REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIETY AND PREJUDICES*

SERGE MOSCOVICI

L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, France

JUAN A. PEREZ

University of Valencia, Spain

When anyone speaks of a group, this term most readily brings to mind the notion of classification, differentiation, normalcy. And hence, criteria become imperative. This recalls the story of the actor who one evening requested Jean Genet to write a play for black performers. To which the writer replied: "But tell me, what is a Black ? And, first of all, what is his color ? " Implicit in this response was his awareness that classifications are crucial in establishing relations between human beings and his condemnation of the arbitrary criteria for these categories and distinctions. It also emphasized the fact that there are several criteria which one can invoke in defining a group. Other criteria than color might be invoked with respect to Blacks, such as their jazz playing, their African origins, or their living in the Harlem ghetto. In short, it might be said that prejudices serve to reduce the arbitrariness of criteria, just as language, by other means, serves to reduce the arbitrariness of signs in relation to the things signified. But this is not a simple notion. On the one hand, ideological prejudicess imply a pre-comprehension, an anticipated judgment that has its roots in widely held conceptions, presuppositions that shape one's thinking.

We are incapable of judging without prejudging, that is, without our sharing a representation that precedes experience and reflection and that derives its authority from tradition and thus makes communication possible. "Simultaneously and inevitably perhaps, writes Jedlowski, there is a system of social representations defining who is alien to the group, that is, who is not "common" to it and thus setting the limits between "ourselves" and someone other than ourselves " (1995-295)

On the other hand, categorical prejudices imply a propensity to make hasty judgments and a predisposition to follow authority or tradition. The term is synonymous with unfounded or mistaken judgment. In this light, a categorical prejudice implies the simplification of features attributed to others by the use of sterootypes or cliches and the polarization of judgments in an exclusively negative direction. More specifically, it determines which criterion among a certain number of possible criteria will be chosen for categorizing the members of a group (Allport, 1954 Tajfel, 1981). In Greek thought, the term "catogory" involved a disparaging concept and derogatory attributes. Categorical prejudices thus allow us to distance ourselves from others. This is accomplished by attributing denigrating traits to these others - whether they are people from a ncighboring district, a nomad population, or any other group - by means of easily manipulable criteria.

There does exist a link between these two forms of prejudice. They both serve to familiarize one with a separate group whose customs are alien and whose language and values are unaccustomed or incomprehensible. In this light, all prejudices have a historical dimension that is too often neglected when one reduces it to its cognitive dimension. In any case, for a variety of reasons - the urge to reduce internal group conflict, strengthen group identity, express hate or dislike - ideological prejudices are changed into categorical prejudices. It is perfectly obvious that these prejudices are shared by the persons who formulate and use them and that they have nothing to do with the persons who formulate and use them and that they have nothing to do with the persons who are their target. Gaines Jr and Reed (1995) make this point very clear in their recent article by explaining that the mainstream of social psychology concerned with prejudice concentrates on the way in which the white majority react to the black minority, not the reactions and experience of the black minority itself. According to these authors, if we have understood their argument correctly, most social psychologists typically focus on individual experiences and neglect the social and historical roots of prejudices.

From this perspective of reality, it is clear that categorization criteria may change either from a historical point of view or from the point of view of the group adopting a categorical prejudice to show its hostility. Not everyone agrees that categorical prejudices should be reduced to a stereotypical reaction, in as much as it depends on a system of historical beliefs and experiences. "In the fullest meaning of the word, Gaines, Reed (1995), write, prejudice is a discrimination that is based on the revelation of a real ro imagined social difference; it refers to a complex intellectual assessment that combines beliefs and values, in contrast to a stereotype, which is nothing but a stereotypical representation. "Jedlowski takes almost the same stand by expressing the view that, through our discrimination, our "self" is projected on the "other", but it also a psychological tool with whose help we project on the other urges and tensions that we are incapable of mastering" (1995, 300).

But about this "other" we must also say a few words. It is generally postulated that prejudices or stereotypes express differences and relations between groups. As a logical consequence of this state of affairs, the "we" is viewed positively and the "other" negatively. However, there are mumerous theoretical reasons for the fact that the most vigorous discrimination manisfests itself against groups of "similars", minorities that in many respect have been part of the group for a long time, can be told apart only by secondary traits, and can therefore lay claim to belong to the same group. And historical illustrations abound as well for this paradoxical fact. A member of an Algerian youth

movement for instance asserted: "We are not alien to French reality, such as work conditions, housing, television, etc". For years we were locked out on the basis of cultural differences. And, what is more, it was a one-way proposition. Why should we bear the entire burden of differences with respect to a dominant model ? Why must differences always appear in the dominated group ?" (Kilani, interwiew).

