

Facing Challenges: an Ontological Approach to the Theory of Social Representations¹.

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ABSTRACT

As an inspiration for this communication, I would like to revive a comment of Serge Moscovici's written in his article of 1972, at the Conference "*The Context of Social Psychology*", whose title was "Society and Theory in Social Psychology". Moscovici tried to unravel a complex of theories that resulted in hundreds of experiments of all kinds proposing to shed light in the advancement of studies in Social Psychology. There are certainly many challenges to be faced when dealing with SRs, some regarding the *ontology* of the representations themselves. I tried to address some of them. I believe they had been at least in part identified. The questions were firstly directed towards the *ontology* of SR: what does it mean to say that a SR is a phenomenon, a social and cultural environment? And secondly it was asked, what is the relationship of SRs and the different practices, both communicative and behavioral, which may present opportunities for innovation and change? SRs cannot be reduced to a concept; they are phenomena, they are social and cultural environments. They also cannot be reduced to pure words, sounds hollow and empty; they are concrete realities, they are practices, and "*wordactions*".

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It is always suggestive to pay attention to the name given to a specific congress, or to symposia within the congress, because these choices help to find out the main concerns of the moment. They reveal some of the signs of the times in which we live at that moment. In our specific case, the name suggested was: *Facing Challenges*. In spite of being general, it already reminds us that there are challenges that can be external to the theme, internal, or both. In this comment, I will restrict myself to two main topics related to internal challenges of the theory of Social Representations (from now on SR).

As an inspiration for this communication, I would like to rescue a comment of Serge Moscovici already written in his article of 1972, at the Conference “*The Context of Social Psychology*”, whose title was “Society and Theory in Social Psychology”. In this article, the author tries to unravel a complex of theories that resulted in hundreds of experiments of all kinds proposing to provide lights in the advancement of studies in Social Psychology. One of the points in which he insists is that it is not enough to progress in extension, if one does not progress in depth. In his words, more precisely:

[...] we might even venture to the suggestion that it is time to stop the collection of information because (quotes Poincaré) an accumulation of facts is not a science, as well as a heap of stones does not become a home ... If we decided to abandon for a time, the collection of new data, we could see them in perspective and reflect on what has been achieved; we could then better define the nature of the issues that we have formulated, the objective of our search and the meaning of our findings (Moscovici, 2003, p. 145)

It is my perception that we are in a similar position now for the field of SRs. We have researches swarming everywhere, but they seem to be lacking a common thread, a sharper, more detailed theoretical light that can, on the one hand, make sense of and interlink this huge backlog of investigations; and, on the other hand, clarify where they are concentrated, in fact, the most relevant issues to the field of SRs. What I would risk then, inspired by the term *challenges*, is to propose the need for a more courageous diving, going in search of deeper waters, which can satiate our thirst and bring new meanings and new energy to our commitment to a research for a better understanding of the social world.

I have no doubt that the thematic of SRs is extremely enlightening, but it could, I believe, be more fruitful. Perhaps we have not yet sufficiently explored its innovative and creative power. The issues I intend to discuss here I believe will take us forward in search of new depths that all of us are looking for.

An issue of this communication that is new, I want to emphasize, is that I will take into consideration other writings of Moscovici which are generally not taken into account when discussing SRs, specifically the books *The Invention of Society – Sociology and Psychology* (Moscovici, 2010), and *Psicologia Social das Minorias Ativas (Social Psychology of Active minorities)* (Moscovici, 2011a) (written initially in English as *Social Influence and Social Change*, 1976, and in French in 1979, as *Psychologie des Minorités Actives*). In addition to the fact that these two publications can help us realize the importance of SRs in the field of social psychology, the reflections made there can also contribute to the effort of answering to current *challenges*.

Right from the beginning I would like to make clear my *main objective*: this is an ontological discussion and I aim to bring into the scene other dimensions that should be taken into consideration when we are approaching the field of SRs. All other discussions, mainly the epistemological and the methodological ones - how can we know and how can we investigate SRs – depend on what they really are and how they manifest themselves in the world.

My starting point is a claim of Moscovici (2012, p.39) stating that: “These are the features – their specificity (symbolic substance) and their creativity within collective life (the practice that produces this substance) – that make social representations different from the sociological and psychological notions with which we have compared them, and from the phenomena which correspond to them”. I will limit myself therefore to these two main points: a) SR as *symbolic substance*, trying to prove this by showing that they are not a concept but a phenomenon, an environment; b) the *creative practice* that produces them, discussing the issues of communication and innovation.

