

## **Social Imagination and Social Representations: The Possibility of Dialogue between Castoriadis and Moscovici**

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This manuscript's objective is to establish a dialogue between Castoriadis' concept of the social imaginary and Moscovici's social representations. First, a brief synthesis of Castoriadis' concept of the social imaginary and Moscovici's concept of social representations will be presented in order to initiate a dialogue between these two schools of thought. The author's reasoning is that it is a very promising intersection of two different but complementary approaches, which can be very fruitful in the field of social psychology.

*Key words: social imaginary; social representations; social psychology; dialogue.*

The concept of social representations is a fruitful concept that has elicited countless studies in the field of Social Psychology and other related fields. It is a theory under construction. The concept of social imaginary, in turn, is also a current and polysemic subject. Is there a possibility of establishing a dialogue between these two schools of thought? This is the purpose of this manuscript. For that, I limit the discussion to two authors, Cornelius Castoriadis and Serge Moscovici. I start summarising the theory of Castoriadis and then that

of Moscovici, noting that I feel more comfortable writing about the first. Afterwards, I unpack the theories of the two authors and engage in a dialogue between them. Even though the assumptions of these two authors are different, I believe it is possible to find points of convergence and challenge between both.

## **SOCIAL IMAGINARY**

The emergence of the imaginary in the field of subject and social analysis is linked to transformations taking place in science in recent years. These transformations have occurred because the scientific discourse of unitary human beings and society has been torn down. Currently, there is no general theory in the field of human sciences capable of encompassing subjective and social phenomena. As a consequence, the human sciences were fragmented and a parallel interdisciplinary movement took place in search of a solution.

The emergence of the imaginary in the current change of paradigms is a way to contribute to filling this conceptual gap. What was in the *peripheral area* becomes the epistemological *core*. The imaginary undoubtedly is a current but polysemic topic. The semantic displacement in this field refers to quantity; one may ask whether the imaginary is one or many. The theoretical positions of Bachelard, Durand, Lacan or Castoriadis confirm such a statement, as shown by Augras (2009).

For Castoriadis, the term ‘imagination’ has to do with the idea of image, or form (*Bild*, *Einbildung*), and also with the idea of creation. In turn, the qualifying adjective ‘radical’ used in the expression ‘radical imagination’ is used to indicate that imagination is in the root (constitutive) of the subject and social-historical. The author considers imagination not to be combinatory or reproductive; that is, it does not combine or reproduce elements only. Nor is it speculative, but rather creative. What does it create? It creates images, forms, *eidos* out of nothing; it does not have a ‘real’ or ‘logical’ reference. Living beings have a sensorial imagination that enables them to create a world *for themselves*. Human beings have a radical imagination rather than a sensorial one; a representative/affective/wishful flow present in one’s psyche, which enables the creation of previously non-existent forms/figures/*eidos*, and therefore enables the creation of one’s very own human world. This creative ability also exists in the collective and is called instituting social imagination. All this is to show that imagination and the social imagination constitute an essential characteristic, the source of experience for human beings. Put that way, imagination comes before the distinction between

the 'real' and 'imaginary'. "It is because there is radical imagination and instituting imagination that there is any 'reality' at all for us, and 'reality' such as it is." (Castoriadis, 1999. p. 242). Hence, *imaginary* is not a mere adjective, it is a noun. It is radical, it is in the root of human. I briefly list the assumptions of Castoriadis' thought.

## **TRANSDISCIPLINARITY**

Castoriadis integrates traditions into his reflections, which have often trod parallel paths in the West: philosophy, science, politics, and psychoanalysis. Perhaps because of that, his thinking does not fit traditional epistemological or philosophical molds. He is neither Marxist nor Freudian, phenomenological nor Sartrean, Heideggerian nor Hegelian, historicist nor structuralist. He opposes all these strands and uses his own categories such as the radical imaginary, the social imaginary, the psychic monad, autonomy, instituting and instituted, ensemblistic-identitarian rationale, magma, historical creation, *legein*, *teukhein*, social imaginary significations, etc. Therefore, in the opposite direction of modernity, this author manages to develop a thought where philosophy and science become involved in a circular form. If, over the course of a long time, especially after the constitution of modern science in the beginning of the 17th century, these two disciplines took separate paths, such a deed is currently no longer possible. It is necessary, all the time, to clarify assumptions, make explicit any implicit ontology, similar to anthropology and epistemology, which underlie each field of knowledge. In Castoriadis' theoretical project, imagination and the imaginary constitute the core around which philosophy and science, psychoanalysis and politics, are connected.

