

## **Conversation with Serge Moscovici**

JORGE CORREIA JESUINO

Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa (ISCTE)

*Translated from French by Claudine Provencher*

*London School of Economics*

About three years ago, at the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010, I suggested to Serge Moscovici that we could have a conversation to discuss his views about our contemporary world. On one hand, I wanted to discuss his views on the trends visible in a world shaken by numerous and successive crises, of which he has had a first-hand knowledge and for which 2008 can be seen as the culminating point, but also, on the other hand, I wanted to question him on his personal experience of the ‘age of wisdom’, if one is allowed to use this expression. Serge Moscovici accepted my suggestion. The interview took place at his home. I recorded him; I transcribed the text; Serge reviewed the text and added some details; and he allowed me to publish if I so desired. Other interviews with him are by now well-known: the one with Ivana Marková which contributed to clarify his scientific ‘oeuvre’; or his dialogues with Pascal Dibie now published as a book concerning his pioneering work in the green (environmental) movement in France. The conversation here presented, surely much shorter, is more personal, more focused on his personal experience, on his views about the world and, to some extent, one could see in it a preface to his *Chronique des Années Égarées*. On the occasion of the 11th conference on social representations which took place in Évora, Portugal, in June 2012, I proposed to Serge Moscovici to revisit our interview and to include it in a publication bringing together the conference proceedings. He renewed his agreement,

something that made me very happy. Serge never repeats himself; he always adds something new to traditional questions, a characteristic which was visible throughout this interview.

*Jesuino: My first question... When you think about our contemporary world, could you discuss what in your views has changed for the better, what has changed for the worse? What have we gained, what have we lost?*

Moscovici: What has changed, first and foremost, is the way with which we look at change and how we discuss it.

*Jesuino: Could you clarify?*

Moscovici: Yes. Behind all these mutations, we are talking here of a Darwinian history and not of a Marxist one. But we could also say the opposite by using, for example, the metaphor of the environment. In fact, this is an idea that flourished during the 19th century, a most deterministic century. I can't remember if Auguste Comte or Darwin was the first to do so but I can bet on Auguste Comte as the one who singled out the environment as a key factor of development, an idea that was taken up by the English and many others such as Darwin, Taine and maybe Tarde. For instance, people imputed popular revolts or crowd aggressive behaviour to global warming. As a result, I sometimes wonder whether today's theory about the environment is a social psychological theory or an environmental one. Thus, one understands that this is an evolution that does not have crises as such but, rather, goes through cyclical variations. If we want to adopt an extreme position, we may say that a geographical determinism has replaced our familiar historical one. You will remember without any doubt, that after the fall of the Soviet Union, we began to look for a 'happy ending', the end of history. This became the quest for the Graal of the 20th century. Maybe we have found it... Red was the colour of our 'unhappy beginning' and green has become the colour of our 'happy ending'. Forgive me these free idea associations.

However, I go back to your question. We can indeed ask ourselves why we should want to transform or improve our history if this one is holding on. When I was younger, in the 1990s,

we had, I had, a vision, I would say, more historical, that is, what was changing, what we were waiting for, was the transformation of ourselves, of society. It was even a historical process dealing with innovation, change, etc. Whereas today, I have the impression that we have a vision which is more evolutive, I would even say 'Comtian' (in reference to Auguste Comte), of change, that is, there are things which will change, that change in a certain way and, as a result, we have somehow introduced the model of progress, of evolution, if you want, the Hegelian model, Marxist, etc. and today, we are faced with a model which has more to do with Comte or I would even say with Saint-Simon.

*Jesuino: So, history has become random with unpredictable mutations...*

Moscovici: Yes. History gets transformed by forces that are contrary, etc., that is, the evolution does not go through crises.

