

# **The Social, Symbolic and Imaginary Dimensions of Spatial Representations**

VALERIE HAAS<sup>1</sup> and THIERRY RAMADIER<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> GRePS, Université Lumière Lyon 2, France.

<sup>2</sup> UMR SAGE, CNRS, Université de Strasbourg, France.

This introduction presents spatial representations as social and symbolic constructs informed by everyday practices, social relationships and cultural contexts. Initially studied from a bio-physical and cognitive angle, these representations have been increasingly subjected to a socio-spatial approach that emphasizes the meanings social groups attribute to places. This body of research, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, draws on the social representations paradigm, combined with ethnographic approaches featuring socio-spatial representations. Far from simple mental representation tools, the maps used by these researchers play a central mediating role, enabling the exploration of collective memories, social identification processes and inter-group relationships. This interdisciplinary framework is used to analyse and understand individuals' relationships to their surroundings, often in connection with current social and environmental concerns, shedding light on the ways in which groups construct and share the spatial, identity and symbolic meanings of their relationships to the places where they live.

**KEYWORDS :** Social representations, socio-spatial representations, cognitive mapping, social, symbolic and imaginary dimensions of space

Spatial representations are often approached as cognitive images that guide movements, and—in an interactionist framework—are structured by everyday mobilities. Whenever practices are not the main focus, environmental ambiances are highlighted in geographical experiences. Even though they connect the social and the physical environment, these approaches share a bio-physical point of view on spatial representations, foregrounding the adaptation and orientation of practices. They treat the social and physical features of space in similar ways, considering the knowledge drawn from cognitive mapping as rational in that it is rooted in lived experience at the individual level. However, the evaluation of places and most importantly their spatial configuration, as a social construct derived from the elaboration of sharing of knowledge and perceptions of space within a social group (Ramadier & Moser, 1998) are more rarely addressed.

Spatial approaches were largely dominant in the early days of environmental psychology, in the 1960s-1970s. While they were essentially cognitive (Evans, 1980, provides an overview) and experimental (Denis, 1989), some ethnographic studies placed an emphasis on fieldwork that was conducive to the development of a more anthropological form of research (Hall, 1971; Lee, 1968; Rapoport, 1977), based on culturalist models (reviewed in Heft, 2013), or the more structuralist ones, focusing on behaviour schemes, or synomorphism, from ecological psychology (Barker, 1968). This led to the development of two stands of research exhibiting many similarities: one drawing on the transactional model in North American environmental psychology (Altman & Rogoff, 1987), and another drawing on social representations theory in social psychology (Jodelet & Milgram, 1976; Jodelet, 1982).

However, as environmental concerns increasingly take centre stage (climate change, decarbonization, waste management and recycling, etc.), the study of individuals' relationships to space has been neglected or relegated to the background, especially in environmental psychology. Research tends to favour immediate utilitarian purposes and econometric models, focusing on changes in behaviour over attempting to understand how individuals develop relationships to space as social subjects who conceive spatial images and environmental meanings.

Still, the application of the social representations paradigm (Moscovici, 1961/1976) to spatial representations has yielded a body of scholarship investigating these questions over decades. *Papers on Social Representations* has contributed to this effort with six such articles published since 1992 (Pitolo, 1996; De Alba, 2004, 2011, 2014; De Alba et al., 2020; Karasu et al., 2023), showing that the social dimensions of the identification of places and to places by individuals structure spatial representations (Jodelet & Milgram, 1976; Jodelet, 1982). This

strand of research has also evidenced the importance of the symbolic qualities attributed to places in cognitive mapping. Jodelet introduced the concept of socio-spatial representation in 1982:

“The meanings of space are informed by culture and history and the subjective meanings attributed by those who occupy a space relate to their biography and the history of their group. This raises the question of the conditions under which a city can appear as a place that is defined by its identity character, used by residents to recognize themselves and to define themselves, and by its relational character, used to understand the relationships between residents, and its historical character, used by residents to find traces of past occupancies and signs of kinship” (Jodelet, 2013, p. 8).

