Linking Political Ecology with the Theories of Active Minorities and Social Representations: Rethinking the Social Psychology of Environmental Issues

ALEXIS LEROY[1][2], ELOÏSE VINSON[1], SAMUEL DUPOIRIER[3], VALERIE FOINTIAT[1] AND RAQUEL BERTOLDO[1]

[1] LPS, Aix-Marseille University, Aix-en-Provence, France.

[2] ADEME, Angers, France.

[3] Laboratoire de psychologie, Université de Franche Comté, Besançon, France.

While collective change is necessary to prevent and adapt to ecosystem degradation (Dugast & Soyeux, 2019), social psychology has mainly taken an individualized approach to studying environmental issues (Batel et al., 2016). In this article, we seek a broader approach, exploring social change in relation to environmental movements through the lens of the theories of active minorities and social representations in dialogue with the field of political ecology. Taking a political ecology perspective allows us to contextualize environmental issues within the power relations (around class, gender, ethnicity, etc.) inherent in current social arrangements. We present the contributions and limitations of the theories of active minorities and social representations to the study of social change, highlighting the connections between these two theories and political ecology. They share some ontological (agency of subject), epistemological (change), and processual (conflict) affinities, and we argue they can complement each other to provide a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding social change related to the environment. An illustration of how they can be

Correspondence should be addressed to: alexislry@gmail.com

applied is provided through a critical reading of a social psychology article examining how environmental movements exert minority influence.

KEYWORDS: Political ecology, active minorities, social representations, social change

INTRODUCTION

During a discussion, Ivana Marková asked Serge Moscovici if he saw a link between social representations theory and the theory of active minorities, two fields of research in which he was a pioneer. He answered "maybe," adding that "they probably share something, but they are independent theories" (Marková, 2008, p. 461). While anecdotal, this interaction points to a link between the two fields, although their theorist never formalized this connection (Buschini, 2016). Moscovici also made contributions to the field of political ecology, which remains little known among social psychologists, and these were developed independently of the other two theories. Indeed, his contributions were plural, related to different disciplines (social psychology, philosophy of science, anthropology, etc.), including involvement in the development of political ecology in France (Augagneur, 2023). Yet the connections between his different contributions are often overlooked, despite the fact they share a common concern: social change and the aim to understand "why and how societies think, decide, preserve themselves, and innovate" (Augagneur, 2023, p. 21).

Studies that have attempted to examine these connections have focused on links between the theory of active minorities and social representations theory (Duveen, 2008; Marková, 2019; Mugny et al., 2008; Orfali, 2002; Papastamou, 2019; Seca, 2015; Staerklé et al., 2011), and between social representations theory and the ways in which societies relate to nature, in light of Moscovici's anthropological work (Caillaud, 2016; Gervais, 1997). The value of these articulations lies in placing communication processes at the center of the analysis of social change (Marková, 2019; Mugny et al., 2008; Orfali, 2002; Staerklé et al., 2011). This article seeks to build on these contributions and connect them with political ecology in order to examine social change as related to environmental movements.

In a context in which social psychology has been predominantly individualistic (Batel et al., 2016), our aim is to articulate the theories of active minorities and social representations,

with the field of political ecology[1] to study social change at a systemic level (Howarth et al., 2013). Engaging with this field requires adopting a critical stance toward our objects of study, which we clarify by presenting the political ecology perspective we draw on. We then revisit the theory of active minorities and social representations theory, highlighting their contributions and limitations for the study of social change. We show how these two theories and political ecology share ontological (the agency of the subject), epistemological (change), and processual (conflict) similarities. We subsequently examine how these fields can complement one another to develop a comprehensive and critical framework for analyzing social change associated with environmental movements. An illustration of how this could take shape is offered through a critical discussion of a thematic article that examined how environmental movements have exerted minority influence in France (Codaccioni, 2020).

DOMINANT APPROACHES IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Most approaches in social psychology rarely address power relations or even social inequalities related to environmental issues (Uzzell & Räthzel, 2009). For example, by participating in prevention campaigns that aim to change individual behaviors, these approaches align with a policy of individualizing environmental problems, thereby avoiding more systemic policies that might conflict with private interests (Comby, 2015). As noted by Comby (2015), such perspectives promote a universalizing and decontextualizing "psycho-theodicy" in which individuals are assumed to be equally responsible for environmental problems and fully in control of their actions.