Similar findings can be enumerated about the Blacks in the United States, the Gypsies in Eastern Europe or Spain, and the Jews, against whom the Nazis acted with the most vicious cruelty not in those countries where the Jews were most numerous but in Germany, where they were most highly assimilated. In other words, it is not certain that categorical prejudices, as is often thought, simplify the image of the other. It is highly likely that they aim to amplify minor distinctive features - the well-known narcissism of minor differences - in order to change an alter ego to one who is wholly other. In short, to accomplish a denial of similarities, to accentuate contrasts and oppositions. This represents the most radical form of otherness. It would be interesting to study more specifically this possibility that prejudices acquire their discriminatory power more from negating similarities than from asserting differences, more from a quest for exclusion than from a que st for maintaining a non- inclusion barrier, an existing difference .

In any case, denial of similarities presupposes the attempt to establish a differentiated society and that its members share a differentiated representations of society which influences the criterion they share and the way they conceive others. Even if prejudices are an expression of relations between groups, as Sherif and Tajfel have shown so effectively, it is likely that these relations are modulated by the representation of society of which they are a part. Not only because it supplies the model for these relations but also because relations between two groups arise within a totality of very different kinds of relationships. In view of this fact, it is reasonable to say that today most of the relationships with which social psychology is concerned are conceived on the same model as ethnic relations.

We wish to show in this study that the representation of society affects the choice of a criterion for "discrimination" against a group and the prejudices against it. To simplify matters, let us imagine three types of society. In the first type, which we might call a uniform society, all members share the same characteristics, hence it is homogeneous and they are alike. In the second society, which we might called an interdependent society, there would be a hierarchy of groups and of their members'characteristics. And finally, in the third type of society, which might be called a disjointed society, each group is defined by disjointed characteristics and is independent of the others. In short, in the first no difference between a majority and a minority is permitted or presupposed; in the second the difference between majority and minority is accepted; and in the third, finally, there are only minorities. It is reasonable to suppose that the type of society is at the heart of the system of representations and beliefs that makes criteria for classification or for the description of groups less arbitrary. It even offers the model for relations between them.

Let us carry this one stop further and suppose that the minority in question might be viewed from two criteria - the social role which is traditionally ascribed to it and its ethnic character - which modulate its relations with the majority or dominant group. The object of this research is to highlight two phenomena:

- that the representation of society affects relations between groups and thus prejudices with respect to the minorty, and

- that preference for a given type of society leads to the choice of a given criterion and the values attached to it, hence the way in which otherness is conceived.

One can thus make the hypothesis that the ethnic criterion which predominates in our culture, will play an exclusive role in a uniform and in a disjointed society, in the former because it maximizes differences and in the latter because it is the most accessible and offers the lowest common denominatior in our culture. Moreover, in so far as it maximizes differences, this criterion will result in a negative categorization of the minority; and in so far as it relativizes differences - since each group is a minority in its own way - it results in categorizing the discriminated minority in a positive way. Conccivably the relativizing of differences amounts to an expression of tolerance, but for some people this is not the case, since "the 'relativistic' conviction which supports experiencing 'differences within equality' is stymied by the reality of power relationships and social hierarchization that characterize the economic and cultural arena in modern society. Even though modern society rejects all hierarchical ideas on the level of values and the social order, this reality still prevails " (Definis, 1994, 292).

Whatever the truth of that matter, in each of the cases enumerated above just one criterion of difference is singled out, given prominence, and used to categorize the other group, in particular the minority. For the interdependent type of society, finally, where differenciations is intrinsic, social roles also serve as a criterion of some importance. The research reported below is of an exploratory nature. It does not propose to validate these hypotheses but merely to see whether they make sense.

Empirical Illustration

We will draw on an extended study on social representations with respect to Gypsies for illustrative findings. This study involved altogether 858 students in the social sciences and humanities from a total of seven countries.

In one question in this study, subjects were asked to indicate which social structure they prefered for their society among the three following possibilities: type A represented a society with a sole and exclusive majority group; type B one in which people were split into a majority and a minority; and type C one consisting solely of minorities. In addition to these descriptions, the subjects were presented a symbol (which appears on the horizontal axis in Figure 1 below) illustrating each of these thrce type of society. The subject was asked to choose one of these symbols.