SYMBOLIC SUBSTANCE: SR AS *PHENOMENON*, AS *ENVIRONMENT*

In this first part I will try to dive a bit in the analysis of the proposition that the SR is a *phenomenon*. This is an interesting term - *phenomenon*. It initiated many discussions, and modern philosophy focused, in particular, around that term to the point of establishing even an entire

theoretical and methodological perspective from it, *Phenomenology*. Kant sought to distinguish between the *fainomenon* - what one might observe; and the *noumenon* - what could not be reached, a distinction that did not prevail as hegemonic though. Others thought this relationship in a perspective that many analysts call *mystery*, demanding from us a continuous research that leads to a further understanding, to something that, similarly, would be what we now call *phenomenon*, that is, a *manifestation*, a sign that leads us always further, a kind of *horizon*: when we think to have hit it, it appears through new angles and new understandings.

What does it mean, then, to say that the SR is a *phenomenon*? Some considerations can be made from there. The first is that the manifestations are *concrete realities*, not necessarily tangible, measured and weighed; but realities, *manifestations*. The starting point of the intellectual journey of Moscovici was the insistence on the recognition of SR as a characteristic form of knowledge in our time or, as he puts it: “So what I propose to do is to consider as a *phenomenon* what was previously seen as a concept” (2000, p.30). We are not able - and I do not know if it is possible to - to "tame" these "almost tangible entities" circulating, intersecting among each other, and crystallizing themselves in the everyday world. Its specificity (symbolic substance), and its creativity (a practice that produces this substance) set them apart from any other sociological or psychological concept, or concepts that are often related to them. The challenge then reappears: how to problematize and reformulate the concepts of this *phenomenon*.

This is certainly not an easy task. We are all aware of the long discussions raised by authors who, in certain ways, are related, for example, to socio-constructionism. Generally there is a lack of understanding about what SR really is. As de Rosa (2006, p.166) puts it, the socio-constructionist thesis centers “on language as a form of social action and a pre-condition for thought (and not vice-versa as in the traditional acceptance of language as expression of thought). ... the dispute originates from a ‘*mentalist*’ reading’ of the SR construct, assuming that social representations are cognitive representations” (emphasis in the text).

I would like to go a little further and ask: can we really separate language and thought? Taking Moscovici’s article of 1984 as a whole, whose title is exactly *The Phenomenon of SRs*, we see that he divides the whole chapter into seven parts. The first two points can be seen as considerations about the *phenomenon*; the third and fourth, a discussion about the theory (*making familiar the non familiar, anchoring and objectification*); and the fifth and seventh, can be referred to as a kind of metatheoretical reflection, where he tries to distinguish the theory from other

theories (point six only presents some research in the field). It helps to examine the way he tries to refer to the *phenomenon*. He presents two points: the first he entitles “Thinking considered as an environment” and the second: “What is a thinking society?” One can guess the difficulty he was facing in trying to explain his intention. In both titles the term “thinking” is present: in the first as a noun; in the second as an adjective. It seems that not being satisfied in separating *thinking* from “reality”, he immediately adds: but there is a *thinking society*. At the same time *thinking* is not conceived as something cognitive, mental; that’s why he immediately adds: *thinking* as an environment (something concrete). This discussion illustrates Moscovici’s tentative to approach to the *ontology* of SRs when comparing it to a *phenomenon*. And it is here, for the first and only time, where he tries to offer a tentative notion of what SR could be (2000, p. 30-33).

Another tentative solution that can help us to understand SR as a phenomenon is to analyze the *way* this *phenomenon* manifests itself. In the author’s words: “we can affirm that these representations are social entities, with a life on their own, communicating between themselves, opposing each other and changing in harmony with the course of the life” (Moscovici, 2000, p.25). They disappear, to appear again under new appearances. They can co-exist, circulating in various spheres of society, they are hierarchical. These phenomena “appear to us almost as material objects, in so far as they are the product of our actions and communications. They are, in fact, the product of a professional activity...” (Moscovici, 2000, p. 27).

In Part Three of the book "The Invention of Society" (Moscovici, 2011b), in discussing the work of Simmel, Moscovici sheds more light into this issue. In the analysis of the discussion made by Simmel about money, which Moscovici recovers in many of his other writings, he shows how money presents itself as a SR. The author takes this analysis of money as a SR as an example of the various procedures he created when discussing the development of theory. When analyzing the process of objectification of the SR of money, for example, he starts quoting first Meyerson (Moscovici, 2011b, p 415.): "The mental states do not remain static, they project themselves, take shape, tend to consolidate, to become objects". He continues:

This means to provide with a material character our abstractions and images, to metamorphose the words in things, give a body to every thought. Designed primarily by intelligence, a notion or an abstract quality end up looking like something physical and visible. The Word was made flesh: every time we put this parable in action, believing that to each word must match a reality (Moscovici, 2011b, p 415.).