## **Inversion of the Traditional Procedure**

When Castoriadis places imagination and the imaginary at the human core, he twists Western thought, reversing the traditional procedure. In contrast with Plato, the author calls back the poets (imagination) to the centre of Republic. He questions the fundamentals of Western thought; not by accident, he is considered an iconoclast. Of what does this inversion proposed by Castoriadis consist? It is possible to briefly state that it refers to an ontological inversion, an anthropological inversion, and an epistemological inversion. It is initially an ontological inversion for two reasons: 1) Putting imagination and the imaginary at the core and basis of his theoretical project means considering it as a new ontological statute. In other words, it is

not something peripheral or secondary for the subject and the social-historical. Imagination and the imaginary belong to the constituting order of human, from which the subject and the socio-historical emerge; 2) Considering the imaginary this way implies another way of understanding being, not as something that is determined, (the category *determinacy* permeates Western thought), ready, or definitive. It implies thinking of being as a flow, a river, magma, in constant transformation. As Castoriadis himself puts it, consider the social-historical as self-creation “requires a radical ontological conversion.” (Castoriadis, C. 1987. p. 237). A new discourse concerning the subject, a new understanding of the human being, based on imagination and the imaginary, is implicit in this ontological inversion. Finally, it is also an epistemological inversion. In this sense, inverting the traditional procedure means to invert a type of knowledge that reduces the human element to the physical and the biological. One needs to start thinking based on imagination and the imaginary; above all, one needs to think about the subject and the social-historical based on the imaginary.

In addition to these assumptions, I list the following items that seem important to understanding the social imaginary.

### **The Imaginary Institution of Society**

Castoriadis’ main work is called THE IMAGINARY INSTITUTION OF SOCIETY. What does this enigmatic expression mean? It is composed of three terms, which I consider separately.

***Institution:*** stating that society is instituted means it was not ‘naturally’ produced. On the contrary, it is a result of human action that implies intention, mediated by a symbolic system, irreducible to any animal behavior or any merely causal explanation. The pre-Socratics had already noticed this phenomenon when stated: our laws, our customs, our traditions were not given by the gods, we made them ourselves.

***Imaginary:*** saying that this institution is imaginary initially means this is a phenomenon of the spirit and that the significations and values guiding it are produced by human beings. These meanings and values should be put in relation to the creative ability of humans, together with imagination and the imaginary.

***Society/social:*** stating that the imaginary is social is to say it is an expression of a series of special phenomena, irreducible to the psychic or the individual. The imaginary to which I refer here is not imagination that exists in the psyche. A sociological answer is

provided to the question “who establishes society?”: it is not a work of a privileged individual, leader or lawmaker, nor a contractual set of individuals. It is the work of an anonymous and indivisible collective, which transcends individuals and imposes itself on them. It is the social imaginary that provides significations and values to the psyche, and not the opposite.

### **The Social-Historical as Creation**

Castoriadis holds that society and history are two realities that can be separated only in logical and linear terms. Society (co-existence) without history (succession) and *vice versa* is inseparable. The author puts together two adjectives, social and historical, to form a noun, the social-historical. In the author’s opinion, the contribution of the thought inherited from the past in thinking about the social-historical was *fragmentary* and *negative*, since it reduced and concealed the issue. Moreover, the West did not think social history in itself and in a separate manner. For the author, the understanding of society and history should be based on imagination, as a creative process. From this perspective, the social-historical introduces a new type of being, irreducible to individual or collective subjectivity. It cannot be thought of as a set of identitarian elements or as chaos. The place to think it lies is in a sort of a third dimension, a magmatic dimension in which, paradoxically, determination and indeterminacy, *peras* and *apeiron*, can be gathered.

The author considers that the social-historical includes a new region of *to oneself* where representations, affections, and intentions gain special content. As it happens with the living and with psyche, each society creates its own world. Now, creating one’s very own world in the socio-historical field equals to create a world of social imaginary meanings and a world of institutions that embody them.

