The value of images for exploring the functions of social representations: toward self-generated pictorial social representations.
A Comment on "History, emotions and hetero-referential representations" by Sen and Wagner (2005)

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The comment is focused on the hetero-referential representations studied by the help of visual stimuli as it has been achieved in the article co-authored by Ragini Sen and Wolfgang Wagner. The comment points out the advantages of the approach developed by Sen and Wagner that has at its core the use of iconic stimuli that record information and symbolic meaning related to important events that marked the relations between Hindus and Muslims. The comment aims also at discussing the epistemic valence of what could be called pictorial (figural, iconic) social representations produced by the insiders of any community that could complement the predominant verbal approach of social representations which, by their content and expression, cannot cover the pictorial representations that are used naturally at different levels of social complexity from individual level up to community level and even global level.

The functions of visual images (icons, pictures, models, figures) in the construction of social behavior

Both phylogenetically and ontogenetically visual images (figures, icons, pictures, map-like structures) either of real objects or of illusionary, even impossible objects are prior to either oral or written communication through words. Images come first, words are coming after, historically and ontogenetically.

The existence of a model that produces images in the imitator's mind is a fundamental precondition of imprinting (Lorenz, 1971). Imprinting is not reducible to visual stimuli, however, visual stimuli are, for humans, a great source for imitation that can be produced in the presence or absence of the imitated object. *Imitation*, as it was defined by G. Tarde (1890/1903) cannot be achieved without visual images. It is interesting to recall that Tarde considered that imitative propagation increases the number of the *shared models* by a given community or by more than one community. Tarde posited that "the force and the extent of

the social bonds between the members of a society" are a function of the number and importance of the "*models they have in common*" (1898/1969, p. 97). Imitation as such could, according to Tarde, increase the bonds among persons and communities. Tarde also revealed the function of imitation in the *dissemination of innovations across social borders*. Imitation implies a model and an image of the model. The deferred imitation, observed by Piaget (1962), would be impossible without mental images. Visual images are essential for simple and complex forms of social learning that is based on observation and modelling as proved by many experiments and field studies inspired by the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 2000, 2003).

Visual images (pictures, icons, figural and non-figural images, concrete and abstract images, mental maps etc.) are parts of the socialization and enculturation processes and as such are integrative and central components of social representations. Despite it the study of the visual images as parts of the social representations is a new explicit research interest in the area of social representations. This is why studies that use pictorial representations for the study of social representations and of other cognitive and emotional processes that have societal meaning and substance are in great need. The power of pictorial representations within the dynamic of social representations and especially in the specific case of inter-ethnic relationships was turned into a major inquiring topic by the study of Sen and Wagner (2005).

Social representations as resources of thinking and acting communities

Within the theoretical framework of the social representations theory as it has been developed by Moscovici (1971/1976), social representations have more than cognitive functions. They have also a powerful transformative function: "it is no longer appropriate to consider representations as a replicas of the world or a reflection of it, not only because this positivist conception is the source of numerous difficulties but also because representations also evoke what is absent from this world, *they form it rather more than they simulate it"* (Moscovici, 2001, p. 154, italics added).

Representations of the social realities, of the world might become parts of higher "levels of social complexity" (Hinde, 1979) than individual units and as such they can be considered parts of what Weber called "concepts of collective entities", of what Durkheim (1995) called "collective thought", of what Jung called "collective unconscious", of what Gandhi (1926/1958) referred at and tried to enhance as "thinking communities", Moscovici called "thinking societies", and Gardner (2005) named "changing minds". At higher levels of social complexity, social representations, collective memory, emotional reactions, social perceptions, social knowledge and decision making processes are integrated in different modes that can influence the development of what Bandura calls collective self-efficacy (2000). As one moves from less complex social units (individuals, dyads) to more complex social levels (communities, ethnic groups, nations, global level) it becomes more and more necessary to identify the wider range of cognitive processes that are involved and that cannot be reduced to mere perception, representation or memory. Social representations, as components of the societal thinking, imagining, communicating and interpretative processes, are at the same time essential elements for the collective actions that are rooted in them, guided by them and that might feed them.