*Jesuino: Hegel was talking about the ploy of reason.*

Moscovici: Yes, the ploy of reason. And thus, then, I think that our perception of change has changed. This is what impresses me. Secondly, always in the same context, what has changed is the engine or the mode of change. We are no longer dealing with significant actors, nations, classes, etc. We now have an instrumental vision whereas we used to have a more philanthropic vision. Thus, I would say that history used to be very factual whereas today history is counter-factual, that is, that we ask the following question: what would have been the societal order if things had been otherwise. For instance, what would our world be had Columbus not discovered America.

*Jesuino: Indeed, even in our discipline, counter-factual thinking is very fashionable. We never talked about this, 10 years ago.*

Moscovici: Effectively, these things are linked. This is how I sometimes find people's reactions when I say that we have to do this or that we have to do that. I say to myself, "there is now a crisis" and, even to people on the very left of the political spectrum, sometimes when I say "we must do it", I get the reply "but who should do it?" There is no one, that is, the

machine should hold on, someone must have some ideas about how to improve it and if there are people who will be able to do it. But why should we improve it if it holds on...

*Jesuino: This reminds me of the English saying: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."*

Moscovici: Let's say that this is God in- or ex-machina but do we know whether we will really change? Is it for the better or for the worse? I don't know what would be the right answer. Everyone assumes it is for the better. Hegel was right to say that we don't learn much from our historical experiences. But we remember them. And my memory is about the threat of the Apocalypse at the same time as the promise of paradise. This is why it is not difficult to believe in long-term predictions and I would say, like Keynes, 'in the long-term, we're all dead'. Look at the economic crisis. For many people, it comes across as an accident or an abnormal phenomenon whereas, in fact, it is a phenomenon inherent to the market. We should not overestimate the economic knowledge concerning the crisis and its solutions. At first glance, this is what shocks me, the idea of how we will change.

*Jesuino: We have some hope of solving it...*

Moscovici: We solve a problem but not a mystery. In one of his last books, Chomsky wrote that there are problems for which we hope to have the cognitive means to solve and mysteries that go beyond these means. We feel that we can solve mysteries because we are a species that can wait and wants to hope. In his *Book of Disquiet*, Pessoa wrote the following:

If men knew how to meditate on the mystery of life, if they knew how to feel the thousand complexities which spy on the soul in every single detail of action, then they would never act – they wouldn't even live. They would kill themselves from fright, like those who commit suicide to avoid being guillotined the next day. (Text 188)

Pessoa was not only a great poet but also a great political thinker. The crises of his times hurt him deeply and his writings are his scars. He was without a doubt a reactionary but this did not prevent him from seeing his world, our world, for what it was nor from finding the exact words to tell us the truth or his truth, whatever this may be.

*Jesuino: There is always this hope of solving the crisis...*

Moscovici: We always have this feeling of hope; this is not something that we think about, this is something that we live, because everyone needs to believe in hope in order to live. This is a legacy of Judaism and Christianity. And we don't want to say, like the Greeks did, that it would have been better not to be born at all. But all of this, which goes back to the experience of the war, does not prevent me from waiting, from hoping, even at my age, nor from acknowledging that things have changed for the better, that we do live better since the end of the war.

*Jesuino: We live longer...*

Moscovici: But we are not necessarily happier. I am not talking here of happiness. This is another issue. I don't know whether living longer is not, in fact, a double-edged sword. But I think that... is better really better? I am not really sure.

*Jesuino: Is there something in the news that shocks you?*

Moscovici: Yes, I wonder, I often ask myself questions but this does not necessarily scare me. I think about hygienism, about Malthusianism within the context of the decline of the birth rate and this, for two reasons: first, because this is happening in countries that have religions which should have prevented this; second, I say to myself that this reflects a lack of love for life. I think that if I analysed this situation more factually, there would be other things to take into account, for instance, the relations between men and women. This Malthusianism is still a major fear...