Foundational studies in this field have probed the connections between collective memory and space (de Alba, 2004, 2011, 2014; De Alba et al., 2020; De Alba & Dargentas, 2022; Haas, 2002, 2004; Jodelet, 1982, 2013, 2015). Additionally, social trajectories (Clementi, 2022; Clementi & Ramadier, 2023), or more simply social positions (Dias & Ramadier, 2015) contribute to making representations of geographical space social representations. This research highlights differences between social groups, pointing to the correspondence between the processes observed in cognitive mapping and the social structure (Ramadier, 2017, 2022).

The fifth Cartotête conference was organized in Lyon by the Group of Research in Societal Psychology (GRePS), after previous editions convened by research units in geography or sociology. The Cartotête network was founded in 2017 for the purpose of fostering scientific research and interdisciplinary conversation on the social dimensions of cognitive mapping. Thanks to the efforts of Kevin Clémenti and Flandrine Lusson, a list of studies on this theme since 1960 has been compiled in a participatory bibliography that is regularly updated since 2023: <https://cartotete.hypotheses.org/bibliographie-participative> .

For this issue, *Papers on Social Representations* called for contributions highlighting the impact of relationships to the other and to others based on the use of cognitive mapping to address such questions as: to what extent do social groups that share a sense of proximity also share spatial representations of the places where they live? How does this affect their shared practices? What roles do collective memory or forgetfulness play in this? How do social distance and social conflict factor in these spatial representations? The articles gathered in this issue shed light on contemporary uses of mapping in studies that pick up the torch of the socio-spatial representations approach. These papers by scholars in social and environmental

psychology, geography and urban studies give us a window into recent research that considers the social, symbolic and imaginary dimensions of relationships to space.

The maps used in these studies are not mere props used to get individuals to report their mental representations on a document. Far beyond this, they act as mediators of individuals' relationships to the places where they live. While the authors often note that these maps have room for improvement or outright criticize them, they use them as means to project social dimensions of individuals' relationships to the world. Some resort to a quasi-ethnographical approach, using them in workshops, while others use them to record field notes or to get subjects to discuss aspects of their cultural heritage or memory through their everyday spaces.

In that sense, socio-spatial representations are often a means to construct a relationship to place in opposition to others and/or to co-construct it. They shed light on current issues related to individuals' relationships to their everyday environment, but to an even greater extent they lend themselves to the expression of relationships to others, to the other. The resulting discourses give us projections on social identifications and intergroup relationships, whether they pertain to natives and newcomers in San Gregorio, Mexico, to observations on maps in Montreal, or to comparisons between the discourses of residents of different maritime areas. Maps serve to evoke, to discuss relationships with others, to delineate social or symbolic borders, or to report on individual practices in space. These articles also show that the concept of socio-spatial representation is a valuable tool across a variety of social science disciplines.

The first article in this special issue, "Living by the Sea. International and Intergroup Comparisons of Socio-spatial Representations of this 'Life Territory' ", by Elisabeth Guillou et al., analyses socio-spatial representations of seaside areas in France and Iceland, looking at forms of appropriation of place and their roles in the construction of identity. They conducted a qualitative survey of 48 residents, including semi-directive interviews and cognitive maps, exploring perceptions of life territories through four themes: representation of the territory, personal history, changes and social relationships. They find a predominance of cartographic representations, more so in France than in Iceland, where other forms of spatial representation are reported. These differences reflect strong cultural contrasts that relate to the interviewees' origins and relationships to time and space.

The second article, "(Un)walkability, local identity and otherness: perspectives from the production of group mental maps in a peripheral area of Mexico City" by Elliott Ducharme, draws on extensive ethnographic fieldwork to explore the creation of symbolic borders in San Gregorio Atlapulco, a former village in the periphery of Mexico City that has been subjected to urbanization and environmental degradation. It offers a very fine-grained analysis of the

perspectives of native residents through their experiences of walking and associated social representations, using mental maps developed during workshops with locals. The article reflects on the value of these maps for our understanding of representations related to walking and on their usefulness in shedding light on daily interactions.

The third article, “The sidewalk, waste and garbage collection: practices and representations of an ‘in-between place’” by Flandrine Lusson and Sandra Breux, studies representations of the sidewalk and their connections to the work of garbage collectors in Montreal, Canada. Considered as a space of multiple expectations, the sidewalk is analysed through a rich methodology, combining a press review and in situ observations (with detailed map drawings, field notes and photographs). It is shown to be a constantly redefined “in-between place”. For the residents, it is a place of appropriation, rejection and control, including control over the work of garbage collectors. For the latter, it plays a central role, but the constraints resulting from contemporary street furniture are a source of frustration.