### **Social Imaginary Significations**

Two inseparable dimensions cross society: the ensemblistic-identitarian and the imaginary. In the ensemblistic dimension, society operates with ‘elements’, ‘classes’ and ‘relationships’, postulated as distinct and defined. The dominant scheme is determinacy. The inherent ways of thinking include ideas familiar to this dimension, including the mistaken idea that social-

historical is simply that. In this aspect, structuralism, Marxism and functionalism are identified.

In the imaginary dimension, existence is signification. A signification cannot be demarcated nor determined. It belongs to another order, the order of creation: creation of imaginary significations. Now, significations do not connect to each other given necessary and sufficient conditions; they connect to each other indefinitely in the form of reference. That is why “there is no science of meaning: there is no possible formalization of knowledge that deals with meaning.” (Castoriadis, C. 1987, p. 42). Formalising meaning would be similar to “emptying the ocean with a thimble” (Castoriadis, C. 1987, p. 432). Signification follows another *rationale* — the rationale of magmas or of the creation of significations.

Two questions arise when one thinks about the social-historical and these are related to the unity and origin of society. From where comes the unit of society? From its significations. There is a fabric of significations beyond economic production and legal organization, beyond coercion and persuasion (propaganda); there is sort of “invisible concrete” that ensures cohesion of the social edifice. It is in this direction that unity and identity of society should be thought of. How do we think the origin of society? As creation. The new ontological type of order of a society is not created by the social-historical, once-and-for-all. It is *materialized* each time by different forms, each of which constitutes one creation, a new *eidos* of society. This is equivalent to saying that there are no ‘rules’ or ‘procedures’ to ‘make’ one society from another, or to ‘cause’ it to appear. All attempts to ‘derive’ social forms from ‘antecedents’ or permanent characteristics out of the ‘human being’ are deprived of sense.

This fabric of significations belongs to the order of the “immanent-unperceived” (Castoriadis, C. 1992, p. 94). The *word merchandise* can be a good example to facilitate understanding of what ‘social imaginary significations means. Nobody buys a merchandise, nobody sees it, nobody will ever see a merchandise. People go to a commercial establishment and buy a yard of cloth, a kilo of potatoes, or the latest car. Nobody buys a merchandise. It belongs to the order of the immanent-unperceived, it is a social imaginary signification that makes a kilo of potatoes work as merchandise in a society of exchange. We do not perceive merchandise directly, we perceive its consequences. Unlike the perceived and the rational, one can only indirectly experience the imaginary, through its consequences. Its essence belongs to the category of *ultimate realities*.

A society's fabric of significations is called *social imaginary significations*. They are imaginary because they cannot be rationally 'explained' nor logically deduced. They are social because they exist while *an impersonal anonymous collective is instituted and shared*. The traditional ontology had stated that the origin of society and of its significations can be credited to the 'subject' or 'individuals' or to a group of subjects, things, ideas. Now, the subject, individual, group of subjects, things, ideas, all imply an instituted society. That is to say that the social-historical is irreducible to the types of being of the traditional ontology; it should be thought of as a creation of the social imaginary or instituting society. On the other hand, the social imaginary significations of a society present a type of organisation unknown in other domains: magmatic organisation. The magma 'contains' sets but is not reducible to sets and cannot be 'analytically' reconstituted through ensemblistic categories and operations. It means that social 'order' and social 'organisation' cannot be reduced to notions of order and organisation inherent to mathematics, physics or even biology, as did functionalism, structuralism, materialism, etc. The social-historical creates a new type of order, one of unity, of organised differentiation.

## **SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: MOSCOVICI'S PROPOSAL**

E. Durkheim (1898 apud Moscovici, 1978, page 24) was the one who first used the term 'collective representations' to understand the characteristics of social thought as distinct from individual thinking. By collective representations Durkheim refers to a homogeneous society, closed on itself, where the group exerts strong coercive power over individuals. Collective representations are equivalent to religious forms and myths: they encompass the dominant, traditional, and conservative social thought, which emphasise the static aspect of representations, preserved in collective memory. Transmitted from generation to generation, collective representations exist outside and independently of individuals. They are forms of consciousness that society imposes on individuals.