*Jesuino: Or maybe a type of selfish behavior?*

Moscovici: This can result in a two-speed racism. This is not an issue to do with selfish behavior, this is a sort of feeling that comes from a long time ago, from the time when I lived in a society in which children were considered to be a privilege and the fact that some people could not have any, a curse. I remember that when ecology was born I was discussing with friends the hypothesis of the Club of Rome which associated the depopulation of our planet

with ecological development. And I also remember to have written that, on the contrary, it is wealth that causes a drop in the birth rate. It could well be that the decline of birth rates results from the fact that our societies are getting richer. However, any solution to an old problem creates a new one. Without a doubt, we are talking here of the problem of memory. Who will remember us, who will remember our era? How will our generation, our culture be transmitted from one generation to the next? What will happen of the collective internal, live, carnal memory? We are observing the phenomenon of anonymous transmission, of which the clearest sign is this museification of history, of an external collective memory. Look at this epidemic of museums and places of memory that we can see in villages, in towns, everywhere in the world. This is one of the most surprising phenomena: the museification of social times. One does not transmit things anymore; things transmit themselves.

*Jesuino: A negative consequence of individualism?*

Moscovici: Yes, individualism also plays a role. However, I am thinking more about the ‘Einsteinisation’ of culture. If culture is transmission then we transmit everything at the speed of light – money, messages, etc.

*Jesuino: This reminds me of Virilio’s reflections... Does this acceleration worry you? This sensation of chaos, of excessiveness? A type of wild rush forward? The system becoming de-centred or even a-centred?*

Moscovici: Maybe. However, I would formulate this in a different way. The physicists and, I believe, the astronomers speak of ‘breaking of symmetry’ and I used this concept with a mathematician, Serge Olan, in my works about the phenomenon of group polarization. We could say that as long as the social interactions are weak, we are in a situation of equilibrium or of symmetry. However, as soon as individuals interact with each other, as soon as interactions become intense, we observe a break of this symmetry, so this asymmetry. There are numerous examples of asymmetry: the left and the right brain, genes which are not symmetrical and so on and so forth. Such an asymmetrical system mathematically reaches another point of symmetry that we call critical point. Once this critical point is reached, it becomes difficult to know what is going on and to predict what will happen.

*Jesuino: You were talking about the crisis. This one had been foreseen for the last ten years and everyone knew this: politicians, economists, etc. However, they didn't do anything to prevent it. I would not go as far as saying that they had bad intentions but I would say that they could not do anything due to the systemic nature of the situation.*

Moscovici: In any case, they had to be careful not to rush things through. The financial system, with its technical possibilities, creates investment tools that most people do not understand.

*Jesuino: Tools that are too abstract?*

Moscovici: I remember someone who was an expert on the Stock Exchange who told me: "I for myself don't buy anything because I don't understand." We are in a system that we don't understand. In fact, the notion of crisis is not crucial. From a purely economic perspective, it is not a real crisis. Take, for instance, the crises from the past such as the Big Depression of 1929. This was a real crisis. The current one is not a crisis.

*Jesuino: I would like to ask you the question formulated by Luhmann. He says that the world is becoming more and more unpredictable. Even if he were only partially right, this would be very worrying.*

Moscovici: We assume that we know, but in this human system, I don't know... When I think that even I did go across two or three worlds... I think that there are different worlds...

*Jesuino: I think that you don't agree with Luhmann as you always give a greater role to the actor than to the system.*

Moscovici: I think that if there are no actors, there is nothing.

*Jesuino: The concept of active minorities is a key concept in your vision of the world and in your research.*

Moscovici: I am not saying that the actor is the only one responsible for the play but...

*Jesuino: He can be wrong, he can get lost...*

Moscovici: But I think that our way of thinking... I would say that there are theological problems. Not in the sense of “does God exist or not” but we could say, does man exist or not, and what is this man who exists.

There is also a contradiction in our society vis-à-vis the past. On one hand, we negate the role and significance of tradition; we want to destroy it. On the other hand, we observe this multiplication in the number of museums as a way to preserve this same past. We also have this idea that history can be redone – this is what we mean by counter-factual. People lived in the illusion that they had a tradition. They lived in this idea of continuity, but we don't live in this perspective. We live to some extent in a mechanistic vision, like automats.