In this sense, the production of knowledge and practices within social psychology contributes to reproducing and legitimizing the modern form of capitalism: neoliberalism (Adams et al., 2019)[2]. Although academics working within this dominant strand of social psychology claim impartiality and scientific neutrality, their treatment of ecological issues supports a particular view of the human being: that individuals are solely responsible for their successes and failures—and, by extension, for environmental degradation—while neglecting

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[1] When referring to political ecology, we prefer the term "field" to "theory." This distinction is necessary because political ecology cannot be defined as a unified theory; it is rather considered a school of thought. In this article, we specify the influences we draw upon.

[2] Neoliberalism is defined as a political and economic movement that emerged in the 1970s, promoting market deregulation and the free movement of capital through the active intervention of the state (Stiegler, 2023). Ontologically, neoliberalism implies viewing "civil society as a collection of individual entities that relate to one another as competitors pursuing their own self-interest" (Adams et al., 2019, p. 3).

the broader role of social and structural contexts (Batel et al., 2016). The research topics in the majority of social psychology studies related to the environment (e.g., green consumption, eco-labels, incentives for sustainable mobility, social acceptability etc.), thus tend to contribute to maintaining the status quo (Comby, 2015). While dominant approaches have been criticized for contributing to the individualization of environmental issues (Caillaud, 2016; Comby, 2015; Uzzell & Räthzel, 2009), systemic approaches remain poorly equipped to study collective change on such a scale.

Social psychology often overlooks the critical question of what kind of social change is being promoted: reformist (i.e., adjustments within the existing political and economic system) or radical (i.e., calling for transforming these systems altogether; Suchier et al., 2024). This requires assessing change through the lens of social order: examining whether proposed transformations seek to contest or preserve it (Staerklé et al., 2007). Proposals for change can differ greatly in their objectives and their implications for existing social arrangements. For example, the concept of ecological modernization argues that environmental issues can be resolved primarily by technical adjustments within a neoliberal agenda (Brand, 2010), while the economic degrowth model argues for a democratically planned reduction in production in the name of social justice (Parrique, 2022).

Since the early 2020s, the need to adopt a critical stance toward propositions of systemic change has become evident in the gap between what are perceived as "extreme" actions by movements such as Dernière Rénovation[3] (e.g., throwing paint on artworks in museums) and their narrowly technical demands (e.g., the thermal renovation of buildings), which do not challenge the capitalist system driving environmental degradation and social inequalities. We argue that a critical framework for analyzing social change in relation to environmental issues is needed, and that this should take a political ecology perspective.

POLITICAL ECOLOGY

As political ecology has diverse sources (scientific and political) and sometimes contradictory ideological influences (Villalba, 2022), it is important to start by defining its main assumptions as well as the positions that inform our perspective on social change in relation to the environment.

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[3] This French civil resistance collective emerged in 2022 with the aim of demanding that the government implement large-scale energy and structural renovation of France's housing infrastructure.

Broadly speaking, political ecology is a critique of the economic, technical, political and cultural organization of modern societies. Its theoretical originality compared to other ideologies (socialism, liberalism, etc.) lies in three aspects: an eco-centered conception of the human being[4], the pursuit of political decentralization, and an awareness of the natural limits to economic and technological growth (Villalba, 2022). According to Villalba (2022), this conception critiques the dominance of logico-mathematical frameworks, which reduce nature to objectified knowledge and obscure lived experience, reinforcing the ontological dualism between humans and nature—a dualism that justifies human intervention in the natural world. Within political ecology, ecological issues are not limited to the protection of nature, but more broadly refer "to a critique of social relations embedded in the consumption/production nexus" (Aspe & Jacqué, 2012, p. 245). Drawing on Marxist, ecofeminist, and ecosocialist perspectives, political ecology focuses on the links between environmental degradation and various forms of domination (e.g., class, species, ethnicity, gender, etc.) within the capitalist system. This system is defined by the pursuit of infinite economic growth in a finite world and relies on the subordination of dominated groups by dominant ones to function (Gorz et al., 2020).

In capitalism, a first form of domination arises from private property, which allows the bourgeoisie to appropriate the labor power of the proletariat, the land, and the technical means to exploit it (Guillibert, 2021). While dispossessing part of the population of the natural resources tied to subsistence, private property compels the proletariat to sell its labor to reproduce its conditions of existence (for wages). This results in a dual exploitation —of natural resources and of workers' labor— enabling the bourgeoisie to generate profit and expand its capital (Guillibert, 2021).

To ensure a constant labor force, another form of domination (patriarchal and heterosexual) is exercised through a politics of controlling women's sexuality, confining this to procreation and the renewal of the workforce (Federici, 2017)[5]. This domination is reinforced by dualisms rooted in logico-mathematical rationality, such as the Culture/Nature divide and the Man/Woman divide, which position culture and men at the top of the hierarchy and are used to justify oppression of nature and women (Larrère, 2023).