When Moscovici (1978) qualifies social representations in place of collective representations, he coins a singular reality, that is, a new understanding of individual and social dynamics. The term 'social representations' permits one to question, on one side, the nature of knowledge, and on the other side, the relationship between individual and society. With such a designation, Moscovici points to social diversity within homogeneity, to interaction and communication processes, as well as to the constructive and creative character

of modern society, characteristics that make social representations more relevant for the study and understanding of current society. Social representations are modalities of practical knowledge intended to communicate and provide understanding of social context. Although, as forms of knowledge, social representations use cognitive elements such as images, concepts, and theories, they are not reduced to such elements. Socially developed and shared, social representations contribute to building society.

There are two axes to understanding the phenomenon of social representations: in the first, the vertical axis, they constitute forms of practical knowledge intended to understand the world and to communicate. In the second, the horizontal axis, they emerge as constructs of social subjects concerning socially valued objects.

As forms of practical knowledge, social representations have various functions: they guide behavior and communication among people (social function), protect and legitimate the social identity of people and groups (affective function), and make familiar what is not familiar (cognitive function). The cognitive function of becoming familiar with the unknown provides evidence for two processes involved in the development of social representations: anchorage and objectification. Anchoring refers to the inclusion of what is unknown in already developed thought. It means that we anchor the unknown in already existent representations: the new is tamed by the group's pressure. Objectification is an operation that forms images, a process through which abstract notions are transformed into something concrete and tangible. This process implies three stages: decontextualisation of information through normative and cultural criteria; formation of a figurative core, and naturalisation or transformation of these images into elements of reality. On the other axis of the analysis social representations represent the construction of the subject as a social subject. Human beings do not merely process information coming from outside, rather they create information. It means that an individual is not a product of the environment nor an independent producer, since representations are always contextualised constructions, a result of conditions that emerge and circulate. In this sense, the study of social representations establishes the relationship between individual and society differently, away from social determinism (human beings are a product of society) and from pure voluntarism, which sees the subject as a free agent. On the contrary, it seeks an inclusive position: it places the human being in a historical process that enables him/her to relate to the creative forces of subjectivity. From a cross-sectional perspective, social representations place us at the interface of individual and collective phenomena: they have an interdisciplinary vocation, can



be seen in different ways and be of interest to all human sciences. However, the perspective of social psychology proposed by Moscovici seeks to overcome the dichotomy between psychologism and sociologism. He tries to overcome this dichotomy by studying the individual and his/her mental production as being effects of socialisation.

#### IS A DIALOGUE BETWEEN CASTORIADIS AND MOSCOVICI POSSIBLE?

In a dialogue that seems to be promising, I highlight the following:

Interdisciplinarity: as previously stated, Castoriadis' thought is encyclopedic. In the Greek sense, the one who integrates does not simply juxtapose different types of knowledge. Something similar can be said about Moscovici. He uses other types of knowledge to establish a new paradigm for social psychology. Both Castoriadis and Moscovici are representative of the new environment in science we are currently experiencing in this socio-cultural transition. If in the 17<sup>th</sup> century each science broke away from philosophy and theology and trod its own path, today the situation is different. No science, no knowledge can, by itself, explain the complexity of the world, the complexity of life, the complexity of the human. Because of that, the time is not of separation but of conjunction, that is, transdisciplinarity.

The subject and the social - inseparable and irreducible: for Castoriadis, the subject and the social are inseparable; one cannot be thought of without the other. At the same time, they are irreducible; one does not derive from the other and both are autonomous. On the one hand, psyche and society are inseparable. They are two poles that come together to construct the human world. If we eliminate one pole, we eliminate the world of people. On the other hand, psyche and society are not reducible to one another. Society does not derive from psyche. The psyche does not create institutions. The unconscious does not create law. It comes from outside and is imposed by society in the socialization process. The psyche does not create language, it receives language from outside and with it, social imaginary significations. After all, society establishes itself in and by the social imaginary, which acts within the anonymous collective.

The subject in turn does not derive only from the social. It is the fruit of an 'impossible' marriage between the psychic monad and society. The psychic monad needs to be socialised to survive, however: it will always preserve its creativity, its self-change. It will always preserve a representative flow as a continual emergence of representations. At the

same time, we find at these two levels, psyche and the social-historical, the ability to create that which is called the imaginary: radical imaginary in the first level and instituting social imaginary in the second. It is exactly in the imaginary where the subject and the social emerge and are constituted. According to Castoriadis, it is where the bridge between both is built.

