Power, nothingness and the social construction of knowledge[1]

JOSE ANTONIO CASTORINA

Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina

In SRT, nothingness is the presence of the rejected meaning, it is a crack in the positivity of SR, its "dark side"; while meanings are rejected to delegitimise the social order. It is the product of a constructive activity of a social group. The absent, as what is repressed being unacceptable, is always present even if it is not 'seen', even if it is not 'said'. In this way, SRT is compatible with nothingness, because it presupposes a construction, dynamic relations between presence and absence, even leaving room for resistance. However, a problematisation of nothingness can be opened up by critically explicating the (usually implicit) ontological and epistemological assumptions that condition the research.

Dans la TRS, le néant est la présence du sens rejeté, il est une fissure dans la positivité de la SR, son côté « sombre », tandis que les significations sont rejetées pour délégitimer l'ordre social. Il est le produit d'une activité constructive d'un groupe social. L'absent, comme ce qui est réprimé étant inacceptable, est toujours présent même s'il n'est pas " vu ", même s'il n'est pas " dit ". De cette façon, la TRS est compatible avec le néant, car elle présuppose une construction, des relations dynamiques entre la présence et l'absence, laissant même place à la résistance. Cependant, une problématisation du néant peut être ouverte par l'explicitation critique des hypothèses ontologiques et épistémologiques (généralement implicites) qui conditionnent la recherche.

---

[1] *This article is based on the conference given in 2021 at the 15th CIRS (International Conference on Social Representations) online: https://remosco.hypotheses.org/news-nouvelles/cirs-2021-programme-videos*

I appreciate the invitation to participate in this event and to be able to dialogue with such outstanding colleagues in this disciplinary field. Much of what I will assert in this talk is the result of collaborative work with Alicia Barreiro (Barreiro & Castorina, 2016).

Firstly, although there are antecedents in the history of philosophical thought, in psychoanalysis and partly in Piaget's psychological theory, the characterisation of the concept of nothingness is realised in cultural psychology. For example, Bang (2009) describes a social drama: in 2006, a truck driver drove into a school in the Amish community in the United States, killed five students and seriously injured others before killing himself. What interests us here is the way the community dealt with its grief: a few days later, among other reactions, the grandfather of one of the murdered said: "We must not think of the devil in this man". The elders of the community decided to demolish the school, which means that, in order to deal with what is intolerable, they have transformed a painful event in their experience by removing the scene of the crime. In this way, they transform the loss into a possibility for future action, rejecting the perspective of the past, as well as that of the events that have occurred, which speak of the victims. It is a way of making history by excluding the past. Removing the school from its physical environment means that the same pain is not experienced again and again. It is a non-being that can be seen from the silence, a silence that expresses a repressed presence, linked to a certain context.

In short, such suppression represents the presence of absence, the creation of a zero signifier, without materiality. I will return to this point later, when I deal with the ontology of nothingness as a bearer of meaning. The nothingness -the empty space- corresponds to the cultural act shared by the Amish community, which leads its victims to become agents towards the future. Obviously, in this perspective, nothingness is about meanings and it is an unavoidable dimension of human transformations, of its cultural being and its history.

NOTHINGNESS IN SRT

However, what about SRT in relation to nothingness? As we know, when the unknown is threatening (a void of meaning, which is not tolerated), groups initiate a process of symbolic confrontation, through inking and objectification. The latter selects certain elements of the represented object and those that will not be represented, to constitute the figurative core of the SR, bringing into play, at the same time, certain tensions of the social groups involved. In his fundamental work, and when studying the diffusion of psychoanalysis in France, Moscovici

(1961) points out that, among Catholics, SR maintains certain elements of psychoanalytical theory, but obscures others, precisely those that would be in conflict with the values of the Church, such as those of libido or transference. In this approach to Nothingness, the cancelled meanings are part of the SRs. Duveen (1998) confirms this as follows: "a representation is thus not only a way of understanding something, it is always, also, a way of not understanding". It should be noted that a significant part of SRT research has focused on the positive aspects of the construction of SRs, i.e., on the meanings prevailing in social conflicts to establish the "real", symbolic structures that are situated in the place of the object in everyday life.

The representations of various aspects of psychoanalytic theory, the emptiness on a map, or the absence of forms of justice other than retributive, were explained because these become the Void, and they remain there as the negated side of the positive representation. It may even happen that there is no representation, because the object is repressed. And the main thing, in any case, is that the exclusion is not arbitrary, but occurs because these meanings are threatening to the social group, they challenge the social order. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that there are few investigations into the relationships of SRs and the distribution of power. In general, the legitimisation of a power relationship -a way of understanding "ideology"- is more than a "horizon" on which SRs are inscribed, it is a framework that intervenes decisively in its social construction.