When discussing Weber and Simmel, Moscovici (2011b) relates SR with the notion of *charisma*, which presents itself as vague and imprecise, but when embodied in people has a real impact, as Gandhi, "which overwhelms with his silhouette, a human tide, or the gesture of Pope John Paul II blessing crowds" (Moscovici, 2011b, p. 415). The term "charisma" is perceived as a physical quality, height, voice timbre. This is a *phenomenon*, something real, but virtually impossible to be caught; a manifestation, but intangible.

Comparison of SRs with other concepts, which are often related to them, can be useful to advance their understanding and to identify their specific reality. In the text in which Marková seeks to deepen and extract from Moscovici some specificities of the SR theory, one finds an illustration of this with regard to the difference between SR and the concept of attitude:

Our representations are also institutions that we share and that exist before we were born within them; we form new representations from the early ones. Attitudes do not express knowledge as such, but a relation of certainty and uncertainty, belief or disbelief, in relation to this knowledge. You can also talk about an attitude towards an object, towards a person, a group, and so on. However, with regard to *social entities*, these (the SR) are the entities represented (Moscovici, 2003, p.319).

The emphasis is mine. In other words, we have an attitude about something. The SR is this thing. SR is a *substance*. It exists and subsists. It is an environment, an *ambiance*.

SRs go beyond a general class of ideas and beliefs, as are religions, myths, science. They are specific phenomena that are related to a particular way of understanding and communicating - a way that both creates reality, as common sense. They are symbolic substances that make up the social fabric. Various thinkers have tried to identify them creating different expressions such as "representational spaces," "realities in themselves", "mental masses in circulation" (Moscovici, 2011a, p 396.), "a form of knowledge, socially elaborated and shared, having a practical orientation and collaborating in the construction of a common reality to a social group" (Jodelet, 1989, p. 36); "social territories," analogous to geographical territories; "representational fields", "clouds" (Jesuino, 2014).

It is then possible to see, somehow, the constitution and the way these real entities that populate the social world in which we live and within which we think and communicate present themselves. In what follows I will reflect more specifically about this other reality, communication, almost another face of SRs.

RELATING SR, COMMUNICATION (LANGUAGE) AND PRACTICES

As the reader will see, this second part does not differ essentially from the first. The concern here is specifically to deepen the relationship between SR, communication and practices.

I will retake to the first paragraph of the book *Psychoanalysis, its image and its public*, already mentioned above, where Moscovici (2008, p. 3) writes: "SRs are almost tangible entities. They circulate ceaselessly in our day-to-day world, intersect and crystallize through a word, a gesture, an encounter". It is interesting to notice, from the outset, the importance given to *communication*: word, gesture. He continues: "Most of the social relationships we established, most of the objects we produce or consume, and most of the communications we exchange are impregnated with them" (idem, p.3). He refers once again to communications and social relations as belonging to the SR. The term employed is symptomatic: *impregnated*. It is suggested that they constitute the same reality. And the author concludes the paragraph: "We know that they correspond, on the one hand, to the *symbolic substance* that goes into their elaboration and, on the other, to the *practice* that produces this substance" (ibidem, p.3) (my emphasis). He draws a comparison with science and myths: science corresponds to a scientific practice and myths, to a mythical practice. It is important here to rescue the word *practice* that produces the substance (symbolic), but always substance.

I would like to invite the reader for a moment to reflect and ask the question: What are *really* communication and language? When I say *really* I mean the ontological dimension of these 'words'. The comments made here can easily be supposed, even if one cannot find them *literally* in the writings of Moscovici.

We have to start distinguishing between two levels, or dimensions, when talking about communication: the first is about the *forms* of communication, as when Moscovici talks about the forms employed by the three groups he analyzed in his book *Psychoanalysis: the diffusion, propagation and propaganda*. These are forms. But we can identify another level of understanding of communication: it is the ontological dimension of communication. When communication is discussed in this ontological dimension, the term is understood as language, speech. I am trying to elaborate this point.

The relatively recent studies developed since the discussions of what is called the *linguistic turn* help to make more evident the subtle, but extremely important, implications underlying terms ‘communication’ and ‘communicative action’. Many scholars were interested in this phenomenon. Among them are the linguists Austin, Searle and Wittgenstein; more recently, Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel and even Paulo Freire. Some approached it explicitly; others, like Freire, implicitly, but all, in my view, with important contributions.