Lastly, Pierre Dias offers a different perspective on Flandrine Lusson and Sandra Breux’s research, from the vantage point of social and environmental psychology.

## **Acknowledgments**

Translated from French by Jean-Yves Bart (MISHA, University of Strasbourg).

## **References**

- Altman, I. & Rogoff, B. (1987). World views in psychology: Trait, interactional, organismic, and transactional perspectives. In D. Stokols & I. Altman (Eds.), *Handbook of environmental psychology* (pp. 7-40). Wiley.
- Barker, R.G. (1968). *Ecological Psychology: Concepts and methods for studying the environment of human behavior*. Stanford University Press.
- Clementi, K. (2022). La socialisation à la frontière au prisme des cartes cognitives, des pratiques et du discours. Portrait de deux jeunes Strasbourgeoises [Socialization at the border through the prism of cognitive maps, practices, and discourse. Portrait of two young women from Strasbourg]. *Regards Sociologiques*, 60, 33-48. <https://www.regards-sociologiques.fr/n60-2022-03>
- Clementi, K., Ramadier, T. (2023). Saisir la position sémio-spatiale d'un élément géographique dans les cartes cognitives [Capturing the semio-spatial position of a geographical element in

cognitive maps]. *M@ppemonde*, n°135 [en ligne]  
<https://doi.org/10.4000/mappemonde.8216>

- De Alba, M. (2004). El método Alceste y su aplicación al estudio de las representaciones sociales del espacio urbano : el caso de la ciudad de México [The Alceste method and its application to the study of social representations of the urban space: the case of Mexico City]. *Papers on Social representations*, (13), 1.1-1.20. <https://psr.iscte-iul.pt/index.php/PSR/article/view/357/319/>
- De Alba, M. (2011). Social representations of urban spaces: A comment on mental maps of Paris. *Papers on Social representations*, 20(2), 29.1-29.14. <https://psr.iscte-iul.pt/index.php/PSR/article/view/445/389/>
- De Alba, M. (2014). Imaginary maps and urban memory: Elements for the study of territorial identity. *Papers on social representations*, 23 (2) 16.1-16.29. <https://psr.iscte-iul.pt/index.php/PSR/article/view/288/403/>
- De Alba, M., & Dargentas, M. (2022). Mémoire traumatique et représentations socio-spatiales de Brest [Traumatic memory and socio-spatial representations of Brest]. In M. de Alba, M. Dargentas & C. Fraïssé (Eds.), *Représentations sociales des espaces de vie* (pp. 61-76). Presses Universitaire de Rennes.
- De Alba, M., Herrera, L. & Loubier, J.C. (2020). Social representations of Mexico City historic center: Heritage and controversial memories. *Papers on social representations*, 29 (1), 7.1-7.25 <https://psr.iscte-iul.pt/index.php/PSR/article/view/540/465/>
- Denis, M. (1989). *Images et cognition* [Images and cognition]. Presses universitaires de France.
- Dias, P., & Ramadier, T. (2015). L'espace géographique comme champ représentationnel: Le cas des représentations socio-spatiales de Strasbourg [Geographic space as a representational field: The case of socio-spatial representations of Strasbourg]. *Regards Sociologiques*, 47/48, 222–242. <https://www.regards-sociologiques.fr/n47-48-2015-17>
- Evans, G. W. (1980). Environmental cognition. *Psychological Bulletin*, 88 (2), 259-287. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.88.2.259>
- Haas, V. (2002). Approche psychosociale d'une reconstruction historique. Le cas vichyssois [A psychosocial approach to historical reconstruction. The case of Vichy]. *Les cahiers Internationaux de Psychologie Sociale*, 53, 32-45.
- Haas, V. (2004). Les cartes cognitives: Un outil pour étudier la ville sous ses dimensions socio-historiques et affectives [Cognitive maps: A tool for studying the city in its socio-historical and affective dimensions]. *Bulletin de Psychologie*, 474, 621-633. <https://doi.org/10.3406/bupsy.2004.15396>

