

Let us not forget to think, nor the thinkers!

SERGE MOSCOVICI

(Translated by Claudine Provencher)

GERARD'S ATTRACTION TO PIAGET

Throughout his career, Gerard expressed his admiration for Piaget's work and, in particular, for his book *The Child's Conception of the World* (1926). Piaget was also one of my favourite authors. And through the originality of its method, its treatment of the interviews with children and its theoretical energy, this book enabled me to grasp more intuitively what is behind 'common sense' and, thereby, a social representation. It is this vision of the abstract into the concrete, of the ideal into the real which compelled me to study Lévy-Bruhl and Piaget, before immersing myself in Durkheim for whom these representations appeared like an 'idealised' real. And maybe I was too much of an atheist to acknowledge the fundamental significance of the antinomy between the sacred and the profane.

To appreciate Gerard's much more significant and intellectual interest in Piaget, one must highlight an exceptional characteristic of the latter's work. Piaget invariably formulates questions and looks for answers within the context of the psychology of children, of their development and, more precisely, of the evolution of their capabilities be they intellectual, motor or perceptive. But the perspective he casts on these phenomena is not only the one of a psychologist but, also, the one of an epistemologist. Or, to be more precise, the perspective of a psychologist must be the one of an epistemologist: that is, it must take into account, in a benevolent fashion, advances in scientific knowledge and new theories while always avoiding a dogmatic attitude. Thus, we can understand the existence of several Piagetian theories of which

the last one was the genetic structuralism. It is interesting to see how the adaptations and assimilations of different theoretic perspectives result in a lively dialogue that goes on to inspire new research and new concepts as, for example, the one of grouping. Nothing is as natural as these variations - a practice that Einstein would have called, approvingly, 'opportunism' - even though some of Piaget's colleagues had doubts about this.

Was Piaget a psychologist? Some colleagues, somewhat bewildered by this 'opportunistic' approach, openly questioned Piaget's credentials as a psychologist. We would argue he was a magnificent 'non-psychologist', standing right in the middle between the meticulous researcher and the pure genius. I believe that this is this richness, this audacity behind the theoretical combinations, this capacity to expand one's theoretical horizons that Gerard so appreciated in Piaget. In Goethe's 'Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship', one of the characters makes the following comments: "Rien n'est plus naturel que d'être saisi de vertige à l'aspect d'un immense paysage qui se découvre brusquement devant nous et nous fait éprouver votre petitesse et votre grandeur."¹

CLOSED VERSUS OPEN METHODOLOGY

One of the first discoveries I made during my initial meetings with Gerard was his genuine interest in children and, let's call it, their social psychology. His (1990/2005) chapter on experimental groupings of children fascinated me and inspired the chapter I wrote in the same book. However, here, I would like to concentrate more precisely on his (2000) article 'Piaget ethnographer'.

This article represents a 'defensive illustration' of the Piagetian method, a method criticized for various reasons, first, by experimental psychologists and, later, by clinical ones. Such a view rests, according to Gerard Duveen, upon a profound misapprehension about Piaget's method. Indeed, it is a misapprehension which is at the centre of my concern, since it relates to the logic of Piaget's method and it is logic which I can suggest can be characterized as ethnographic.

¹ "Nothing is as natural than to be seized with dizziness when faced by an immense landscape that suddenly opens up before us and makes clear both our smallness and our greatness." (translated by Claudine Provencher)

Papers on Social Representations, 19, 2.1-2.4 (2010) [<http://www.psych.lse.ac.uk/psr/>]

To my knowledge, these criticisms go back a long way, maybe since the beginning of research on child development. For experimentalists, the model to follow in these studies was the experience on reaction time, while for clinicians it was the observation or one-to-one interview with a child. However, if these critics did not manage to win the argument, it is firstly because the heuristic nature of Piaget's methods was undeniable. And also, in many respects, because his developmental theory was making an important contribution to the emerging tradition in psychology and sociology. One only has to read Piaget's book on normative judgment to see in this discussion of a child's transition from family collectivism to school or post-school individualism a synthesis between Durkheim's sociology and Tarde's psychology or inter-psychology. One finds the same inspiration in Bergson's explanation of the origins of morality and religion. Bergson imagines an evolution from closed societies, à la Durkheim, to open ones, à la Tarde.

I may be exaggerating here and one would need more time to clarify this point. However, what I noticed most in Europe, and even in the United States, is this contrast between the assessment of the methods and of the theories of Piaget. This contrast is surprising because we share a professional positivistic or empiricist epistemology. However, Gerard Duveen turns his back to this epistemology in his assessment of Piaget's approach, and overlooks the difference between the qualitative and the quantitative. Thus, Piaget becomes an ethnographer of children's 'societies' and, through these, of ours or any society. Or in the words of Gerard Duveen:

In this way the ethnographic perspective establishes a dialectic between observation and interpretation, between the material collected and the categories employed in rendering it comprehensible. (...) This 'persuasive stance' which Piaget adopts in his writing reflects a sensitivity to the ethnographic situation in which it is not appeals to the weight of external or objective facts which can sustain or justify a particular interpretation, but rather the ethnographer's ability to convince a reader that the system of categories which is proposed is adequate to grasp and render intelligible the social action under investigation. (p.81)

The article nicely develops this argument and explains Gerard's 'persuasive stance'. However, I believe that Piaget should have done more to convince the

experimentalists or the clinicians. Indeed, the actual process of data collection was a collective process whereby Piaget's hypotheses were being tested by researchers who, despite their support for his ideas, could differ on how to interpret these data. I must admit that this discussion, or the negotiations over the interpretation of the data, appeared to me as the most fascinating aspect of 'the' method, along with its original and even scientific nature in the classical meaning of the term.

We thus easily understand how this method marked the beginning of a new epistemology in which the relation to the 'Other' is more heuristic than the relation to an object. If we accept this observation, which many may contest, we can complete Gerard Duveen's proposition by adding that Jean Piaget was the ethnographer of his own method. This link between the theory and the phenomena was functional, reinforcing the connection between those researchers sharing a theoretical framework and its variations. They were not, as implied in the myth of an objective science, the passive witnesses of phenomena taking place outside themselves.

I stop here with the thought that Gerard had been able to raise fundamental epistemological questions and to propose some elements of answer on which we must reflect further. This is what we called the Zeigarnik effect, unfortunately, in the literal sense of the word.

REFERENCES:

- Duveen, G. (2000) 'Piaget ethnographer', *Social Science Information*, 39(1): 79-97.
Duveen, G. & Lloyd, B. (Eds). (1990). *Social Representations and the Development of Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

SERGE MOSCOVICI is director emeritus of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and founder and director of the Laboratoire Européen de Psychologie Sociale at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. He is a member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts and Officer of the *Légion d'honneur*. He is 2003 Balzan Prize Winner for Social Psychology. His 1961 founding work on social representations theory has recently been translated and published in English by Polity Press in 2008.