Due to the almost limitless technical capacity to store images about historical events the problem is not so much to find out such images but *to select* the most significant ones for specific groups and a specific major problem that marks the interaction of the respective groups. Sen and Wagner (2005) had the fertile idea to resort to iconic stimuli and worked out

a reliable methodological framework to use them in the study of social representations between groups that are in conflict. The study "*History, emotions and hetero-referential representations in inter-group conflict: The example of Hindu-Muslim relations in India*" by Sen and Wagner is focused on the methodological, theoretical and practical value of visual (icons, pictures, figural and non-figural images, etc.) representations studied in relation with major social issues as inter-ethnic-conflicts. This insightful and original study invites to explore what are the main *types of visual images* that can be used in the study of social representations.

One of the major criteria to *categorize* the huge variety of *images* that can be used in this area is their origin on the *continuum* between *insiders* (observed, respondents, subjects) and *outsiders* (observers, experts, experimenters, etc.). According to this criterion there are three major categories of visual images: a) visual *images* produced, worked out by the *insiders*; b) visual *images* worked out by the *outsiders*; c) visual images produced naturally by *different social groups* that include all kinds of more or less specialized persons and institutions that have the means and/or the duty to produce, store, modify, expose and disseminate images that have social substance. Sen and Wagner selected a set of significant images that have been produced during time by more or less specialized persons and social institutions from within the Indian society.

Wagner and Hayes (2005) advanced the idea that relatively frequently *social representations are related to thinking through images, icons and metaphors* and in many cases *might not take a propositional form.* In their article, Sen and Wagner make explicit that the "representational anchoring is always a many-sided and concatenated process in the course of which a network of mapping relationships is established" (p. 24). Representational anchoring includes propositional/verbal components mixed in different degrees with iconic/pictorial components. The interaction between the verbal/propositional components of social representations on one side and their iconic/figural components remains a difficult methodological, theoretical and practical question. The research on hetero-referential representations of Muslim and Hindu individuals approaches this question in an original and efficient mode by resorting to iconic/pictorial stimuli.It used as iconic stimuli a set of 15 images that were offered to the participants in order to *reveal their own reactions* to each of these pictures, to express the *associations stimulated* by these images, and to *imagine the mode in which people would react to each of these images* if they would be "plastered over".

Most of the images refer to recent historical events such as the 1990 resurgence of Hindutava (Hindu revivalism) as in the image that represented the Chariot March, the destruction of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (December 1992) by militant Hindus, and an image with the Godhra incident produced in 2002 when militant Muslims supposedly incinerated a train and killed many Hindus, or a calendar picture of Ram and Sita. Each of these images acquires a political meaning within the context of the relations between the two religious groups.

It is surprising that the study on hetero-referential representations did not use any *images that explicitly symbolize non-violent ways* of approaching Hindu-Muslim relations in India. For instance, one could resort to the Gandhi's archives that include pictures that have explicit symbolic value and represent non-violent ways of relating and of coping with conflicts.

The epistemic, social and practical value of visual social representations

There is little doubt, especially after the series of recent (July 2006) terrible bombings in Mumbai, when hundreds of innocent people were killed or wounded, that the approach

achieved by Sen and Wagner is not just essential for the theory of social representations but also for the practical implications of social representations, and specifically for *the functions of images* in this area. Such an exploration implies not only scientific imagination that is proved by the simplicity, boldness, validity and efficiency of the method as such but also it would be impossible without dedication and courage to be involved in field study carried within a stressful environment. The interviews based on visual stimuli were carried out within a dangerous climate. Even so they lasted 60-75 minutes and sometimes they had to be "abandoned because the respondent exhibited fear of the underworld or communal politics and did not want his views to be recorded" (p. 25). I wonder if in Sen's field notes one might find information about the feelings of the interviewer also. The fact that the interviews were carried out in non-standard places such as under a tree, in a playground, on a construction site, etc. does not diminish but increases the value of the study.