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[4] Political ecology views human beings as integrated within nature, part of the community of living beings, and responsible for the degradation or the protection of natural resources (Corraliza & Collado, 2022).
[5] This exploitative relationship became institutionalized in Europe during the 15th century through the shaping of feminine identities, the tightening of marital bonds, and the church's control over reproduction. This period also marked the repression of practices associated with knowledge of plants and reproductive autonomy, as such practices represented a form of independence from nature and stood in opposition to the rationalization of labor and bodies under capitalism (Federici, 2017).

The productivism inherent in capitalism prevents exploited ecosystems from regenerating, leading to their degradation and, consequently, the need to exploit new territories (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016). This makes colonial domination central to capitalism, as it "combines the appropriation (and transformation) of land with the domination of humans" (Larrère, 2023, p. 42). The material and cultural development of Europe —which favored whites, a numerical minority globally— was thus achieved through the dispossession and underdevelopment of ethnic majorities (Rodney, 2018).

The interrelation between these forms of domination and environmental degradation continues to shape contemporary social inequalities related to the environment. The richest 0.54% of individuals on the planet emit more CO_2 than the poorest 50% (Otto et al., 2019). Yet the poor bear the brunt of climate change: in particular, women, who are the most vulnerable not only because they represent the majority of the world's poor, but due to their social roles and the discrimination they face (Global Gender and Climate Alliance, 2009). Since the 1980s, environmental justice movements have shown that environmental racism (e.g., the greater exposure of non-white populations to industrial pollution) is embedded within the capitalist system (Donaghy et al., 2023).

Examining these forms of domination within capitalism is essential to understand the social order at stake when discussing social change in relation to environmental issues. This is why we have chosen the critical lens of political ecology to inform our perspective rather than the dominant individualistic approach in social psychology that contributes to maintaining the status quo. Building on this critical lens, the following sections present the contributions and limitations of the theories of active minorities and social representations for studying environmental movements.

THE THEORY OF ACTIVE MINORITIES

In 1976, Moscovici's work on active minorities offered a new angle for studying social change. From the 1940s to the 1960s, social psychology was largely grounded in a functionalist model that understood influence as a one-way phenomenon, oriented exclusively toward conformity and obedience (Butera et al., 2017). Approaches derived from this model explain how a source identified as the majority (authority, expert, etc.) influenced the behavior of a target positioned as a passive recipient. Within this framework, any target that failed to conform to the behavior expected by the majority was regarded as deviant. A major limitation of this functionalist model

is that it made social psychology largely blind to the process of resistance, especially when a minority deliberately refused to submit to majority influence. While it explained how societies maintain and reproduce norms, it did not explore how such norms might be challenged and changed.

Moscovici's response was to propose the genetic model of social influence, which accounts for both the reproduction and the innovation of social systems. In this model, influence is conceived as a bilateral process, exercised reciprocally by minorities and majorities. No longer simply passive targets, minorities can take an active role by resisting the majority and seeking to exert influence over it. They do this by engaging in conflict with the majority in order to foster social change (Moscovici, 1976). This shifts the analytical focus toward the study of conflict between majorities and minorities (Caillaud, 2021), defined by their unequal distribution of power (Moscovici, 1976). This approach considers that majorities and minorities do not act in isolation from one another, but interact (Moscovici, 1976) and influence each other through communication (Duveen, 2000). While majorities look to achieve social control through consensus, minorities aim to generate social innovation through conflict. From this perspective, society is understood as a heterogeneous and conflictual entity in which forces of stability and change oppose and complement one another (Moscovici, 1976).

This new way of conceptualizing social influence initiated a broad body of experimental research on active minorities influence, which produced a typology of influence (latent vs. manifest) and of majority status (numerical vs. in power, Butera et al., 2017). These studies identified the factors that enhance minority influence: behavioral style (consistency, flexibility, etc.), status relative to the target (in-group vs. out-group), individuals' motivations to accept the message and their prior attitudes, the strength of arguments (strong vs. weak), as well as whether the message is dissociated from the source (Butera et al., 2017)[6]. These represent valuable contributions to understanding social influence, yet this line of research remains limited for studying broad societal change in relation to environmental issues.

Studies on active minorities, as they are rooted primarily in an experimental paradigm, have tended to: (1) operationalize minority groups on the basis of their numerical status rather than their real-world existence; (2) focus on subjective rather than objective issues; and (3)

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[6] The dissociation theory posits that during the early stages of minority influence, targets are often reluctant to process messages coming from an active minority, fearing association with the negative stereotypes surrounding it. A minority message thus becomes more influential when dissociated from its source, as this allows the target of influence to process the message independently of any social comparison with the minority group (Butera et al., 2017).

examine reactions to minority influence only at an intra-individual level (Prislin et al., 2017). These limitations make it difficult to capture the ideological and cultural struggles within social movements, or to understand how social knowledge oriented toward social change is constructed and negotiated in opposition to knowledge aimed at maintaining social control.