The absences express the forms in which the tensions inherent in power relations restrict the objectification of SRs. These take three forms. On the one hand, some possible representations are excluded from other prevailing representations, as in the case of justice. According to Barreiro's studies (2013), in the city of Buenos Aires, the SR of justice is considered restorative both by adolescents and by the newspaper Clarin. The distributive sense is totally absent from the subjects' responses, this refers to a social and political context where the demands for punishment for various acts against people and property have multiplied. This absence represents a substantial part of the process of objectification of social meanings, such as "the presence of absence", and is the result of a constructive process that rejects what cannot be symbolised, since it would be threatening to the social group.

Another modality of absence refers to the fact that some significant 'parts' of the object are present, while others are not positively included. One can evoke, for example, the absence of libido in the SR of psychoanalysis, already mentioned. And what is interesting - the question of the space referenced as empty on a map - is not simply an objective state, it comes from the representations of the cartographer or the social groups around this place. A map is always

loaded with meanings, but some of them remain hidden and help to support what is shown and said in the representation (Harley, 1988). For example, there are blank spaces on the map of the Argentine Republic at the end of the 19th century, corresponding to the lands occupied by the original peoples. These maps express the representations that the ruling elites had of them, and which helped to legitimise the historical process known as the 'Conquest of the Desert' (1878-1885) (Parellada, Castorina & Barreiro, 2021).

Finally, the existence of the object is denied in its entirety. This is the case of the Amish community school, which was eliminated in order to be able to endure the pain produced by the murder. This is also true for most Argentines, for whom the existence of indigenous peoples remains invisible. Indeed, the nation's president recently declared: "We Argentines are descended from boats", thus reaffirming this SR. It is in many cases that this active construction of Nothingness shows that objects are not positively structured by a SR, but are rendered invisible, because their meanings are unacceptable to the group.

For the analysis of the Void, I would like to stress that not only the particular characteristics of the SR object, but also the subjective dimension, linked to repression, must be retained. A dimension -on which Jodelet (2008) has insisted- and which requires the greatest attention: the intolerable is rooted in cognitive processes of denial bearing individual feelings of anguish, anxiety or fear, expressed in the experiences of nothingness, in a Freudian sense.

THE ONTOLOGICAL QUESTION

From what has been said, it is necessary to reflect on the ontological status of the object. But the difference between the construction of SR and social reality must first be assumed. The social reality gives rise to and limits the production of SR, because it transcends all representation. Thus, the object towards which SRs are directed is not reality itself, but its reconstruction by symbolic activity. It is then postulated that the object of SR is not identified with the Real -which always overflows what is symbolised-, the difference must be supported. Secondly, one has to take into account cultural psychology's refutation (Bang, 2009; Valsiner, 2014) to empiricist ontology, according to which one cannot perceive what is not given to the senses, and what is not glimpsed by the senses 'is not there'. This clearly applies to what is not there ('nothing'), but it is not the same for 'nothingness', which presupposes an overcoming of the dualism of representation and world, or meaning and means. For this elementarianism there is no nothingness, but 'what there is not'. Instead, the 'presence of absence' suggests an ontology

that transcends the immediately perceptible. This is an inescapable dimension of cultural meaning studies. In this sense, when we speak of nothingness, we focus on non-existent objects, inspired by Meinong's theory of objects. In contrast to the non-existence of physical reality, the only ontology of an empiricist, there are other non-existent objects such as impossible objects (such as "round squares") and subsistent objects (such as theories, novels, "the mountain of gold"). For Meinong, there are objects that do not exist (they are not specifiable objects) even if they subsist (bestehen), not in a Platonic or purely subjective sense (Valsiner, 2014). These subsisting objects remain essential for the organisation of human life. That is, a table can be said to exist in the physical world, but the same cannot be said of a 'round triangle' or 'justice'. Yet, by creating them, we can talk about them. Even if they do not exist as physical entities, they subsist in culture (and thus in the mind).

These are conceptual objects, such as the notion of number, or a scientific theory, for example Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. Here, nothingness would be that which 'is not yet', it would be potential, such as knowledge that can be realised with the help of another. What is important is that objects exist and function for us, but they do so through subsistent objects. For this reason, they guide our lives, and in this sense, Nothingness is not a thing, but an idea or a meaning. Nothingness arises in the encounters of human beings with the world, it participates in the development towards the unknown, in the act from the potential. It is a negated meaning, present beyond the empirical, it is an empty place, a signifier without materiality. The disappeared school or distributive justice, they do not exist as what "is not there".

In SRT, nothingness is the presence of the rejected meaning, it is a crack in the positivity of SR, its "dark side"; while meanings are rejected to delegitimise the social order. It is the product of a constructive activity of a social group. The absent, as what is repressed being unacceptable, is always present even if it is not 'seen', even if it is not 'said'. In this way, SRT is compatible with nothingness, because it presupposes a construction, dynamic relations between presence and absence, even leaving room for resistance. Let us return to the disappearance of the Amish school: faced with a troubling situation, the community changes the atmosphere of pain into a signifier that makes it more tolerable, more bearable.

