

The Imaginary Formation of Cultural Otherness

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The aim of the text is to give evidence of the imaginary dimensions of social representations. The issue concerns the images of otherness as they appear in narratives about their localisation in territories, place being a receptacle of identity projections. The narratives used are taken from literary and scientific texts, about Latin America and Orient. Referring to the theoretical proposals of G. Durand on anthropological structures of imagination, the texts analysis shows how the interplay between subjective desires and context constraints leads to construct genuine representations of otherness, giving to the latter properties that allow enhancing or criticizing the national and cultural identity of the narrators. Durand's model focuses on the way the marginal status of the individuals who construct the images, favours the intervention of imagination on representation and its role in innovation. It is used here to examine how the social situation of the narrators, their refusal of occidental civilisation or their personal quest for change influence the way they relate to the otherness of countries and their history, people, nature and society. This process generates a positive idealization in the case of Latin America and an ambivalent or negative position towards oriental territories and populations pertaining to the late French colonial empire.

Key words: imaginary, cultural otherness, social representations.

The aim of my contribution is to give evidence of the imaginary dimension of social representations. As noted by the philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1973) we must integrate the imaginary dimensions if we wish to conduct a systematic study of representation without any exclusion. In order to fulfill this obligation, I have chosen to study, in French literature representatives, how the territory of Otherness is constructed. Borrowing an empirical material from the chapter included in the book edited, in 2007, by A. Arruda and M. de Alba "*Espacios imaginarios y representaciones sociales. Aportes desde Latinoamerica*", I will develop an analysis of the imaginary dimensions of social representations, taking as object the social representation of the territory of Otherness, in the case of Brazil and Mexico. This approach will be completed with some remarks related to images of Asia.

Territory is a propitious *lieu, locus*, to examine the role of imaginary. Plato in his theory on "genus of being" (*genres de l'être*) assigned to "place", "Topos", a status of third genre between sensible experiences and ideas universe. Place is the receptacle of projections that "make us dream when we perceive it" (1950, 472). This theory has inspired me with a new perspective centered on the image of the global unity made up by a territory and its inhabitants. This perspective is different from the diverse approaches of the "Other" or the "Stranger" taken as an individual or a group that gets into a new community (Simmel, 1908/1984; Schütz, 1944, 1945//2003) or is target of variable social evaluations, categorizations and receptions (Jodelet, 1992, 2005; Joffe, 1999, 2005 ; Kalampalikis & Haas, 2008). It aims at enlarging the scope of alterity analysis, by focusing on its imaginary dimension. The choice of the territory of Otherness is peculiarly adapted in the case of French writers and thinkers, who have a tendency to project their desires overseas (Rabinow, 1988).

LITERATURE AS A RESOURCE FOR SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS STUDY

Since Moscovici's contribution on Proust (1986), a lot of studies in the field of Social Representations have been devoted to the analysis of a literary material (see contributions in Sugiman et al., 2008). Few have focused on imaginary. Nevertheless, narratives are prone to facilitate observing the interplay between imagination and representation (Jodelet, 2007). As shown by numerous authors, literature offers a rich material, particularly in the case of other culture representations (Saïd, 1980; Bhabha, 1994; Todorov, 1989). Writers reflect the trends of thinking, ideologies and sensibilities of their cultural *milieu* and epoch. More, as they influence the vision of their lectors, they contribute to make up the mood of the time. Thus

Saïd has selected in the 19th century's production, scientific, erudite and narrative texts to analyze the phenomenon called Orientalism. Orientalism is treated as a *corpus* of ideas, beliefs, clichés, fantasies and knowledge on Eastern countries and cultures. This *corpus* is defined as a representation system framed by political and ideological forces that have allowed its penetration in Occident science, conscience and latter empire.

Concerning images of Latin America and Asia, I thought relevant to look at the way they are seen from an external perspective, in some texts of the French literature. As the book on imaginary spaces in Latin America considers the case of Brazil and Mexico, I selected two authors who have chosen to live in these countries, Georges Bernanos (1995) in Brazil, and Antonin Artaud (2004) in Mexico. They went there at the same time, between the two world wars, in the thirties. They illustrate a tendency of French thinkers to be fascinated by "*l'ailleurs*", the "elsewhere", projecting a double desire: one of change, of intervention on others 'realities, another of importation of other countries values in their home nation in order to improve its spirit. This gives rise to what I call a myth of "boomerang effect".