In our view, the strength of genetic model lies in its attention to the dynamics of influence between majorities and minorities, with social change emerging as much from conflict as from consensus. A further important contribution concerns the question of power, which distinguishes between a majority in power and a numerical majority (Mugny, 1982). Whereas a majority in power refers to dominant groups that dictate societal rules and values, a numerical majority corresponds to the general population, subjected to the dominant ideology through socialization in institutions such as the family and work (Mugny, 1982). A third group is formed by minorities, which must maintain consistency and opposition to the majority in power, while adopting a flexible negotiating style with the numerical majority. This tripartite model is particularly relevant for understanding environmental protest movements in France, which from their inception have denounced capitalist modes of production (targeting the majority in power), while simultaneously promoting changes in individual practices (targeting the numerical majority, Aspe & Jacqué, 2012). For an even richer understanding of collective change associated with environmental movements, the theory of active minorities can be linked with the theory of social representations in a political ecology perspective to take into account socio-symbolic dimensions and historical context (Marková, 2019).

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY

In 1961, Moscovici's theory of social representations marked a departure from both mental representations and collective representations (Marková, 2015). While the former locates the study of knowledge within cognitive processes tied to intrapsychic mechanisms, the latter addresses knowledge through collective processes rooted in social structures (Marková, 2015). The social representations theory bridges these two approaches by positing that the individual and the social are not separate entities but mutually constitutive within a dialogical relationship (Marková, 2007). The purpose of this field of research is to understand how new knowledge (e.g., scientific knowledge) is transformed into common-sense thinking (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008).

Within the framework of social representations theory, the objects of study are complex social phenomena capable of reshaping society, which may embody both threats and hopes (Marková, 2015). The processes through which social representations are formed and transformed emerge from communication between ego (an individual or group) and alter (another individual or group) regarding a given object. This relationship is conceptualized through the psychosocial triad of ego–alter–object, whose entities are inseparable and interconnected by a dynamic tension (Marková, 2007). Representational activity concerning an object is always socially situated in interactions with others, whether real or imagined, and unfolds through dialogue, oppositions, and internal conflicts (Marková, 2007). The identities and ideological projects of different groups shape this representational activity (Caillaud, 2016). As a result, the same object may carry different meanings depending on group, context and historical period (Jovchelovitch, 2001), and may be entangled in issues of power and domination.

Investigating these issues requires an analysis through the lens of the social order. Staerklé et al. (2007) argue that social life is inherently conflictual, concerned with the psychosocial mechanisms that contribute either to reproducing or to challenging existing social arrangements (i.e., the social order). From this standpoint, society is composed of groups that oppose one another to seek to promote a particular social order, implying that individual positions reflecting adherence to broader political projects. This approach assumes that (1) social relations are structured by gender, class and ethnic hierarchies; (2) each social order derives its strength from these power relations; and (3) dominant groups continuously engage in ideological work to spread beliefs that naturalize and legitimize these hierarchies (Staerklé et al., 2007)[7]. This lens enables us to examine "the social structure in which communications and interpersonal relations around the object under consideration are actualized" (Dupoirier et al., 2022, p. 4).

According to Staerklé (2015), consensus around current social arrangements is continually produced by dominant groups in opposition to minority groups, which constantly put forward alternative ways of organizing society. The conflict between minorities and majorities plays out within social relations of domination, with at stake both the preservation and the transformation of the social order. These conflicts are not solely socio-symbolic, but

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[7] However, theories such as the system justification theory argue that, under certain circumstances, members of disadvantaged groups may also participate in legitimizing a system that works against their own interests (Jost, 2019).

grounded in material power relations, leading to an unequal distribution of resources between dominant and subordinate groups (Staerklé et al., 2011). This makes it essential to attend to material dimensions—technology, infrastructure, the environment, and the biophysical system—in the study of social representations (Batel et al., 2016). It follows that social representations of environmental degradation must be analysed with regard to their roots in the unequal exchange between infinite economic growth and finite resources (Parrique, 2022).

Political ecology provides a relevant analytical framework to account for both the material reality and the ideological projects underpinning these interactions between actors[8]. It is also a useful tool for examining how proposals for change put forward by active minorities may be more or less radical with respect to the capitalist social order (e.g., to fit within existing arrangements or to aim at overturning the system). The following section attempts to bring together theory of active minorities, social representations theory, and political ecology to offer a comprehensive analytical model of social change in relation to environmental movements.