A first point to which attention should be paid is that when we refer to the communicative practice, language, the act of speaking, we must realize that this communicative act has different dimensions. The first is the *elocutionary* level, that is, what I mean with my speech, as when I say: “it's raining”. A second is the *perlocutionary* level, that is, when I intend to do something, make something happen with my speech, as when I say: “please, give me a glass of water”. Finally - and it is this dimension that concerns us here – there is, in all communicative action, a level that is called *illocutionary*, which is what I am already doing with the very act of speaking, that is, what is implicit and assumed in the act of speech. In other words: *the very manner of speaking, the assumed relationship in the act of communicating, they all contain already a content*. In this sense, the communicative act is, in itself, a message, a content that goes beyond the strict sense of the meanings of the terms that I am using to speak.

Constructivist theorists speak of performative act, but do not speak of the *illocutionary* act dimension. This distinction is important and crucial for understanding the difference between the assumptions of the SR theory, on the one hand, and cognitive assumptions, or constructionists (constructivists) assumptions, on the other hand. It is important to emphasize that the illocutionary dimension of language, is, to the extent that I can see, the dimension that Moscovici has in mind when discussing communication and social representations.

In his 1984 paper, *The phenomenon of social representations*, Moscovici writes that SRs should be seen as a specific way to *understand* and *communicate* what we already know. And he states: “Language itself, when it conveys representations, is located halfway between what is called the language of observation and the language of logic; the first, expressing pure facts – if such things exist – and the second, abstract symbols. This is, perhaps, one of the most remarkable phenomena of our time – *this welding of language and of representation*” (2000, p.31) (my emphasis).

Language, excluded from the sphere of material reality when transformed in a kind of mathematical tool, reemerges in that of historical and conventional reality; and, as Moscovici (2000, p.31) writes, “if it has lost its relation to theory, it maintains its relation to representation, which is all that it has left. The study of language is increasingly the concern of social psychology. It is simply connected with the change (...) which links it so exclusively to our common, everyday method to understanding and for exchanging our ways of seeing things”. This is language as illocution, that is, what it communicates in the simple way of saying things.

The relation between SR and communication transpires when Moscovici (2000, p. 32) says that "The social representations with which I am concerned ... are those of our current society, of our political, scientific and human soil which have not always had enough time to allow the proper sedimentation to become immutable traditions". In other words, there is a continuing need to reform the "common sense", i.e. the way of understanding, which creates the substratum of images and meanings, without which no collectivity can operate. He adds (2000, p.32): "Similarly, our collectivities cannot function today if social representations were not formed that are not based on the stock of theories and ideologies which they transform into shared realities, relating to the interactions between people which thus constitute a separate category of phenomena" (idem, p.32). This "separate category" of phenomena is the social representation.

The discussion about the ontology of SR will profit, I imagine, especially in the attempt to relate them with language, when an analogy is drawn with the traditional relation between mind and body. The understanding of what we are trying to say about SRs is a tentative step to overcome this dichotomy that goes back to Descartes. What is needed is to show the intrinsic relation between language (ideas, words) and reality (body, flesh). Looking at reflections of many authors that discuss the *reality* of SRs, we find expressions like these: “the specific feature of these representations is precisely that they ‘embody ideas’ in collective experiences and interactions in behavior” (Moscovici, 2000, p. 32); or this other expression, found in many of his books: “The biblical writer was already aware of this when he asserted that the Word became flesh; and Marxism confirms it when he states that ideas, once released amongst the masses, are, and behave like, material forces” (2000, pg. 32-33). These material forces are the social representations.

In the same line of reasoning, including the use of the same biblical expression – “*Word made flesh*” – are the reflections of Paulo Freire. He employs the word “*Palavração*”,

“*Wordaction*” (1992, p. 20) when discussing the inseparability between theory and practice in the role of education. What matters is the “illocutionary” dimension of the teaching. Out of his thirty books, thirteen brings in the title the word “pedagogy”, meaning that the essential “content” of the teaching is the practice, the “interactions in behavior”, as Moscovici says: SR act as "embodiment of ideas", as practices or phenomena that constitute "almost tangible reality", originated *in* and *through* communication, the illocution.

Some authors like de Rosa (2006:186) when analyzing the presuppositions of socio-constructionism mention that they can be summarized by the biblical expression “*in the beginning was the Word*”. But it is a second biblical expression, “*The Word made flesh*” that can help us to understand what SR are about, an intrinsic relation between language and reality. Here one can see the difference between the SR and the socio-constructionist approaches.