This myth is present in our two authors' discourses, illustrating one of the rules drawn by Todorov (1989) concerning the relation with far off countries, and the role played by identity expression and judgment on the social and political state of affairs. Todorov infers from Greek literature two constitutive rules bearing on relation with distant Otherness. Herodotus' rule stating that the more the Other is distant, the less he deserves esteem. Homer's rule stating that more the Other is remote, better he is. In the first rule, typical of nationalist thinking, an own identity valorization leads to a negative construction of Otherness. With the second rule, founded on fascination for the exotic, an own negative identity leads to a positive construction of Otherness, the distance inducing attraction based on self-criticism. Roughly speaking, Bernanos' and Artaud's look on their favourite foreign countries is in line with Homer's rule. They design in their description otherness figures that appear as alternative models to reconstruct a national and European identity betrayed by modern times evolution. The case is different concerning Asia, marked by its past colonial relation with France. In the following I will try to argument these points, after having designed the theoretical framework of my analysis.

IMAGINARY AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATION

To study the relation between imaginary and social representation, I refer to one of the major theorist of imaginary structures of society, Guillaume Durand. His propositions seem particularly adapted to cope with the narrative contents, forms and styles. Durand (1960, 1994) suggests following the “anthropological path” where, at the imaginary level, an exchange between subjective drives and social constraints takes place. This model refers to formation processes of representations inasmuch it assumes, in line with Piaget, that imaginary is the path by which the representation of the object is assimilated and framed by drive imperatives and by which, reciprocally, subjective representations are resulting from prior accommodation to objective *milieu*.

To follow this path we may consider:

- On the one side the features that are common to the two authors: the reasons why they choose to go to America Latina, in terms of desire - their social position in the French intellectual *milieu*, in terms of constraints;
- On the other side the features that differentiate them: their choice of life in the host country. These features result in similar thematic relative to race mixing, people exaltation, and nature meanings. I will only summarize these different items as the length of this text does not allow quotations of the texts on which my analysis is based.
- Three reasons justify going abroad in an historical moment characterized in the 1930's, by the Spanish war, Nazism growing, and Marxism expansion.
- Economic ones: both authors were in a difficult material situation and tried to find better living conditions, Bernanos becoming a farmer, Artaud working in the intellectual sphere of Mexico.
- Vocational ones: Bernanos wanted to found a *New France* in Brazil similar to the German and Swiss colonies and reminding the dream of Villegagnon who arrived in the Bay of Guanabara, Rio de Janeiro in the 16th century, with the project to create an *Antarctic France*. Artaud, informed of a movement of return to pre-colonial civilization but being doubtful of its position for rediscovering the magical thinking of ancient time, wanted to offer his services and competence to support and orient the movement.
- Contestation motives: both authors manifested a rejection of contemporary forms of European civilization marked by cultural decadency with its false sense of humanism; rejection of progress, science and technology, economic concerns. In front of failure and contamination of France and Europe, they wanted to escape and find elsewhere the possibility

to express liberty, restore an identity and even find a personal salvation. The refusal of modern civilization echoes a search for authentic and true forms of life.

Thus we can observe how the dialectic relation between personal motives and the representations of an objective situation leads to the desire for another country that presents positive features opposed to the criticised ones. This dialectic corresponds to the Homeric model of relation between distance and otherness. In this case, at the contrary of what happens with Asia, we must notice that “elsewhere attraction” is not only the result of an exotic fascination. The critics of European ways of life anticipate postmodern claims, in a process highlighting the role of imaginary.

Durand shows that changes in society come from marginalised groups whose imaginary is able to capture the profound, but not yet formulated, needs and queries of their society, to express them and become an agent of transformation. This process operates over time and progressively leads from imagined desires to structured ideological forms. Bernanos and Artaud occupied a marginalised position in French intellectual sphere. They were polyvalent - writers, filmmakers, journalists, actors, etc. - and for this reason outside of the ordinary professional categories of writers and liberated from allegiance to literary chapels. They were in a state of quarrel with their group. Artaud, due to his pathology and the violence of his expression, shocked his public and colleagues sensibilities. Bernanos, a fervent Catholic, was in opposition to the clerical power at risk of being excommunicated, and defended a traditional patriotism against nationalism. Their marginality placed them in a propitious position for the production of representations expressing *malaises* and potentialities characteristic of the historical moment. So they could anticipate themes that later became dominant.

THE REPRESENTATIONS OF BRAZIL AND MEXICO

When they arrived in the host country, both received a warm reception of the national elites. But their life project and their situation produced differences in their attitude. Bernanos' pragmatic project oriented him to develop his farm and keep in close proximity with the dominant power of the state. He was not at all curious of local life but remained in a symbiotic relation with society leaders, enduring a process of assimilation and becoming strongly attached to Brazil. Artaud had an ancient interest in Mexico, preparing his travel with an anthropologic work in the Musée de l'Homme. His idea was not to settle there definitely,

but he felt a strong urgency to act in favor of Indian population and to undergo a mystic, magical and mythical research. Strongly opposed to colonisation, he rejected the white bourgeoisie and was firmly linked to Indian communities.