LINKING THE THEORIES OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND ACTIVE MINORITIES WITH POLITICAL ECOLOGY

First, an ontological affinity can be observed (Table 1), as these fields share a vision of the human being as an agentic entity within relations of interdependence—whether with nature, social, or influence. Political ecology views humans as self-determined beings integrated in nature, not merely subject to external determinants, but continuously reorganizing "the environment (the ecosystem) from which they emerge" (Gorz et al., 2020, p. 104). This implies conceiving of humans within a dialectic of fate and freedom—to borrow Edgar Morin's words: "Our destinies are already inscribed, programmed, played out in advance and yet we write them, strategize, and play them endlessly at every moment of our lives" (Morin, 1980, p. 140–141).

Both the frameworks of social representations and the genetic model of influence share an interactional view of the subject and the minority in their respective relations with the alter and the majority, as noted by Marková (2019) and Caillaud (2021). In social representations theory, the social subject is not passive in reproducing social knowledge, but actively participates in its negotiation and production (Billig, 1991). Similarly, the theory of active

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[8] Here, material reality refers to the idea that "the history of societies is the result of the transformation of nature through specific modes of production," and an understanding that "the social history of nature is inseparable from the ecological history of societies." (Guillibert, 2021, p. 33–34).

minorities positions minorities as active agents exerting influence over majorities (Moscovici, 1976). In these frameworks, we move from a determined to a self-determined being in political ecology, from a passive to an active social subject in social representations theory, and from a deviant to an active minority in the genetic model of influence (Table 1). Without denying the existence of a social order that disseminates a dominant ideology, these approaches focus on the active role of the individual or group in relation to that ideology.

Orfali (2002) and Marková (2019) situate the relationship between minority and majority within the psychosocial triad (ego: minority; alter: majority; object), in which the minority–majority interaction shapes the social representations of a given object (Figure 1). In this respect, the link established between social representations theory and human history with nature (Moscovici, 1968), as developed by Caillaud (2016, 2021), suggests that nature is "the product of a process historically and culturally situated with matter" (2021, p. 19). One of the key insights in this understanding is how so-called "natural" categories are socially constructed through the relationships that groups maintain with one another and with the material world (Caillaud, 2021). In this view, social representations of nature depend on the identity and projects of different social groups (Caillaud, 2016).

Figure 1
Integration of active minorities within the ego–alter–object triad (Orfali, 2002)
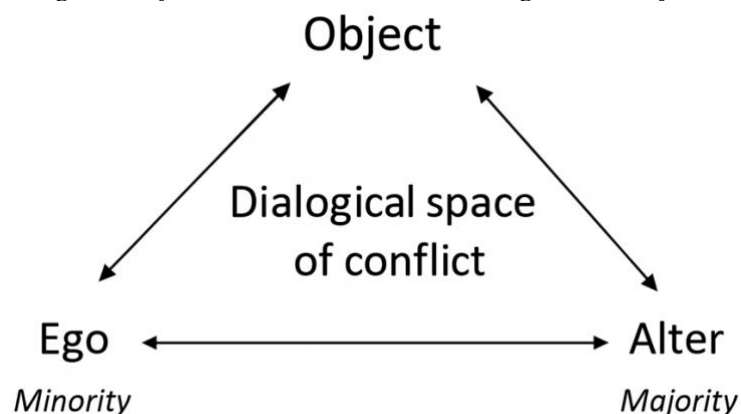
However, this perspective can be complemented by the work of Mugny et al. (2008), who demonstrated that influence processes unfold within different types of relationships: numerical, domination, and social belonging. As argued by Staerklé et al. (2011), these relationships are embedded in antagonistic dynamics tied to power struggles. The struggle between majority and minority groups must therefore be contextualized within attempts to challenge or preserve the social order (Staerklé, 2015). By positioning humans, social subjects,

and minorities as agentive entities, these frameworks allow an understanding not only of the reproduction of a dominant system, but its contestation.

The aim of this contestation — social change — constitutes a second affinity of an epistemological nature (Table 1). Political ecology conceives of society as not just governed by control and maintenance, but by change and innovation (Gorz et al., 2020). Moscovici describes societal evolution as driven by marginal groups that reinvent new relations with nature, in line with the argument that it is "the peripheries that invent, and the center that conserves or maintains order" (Augagneur, 2023, p. 165). Political ecology critiques centralized states that, by governing society "from above" (where a rational head governs a supposedly disorderly mass), ultimately deny the vitality of the living (Gorz et al., 2020). Applied to environmental issues, it distinguishes between "ecologism", driven by social movements and oriented toward social transformation, and "ecology", led by institutions and oriented toward technical solutions (Moscovici, 2002).