To test the various hypoteses, we looked at the number of stereotypical judgments that each of these groups of subjects prefering a given type of social structure expressed about Gypsies. In the questionnaire each subject was presented with a list of 70 statements about Gypsies and was asked to mark with which statements he agreed. Half the statements (35) were negative and the other half (35) were positive and favorable to the Gypsies. They refer to social distance ("I would not like a gypsy as my roommate", typical features of the Gypsy stereotype ("liars", "free"), the sort of image Gypsies might give to the country in which they live '("Gypsies represent backwardness in the country", "Gypsies teach us how to treat the elderly well, "items that allow identification or lack of identification with Gypsies) (" I identify with the way Gypsies treat their family"), and items that set up the Gypsies as a moral reference group ("I would feel ashamed of boing accused by a Gypsy if I had myself mistreated my son") and proposed solutions for the

Gypsies' problems ("they should be given more financial aid", "they should be expelled from all countries").

The variable that was investigated in this study involved the type of Gypsy to whom these statements were supposed to be applied. A third of the subjects were asked to apply their judgment to a valued social role, the Gypsy musician (G-musician), a third to a deprecated social role, the Gypsy-beggar (G-beggar), and another third to Gypsies in general (G-general) on the basis of their ethnicity.

RESULTS

Let us see first of all how the subjects'preferences with respect to each of the types of suggested social structure were distributed :
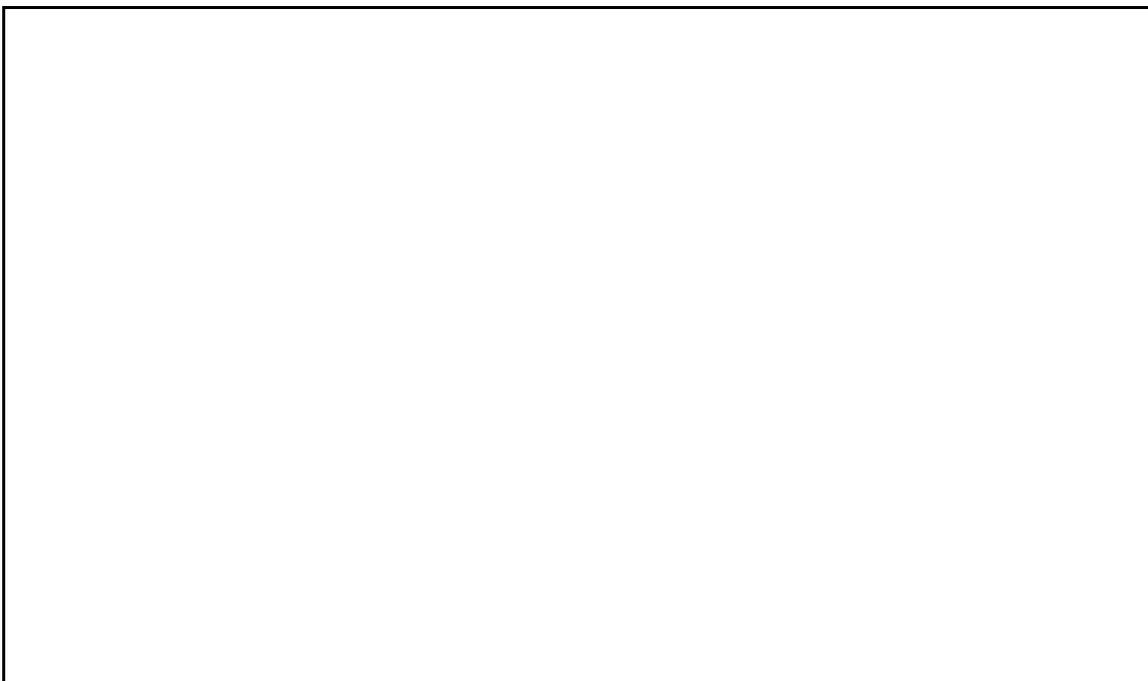
Figure 1
Number of subjects preferring each of the suggested social structures.

As indicated in Figure 1, type C was preferred by the largest number of subjects (421 or 49,1%), type B (chosen by 182 subjects, 21.2%) was preferred by the fewest subjects, even fewer even than type A. (chosen by 255 subjects, 29,7%). The subjects thus prefer societies in which minorities are present. It is significant that a bi-polar society (with a single majority and a single minority) is less desirable than a society with a single majority.