- Hall, E. T. (1971). *La dimension cachée* [The hidden dimension]. Seuil.
- Heft, H. (2013). Environment, cognition, and culture: Reconsidering the cognitive map. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 33, 14-25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2012.09.002>
- Jodelet, D. (1982). Les représentations socio-spatiales de la ville [Socio-spatial representations of the city]. In P.-H. Derycke (Ed.), *Conceptions de l'espace* (pp. 145–177). Université de Paris X-Nanterre.
- Jodelet, D. (2013). Les inscriptions spatiales des conflits de mémoire [Spatial inscriptions of memory conflicts]. *Psicologia e Saber Social*, 2 (1), 5-16. <https://doi.org/10.12957/psi.saber.soc.2013.7200>
- Jodelet, D. (2015). *Représentations sociales et mondes de vie* [Social representations and life worlds]. In N. Kalampalikis (Ed.). *Editions des archives contemporaines* <https://eac.ac/publications/9782813001306>
- Jodelet, D., & Milgram, S. (1976). Psychological Maps of Paris. In H. Proshansky, W. H. Ittelson, & L. G. Rivlin (Eds.), *Environmental psychology: People and their physical settings* (pp. 104-124). Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Karasu, M., Karlidağ, S. Tekdemir, G. (2023). Social representations of Istanbul: socio-spatial analysis via visual and verbal techniques. *Papers on social representations*. 32 (2), 4.1-4.21 <https://psr.iscte-iul.pt/index.php/PSR/article/view/680/531/>
- Lee, T. R. (1968). Urban neighborhood as a socio-spatial schema. *Human relations*, 21, 241-268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872676802100303>
- Moscovici, S. (1961/1976). *La psychanalyse, son image et son public* [Psychoanalysis: Its image and its public]. Presses Universitaires de France.
- Pitolo, F. (1996). Représentations sociales urbaines: quand les ressources historiques sont évaluatrices, compensatrices, réductrices, l'exemple de Nice (France) [Urban social representations: when historical resources are evaluative, compensatory, reductive, the example of Nice (France)]. *Papers on social representations*. 5 (2), 81-98. <https://psr.iscte-iul.pt/index.php/PSR/article/view/222/188>
- Ramadier, T. (2017). Adjustment to geographical space and psychological well-being. In G. Fleury-Bahi, E. Pol & O. Navarro (Eds.), *Handbook of environmental psychology and quality of life research*, Berlin, Springer, pp. 291-307.
- Ramadier, T. (2022). Logiques sociales et cognitives des représentations sociales de l'espace urbain [Social and cognitive logics of social representations of urban space]. In M. de Alba, M. Dargentas, & C. Fraïssé (Eds.), *Représentations sociales des espaces de vie* (pp. 37–57). Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

Ramadier, T., Moser, G. (1998). Social legibility, the cognitive map and urban behaviour, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 18 (3), 307-319.  
<https://doi.org/10.1006/jevp.1998.0099>

Rapoport, A. (1977). *Human aspect of urban forms*. Pergamon.

VALERIE HAAS is professor of social psychology and researcher at the GRePS at the University Lumière Lyon 2 in France. She trained in EHESS (Paris) where she completed her doctoral thesis and obtained her habilitation in 2012. Her research work is framed in the field of collective memory and forgetfulness, social representations and socio-spatial representations through qualitative methodologies. Her research focused on groups transmission, the lack of transmission, the “places of memory” and the rumors. She has co-edited several papers on social memory and representations. Email: [valerie.haas@univ-lyon2.fr](mailto:valerie.haas@univ-lyon2.fr)

THIERRY RAMADIER is a CNRS director of research in environmental psychology at the Societies, Actors, Government in Europe laboratory (UMR 7363 SAGE CNRS) of the University of Strasbourg, France. His research focuses, first, on the relations between spatial representations and geographical mobilities in the analysis of socio-spatial segregations, and second, on the connections between the social meanings of space and cognitive mapping. He has founded the Cartotête network and edited the thematic issue of *Regards Sociologiques* (2022) on the “social dimensions of spatial representations” (<https://www.regards-sociologiques.fr/n-60>). Email: [thierry.ramadier@misha.fr](mailto:thierry.ramadier@misha.fr)