomas Mann novel *-Death in Venice*. The novel, as is well known, is very rich in symbolism, many interpretations having been offered about its multiple metaphorical layers.

The *Death in Venice* might not be written with the aim of describing the tragedy of getting old but, however marginal, many are the signs that age, as a proxy of death, has here a significant and haunting presence. The grotesque elderly fop met twice during the journey to Venice, the no less disgusting singer and its obscene players at the veranda of the hotel, the ironies of the barber who dyes his hair, as well as the images of the gondolas – “black as nothing else on earth except a coffin (...). What vision of death itself (...) the armchair lacquered in coffin black” (p.25), let alone Venice itself that most *improbable city*, an operatic scenario surrounded by the pestilence of the Laguna - everything conveying an image of decadence and anxiety, that not even the *simple life* displayed by the families with their joyful youngsters at the seaside were able to redeem.

For some commentators the aging Aschenbach could be a replica of the Goethe’s Faust, a Faust who only becomes aware of his desire to recover his lost youth after the *coup de foudre* he feels in seeing the young adolescent, but whose guilt he tries to disguise attributing his infatuation to a sort of Platonic vision of an ideal of the beauty in itself.

Like Cephalus, visited by Socrates, Aschenbach is rich and famous, but in his case he does not live his aging days in happiness, nor is dying in peace. Maybe, as Cephalus has suggested to Socrates, richness help to enduring the inconveniences of getting old, but it is not enough. No less decisive is living a life of virtue - maybe an Apolinean life never haunted by the appeals of a stranger God. Or maybe Cephalus was more able in dealing with the mechanisms of bad faith giving him the illusion of having lived beyond guilt or shame.

The only intent of this lengthy excursus is to illustrate the power of the literary imaginary in transmitting complex social encounters and existential puzzles as it seems to be the case of those who live enough to feel how the stigmatic marks of age inscribed in their bodies might eventually lead to a radical change in their social roles and identities.

THINKING DIMENSIONS

Desire

Returning to the text of the Montreal's conference, the Moscovici's proposal is to examine the issue of discrimination, in more systematic terms, distinguishing between the *stigmatic* and the *symbolic*, as different if not opposite ways of social thinking. He further clarifies what such a distinction intends to mean in terms of *desire, categorization and causality*.

Starting with the *desire*, in the broad phenomenological sense of *intention*, whereas the stigmatic way aims at *comparison*, the symbolic way aims at *recognizing*. Surely, both comparison and recognition are necessary but only sufficient when in conjunction, for a full understanding of the phenomena under observation.

In strict psychological terms the distinction could be related to cognitive styles as formerly introduced by Jung (1923) that more recently led to the distinction between the two basic style dimensions of the *Whole –Analytic* versus the *Verbal-Imagery* (Riding 1997). Psychological common sense has it that some people are more prone to look at differences, while others prefer to search for what is similar.

Without denying the role of those basic mechanisms, at least at the individual level, what seems to be at the center of a more social social psychology, is the observed widespread tendency of human social groups to be structured in terms of in-groups versus out-groups, whatever the group dimensions involved, be it at a more local or at a more global level. Comparative mechanisms tend to introduce normative criteria, not always easy to avoid and, moreover, when we move from the scientific field to the common sense practices that, all of us, sooner or later, depending on the epistemic distance of the issue, come to share and embrace.

Of course differences are not incompatible with similarities, at least at higher levels of abstraction, but social psychology has since long called our attention to the pervasiveness of intergroup conflict mediating social identity processes. Moscovici introduces here a rather subtle distinction between the Tajfel's (1981) discrimination between the in-group and the out-group, and his own dichotomous notions of *group of the self (groupe de soi)* and *group of the other (groupe de l'autre)*.