NUMBER OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE JUDGMENTS WITH RESPECT TO EACH TYPE OF GYPSY

In figure 2, we indicate the number of positive and negative judgments with respect to each type of Gypsy that is targeted by these judgements. An interaction between the type

of Gypsy, and the number of positive and negative judgments applied to it can be observed (F/2,849 = 26.46; p<0.0001). A break-down of this interaction shows that the subjects differentiate the types of Gypsies they are judging both in terms of the number of negative judgments (F/2,849 = 12.08, p<0,0001) and in terms of the positive judgments (F/2,849 = 13.28; p<0,0001). Specifically, the G-beggar receives more negative judgments than the G-musician (p<0.05) or the G-general (p<0.05). However,it should be noted that the G-musician is judged neither more nor less negatively than the G-general. On the other hand, the G-musician receives more positive judgments than does the G-beggar (p<0,05) on the G-general. At the same time, the G-beggar and the G-general receive about the same number of positive judgments. And lastly, althought the G- musician receives more positive than negative judgments (p<0,01) and the G-beggar receives more negative than positive judgments (p<0,01), there is no signifiant difference (p<.21) as far as the G.general is concerned.
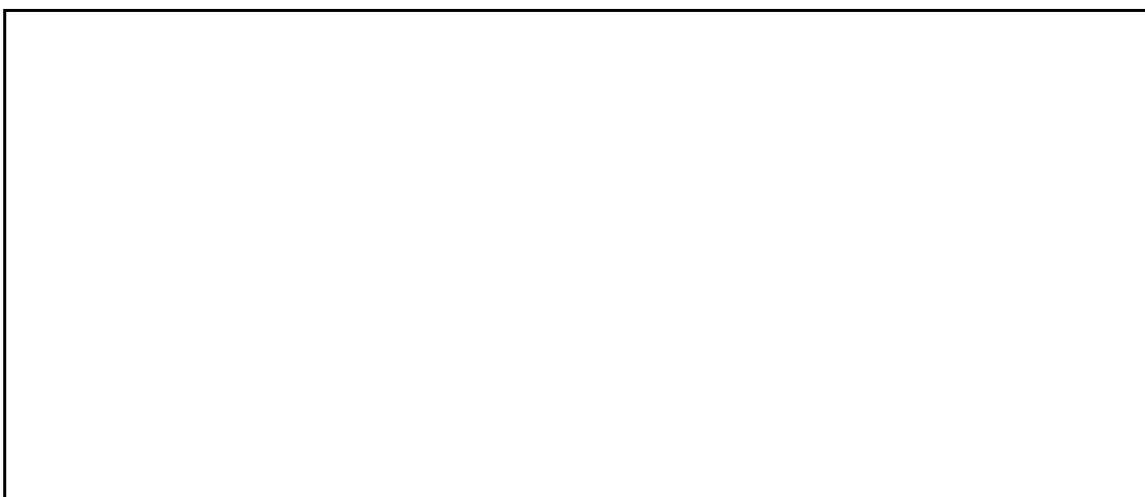

Figure 2
Number of positive and negative judgments with respect to each type of Gypsy.

These results lead to the conclusion that the social role differentiates positive or negative prejudices about Gypsies more clearly than ethnicity. The G-musician receives more positive than negative judgments, and the contrary holds, even more markedly, for the G.-beggar. The G-general, on the other hand, elicites an ambivalent reaction toward this minority. It must be pointed out that this effect of the social roles does not seem to redefine the ethnic image but merely suppplements it. To the extent that the prestige of the specific social role has no bearing on the factor to be evalutated, the ethnic image remains predominant.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE JUDMENTS ACCORDING TO THE CHOSEN MODEL OF SOCIETY

The frequency of negative and positive judgments varies according to the representation of society and hence the preferred type of society (F/2,849 = 163.10;

p<0.0001 for the negative judgments and F/2,849 = 5.21; p<O.006 for the positive judgments). Interaction between the direction of the judgments and the preferred type of

society is also significant (F/2,849 = 90.03; p<0.00l). Let us now examine more closely how these effects operate (Figure 3).