The theory of active minorities and the social representations theory converge on this vision of social change. Both seek to study "not the tradition, but the *innovation*, not a social life already in place, but a social life in the making" (Moscovici, 2003, p. 99). Social representations theory conceives of social reality as composed of multiple coexisting systems of knowledge: some oriented toward change, others toward stability (Castro & Batel, 2008). Similarly, the genetic model conceives of social change as composed of influences promoting both conformity and innovation. The three concepts of political ecology, social representations and active minorities thus share common dialogical tensions that are at the heart of social change (Table 1): *ecologism vs. ecology* (Moscovici, 2002), *change vs. stability* (Castro & Batel, 2008), and *innovation vs. conformity* (Moscovici, 1976), whose common denominator here is conflict (Orfali, 2002; Staerklé et al., 2011).

The process of conflict thus constitutes a third affinity among these frameworks (Table 1). Political ecology brings the notion of conflict to the fore in the context of environmental issues. Throughout its history, political ecology has proposed alternatives in opposition to capitalism, which frames political action as aiming for consensus and excludes antagonism (Batel et al., 2016). In contrast, political ecology highlights the conflicting relationships between groups regarding environmental degradation. It distinguishes (1) an ecology that links relations of domination over nature and minorities within capitalism (i.e., political ecology) and (2) a consensual ecology that conceives environmental problems through economistic, techno-solutionist, and siloed logics (i.e., greenwashing, Berlan et al., 2022).

In the theory of active minorities, conflict is the necessary condition for change and contrasts with the search for consensus sought by majorities. Active minorities offer alternatives to existing social reality; they generate conflict that divides society between minority and majority viewpoints (Orfali, 2002). Majorities, conversely, seek to suppress conflict (Marková, 2019). Nemeth (2012) has shown that exposure to minority influence can encourage individuals to actively search for alternative solutions to a given problem, whereas majority influence tends to direct thought toward reinforcing the dominant perspective. Reinterpreted at a socio-representational level, the conflict initiated by active minorities implies viewing social reality as inherently conflictual: a constant "battle of ideas" that social representations theory captures through communication between individuals and groups (Marková, 2011; Moscovici, 1998). The communicative processes that emerge from these interactions give rise to social representations that enter into conflict: those that consolidate the social order (hegemonic representations) vs. those that contest it (polemical representations, Staerklé, 2015).

By grounding analysis in a historical and ideological perspective, political ecology helps to clarify which minority and majority societal projects confront one another, and how conflicts between hegemonic and polemical representations oppose: a critical ecology concerned with the social relations linked to nature (political ecology) vs. an ecology that seeks to conceal them (greenwashing). This conflictual process sheds light on how, in response to environmental movements, dominant majorities have deployed complementary strategies to resist change, such as greenbashing to discredit these movements and exclude transformative projects from public debate, and greenwashing to appropriate ecological critiques and fit them into existing social arrangements, presenting them as the "rational" solution to environmental issues (Berlan et al., 2022). A process of conflict is thus inherent to all three frameworks: it is a condition for change in the theory of actives minorities, it structures social reality in the theory of social representations, and it lies at the heart of environmental struggles in political ecology (Table 1).

Table 1

Affinities between the theory of active minorities, social representations theory, and political ecology

Shared affinities	Active minorities	Social representations	Political ecology
Ontological	Active minority vs. deviant minority	Active social subject vs. passive social subject	Self-determination vs. determinism
Epistemological	Innovation vs. conformity	Change vs. stability	Ecologism vs. ecology

| Processual | Conflict vs. consensus | Conflictual vs. consensual social reality | Political ecology vs. greenwashing |

From the theoretical affinities between these three frameworks, we can construct an analytical model that conceives of social change as stemming from the agency of minority groups that challenge majority positions through conflict. The tension between minority and majority projects causes a conflictual socio-representational reality to emerge. The theory of active minorities provides a conceptual framework to analyze change rooted in the conflicts led by environmental movements; the social representations theory offers a theoretical lens to examine this change at a socio-representational level; and political ecology provides a critical framework to understand the competing societal projects involved in this process (Figure 2). As an illustrative example, the following section applies this tripartite analytical model to a thematic social psychology paper by Codaccioni (2020) that focuses on the minority influence of the environmental movement in France.