*Jesuino: You are disillusioned...*

Moscovici: No, I am not disillusioned. One can have a dramatic outlook on things without being disillusioned.

*Jesuino: Let's talk about the new generation. Do you find it to be too obsessed with the future? Or instead too focused on the present? Too hedonistic?*

Moscovici: I don't think so. However, this is a world that does not think enough, that does not question itself.

*Jesuino: They do not care?*

Moscovici: No, they live a more ordered life, more predictive; it is not that they do not care. But, what have we won?

*Jesuino: Today, we talk a lot about confidence. Do you think this is something really important? And is this confidence disappearing?*

Moscovici: Indeed, confidence is something really important but the challenge here is more about how we live it. I am struck by this obsession with the future. That being said, we must admit that we have gone through several worlds, in the sense that we have lived through several significant historical moments.

*Jesuino: This obsession with the future is visible in the field of employment. It has become more and more precarious, so people have been encouraged to adopt more individualistic behaviours and to manage their life without the guarantees that we had before.*

Moscovici: This is really a cruel problem but, if I compare it with the world that I knew a long time ago, I would say that this was a world where there were no parachutes either, golden or not. I think that, for unknown reasons, we always think that it was better before, for instance, when women say that women did not work before and that now they are working. In fact, this is rather extraordinary to say this since 90% of the population then was peasant and, in the country, women – and old people, worked really hard, like beasts. I, for myself, remember, once in the 1970s, I went to the Algarve [in the south of Portugal] and in a house there was an 80 or 85 year-old person who was still working. People were working hard, even the bourgeoisie. In Balzac novels, people did work. The world was very precarious; people were dying of hunger. In addition, there were tuberculosis and syphilis. When I was young, AIDS did not exist yet.

This brings me to say that we are not looking at this world in the correct way. There may not have been all this uncertainty but this does not mean that things were easy. Today's uncertainty comes from the fact that we tell people that certain actions can bring more certainty. For instance, we say that studying will result in a certain life style, a specific job. Business schools are everywhere, but the economic world is not a stable world; it has never been and the same thing applies to the world in general.

*Jesuino: It is possible that this obsession with the future is produced by this greater uncertainty and by the fact that people need stability.*

Moscovici: Hey, there are difficult years, there are lean years and, afterwards, come years of plenty. I was teaching in Louvain once and I met a psychiatrist, who wanted to convince me, and he succeeded, that everything that is alive is cyclical. This is partly true; in fact, the world is only going round. But history is, in fact, more a cosmological history.

*Jesuino: The eternal return...*

Moscovici: No, I would not talk of an eternal return but I would use instead Pascal's metaphor about aggression and regression.

It is difficult to live like this. Our world is asking us a question: are we still transmitting something? Because the things that are transmitted are what really matter.

I did a social representations study about the past and about this model of catastrophe and I was surprised to observe that no one had mentioned the syphilis epidemic that took place in Italy in the 16th century. Syphilis brought with it medicinal products, antibiotics. And then, thinking about it, I realized that, despite the harm brought by syphilis, the period between the 16th and the 20th century was the most brilliant in Europe, even in demographic terms. Do you see what I mean? We have to examine the world carefully. I am not an optimist but if we try to understand it at an intellectual level, there is more room for a wisdom of life, of culture, a way of thinking.

*Jesuino: Exactly...*

Moscovici: What do we say today about university? It has become a professional space: we go to university in order to get a job. But universities cannot do that. For instance, universities produce jobs for psychologists. Forty or fifty years ago, this was not the case. Nor did we have jobs in IT, in sociology, or market studies. These were very rare and now they are everywhere.

I think that universities plays a role of transmission, and this applies to school in general. This has always been the case and we can therefore say that this is its function. It transmits knowledge [savants], ways of feeling things.