Negative prejudices toward the Gypsies are highest in an interdependent society (S.N.K. p<0.05 with each of the other two groups) and lowest in the disjointed society (S.N.K p<0.05 with each of the other two groups), with the uniform society occupying a middle ground. There is no clear difference between the first two types of society with respect to the number of positive prejudices. And we were surprised to note that in the third type of society positive judgments are less frequent than in the other two groups (S.N.K. p<0.05 with each of the other two groups). But in interpreting this finding, it must be kept in mind that subjects who prefer the uniform or interdependent type of society always make more negative than positive judgments on the Gypsies (p<0.001), while the subjects preferring the disjointed type of society make more positive than negative judgments (p<0.00l). In short, for those who chose a hierarchic and differentiated representation of society, negative prejudices toward the Gypsies were amplified. A disjointed society does exerts somewhat of an inhibiting effect on the expression of positive prejudices, even though it elicits significantly more positive than negative judgments overall. A tentative explanation is that the subjects who prefer this type of society a more inclined to refrain from categorizing the Gypsies, be it negatively or positively.


Figure 3
Number of positive and negative judgments according to preferred social model.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PREFERRED TYPE OF SOCIETY AND THE TARGETED GROUP OF GYPSIES

The results are clear: the preferred type of society has an impact on positive prejudices (F/4,489 = 2.49; p<0.05) and negative prejudices (F/4,849 = 2.15; p<08) with respect to the groups of Gypsies that the subjects were asked to evaluate (Figure 4). To get a better grasp of these results, let us introduce a semantic distinction. Let us call prejudices *optional* when they apply to a group identified by one criterion but not by another one, to

X but not to Y. And let us call prejudices *obligatory* when they apply to all groups defined by the available criteria. It is appropriate to speak of obligatory prejudices for subjects who prefer a uniform society. Negative prejudices about Gypsies prevail in their socially valued or socially despised role, as well as in terms of their ethnicity. The same holds true for the positive prejudices of the subjects who prefer the disjointed type of society. These subjects express equally positive judgments about all the groups of Gypsies.
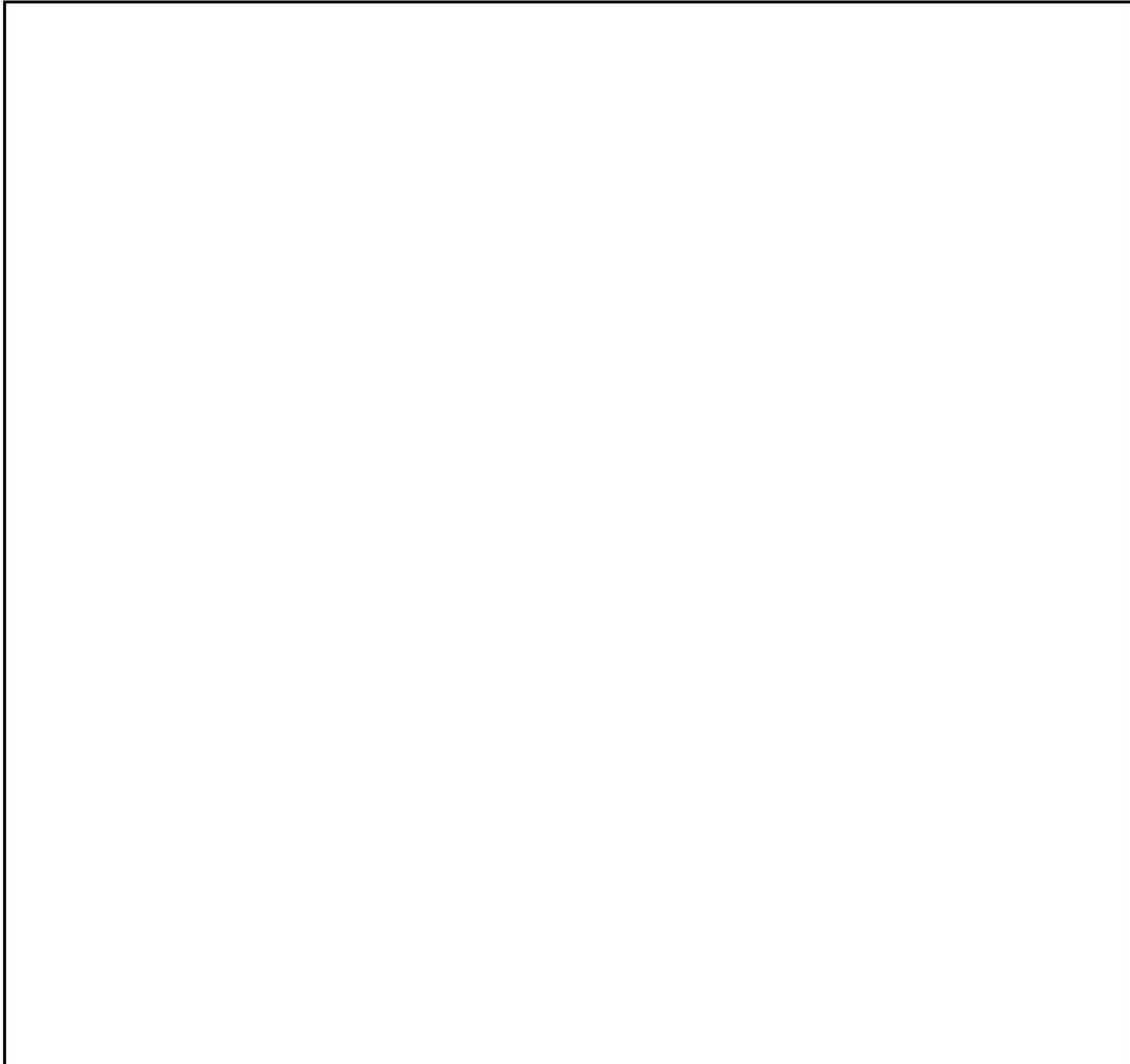
Figure 4
Negative or positive prejudices according to the preferred type of society and the targeted group of Gypsies.

