Response to Dijana Cakaric

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It is my pleasure to engage in dialogue with Dijana Cakaric on the topic of epistemology of social representations and dialogicality. Epistemology of social psychology is a topic that has been largely neglected and as a result our discipline has become absorbed in downright empiricism which isolates it from other social sciences. I shall devote my commentary largely to this issue.

The opening of Dijana's paper introduces a major epistemological point. In contrast to the claims of traditional positivistic epistemology, scientific discoveries are largely based on intuitive thinking and imagination (Peirce, 1931-1958, 1.46). No inductive method produces fundamental concepts in physics (Einstein, 1954) and although imagination must be restrained, its absence does not lead to any creative thoughts. Concepts are free inventions of the human mind, and they cannot be deduced by abstract logical means (Einstein, 1949). The theory of social representations, likewise, is based on an intuitive application of common sense thinking, bringing together different kinds of knowledge and studying their transformation.

With this opening in mind, Dijana's perceptive analysis appeals to a number of contentious issues. I shall select only a few of them because a full discussion would go far beyond the space allocated to my commentary.

DIALECTICS AND DIALOGICALITY

Dijana refers to remarks by Voelklein and Howarth (2005), and one should also include Raudsepp (2005), who all note that lack of education in dialectical and historical materialism makes it hard for researchers to understand the social representations theory. I raise this point because, in past, I made similar observations. While I still think that there is a great deal of truth in this remark, we must clearly specify what it is that makes for this difficulty, because the theory of social representations IS NOT a dialectical or historical materialist theory. Here again, the claim of Voelklein, Howarth and Raudsepp must be understood epistemologically and we need to make a distinction between dialectics and dialogicality and I shall do this briefly in terms of three issues.

Continuous and Discontinuous Development

The theory of dialectical and historical materialism is based on relational and dynamic concepts, which the creators of Marxism took over – and adapted – from Hegel. Dialectics in its Hegelian/Marxian version is conceived as a moving principle of reality leading to an ascendant resolution of contradictory forces and so to the progress in nature and in the human mind. The Hegelian/Marxian version of dialectics also assumes to govern scientific progress.

However, the idea of dialectical progress does not apply to the theory of social representations. The mastery of nature and technology can be viewed not only as a progress, but also as a retrogression in society and as catastrophes 'piling wreckage upon wreckage' (e.g. Benjamin, 1955/1973, p. 249; see also Moscovici, 2011). It is despite the progress in knowledge, and indeed, it is because of the progress in knowledge, that wars and totalitarian regimes are able to instantly annihilate millions of people; equally, the progress of knowledge does not stop the violent destruction of nature. The theory of social representations is not concerned with an ascendant development of knowledge as is dialectics, but with transformations of one kind of knowledge into another one.

Moreover, the theory of social representations is intrinsically linked with language and communication, to which dialectics in its ascendant sense does not apply. Dialogue and communication do not necessarily resolve conflicts. The search for resolution of problems and for intersubjective relations is one aspect of communication; tension, conflict, the search for social recognition, and negotiations of meanings in order to sustain communication, is the

other aspect. This is why dialogicality, rather than dialectics, is a more plausible epistemology in relation to the theory of social representations. Dialogicality is about interdependencies of other-orientated and self-orientated forces, some of them entailing intersubjectivity and others involving the search for social recognition.

Science and Common Sense

This leads me to the second point. From the very beginning Moscovici (1961/2008) insisted that social representations are formed by anchoring and objectification from common sense knowledge and from its transformation. In his analysis of psychoanalysis as a social representation he shows how common sense language and different forms of thinking designate ways in which relations between parents and children, or professionals and lay people, are organized; how names turn ideas into social reality; and how they become fixed as well as transformed within that reality. In other words, common sense knowledge refers to knowing obtained in and through experience, communication and daily activities that are underlain by traditions, customs, folk-knowledge and historical narratives. In contrast, Marxism refers to scientific knowledge. It has firmly adopted the rationalistic outlook with respect to theories of historical and dialectical materialism, economy and politics. Its general ethos, from the beginning, has been to eradicate common sense and 'irrational' thinking. It has insisted that religious, unscientific ideas and myths must be replaced by rational thinking. In order to achieve this, its proponents have argued that it is necessary to teach masses of people to substitute unscientific reasoning by scientific reasoning, that is, to replace irrationality by rational thought. It is necessary to exchange the spontaneous and arbitrary activities of masses by activities that are guided by the instruction of the Party (e.g. Lenin, 1913/1977).