*Jesuino: Concerning this, I would like to ask you about the relationship that you see between science and technology. We had science and its applications and now?*

Moscovici: I addressed this in my essay on the *Human History of Nature*. However, I'm afraid that the issue goes beyond the relationship between science and technique. Or, can one make the distinction between science and technique? The two are linked. I don't think that we understand the causality, the explanation, but it is magical thinking that knows the cause of everything. In the end, through observation, I think that we are dealing with a technocratic fundamentalism, which is everywhere, and which has gone beyond the limits of what is rational, be it in the context of the state or in business. We have gone very far; we are now in a 'steel cage' and, in fact, the scientific activity as well as technical activity have much less autonomy than it was the case 50 years ago.

*Jesuino: The technoscience...*

Moscovici: Yes, I would not say that epistemology is the problem but rather the fact that, after a while, anything, even religion, becomes a type of institutional system. Look at what happened with the Roman Church. It is not Christianity that was Romanized but Rome that imposed itself. I thus think that science and technology are in this steel cage. This is simultaneously the way of doing things, the questions that are asked, the institutions in which things happen, and thus, we can see that this is not purely an epistemological problem.

*Jesuino: What could it be then?*

Moscovici: Sciences are not ectoplasms, of course. They have their own dynamism, their own autonomy and we can ask ourselves what is their dominant type, their characteristic shape at a given time. Thus, I go back to the problem of ecology. At the ecological level, the climate issue focuses on one thing, which, in my view, is not easy and cannot be mastered but can still

somehow be organized. But should one speak here of technique or of the evolution of science?

For example, take a trivial case, the problem around publishing, a problem for many people. It is thought that we can evaluate science based on publications and, thus, the quality of a researcher based on his/her publications. I'm not saying that this is not important, that there is no relationship between the two but the correlation is rather flimsy and, in addition, you have the problem of the impact factor. But I would rather not talk about this since it is, in any case, a way of measuring something that cannot be measured because being published does not defined the quality of the findings nor what scholastic was attempting to do.

*Jesuino: Perverse effects...*

Moscovici: No, I would not say that. It is the same type of thinking, of action and of organization, that encourages people to say that nature is the climate. At least, this is what I think.

*Jesuino: Would you say that the idea 'nature is the climate' is a scientific representation?*

Moscovici: No, I don't think so. It is a social representation. Decisions are not made outside this. Decisions are made within this framework.

*Jesuino: Let's move on to a more personal level. Let's say that you see your life as having a trajectory, a journey that oscillates with its highs and its lows. Does the Greek notion of 'achme' mean something to you?*

Moscovici: Yes, around the age of 60.

*Jesuino: Why?*

Moscovici: My professional and intellectual life has been determined by my meeting with two or three exceptional people: Lagache and Koyré. They were my masters and, I would go as far

as saying, my fathers. Yes, my fathers because they helped me at a time when I didn't have anything and I didn't know anyone but also, because after my 'doctorat d'état', I could have obtained a chair of social psychology at the Sorbonne. Fraisse had proposed it to me. However, I preferred to go to the École des Hautes Études which, at that time, was only beginning and sat besides, if not outside, the university. I then began a most intense professional life, very busy as a member of the Transnational Committee on Social Psychology, as the President of the European Association and, from 1968, with much, much teaching. As a result of May 68, I began to teach social psychology in Geneva and at the École Polytechnique. I helped to create the ecological movement, so one could say that I was involved in politics. I took part in elections and I learnt how to organize electoral campaigns and things related to that. In Paris, I had a great team; we created a laboratory of social psychology and then the European Laboratory of Social Psychology.

You also know about my implication in social representation research. But there is no need to give you my entire curriculum vitae. I could have continued to teach at the EHESS since one is allowed to do so after retirement. But I stopped in the 1980s. Since then, I have dedicated myself to research and focused on my relationships with other researchers and authors. The absence of administrative responsibilities enabled me to discover Latin America of which I became very fond.