Nevertheless confronting these new realities they shared the same point of view on the benefit of race melting. Artaud was only interested in the mixing of indigene communities, the survival dynamic of which he had a good knowledge. For him, race mixing had to play an historical role. The same goes for Bernanos who attributes to race crossbreeding the originality and grandeur of Brazil and its future worldwide role. The exaltation of crossbreeding is an opportunity to condemn European failure and fallacy. But at the same time, recognising this human potentiality serves to affirm that France can help as a developmental model.

Another similarity is encountered in the way the two authors construct a mythical image of local people. In doing so they remain at a very abstract level, confirming that Otherness territory is a projection place where one tries to embody values. Artaud came to Mexico in order to find a new idea of mankind. Bernanos looked at the moral qualities of Brazilians fighting against the technological barbarism of the United States and the military barbarism of Nazi Germany. In both cases the representation of people relates civilization as well as cultural types and the type of humanity they produce. So that it leads, in a same movement, to stigmatise white race and men corrupted by a malefic civilization, with its rationality, massification, foreign influences dependence, and to glorify other people whose skin color (red for the Mexican Indians, black for the Brazilians) testifies of their rooting in another world valued for its purity, its strength, its hopes, its courage facing overwork and poverty, its abnegation, and fidelity to nation or culture. Thanks to the qualities expressed in skin color or crossbreeding, people are invested with a power of transformation and resistance.

But, at the same time it is assumed that to find the means of their action, these people need external agents and models' help, in this case French ones. Both authors underline features that contribute to people fragility, weakness and helplessness. These features are opposed or inferior to French qualities. For Artaud it is a lack of conscience that calls for the support of his proper ideas and intervention to rediscover and defend cultural richness. For Bernanos it is a psychological fragility (neurotic disorders, suicidal tendencies) that can be overcome looking at the liberty message delivered by France, the religious values of authentic Catholicism, and respect of hierarchic solidarity as in ancient France. The world vision

defended by the observer helps defining *a contrario* what is good for other people and what qualities, defaults and potentialities it bears.

Concerning the relation to territory and nature, the two authors diverge in their positions and attitudes. Bernanos, who was in search of a settling to work and a refuge to live in, makes an instrumental use of space. The difficulties encountered to establish his settlement, result in a negative evaluation of nature and an orientation towards enrichment of cultural knowledge. Artaud, in a hermetic vision, postulates the organic identity between nature, man and life, constructs a mythical image of nature and goes in search for the symbolic signs of landscapes and the mystic experience of space.

Reading the authors' texts would have given a better idea of the rooting of otherness images in their mystical and world vision, and evidence of their millenarian perspective upon regions loaded with youth, revolt and revolution values they oppose to European civilization decay.

Nevertheless, I hope that you could get an idea of the approach proposed to link representation, imaginary, social context and projection as well as its fecundity to treat the relation with otherness.

LOOKING AT IMAGINARIES AND REPRESENTATIONS OF ASIA

The idea to pursue this research by looking at writings on Asia has been rendered uneasy for two reasons. First, for setting a good comparative study it is necessary to work on texts of the same period and of the same kind (autobiography and essays). This material being scarce in the case of Asia, I had difficulties to make a true matching. Second, such a study calls for an important work that was impossible to achieve for this article. So I will limit myself to some remarks on *Exoticism* that has marked French literature in the case of Asia. As noted by Todorov, exoticism as a literary genre and a thinking category, is an example of Homer's rule: the movement toward otherness is founded in the nation self-critic as showed by Bernanos and Artaud, illustrative of French writers' positive attitude towards Latin American continent. But the situation may be different for countries of the Asiatic sphere. First, in France until recently, the exoticism has been a characteristic of travel literature; few people engaged themselves in a long stay and a profound acquaintance with Asiatic countries and regions. Second, the relation to Asia is loaded with colonial past history; it is not the case for Latin

America, and this is the reason why it appears as a *promised land* and benefits of a positive bias, less evident for Asia.

To illustrate exoticism tendencies, I retain the cases of Pierre Loti (1890/1914), and Victor Segalen (1878/1919). Both spent part of their life in marine and visited diverse Asian countries by the end of the 19th and beginnings of 20th centuries. Although they do not pertain to the same period as the authors studied in the case of Latin America, they are worth mentioning because they represent two figures of exoticism and had a profound influence. Pierre Loti has marked many sensibilities until recent times as testified by Roland Barthes (1972). Victor Segalen kept a stable actuality and his texts have returned to popularity because he theorised exoticism as an expression of respect for difference.