Figure 2

An analytical model integrating political ecology, the theory of active minorities, and social representations theory to the study of social change.
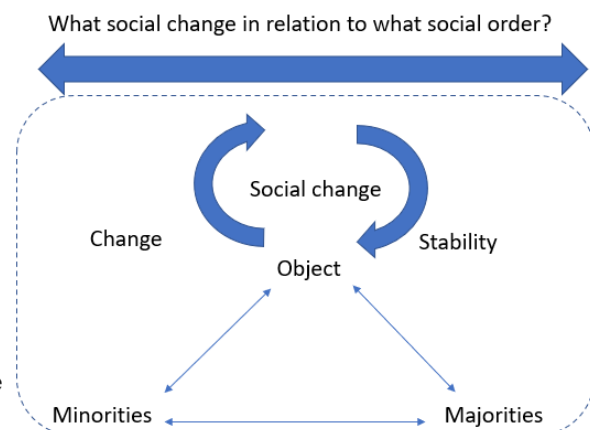

APPLYING OUR ANALYTICAL MODEL TO THE CRITICAL READING OF AN ARTICLE ON MINORITY INFLUENCE FROM ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS

A thematic article, by Codaccioni (2020) offers a psychosocial investigation of the influence of the environmental movements in France since the 1970s. Drawing on theories around minority

influence, the article seeks to understand "the evolution, if not the shift, of the minority framing of ecological ideology towards a majority or even dominant framing" (Codaccioni, 2020, p. 8). Codaccioni's analysis aims to account for the development of environmental awareness and individual practices (e.g., around consumption and eco-citizenship behavior) as a delayed influence of environmental movements in France.

The article is particularly valuable in highlighting the temporal delay and the dissociation of the message from its source as a necessary condition for minority influence. However, describing the "increase in ecological awareness" and "new 'eco-friendly' practices" (Codaccioni, 2020, p. 14) in terms of "conversion" tends to obscure the content and processes of social change associated with environmental movements[9]. It is true that these movements have influenced the emergence of more widely shared environmental values (Aspe & Jacqué, 2012). Yet reducing this process to the delayed influence of a numerical minority on a numerical majority—while overlooking the power relations with the majority in power—fails to situate these phenomena within the historical context of environmental struggles.

First, this interpretation implies that these movements were solely concerned with changing individual behaviors. In reality, an examination of their history shows that for a significant part of the environmental movements, behavioral changes are embedded within a broader project of systemic transformation (Aspe & Jacqué, 2012). Second, these new environmental norms were not produced solely through minority influence but also emerged from the resistance of dominant groups striving to preserve existing power relations. The so-called "conversion" process in fact contributes to the individualization of environmental issues, fitting them into existing socio-economic arrangements and helping to maintain the dominance of the ruling classes (Comby, 2015).

In this regard, another critique of Codaccioni's article (2020) concerns the observation of the effects of minority influence on the increased consumption of organic food. An alternative analysis suggests that the adoption of ecological practices by the upper classes serves as a form of distinction, helping to conceal their disproportionate contribution to environmental degradation through a more polluting lifestyle made possible by greater economic capital (Comby, 2015). The increase in buying organic thus represents a phenomenon of both "conversion" and "recuperation" of environmental issues (Papastamou, 2019). Framing this

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[9] Here, "conversion" refers to a profound change in people's opinions, values and behavior following the intense processing of a message conveyed by an active minority, and is characterized by an indirect and delayed impact (Moscovici & Mugny, 1987).

dynamic merely in terms of the delayed and latent influence of active minorities risks conflating the processes of change and stability that have shaped the history of environmental movements. It also leads to an underestimation of the influence exerted by dominant majorities in resisting change. This critique echoes Moscovici's observation that minorities can generate change without transformation, producing "objects that have been taken over by industry and commerce" (Moscovici, 1976, p. 208).

Yet Moscovici (1976) also cautioned against reducing these dynamics solely to processes of recuperation. Understanding the influence of environmental movements at the socio-representational level allows us to grasp the coexistence of conflicting forms of social knowledge within societies, groups and individuals (Marková, 2007). This coexistence can be revealed by examining how new ideas introduced by environmental movements become institutionalized through law and encounter resistance when diffused (Castro & Mouro, 2011). As Castro (2012) notes, concepts such as "sustainable development" appear consensual enough for groups with divergent interests to find common ground, while at the same time restraining more radical change. Building on this idea, it is worth noting that not every form of social innovation necessarily represents progress toward a more energy-sparing and socially just world[10].