Cognitive Polyphasia and Polysemy

Thirdly, and following from the second point, common sense thinking is multifaceted and polyphasic. One form of knowledge interacts with other forms of knowledge, and one belief interacts with other beliefs. Knowledge and beliefs are interdependent with particular political, historical and cultural contexts that are part and parcel of social representations. Beliefs and images are sources of actions; they are judgmental and they cannot be replaced

by 'neutral' scientific propositions. Equally, language expressing social representations is never neutral, but is polysemic and evaluative.

In contrast, dialectics and historical materialism advocate one truth and one epistemology: that of Marxism.

MAKING A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE THEORY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND OTHER APPROACHES IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

These brief comments about the relation between dialectics/historical materialism and social representations bring me to a related issue. Dijana raises the following question: 'if reaching for the other and dialogue are in the foundations of the theory of social representations, does not that mean that, as one of the paradigms of social psychology, it should not be closed to the findings coming from the neurosciences, social cognition and evolutionary psychology?' This is a provocative question and an answer to this deserves some thoughts. If we consider the history of the theory of social representations at least over the last three decades, we find that social psychologists have made numerous attempts to cross the bridge between the theory of social representations and other approaches, for example, between social representations and social cognition, or between social representations and discourse analysis. In my view, many of these attempts to engage the theory of social representations in a dialogue with social cognition and discourse analysis have been genuine efforts to cross the bridge; others, however, have been defensively motivated due to the fact that from its inception the theory of social representations has been subjected to various forms of criticism. The advocates of social representations, from the beginning, have kept responding to criticisms, explaining the theory and clearing up misunderstandings of critiques. I have always agreed with Serge Moscovici who has claimed for a long time that the best way of responding to critiques is to theoretically advance and so move forward one's theory. In this way one can show more convincingly the usefulness and practical value of the theory's ideas rather than in involving oneself in endless responses to criticisms.

But let us take this important point further. Dijana refers to some attempts to establish a dialogue between social representations and other approaches, e.g. the volume of Deaux and Philogène (2001), in which these authors, in their attempt to bridge diverse approaches and find a common ground, introduced the theory of social representations to American social psychologists. Yet a common ground cannot be found easily and one needs

to address the presuppositions upon which diverse approaches are based. But in order to do this, it is necessary to attend to epistemologies and concepts that underlie those approaches.

Unfortunately many attempts to open a dialogue are usually reduced to simplifications. For example, it is thought that since diverse approaches use the 'same' terms, notions, taxonomies or categories, one should be able to maintain a dialogue going. It is ignored that terms, notions, taxonomies and otherwise cannot be substituted for concepts and epistemologies. The so called 'same' terms used in different approaches refer to different concepts and consequently, to different phenomena. 'Operation' in a surgical theatre and an 'operation' in Piaget's theory refer to vastly different concepts just like do 'anchoring' in social cognition and 'anchoring' in the theory of social representations. A dialogue at such simplified levels can only be counterproductive. Let us take a concrete example. As an invited commentator in the above attempt to cross the bridge, Kruglanski (2001, p.243) explains the difference between social representations and social cognition as follows: 'Indeed, both research programs contain strong commitments to both cognitive and social elements, albeit they emphasize them to different degrees: in the representations program the 'social' is often the figure and the 'cognitive' the ground, whereas in social cognition these 'figure-ground' are inversed'. Kruglanski continues saying that these matters are not trivial and they have led social cognition and social representations in different directions. Yet, what is meant by 'social' in 'social cognition' and what is 'social' in social representations? Can we presuppose that these approaches are dealing with the same concepts? Surely not. While in one theory 'social' may mean 'more than one', in another theory it may refer to the interdependence between the 'self and others', and yet in another approach it may mean culture, traditions, collective memory, and so on. Unfortunately, many attempts to open a dialogue take place at a level of categories or taxonomies, e.g. abstract/concrete, individual/social, quantitative/qualitative, cognitive/social, static/dynamic, in-group/out-group and so on, rather than at the level that addresses deeper questions concerning the epistemological nature of such categories and taxonomies. If a proponent of social representations engages in a dialogue with others at a superficial level of this kind, it can hardly lead to any satisfactory outcome. The theory of social representations and dialogicality needs to engage with other theories at the level of epistemology. Social psychologists need to ask questions like: What is meant by knowledge in this or that approach? What is the meaning of concepts used in this or that approach? In what kinds of semantic networks are the 'same' terms involved?