The notions initially seem equivalent but are actually distinct. While the *in-group* versus *out-group* reflect a social dynamics grounded on conflicting differences and competitive strategies, Moscovici proposes instead the dialogical relation inscribed in the semiotic triangle where an *Ego* tries to make sense of the *Object*, unfamiliar as it might be, through a dialogue with an *Alter*, with a different epistemic instance, nevertheless indispensable for achieving a higher level of integrative common understanding, as a sort of empathic *recognition* (Markova, 2003). In the former case groups are ontologically closed whereas in the latter they are open. Or, still in other terms, while stigmatic logic seems to be a zero sum game, the symbolic logic implies a game of mixed sum outcomes.

Goffman (1963) has introduced a similar distinction between the stigmatized and what he calls *normals*, along a number of tactical *in-group alignments* and/or *out-groups alignments* aimed at reducing their social distance. Goffman's approach, as I see it, does not substantially differ from the corollaries of Tajfel's theory of intergroup conflict.

For Moscovici there would be, however, a third way between the *militancy* of claiming the in-group distinctiveness, and the *psychiatric* attempt to adjust to the *normals* or helping them to become more attentive and benevolent. Such an alternative, so I have understood the specificity of the symbolic social thinking, would consist basically on the creative and innovative capacities of minorities - again the imaginary at work - to uncover new super ordinate dimensions opening the way to an integrative approach at a higher level of abstraction.

It will be not difficult to find examples in the field of *age studies* where the ideology of decline is at work. To come again to the two Fiske's dimensions of *competence* and *warm*, when optimized, are restricted to the Tajfel's in-group of the youngsters and adults, whereas the remaining combinations, defective of at least one of these two structural dimensions, are attributed to subtypes of old people.

It could be argued that such a derogatory way of thinking the old age is rendered more subtle in the present popular approaches such as *successful aging*, *positive aging*, or *active aging*, without radically change the in-group favoritism. In fact this apparent *new look* might easily become entrapped by the elusive age equalization that they are convinced to be promoting. All those policies, allegedly grounded in robust scientific evidence, seem to confirm the widespread representation that relates aging with decline with its invisible corollary of an everlasting youth.

Social representation studies mainly focused on the semiotic folklore of one consumer society can find here a rich source of data. I would suggest that this is becoming our *new brave* imaginary.

Categorization

The second process contrasting *stigmatic* with *symbolic* social thinking is centered on *categorization*. As remarked by Moscovici the stigmatic approach tends to naturalize, tends to use natural signs if not stigma to categorize people. It could be the gender, the color of the skin, and of course, it could be age. As remarked ironically by Gullette (2009) the chronological age was one of the great inventions of our civilization.

The process of categorization is closely connected to the in-out group dialectics. Moscovici draws our attention to another distinction – between *taxonomy* and *categorization*, “the former being the main process.” (Moscovici 2002, pp. 39). Although no further explanation is given I think that categorization is a way of premature closure of a process that by its own nature remains open. Age is of course very much *visual*. As suggested by Hepworth (2008) the three key images of old age are *anchored* but also *objectified* in (1) *the geriatric body*; (2) *the physiognomic body*; and (3) *the masks of old age*. Such images, as argued by Hepworth

Are essentially moral categories of the body created within specific historical contexts to enable societies and individuals to make sense of the biological changes that are taking place in and or their bodies as they move through the socially determined life course. (Hepworth 2008, p. 4)

The word moral is here used in Goffman’s (1963) sense of *moral career*, referring to changes in a person’s self image anchored on the current social imaginary. In this sense aging could be conceptualized, in psychosocial terms, “as a process of encountering new images of the self as interpreted by others in relationship to observable alterations in the face and body” (ibid) [added emphasis]. When we look into a mirror, that pervasive iconographic device, we don’t see simply a reflection of selves as we are. What we really see is an image of the face as we imagine it

appears to other people (Hollander apud Hepsworth, p. 10) and usually found difficult to accept. Besides, as reminds Goffman, this could rapidly lead to “the infinite regress of mutual consideration that Meadian social psychology tells us how to begin but not how to terminate” (Goffman 1963 p. 18).

In contrast with the stigmatic approach leading to reify natural features, Moscovici opposes the process of *giving a name*, of baptizing the category, which implies a social involvement in the shared story of the group or even on the outcome of an institutionalization process. At a certain extent the way of baptizing a stereotype in ironic terms, as for example *doddering but dear* is a way of introducing a critical distance between the name and the thing.