CONCLUSION

As several authors have argued (Adams et al., 2019; Batel et al., 2016), the apparent neutrality of social psychology may serve an ideological project that sustains the existing social order by individualizing environmental issues. Our aim is to put the focus on collective change, which can be studied by linking the theory of active minorities, social representations theory, and political ecology. The theory of active minorities can be used as a way to understand how contemporary environmental movements bring conflict into seemingly consensual notions such as environmental action (Carvalho et al., 2021). Social representations theory provides a way to study this conflict at the socio-symbolic level, by examining tensions between hegemonic and polemic social representations and considering how dominant majorities actively resist

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[10] Some environmental initiatives align with political agendas aimed at maintaining the status quo. For instance, the creation of French public agencies for environmental protection during the 1990s responded to environmental demands while remaining embedded in a neoliberal governance framework. These agencies framed environmental issues through an economic rationale, promoting the "management of natural resources characterized by processes of privatization, liberalization, commodification or outsourcing" (Weisbein, 2022, p. 182).

change (e.g., through the recuperation of critique). Political ecology grounds objects of study within their historical, material and ideological contexts, linking the analysis of environmental degradation to issues of class, race and gender. An analytical model combining these three approaches enables a critical reading of ideas advanced by active minorities and later adopted by majorities, questioning to what extent these actually challenge or, instead, reinforce the existing social order. This analytical model may appear at first glance to lack direct empirical applications. However, we contend that integrating these theories within the broader field of political ecology provides a productive framework for empirical analysis in social psychology.

One avenue for future research would be to investigate how the communication of alternative social arrangements by environmental movements confronts the perspectives of groups with different belief systems and social positions regarding environmental degradation. Communication is a central process to "understand the formation and transformation of 'common sense'" (Kitzinger et al., 2004, p. 239) across multiple levels: the macro-social, the level of social interactions, and the micro-social (Caillaud, 2021). Such a perspective requires to analyze how divergent ideas about environmental degradation are shaped by socio-cultural contexts (Clayton, 2024). Moving beyond a traditionally universalist social psychology will require engaging with diverse sectors of the public in data collection (in terms of ethnic background, socioeconomic status, profession, etc.; Tam et al., 2021). Last but not least, studies should be informed by multiple disciplinary perspectives, calling for collaboration with scholars from other fields to understand how ideas about environmental degradation are shaped by non-psychological factors (Clayton, 2024). This interdisciplinary approach is all the more necessary to grasp the material and social implications of environmental goals: e.g., proposals for economic degrowth or ecological modernization reflect different relationships between society, nature and governance (Brand, 2010; Parrique, 2022).

The theoretical perspectives outlined here have been developed within a research program that includes different studies (Leroy, 2024). At the macro-social level, a study of media discourse showed how the actions and messages of environmental movements are framed differently depending on the media's editorial angle and the time period. At the level of social interactions, another study used focus groups to explore how participants from different social positions (e.g., climate activists vs. industry managers) represent the causes of and solutions to environmental degradation. At the micro-social level, a final study involved an experiment on activists' modes of action and discourse, revealing that the factors leading to activist devaluation depend on participants' belief systems. Taken together, these studies help

illuminate how conflicts surrounding consensual discourse on environmental protection are crystallized at the socio-symbolic level by active minorities, while situating these dynamics within the broader history of environmental struggles. Beyond this specific research program, we hope that the analytical model proposed here will inspire future empirical investigations and theoretical-methodological developments.

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LEROY ALEXIS holds a PhD in Social Psychology from Aix-Marseille Université and is currently working as a postdoctoral researcher at the GRePS of University Lumière Lyon 2. His work focuses on social change in the context of ecological issues, using the theoretical framework of social representations. He is particularly interested in the role of environmental movements in social change.
Email: alexislry@gmail.com

ELOÏSE VINSON (PhD, social psychology) is a researcher from Aix Marseille Université. Her work focuses on how the ideological structures and socio-cultural belonging shapes the perception of complex social objects such as bioethical debates, reproductive technologies, and the boundaries of life.
Email: eloise.VINSON@univ-amu.fr

SAMUEL DUPOIRIER is an assistant professor of social and work psychology at Marie-et-Louis Pasteur University in Besançon. From a critical social psychology perspective rooted in the social representations approach, his work focuses on social, work, and environmental issues; particularly the links between ideology and social representations and their implications in terms of legitimizing or challenging the social order.
Email: samuel.dupoirier@univ-fcomte.fr

VALERIE FOINTIAT (PhD, Social Psychology) is Full Professor at Aix-Marseille Université. Her works focus on social influence and cognitive dissonance.

Email: valerie.fointiat@univ-amu.fr

RAQUEL BERTOLDO (PhD, Social Psychology) is HDR Professor (Associate) at Aix-Marseille Université. Her works focus on social representations and climate change.

Email: raquel.BOHN-BERTOLDO@univ-amu.fr