*Jesuino: In any case, you have never stopped.*

Moscovici: Quite a lot when compared with this era but this has changed the pace of my life. I never stopped working but my whole life has been filled with uncertainty – war, my childhood. This is not very usual.

*Jesuino: And on the family side? You have two sons who have been very successful.*

Moscovici: All the credit goes to them. I sometimes think about it and reflect on the role I played into that. And I am very happy.

*Jesuino: Did you accompany them?*

Moscovici: Yes, but I never had any major issues with them.

*Jesuino: They never caused you any problems?*

Moscovici: Everyone can be the source of problems but I never had problems that were really complicated or totally intractable with them. I think that problems with children can sometimes lead to a dead end situation and, in my case, this has never been the case.

*Jesuino: And the joy of having grandsons.*

Moscovici: I admire them. In any case, as soon as I got married, I decided that I would have children.

*Jesuino: Do you continue to have projects?*

Moscovici: Of course. At the moment, I am working on a problem which is familiar to me. I'm talking here not about racism or discrimination but about persecution. Over the last few years, I have worked with Juan Perez on gypsies and we even produced an international study with the European Laboratory of Social Psychology.

In a sense, this is a return to my childhood as I began to know them in the Romanian countryside where my father was dealing in cereals. The readings I have done since that time, be it in social psychology, in anthropology, etc. have enabled me to understand better relations and behaviours that I already knew and to ask myself if we can find a solution to racism. Can we find a solution to this new problem in our contemporary society?

Indeed, this is a new problem since our societies are the first ones to be built around the lay beliefs that human beings have a set of rights and to make this clear very formally. I don't conceive of racism as a prejudice but as a system of beliefs or of social representations. And, here, there is a conflict of beliefs in a world that tries to impose a system of beliefs that is contrary to that, a different representation of society. Thus, we have here an ethical and

political conflict that focuses on the persecution of a minority by a majority. And we know what a persecuting society can be, thanks to the works of historians on the Middle Ages.

When I am pessimistic, I compare racism to paranoia, which is a psychosis, or I compare it to a type of neurosis that could be said to accompany our current social conflicts. This is why I wonder if research about this topic goes far enough, if it really takes into account the historical nature of these groups, and so on and so forth, of how this conflict can be solved. There can be other solutions than assimilation, which underlines many theories. It has not worked with gypsies, not even with ethnic groups such as the Catalans and the Basque people in Spain, the Flemish in Belgium who people thought would eventually unite with the Walloons to form a unified nation. I have worked on this ethical-historical dimension and I even wrote a paper for a conference in Brasilia but I did not dare present it.

In parallel, I have worked on the idea of the 'victim', as a new social category. Juan Perez and I have done a number of experiments on victimized minorities. In that context, Denise Jodelet's book on the social representations of madness has influenced me greatly. If you replace the mad who live in a small 'normal' town by gypsies or Jewish people, you see the same processes of persecution, of damnation, conceived in a much more integrated and dynamic way than in most studies published on the same topic.

*Jesuino: In the United States, people talk about the 'melting pot'. Why is that different?*

Moscovici: The first time I dealt with the issue of persecution was when I met Poliakov who had written a book on diabolic causality, itself inspired by Lévy-Bruhl. I don't remember exactly what his intuition was but it was dealing with the relationships between human beings and animals. I had prepared a paper for a meeting he had organized on this topic. One cannot really change animals into human beings, nor the other way around, but the idea of a mix between the two species was very interesting!

*Jesuino: It looks as if you deplore this kind of ontology, which is difficult to overcome. To use Bateson's idea, one could speak of 'schismogen' ...*

Moscovici: I met Bateson once at a conference in Paris on the construction of the 'real'. I must confess that I have never clearly understood his theory of schismogen but the one about double bind is a piece of genius.