The classic Greek ideal of physical beauty and the correlative depreciation of old age gives an example of a symbiotic criterion that contrasts with the more symbolic aesthetic ideal aiming at a spiritual beauty above and beyond the visible that can be observed in the hagiographic painting of the Middle Ages. This could well be the Venetian labyrinth in which the aging professor Aschenbach entered for never leaving.

Once again the two processes can converge as shown by the socialization rituals associated with the coming of age, be it from infancy to adolescence, or the entry in the adult society by marriage, by starting to work, by becoming a parent, a widow or eventually a retired worker where a de-socialization of sorts seems to take place. Be that as it may, it is however the chronological age that eventually becomes the only criterion for defining the social age. In terms of nominal categorization one can identify some examples where a socio-cultural content seems to acquire some relevance. Such it is the case for labels as the *baby boomers*, the *beat generation*, the *68 generation*, the *angry young men*, or even the euphemist expression for designing namely the *elderly* such as *silver people*, *third age*, *seniors*, the *age of reason*, the *golden age*, etc.

The extent to which such labels are acceptable by those who are so characterized remains to be seen. Older people, at least in accordance with the empirical findings that I am familiar with, don't like to be categorized in terms of age. Cross-cultural research suggests that healthy elderly tend to feel themselves 10 to 15 years younger than they actually are. Denial is here a rather common defense mechanism.

They seem to be aware that differences with aging tend to become much more individualized than a group stigma. Of course everybody is aware of their age, as they are of their sex, or of their skin color, but what they legitimately refuse but eventually come to accept is that a label corresponds to a stereotype externally imposed and with which they obviously are not identified.

Age studies have given a positive contribution to a more differentiated view of older people and to uncouple age from decline. In the United States retirement has ceased to be compulsory. In China it never was. The literature has introduced subtle sub-categories such as the young old, from 65 to 75, old from 75 to 85, and old-old above 85. It is also known that the so called emotional intelligence could improve with aging, as well as crystallized intelligence, certainly good news but apparently not enough to stop the flight from age and the lure of an everlasting youth. (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000).

Causation

The third process identified by Serge Moscovici for social thinking has to do with *causation*. The distinction hereby introduced, closely related with the former processes examined, has to do with *substance* and *function*. *Substantive causality* refers to the intrinsic and immutable features, independent of the observer, that are invoked to explain the attitudes and behavior of a social target. For example the lack of success or even the criminality indices of the blacks in the American society, explained in terms of measured intelligence, as a genetic rather than as a learned capacity developed by training, or even as by more social favorable conditions. This latter explanation would be characteristic of *functional* causes in that it can be related to their effects in normative terms of satisfaction or no satisfaction for the economic causes, of maximum and minimum for physical phenomena, having both the underlying norm of the good and the evil which leads to associate the bad effects to bad causes: violence to poverty, fascism to unemployment, racism to irrationality.

Applied to aging it could explain that external, situational factors, could have more impact in some of the impairments observed in the elderly and a *fortiori* with those submitted to harder experience of deprivation than to the inevitable decline associated to more internal intrinsic

factors. But here we enter in a slippery field. Is the process of aging a genetic process or a disease that eventually could be eliminated by science?

Not exactly a kind of utopian immortality but rather the injunction repeated *ad nauseam* of *not getting old before dying*. Such it seems the ideal of postmodern consumerist life styles where getting old tends to become an individual responsibility. The contrast between the two modes of social thinking seems to parallel the other contrast that Moscovici proposed between the *reified* and the *consensual* world or, in other words, between the positivistic and the phenomenological paradigms for making science.

Applied to our field of age studies and using a more conventional terminology, one could also distinguish between the symbiotic *bio gerontology*, more focused on the biological and biomedical aging processes, and the more symbolic *social gerontology* with its preferential focus on the social and psychological processes related with aging.