Moscovici participates in the *same crucible of concerns* as Castoriadis. He reacts to the paradigm of the American psychology of a cognitivist and experimental nature, which considers the subject a mere receptor (or processor) of stimuli that come from outside. Opposing this psychology, Moscovici considers that this representation (knowledge) is always social. Or as stated by Arruda (2009): “The human being does not think in isolation, disconnected from the social. Human beings’ thoughts are crossed by it.” In this sense, according to the same author, the social and the individual are “intertwined treads of the same fabric.” (Arruda, 2009, p. 748).

The subject and the social were frequently based on the Cartesian model, the model of separation. On the one hand, Psychology, and from the other hand, Sociology, treated these issues as if they belonged to different epistemes. Because of that, these disciplines have always had a difficult time equating the relationships between the subjective and **social** world, sometimes favouring one, sometimes favouring the other. With the contribution of these two authors, this situation is considered to be within another epistemological paradigm. In good timing. This is the point of convergence between both.

### **The Major Reversal of Western Thought: Thinking Based On the Imaginary**

Thinking based on the imagination and imaginary implies an *ontological inversion*: a new way to understand being, a new way to understand humanity itself and a new way of ordering thought. With these assumptions, Castoriadis questions Western thought; he establishes new grounds for it. What had been put aside since Plato’s Republic, comes back to the epistemological centre. In my view, here lies the absolute novelty and difference between Castoriadis’ way of thinking of the imaginary and the way other authors discourse about it, such as Bachelard, Lacan, and Durand, among others.

Moscovici confronts the positivist perspective of social psychology and proposes a new paradigm for it, the core of which is the complex reality of social representation. He therefore participates in the important inversion proposed by Castoriadis. Nonetheless, the relationship between the symbolic and the imaginary in the field of social representation is not

clear for Moscovici, which impedes some theoreticians of social representations from being clear about what belongs to each of these fields.

It is important to clarify that the theoretical perspective of both is different: Castoriadis, as a philosopher, considers imagination and the imaginary at a more abstract level, while Moscovici constructs the world of social representation in the sphere of social psychology.

### **At the Crossroads of the Functional, Symbolic and Imaginary**

To inaugurate the theoretical field of social representation, Moscovici examined in 1961 what happens when psychoanalysis (technical knowledge) leaves the clinics and disseminates into the public domain: how the public perceives it, what the public calls it. This transformation can be summarised as: there is an intermediate between the way psychoanalysis perceives itself and how it is perceived by French society, which is the social representation. This representation changes depending on the socio-cultural context of the members of a society. The process of representation follows a logical sequence: it makes familiar what was new or unknown through a double mechanism, anchoring and objectification, a process through which individuals or groups engage real, concrete and comprehensible images taken from daily life, with the new schemes presented and with which one has to deal.

I believe this scheme lacks an essential element: imagination or creative ability, which is present in individuals and in the collective. As a form, representation is something new that did not exist before; it is an *ex nihilo* creation. It is true that such a representation was achieved with elements that already existed at that time in that culture. All is there, but representation as form or *eidos*, is a creation of something absolutely new. A social representation, in my understanding, needs to connect three dimensions: the functional or rational, the symbolic, and the imaginary dimension. A social representation certainly includes a functional or rational dimension that supports and gives consistency to it. It also includes a symbolic dimension that links meanings to signifiers; neither would exist without a third creative element, the imaginary, which establishes them in a network of social significations of a given society. We thus arrive at the deepest level of the social fabric, where a core generator of meaning operates, around which a social group emerges and organises life. At this level, the imaginary is neither image nor symbol. It uses images and also uses symbols, however its nature is of another order, the order of absolute creation.

In summary, the functional dimension as well as the symbolic dimension is very important in a given social representation, however the element that provides a system's functionality its specific orientation and determines the choice and connections of symbolic networks is the imaginary. The three should be postulated together in a relationship of mutual implication, because when they are separated, as frequently occurs, understanding of the social fabric becomes inconsistent. This is the beginning of a potential dialogue between these two authors. It is likely to continue.

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