

The Theory of Enablement and Social Representations as Contributions to “Societal” Political Psychology: Some Thoughts on Valsiner (2003) and Wagner (2003)

Thalia Magioglou

Maison des Sciences de l'Homme
54 bd. Raspail, Paris
E-mail: thalia.magioglou@msh-paris.fr

Social Representation's theory is a social psychological theory; Valsiner's (2003) theory is a contribution from the perspective of cultural and developmental psychology that insists on the dynamic aspect of social representations. My main interest when I read both Jaan Valsiner's (2003) "theory of enablement" and W. Wagner's (2003) comment, was in their possible contribution to a "societal" political psychology, with an approach of the political that:

1. goes beyond the institutional dimension, and focuses on the ways individuals, groups and collectivities construct/ deal with conflicts and decide about their common future
2. pays particular attention to the analysis of the everyday, 'ordinary' citizens and common sense thinking.¹

"We live in order to face the next moment- until the end". Valsiner (2003, p.7.1) starts his article with this phrase, and his theory of enablement, in the way I understand it, as a means of coping with the uncertainty of the immediate future, although focused on individual action, can be helpful for a "societal" political psychology. Signs, semiotic mediators, or social representations, in Valsiner's terms are means of psychological adaptation oriented to the immediate future. They present a heterogeneous quality including opposite meanings, and this *"creates the basis for dialogicality of social representing"* (p.7.13). Political ideology and religion are forms of social thinking that also try to create a way to cope with uncertainty.

¹ The idea of a "societal" political psychology is presented in the introductory text of the web site of the groupe "EPOPS", at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme: www.epops.msh-paris.fr.

Politics and political action tries to be an intentional action affecting the future and diminishing uncertainty.

The kind of society a collectivity wants to live in, and the way it directs its actions and resources towards this end, is an object of study for a “societal” political psychology.

Stressing the dynamic aspect of social representations and focusing on a theory of action without ignoring the dialogical aspect of representations are three elements that can be particularly useful as a starting point. In Wagner’s words, cultural tools such as signs representations, etc. bridge the past and the future and enable people to act. These constructions of the past undergo change when put in use since the context is not the same.

In Valsiner’s perspective, human beings, groups and different collectivities, are approached as potential social actors. In that sense, a theory of enablement that links social representations to action is a very interesting theoretical tool. On the other hand, social representations of the social context and self -low self efficacy- can lead individuals and collectivities to relinquish their role as a social actor and abandon the public sphere. I see two possible developments of the theory of enablement in the direction of societal political psychology: in the first place, the link between semiotic mediators and collective action; in the second place, to take into consideration inaction and withdrawal from activity as a way to diminish anxiety for the future. Loss of interest for the public sphere and less political participation in western democracies, are an example of this form of inaction, combined at times with a feeling of self-inefficacy, as in the case of a group of young Greeks in my study on common sense thinking on democracy (Magioglou, 2000).

The theory of social representations can be of great help to the understanding of common sense thinking and the way collectivities co-construct meaning, their identities and that of others, their interests and the social objects they value, which could become a source of conflict. I think that the aspect of social representations that Wagner stresses, as “holistic in comprising mental content as well as behaviour”, and the fact that “representational change comes about through collective controversy” (p.8.1), is particularly useful to the understanding of political questions. However, I don’t see these positions as incompatible to Valsiner’s theory of enablement, for two reasons: in the first place, because to me, there is no reason to completely separate “internal dialogue” from “collective controversy”. Very often, as in the case of Valsiner’s experiment, internal dialogue uses material from a public controversy and social representation allows argumentation and the presence of dilemmas. When thinking or explaining why one should or should not shoot an image that is *recognised* to be Hitler, or a member of KKK², it is not possible to ignore, on the one hand humanistic, Christian and other positions about the value of human life on the Western culture, and on the other hand, the role this person has played in destroying so many of them. Internal dialogue is not immune to social controversy. In a case like this, there are conflicting arguments that can be used to justify any possible course of action. In this sense, I understand it as a dilemma, and it is the construction and presence of dilemmas in a culture that allow a degree of freedom for individual or collective choice and action.³

The issues Valsiner chooses in his experiments are part of a public debate and embedded in a culture that cannot be ignored. This is one reason why the way Valsiner links social

² Recognising a historic figure is related to a certain degree of knowledge about the role of this figure and the controversies around it.

³ Billig’s (1987) conception of dilemmatic thinking illustrates the role of dilemmas.

representations to individual action, could be used as a basis for a link between social representations and collective action.

Valsiner also stresses the importance of time: thinking, acting and explaining an action may be part of the same universe of meaning; nevertheless, despite the association between them, common sense allows different and sometimes contradictory courses of action and justification of an action. The three steps can be part of the same social representation, nevertheless, controversial or dilemmatic aspects of the representation may encourage this or the other course of action.

Freedom may be an important element for the social representation of democracy⁴, but for a person who demonstrates, freedom of action consists to block a street in order to express dissatisfaction with a certain policy, and for a certain driver who cannot go to his destination because of the demonstration, freedom of action is the possibility to go where he wants without being stopped by a demonstration.⁵

References

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⁴ Markova, studying the representation of democracy with different populations has insisted in the importance of freedom. Also in our research in Greece, democracy is associated to freedom (Moodie, Markova & Plichtova, 1995).

⁵ The example comes from our research about common sense thinking on democracy in Greece (Magioglou, 2000).