This is also related to the traditional contrast between the *hard* and the *soft* sciences that, as well known, does not exactly correspond to a clear cut paradigmatic divide. As a matter of fact the schism is again reproduced within the social sciences and even within each specific discipline.

The theory of social representations, as we are well aware, is however less concerned with those *religious wars* than with the dialogue that always takes place between thinking styles, forms of life, which are not so radically incommensurable as presumed. At least a practical overlap between fields can hopefully open the way to what Rawls (1985) designated as an *overlapping consensus*, which, I would agree, it is most of the times rather minimal.

Age studies might take profit of this alternative new look introduced by Moscovici with his theory of social representations. At a great extent the theory anchors in the phenomenological approach in the sense of giving priority to the view of the observed instead of imposing the models of the observer.

The main objective becomes familiar with the meanings that individuals and groups attribute to the problematic situations wherein they are embedded which, in our present time, and also as recalled by Moscovici, are saturated by the ever growing findings of science and technology. Health, medical care, as well as everything related with our well being in day life is

therefore a privileged field for the study of how social representations develop at the interface where science and common sense converge.

But beyond the obvious importance of gathering more accurate descriptions of how critical issues are represented and how they anchor in their synchronic and diachronic contexts, this new look could also vindicate a deconstructive vocation in the sense of attempting to uncover more allusive assumptions not evident at the immediate levels at which the descriptive studies are usually conducted.

The recent emergent salience of the older population – the *new era of aging*, that at first sight could be seen as an attempt to overcome the obscurantism of traditional views about aging, when reevaluated under a deconstructive outlook, will eventually lead to a less optimistic portrait. As a matter of fact the demographic aging of the population when examined at more distal levels of anchoring in *thêmata* does not seem to correspond to more power, either politics or economics, to the elderly.

On the other hand the *glamorization* of old age – which the experts on consumer research are only too aware, alongside with the sybaritic model of the valorization of pleasure at all costs could lead to coping strategies such as *old is beautiful* no less alienating and misleading than the more traditional *old is ugly*.

TO NOT CONCLUDE

Maybe that in accordance the inner logic of the *thêmata* we might argue that the present imaginary of the old age is articulated both in stigmatic and symbolic processes instead of opposing them one another. Another instance of a *polyphasic* process so pervasive in social representations? Be it as it may it is remarkable the inventive vitality of this new imaginary where the elderly are no more negatively but rather positively stigmatized, however intriguing such oxymoron might sound to our rationalist ears. The imaginary also works as a legitimization operator of the social order.

In a rather unusual short but no less insightful text presented in 1996, Moscovici introduced the no less heuristic notion of *paradoxical* social representations, which he relates to

the pervading tendency in post-modern communication of dealing peacefully with double-binding messages.

To a certain extent this also seems to agree with the dichotomous *thêmata*, would they be compatible, which I think they are, with a rejection of the logic of the third-excluded. Moscovici remarks in this text that such could be a consequence of a cultural change towards a more integrative or maybe a more syncretic societal processes, where we do not have to oppose global to local, integration to differentiation, or individualism to collectivism.

In his words we have instead *more of the same*, which could also be extended, I believe, to the symbolic and the stigmatic ways of social thinking. Of course this also means that social thinking becomes more fluid, more ambiguous, as well as more anxious prone. That elderly people might feel victims but not less accomplices of such double-bind messages, either on their daily encounters or conveyed by a plethora of iconic signs, is what now acquires a growing visibility.

Those alternative reflections about the stigma are closer to the views formerly introduced by Goffman, in his essay of 1963, where he reaches the rather melancholic conclusion, “that there may be no *authentic solution at all*” (Goffman, 1963, p. 24) to people under *stigmatization* and this because stigmatized people are supposed to be at the same time *normal* and *different* reputed as they are to play the role of accepting a condition that they reject, but eventually they often are condemned to accept.

The role of social observers, be they philosophers or scientists, might help to deconstruct such perverse games that people are induced to play but, to recall the beautiful metaphor, *the bird of wisdom speaks only when the deed is done*.

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