With respect to evolutionary psychology and neuroscience, here again, we need to carefully consider in what ways scientific developments might be relevant to social psychology before jumping upon the latest fashions. For example, what theoretical assumptions does the researcher make, or what empirical evidence does he/she need to have in order to meaningfully investigate whether complex social phenomena, like the dialogical self, trust, and otherwise originate in the brain?

Recent studies published in popular as well as scientific literature and highly prestigious journals including *Nature* and *Scientific American* claim that researchers have begun to uncover how the human brain determines social phenomena like justice (Beugré, 2009), influence (Mason et al., 2009) or trust and generosity. Take the newest experimental studies of trust and generosity as examples. But before we do so, let us consider what it means 'to trust someone'. 'Trust' is a generalised term for multifaceted dialogical relations ranging from pre-conceptual and intersubjective feelings on the one hand, to macro-social trust in 'others' and to reflective strategies as well as self-reflective doubts on the other hand. Trust strategies with respect to others include co-operation with or manipulating others in order to achieve a common goal, to gain something or to deceive others (e.g. Marková, Linell and Gillespie, 2007). There is an enormous amount of literature associating trust with co-operation, solidarity, faith, beliefs and confidence. Social scientists have been struggling to discover relationships between these phenomena and to detect conceptual similarities and differences among them. The concept of trust and its different forms are indispensable in the content of the concept of the dialogicality (e.g. Marková and Gillespie, 2007).

Yet such complexities in relation to trust are avoided by neuroeconomists like Paul Zak or neuroscientists like Antonio Damasio (2008) who treat trust as a transparent phenomenon not requiring any conceptual analysis. Using an experimental task of 'the trust game' in a series of studies, Zak (see, for example, 2008) and his colleagues (Morhenn et al, 2008) have shown that oxytocin (the substance that is produced in the body of pregnant women), when administered through a nasal spray, plays a major role in increasing one's trust of others and cooperating with them. Zak's article in the *Scientific American* (2008) is introduced by a persuasive claim: 'Our inclination to trust a stranger stems in large part from exposure to a small molecule known for an entirely different task: inducing labor'. Note that although Zak conducted experiments with the experimentally based 'trust game', the *Scientific American* turns this to a generalized claim about trusting strangers. In the same article a number of other papers are advertised, like 'Neuroendocrine perspectives on social

attachment and love'; 'How love evolved from sex and gave birth to intelligence and human nature'; 'Oxytocin increases trust in humans'; 'Oxytocin is associated with human trustworthiness'; 'Oxytocin increases generosity in humans'. The reader of such claims might wonder not how to build a bridge between neuroscience and social psychology (or social representations) but whether there is any longer a need for social psychology!

Unjustified associations between brain cells and complex social behaviour have also been made in new evolutionary domains called 'darwinising culture' (Aunger, 2001), social neuroscience and neuroimaging. These new developments consider that evolution and social development are explained as a continuous progress; with respect to dialogicality, the 'dialogical brain' is a model and 'we can speculate how a dialogical self might actually be housed in a dialogical brain' (Lewis, 2002, p.178). The idea about continuity in development is an old one and in one form or other it can be traced to at least the eighteenth century. In recent and contemporary social sciences we find it in the work of scholars like Piaget or Durkheim. The contemporary researcher Harris (2002) entitles a section in his chapter 'Selfish genes and/or evolutionary continuity'. The possibility of the discontinuity hypothesis, which was adopted by Vygotsky and Levy-Bruhl and which is a guiding concept in the work of other scholars, e.g. Moscovici, Ingold, Lewontin and Gould, is ignored.

I am in full agreement with Dijana in her suggestion that we should not isolate ourselves from scientific discoveries in natural sciences. Cognitive neuroscience and brain sciences are making significant advances in understanding how the brain functions. Yet we need to ask a fundamental question: how relevant are the discoveries of the brain functions to dialogicality and social representations? What do we know about such relevance? Can one assume a continuous development from a brain cell to, say, social representations of democracy? Dijana draws attention to important epistemological issues that must not be disregarded. We cannot respond to them thoughtless jumping at the latest fashions in hope that we shall become more 'scientific'. If we look into the history, we find that such attempts, very often, are no more than reverberations of similar occurrences in the past.

The theory of social representations, in contrast to most social psychological approaches, engages with other social and human sciences. Indeed, by assuming the stance of anthropology of modern culture, the theory of social representations and its epistemology shows its relevance to the study of contemporary society in dealing with unresolved problems in education, health, disability, environment and politics.

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