NOTHINGNESS IN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Undoubtedly, in any process of scientific knowledge there are questions that are not yet asked, because their theories have not yet been challenged. However, and this is where the similarity with Nothingness in the construction of SR lies, there are questions, and cuttings of objects, or areas of the world that remain conceptually invisible to a scientist. This is so because a worldview or ideology in the broadest sense constitutes the 'academic common sense' (with its ontological and epistemological theses and ethical and political values) that prevents or closes off questions (which, following Piaget and García, we have called the epistemic framework (Castorina, 2021)). Thus, all Western mechanics, from Aristotle to Galileo, could not ask the question of inertia, since their conception of the world was static, and therefore, a permanent movement resulting from a non-constant force was unthinkable. Similar examples in the history of science could be multiplied.

As far as we are concerned, for a psychology focused on information processing, cultural meanings are not thinkable, since a split epistemic framework of individual and society, nature and culture prevails. Similarly, from an elementalist ontology of facts, Nothingness cannot be thought. It is a field of enquiry that cannot be actualised, as it would conflict with a certain worldview. And although the latter expresses the historical context and social conflicts of its time, the links to power relations do not directly affect scientific questions.

However, a problematisation of nothingness can be opened up by critically explicating the (usually implicit) ontological and epistemological assumptions that condition the research. Already Bang (2009) and Valsiner (2014) questioned the split conception of psychology, which either denied meanings in the name of facts or referred them to the individual mental construction. Within this framework, problems were raised such as: the ontological dichotomy 'internal-external', 'mental process and culture', or the reduction to facts, as well as the epistemological dualism 'representation-world'. Instead, meanings should be identified as qualities of the individual-environment relationship, which unfold in the process of transformation of the human world, and are culturally produced.

The same can be said of SRT: the relational epistemic framework, in terms of the ego-object-other dialectic triad, allows us to think of nothingness. Moscovici (1992) postulated that SRs are constructed by the subject and by the other (another individual, group, class, etc.), in relation to an object, through the communicative action of interlocutors in a social context and in a temporal horizon. Thanks to their dialogical nature, SRs can be placed in a relational framework, far from the challenged dissociations. In the same relational perspective, for Markovà (2003), interaction is ontological and constitutes a new reality. In such a meta-theory,

nothingness can be conceptualised as a non-physically existing object, but constructed in a dialectical relationship between presence and absence, between what is evident from the symbolisation of reality and what is repressed, between individual and society. The tensions between these aspects give rise to a true synthesis, both in the construction of the triumphant SR, and in the nascent resistance to the hegemony of a representation.

From an epistemological and ontological point of view, the concept of SR seems to become stronger and more complex by incorporating into its construction the nothingness, a subsistent object, created in the symbolic structuring of the social real. And this also serves to legitimise power relations, but at the same time it is a condition for their questioning. It seems to me that what has been said opens up a field for problematisation and conceptual discussion in SRT.

REFERENCES

Bang, J. (2009). Nothingness and the Human Umwelt. A Cultural-Ecological Approach to Meaning. Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Sciences, 43, 374-92.

Barreiro, A. (2013). The Appropriation Process of the Belief in a Just World. Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Sciences, 47, 431-449.

Barreiro, A., & Castorina, J.A (2016) Nothingness as the Dark Side of Social Representations. In J. Bang & D.D. Whinter-Lindquist (Eds.), Nothingness. London: Transaction Publishers.

Castorina, J.A. (2021). The Importance of World-Views for Developmental Psychology. Human Arenas, 1, 1-19.

Harley, J.B. (1988). Silences and secrecy: The hidden agenda of cartography in early modern. Imago Mundi: The International Journal for the History of Cartography, 40(1), 57-76.

Jodelet, D. (2008). El movimiento de retorno al sujeto. Cultura y representaciones sociales, 5, 32-63.

Marková, I. (2003). Dialogicality and Social Representations. The Dynamics of Mind. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Moscovici, S. (1961). La psychanalyse son image et son public. Paris: PUF.

Parellada, C., Castorina, J.A., & Barreiro, A. (2021). Representación y represión de los significados sociales en la cartografía: El caso de la Conquista del Desierto. In J.A. Castorina & A. Barreiro (Eds.), Hacia una dialéctica entre individuo y cultura en la construcción de conocimientos. Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila.

Valsiner, J. (2014). Functional Reality of the Quasi-real: Gegenstandstheorie and Cultural Psychology Today. Culture & Psychology, 20, 285-307.

José Antonio CASTORINA is Consultant Professor in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Buenos Aires. He is a researcher at CONICET (The National Scientific and Technical Research Council) and Chief Director for the Research Institute of Education Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires. He has published several books and articles on the psychological development of social knowledge and on epistemological problems of educational and development psychology. Email: ctono@fibertel.com.ar