*Jesuino: And now we are dealing with the issue of elderly people. It has been said that they are tolerated as long as they act like saints or if they are scientists. I remember you telling me that this was an example of racism...*

Moscovici: I don't have anything to reply to those who believe in the fight between the young and the elderly. The generations are at war because it is assumed that the elderly have benefited from a period of riches and of full employment whereas the youth will know a period characterized by poverty and unemployment. As soon as war is set out on these terms, there is no room for an agreement.

In exotic societies, the elderly are put aside on a coconut tree while they are waiting to die. We turn them into a class of social anchorites who must be cared for by charities. Scientific thanatology and leading-edge medicine view them as organisms who are exhausted, whose life expectancy has finished but who remain a collection of organs and, as such, of interest to the health sector. The new ethics, which comes from the medical field and pretends to be objective, cannot accept that these people can come up with a decision of their own. The man who, a few years ago, was a father, who belonged to a family, a professional or religious community, who was responsible for the well-being of others, falls in disfavor or is thrown into a category imposed by others: 'the old'. This is so even if he continues to live and work like the others. No government or society has had the courage to engage into a conversation with the elderly about issues related to thanatological ethics, an important issue especially in the context of the growth of recombined families.

In my book *Society against Nature*, I foresaw the move away from a family of filiation to one based on affiliation, the end of the sex war. This is a notion that met with much approval amongst the feminist movement. It could well be that the term 'recombined family' comes across as more scientific and more rational in a culture such as ours, which does not pay attention to the social or to the affective outside the Web.

Racism against elderly people? We have become accustomed to it and like with drugs we cannot live without it. Now that certain forms of racism are disappearing, we are looking for new ones in order to feed our rapacity, our fear, and our selfishness. These are the new racisms, which, in a society without strong beliefs or dominant principles, do not meet any resistance. Theologians who debated whether the Indian natives are human beings, or people like Pascal, who asked why Jews had not yet disappeared, do not exist anymore. In fact, the Jews are the only people to have witnessed the miracles of Christ in the same way that the gypsies have witnessed persecutions on the European continent for the last six centuries. Their origin is a mystery and so is their resistance to persecutions. And to the same extent that the Jews have resisted attempts to convert them, the gypsies have resisted attempts for them to adopt a sedentary lifestyle, even though the majority of them are not nomadic.

In any case, as time goes on, the questions change. In the olden days, people were trying to understand anti-Semitism. James Joyce was right to say that, since the advent of Hitler, the question we need to ask ourselves is why is anti-Semitism the prejudice which is the easiest to prove. When I read this question, I added in my notebook “one starts with the Jews but does not stop with them.” In fact, we know much more than that... We know that the more we want to win, the more we are prepared to lose everything. And in this immense effort that Germany undertook to unify its people, to fix its territory, one could only but rely on the easiest prejudice to rally the masses. In the current state of affairs, it would be a mistake to rely on this prejudice about age. There will inevitably be a time when people realise that a society that cannot look at its parents in the eyes when comes the time to say goodbye is a society that does not see, that does not know how to see.

*Jesuino: One last question. I found, while reading Deleuze, a rather enigmatic sentence: “ageing is a desire... even death is one” and also: “one has to die quickly.” Do these words resonate with you?*

Moscovici: The only thing I know about death is its solitude. The absolute solitude of the moment. The only thing that biology teaches us is that death is inherent to life. Deleuze is not wrong but the desire of death is more sexual, more intense when one is young, at the time of ‘petites morts’. However, I believe in the desire for a good death. The feeling of expectation

and of hope never goes away. I remember the death of a friend four or five years ago. I was visiting her and, every time, would talk to her about Spinoza, about his principle of perseverance in being, of sadness and or joy. She would never cease to think, to ask for clarifications. Until the end when she stopped breathing, I would look at her and be waiting for I don't know what. What is unfair is to die alone, without anyone. The characteristic of our civilisation is that the majority of people die alone, in hospital, without hearing a familiar or a loving voice, without being able to say goodbye.