It is now appropriate to introduce some comments about Moscovici’s book “*Psicologia das Minorias Ativas*” (Moscovici, 2011a - first published in English, in 1976, under the title of *Social Influence and Social Change*) relating the findings presented in this book with the discussion we are conducting here *facing the challenges* presented in the analysis of SR as language. At least two points can be raised here.

The first refers to the understanding of the SR as action, as practice. The reason why the author wrote this book first in English is because he wanted to bring the discussions to the English-speaking world, mainly to the United States. The book is divided into two main parts: the first makes a critical analysis of functionalism, a theory, as he shows, that underlies the theoretical framework and the research conducted by the United States social psychology. The functionalist assumptions are that the world is a closed system that moves inexorably to equilibrium, because there are determining forces and laws behind the phenomena; not only the world but also societies and human groups are governed by such laws. It remains evident that with these presuppositions no change is possible. The gestures and movements of dissent, of non-compliance with the rules and standards of an institution or group are, therefore, seen and considered as rebellion, deviant behavior, aggression, which should be rejected and punished. Moscovici (2011a) departs from the research about compliance of these same authors and shows that it can be seen from another point of view: as innovation and intents for transformation and change. Reality is not something determined, but something in construction, and conflict is part of social reality.

In the second part of the book he shows the necessity and possibility of another theory, the theory of innovation, from the genetic point of view, which allows for change. Here is where one can see SR as a practice, and a practice that leads to change. Let us try to justify this understanding through an analysis of this process.

Based on his own investigations, Moscovici (2011a) shows that what brings about change are not reflections and theoretical concepts, but a *practice*. And what would be this practice? It is a *presentation that is a representation* of the actors. A practice that is a behavior, an action, which he calls a *style of behaving*. The style is a manner, a method, a way, that is, a *practice*.

And what are the styles that the author will find out from his research? He points to three main ones:

a) Autonomy, or the consciousness of one's own identity, namely the consciousness of who one is and what he wants. An "independence of judgment and attitude that reflects the determination to act according to their own principles" (Moscovici, 2011a, p.120).

b) Coherence and consistency in action. This seems to be the most central among the behavioral styles. You can only check it through time and compare what one *says* with what one *does*.

c) Justice, equity, which basically means "the concern to take into account the position of the other" (Moscovici, 2011a, p.148), an ethics of alterity.

We should go a little further and *problematize* this reality we call *practice*. Analysts of SR theory are almost unanimous in saying that SRs are *practices*. And these practices are actions. As expressed by Moscovici (2001, p.21), "to a certain extent, the representation that 'stands for' can also 'act for', or 'act on behalf of' or 'instead of' those it represents ... What they do is out of proportion to what they are". These practices-actions are *styles*, not only to communicate, but also styles of acting, performing; styles of *representing* oneself. For there to be a change, and this intuition of Moscovici, it is not necessary to take up arms. It is sufficient the *presentation/representation* of a new style, a new practice, for a new representation to be created. In the last chapter of the book "*Psicologia das Minorias Ativas*", Moscovici (2011a) provides a detailed analysis of the role played by Solzhenitsyn, *The dissent of only one*, where he shows that the style, the practice of a dissident, materialized through its coherence, identity and ethics started to make evident a new *social atmosphere*, already tacitly felt by many who were not sufficiently

courageous to *present* themselves; and it was this *practice* that allowed an innovation, a change of an entire nation.

I ask permission for a brief note on the *new social media*. There is no doubt that we live in a new atmosphere in which proliferate a great number of different ways to communicate, generally referred to as the *new social media* that help to create a new environment. But as for all other kind of media, the question that should also be taken into account in this context is to ask about which is the *illocutionary dimension* of these new media. Faced with an instant communication available to many, made orally, in writing, in imagery, in subliminal strategies, etc., we must understand which are their implicit practice, the relations they embody. What is their style? Are these new media authoritarian, vertical, one-way, conclusive, implying an absolute position or, rather, are they presented as open to discussion, as asking questions instead of giving absolute answers?

To conclude, what I tried to show with these comments is that there are certainly many challenges to be faced when dealing with SRs, some regarding the *ontology* of the representations themselves. In the pages above, I tried to address some of them. I believe they had been at least in part identified. The questions were firstly directed towards the *ontology* of SR: what does it mean to say that SR is a phenomenon, a social and cultural environment? And secondly it was asked, what is the relationship of SRs and the different practices, both communicative and behavioral, which may present opportunities for innovation and change?

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