In both authors' works the movement towards elsewhere is based on dissatisfaction with the world they belonged. Their dissatisfaction has more a moral than a political flavour, bearing on traditional and bourgeois style of life and customs. While Bernanos' and Artaud's departure was based on a critic of civilisation, Loti and Segalen had more egocentric motives: lassitude of their milieu, forgetting painful life episodes, and, above all, desire to maintain the vivacity of impressions known at the moment of discoveries during childhood that tends to disappear and becomes blunted as time passes.

Thus the countries visited are instrumentalised and subordinated to the satisfaction of the traveller's desires. Loti is animated by the search and accumulation of pleasure and sensorial experiences, and his contact with oriental countries goes through sexual and erotic relations. The realities encountered are not important: the effect they have on him, in terms of impressions and sensations is worthwhile. In Segalen's work, the desire to escape the monotony of familiarisation dominates. The contact with difference allows renewed sensations taken as sources of energy and life force. The choc with diversity exalts sensations. Segalen creates a neologism "the exot" to designate a person in search of novelty, refusing adaptation to his milieu and savouring distance.

These two authors' attitude towards colonisation differentiates them from the first ones. The latter celebrate the strength of resistance of people and take a clear position against colonisation process. They maintain a proximal relation with colonised peoples. The itineraries of Loti and Segalen follow the lines of colonisation that they don't put into question. Both underline the gap that separates them from the visited peoples. There is no possible identification with them due to race differences for Loti and to necessity for the "exot" to preserve a feeling of strangeness, for Segalen. For the two authors, the outcomes are

partial and time limited contact with visited peoples as well as the affirmation of incommunicability and *eternal miscomprehension*. This incommunicability eliminates possibilities of participating and intervening in foreign life, even if it corresponds to different attitudes. As a matter of fact, for Loti the otherness opacity leads to give near-grotesque descriptions of it and to limit relations to those of erotic use. Segalen, criticising tourists' perspective and authors who describe other countries as scenes of spectacles, interrogates the negative effect that the observer presence may have on indigenous communities, and tries to comprehend their language and respect their modes of living.

There is no place here to analyse in more detail Loti's and Segalen's writings. Nevertheless, it seems evident that the differences observed between them and Bernanos and Artaud have to do with the specificities of colonial relation and the consequent representation of Asia. We could find similarities in other works that express low interest for the inhabitants of the visited countries. An example lies in the narrative made by his wife Clara (2006) of the first oriental expedition of André Malraux. He came as a predator to rob Cambodian art pieces, without paying any attention to people and their customs; the only remark he made was "knowing how the Oriental would accommodate with his transformation in individual" (p. 187). The same could be said about with Marguerite Duras texts that localise her family and erotic fate in the physical landmark of Indochina but remains silent on the human local reality. And when a poet as Henri Michaux (1933) gives a look at people in the street, calling himself "a Barbaric in Asia", the spectacle described endorses a distancing and ironical stance. The comprehensive understanding of Asia appears as if it was impeded by the opacity of cultural reality lived as insuperable in the context of colonisation.

We can apply to the case of relations with Asia, Saïd's interpretation of Orientalism. It constitutes a representational system politically oriented and founded on the "dépaysement", the sentiment to be removed out of one's element, experienced in front of different cultures, reinforcing the superiority sentiment of European culture. Saïd gives evidence of the existence, besides a manifest orientalism that takes varied stylistically expressive forms, a latent orientalism characterised by permanent features such as originality, retard, feminine penetrability, etc. This latent orientalism confers to all European discourses a racist, imperialist and ethnocentric touch. These discourses appear as true political doctrines that founded political weakness of Orient and impelled to recognise its difference. Saïd underlines another significant dimension of East-West relations: the unevenness of exchanges in terms of

publications and travels. The movement from West to East, much more important than the East-West one, shows a cultural dependence.

All these remarks bear on past time. Saïd's analysis takes its material in 19th century production. In this article, the texts referred to were written before the Second World War or located before decolonisation of Asian countries. What would we observe in contemporary context where cultural flows between East and West, North and South intensify, where Asia and Latin America gain in power and, through communication systems, know a double stream of influence: incorporation of life styles that refer to images diffused from Occident, as Appadurai shows (2005), and at the same time the proposal of their cultural richness and their innovations?

This new situation opens up a field of comparative research that could be devoted to the study of reciprocal images conveyed by literature, cinema and diverse forms of teleglobalisation, taking into account cultural production and exchange - in and between continents - which are today impressive. There is here a vast domain of exploration for analysing the links between imaginary dimensions and social representation constructs. I hope that the anthropological model that underlies the analysis proposed and exemplified in these few lines can be a useful tool to develop the reflexive work on relations between imagination and social representation.

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