Durkheim would have said that this is a profane death; I would say that this is a profanation of death. What paralyses us here is the fact that this symbolizes a social rupture, the flight of men or women who are unable to face their anxiety vis-à-vis the solitude of death before this death becomes theirs. This fear, a nameless fear that cannot be mastered, be it in front of birth or of death, has spread and still does. Religion cannot help here in our culture nor can those myths of substitution that people fabricate on the web and which propagate at the speed of light. These are not critical thoughts or complaints, only questions without answers that only societies can invent. Against this reign of the abstract (or of the good scientific mind), what gets expressed here is a desire for the real, a hunger for dialogue. And you are the one to have provoked this!

There is something deep in this. I have the impression that because we speak of stigmatization, there is a movement towards 'biologisation', a new form of eugenics. I also think that the fact that society has given doctors the right not to save people is a major ethical problem.

Old age is possibly a desire in our society, a type of desire for peace, for coming out of the social labyrinth, of this ever-questioning world. Yes, a desire for peace.

*Jesuino: A desire for peace, of completing the circle... of taking stock.*

Moscovici: Yes, of taking stock.

*Jesuino: An ambiguous desire...*

Moscovici: There are in fact two discourses about old age: there is the discourse of the scientific triumph and of the lengthening of life expectancy; the second deals with old people as a burden and this can lead to old people being put on a coconut tree, to eugenics... In the end, the desire for my death, for eugenics, it's the same thing. Biology, illness, all of this, both discourses go together.

*Jesuino: I have observed the existence of these two discourses systematically throughout the history of Western civilization.*

Moscovici: The same thing as with the gypsies...

*Jesuino: Yes, I was reading something by the Portuguese author Lobo Antunes about the idea that "even death loses some of its enthusiasm with age."*

Moscovici: So does it mean that there is such a thing as a desire for death?

*Jesuino: Yes, and if death is something romantic or dramatic then everyone hopes to die suddenly.*

Moscovici: In any case, death is an ending.

*Jesuino: This slowness of death...*

Moscovici: I am thinking about an author, a historian, someone who was with us at the Ecole [des Hautes Etudes Sociales] who wrote something about letters that people write at the end of their life, people who write about their entire philosophy at the end of their life. In the Christian religion, ritual played an important role but, in Judaism, there is neither paradise nor hell. So in the prayer for the dead, they are forgiven for being absent from the community.

Nobody cares about those who are dying. Death has become like a suicide. Festinger decided to stay at home...

*Jesuino: Is there a link between dying in one's bed and this obsession amongst the Greeks to bury their dead?*

Moscovici: In any case, for the Greeks, the dead were not really dead because one would leave them some food, etc. But, in fact, it is interesting to note that, in today's discourses, age has become a stigma. It is not a political problem but look at the political class, the case of McCain or, a long time ago, the case of Churchill or of Roosevelt.

In a society in which it is forbidden to say of a woman that she is a woman, one finds oneself in this constant asymmetry, as I said at the beginning. One cannot see what is forbidden at one level and allowed at another.

*Jesuino: However, on the other hand, and I speak for myself, it can be somewhat annoying to hear people congratulate us for still being there.*

Moscovici: You are right, it is as if I said to a woman "you are beautiful, you don't have any wrinkles." This type of reactions really shows that we want everything: a moral society but, at the same time, we do exactly the opposite.

*Jesuino: To go back to Bateson, we could say that we are always in a double-bind situation.*

Moscovici: Yes, exactly!

*Jesuino: And, at times, these are double-binds that we created for ourselves.*

Moscovici: Of course, who else could have created them?

#### JORGE CORREIA JESUINO

PhD in Sociology by the Technical University of Lisbon. Professor emérito at the Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL) in Lisboa, Portugal. Honoris Causa by the Universidade Federal do Paraiba (UFPB)

Brazil. Teaching and research activities on Organizational Behaviour and Social Representations. Has published a number of texts on leadership, group processes, social representations and epistemology.

Contact: [jorge.correia.jesuino@gmail.com](mailto:jorge.correia.jesuino@gmail.com)