In line with our interpretation, it is justified to speak of obligatory negative prejudices in the uniform society and of obligatory positive prejudices in the disjointed society. On the other hand, positive prejudices are optional in the uniform society (the Gmusician has more positive ratings than the two others groups, S.N.K. $p<0.05$) and negative

prejudices are optional in the disjointed society (the G-beggar receives more negative judgments than the others, S.N. K. p<0.05). As to the interdependent society, both negative and positive prejudices are optional. Space does not permit us to examine these results and their theoretical implication in detail, but they certainly have a suggestive value.

CONCLUSION

An individual's preference for a given type of society is highly likely in turn to influence his conception of relations with minorities and his prejudices with respect to them. The opposite would be far more astonishing, to wit, that antagonist groups were viewed in isolation on the basis of single criterion, forgetting that they are after all not the only such group and that encounters with them were envisaged as one on one, like in boxing match. And it may be just as well to view prejudices as products of a society whose representation shapes the choice of categories or stereotypes. Surely, in our contemporary culture, the categories are bioethnic in nature. But the case seems to be that only individuals who prefer a uniform or a disjointed type of society consistently opt for this ethnic criterion. Oddly enough, the only distinction between the two societies is whether the criterion is applied in a negative or positive direction. Uniform societies agree to apply negative discriminations, and thereby put ethnic minorities at a disadvantage.

Disjointed societies agree to apply positive discriminations, thus assuring a preferential treatment for minorities. In both cases, however, minorities are treated on the basis of their ethnicity. Individuals who prefer an interdependent society, on the other hand, tend to be influenced by a second criterion, social roles, when they judge the Gypsies.

Consequently the way the Gypsy minority is conceived becomes more fluid and complex, and for them prejudices that were obligatory in the first two types of society are optional here. We hope to develop additional aspects of our research at a later date.

Gavies Jr and Reed are correct in writing that "If race is not a simple matter of genetics or false subjective categorization, then segregation, prejudices, discrimination, and other manisfestations or bias on the part of the inside group in the face of the outside group.. are not the inevitable result of biological or cognitive processes. We maintain on the contrary that they reflect the historical emergence of specific behaviors and related systems of belief which turn physical and cultural differences into the equivalent of what is "good" or "bad" within the human species " (1995,101). We believe, however, that the theoretical framework that we have attempted to work out in this area (Philogene, 1994) is the only one at this point that can serve to broach such a complex and ancient phenomenon embracing both convictions and behaviors. It really seems too far-fetched to imagine that people discriminate against the Gypsies as a result of erroneous generalizations or for the sake of conserving mental energy. The history of oppression shows, on the contrary, that a great deal of mental energy, physical violence, strategic skill (Perez, 1996) and a whole cultural tradition had to be mobilized on its behalf.

REFERENCES

Jedlowski, P. (1995). Razzismo, pregiudizio e senso comune, il mondo 3, 2, pp. 298-304

Gaines, S.O. & Reed, E.S. (1995). From Allport to Dubois, American Psychologist, 50, pp. 96-103.

Allport, G. W. (1979). The nature of prejudice, Allison Wesley, Gambridge, .

De Finis, G. (1994), .11 7~01~do 3, r, pp. 290-298

Serge Moscovici
LEPS - Maison des Sciences de l'Homme
54 bd Raspail
75006 Paris
France