The visual stimuli were perceived within the environment in which the respondents are living and working. The fact that the interview was carried out by a Hindu woman poses challenging questions regarding the possible long term influence of the social research process on a given community if we take into account that for the Muslim respondents a woman in such a role is a very unexpected presence.

The images induced strong emotions, verbal reactions, associations, comments of the respondents who belong to the two communities. The procedure reminds one of the classical *TAT* introduced by Murray (1951) but this time the pictures refer to well known social events that marked the lives of Hindu and Muslim communities and their relationships. These images, in contrast to the TAT set of pictures, could generate not just stories that are focused on an individual and his/her life events but *stories focused on communities and their history*. All these images received public interpretations and comments since the moment they have been produced even far beyond the Indian geographical and cultural borders. This means that the interpretative framework for all the images selected by Sen and Wagner contains pre-existing societal views that might have an influence on the specific mode in which each respondent reacted to the images.

The iconic stimuli were used as means to externalize the verbal, including the emotional reactions, of the participants toward these events, to make them to interpret these images and to comment about the possible social consequences of the public dissemination of these images. So, the images had an *evocative potential* (recalling highly significant social events), a *projective function* (especially through the associations produced by them) and, very importantly a *potential to produce social changes* as this potential was envisaged by the respondents when they answered to the question regarding what might happen if such images would be displayed to rallies.

The findings of the study strongly suggest that the visual stimuli are extremely efficient in the externalization of powerful emotions that have collective meaning and make evident that the same image as such could trigger contradictory emotions between the two communities being a *symbol* for opposite states and views. For instance, the photograph of the destruction of Babri Masjid "had become a symbol of *collective grief* amidst the Muslims" while amidst the Hindus it had become a symbol of "*collective triumph*" (p. 2.8). These findings have major practical implications for the value of certain images for a non-violent re-construction of inter-ethnic relationships.

At the same time these findings invite to a few questions regarding the study. First it seems useful for the reader to learn more about the details of the use of those 15 or so images. For instance: What was the order in which the pictures were presented to the respondents? What was the reaction time to each picture across the two groups? Also it might be useful to identify the similarities and differences between the hetero and self-referential pictures for the

two groups and to have a quantitative measure of these differences. It seems to me that such a comparison might serve one of the major arguments of the commented study regarding the vital role of emotions in the representational politics approached via visual stimuli.

It is necessary to discuss the theoretical potential of the concept of "*figure*" within the study carried out by Sen and Wagner. The authors, following the landmark suggestion of Moscovici (1976) regarding the metaphoric value of images, are mainly attracted by the figurative aspects of the images, and less by their figural aspects. For instance, this is very clear in the case of they call the "*core images of Babri Masjid-or figurative core*" (p. 2.8). Certain places, constructions, monuments, public events, buildings, and even ruins may acquire a symbolic value that is transferred to their images that could be carried out at different distances and in different times. It seems that it might be useful to approach the figural elements of an image (picture) in a mode that will allow identifying the figurative meaning of each or some of the major iconic elements of picture.

There are terms, such as "enemy of the people", which can evoke "a definite image" that "excludes the person from the society" (Moscovici, 2001, p. 47). Within the communist societies "enemy of the people" (party, state, etc) was an official representation while, in the minds of common people it evoked images of "victims", "dissidents", "strong characters", etc. After 1989, in some cases, the official representation was reversed and replaced by the common one, and the former "enemies of the party" were represented as "heroes". *Images* per se, as those used by Sen and Wagner invite to a methodological question with wide theoretical ramifications: *what are the relations between the iconic, figural, pictorial components of social representations and their verbal (oral or written) components?* How do these components and their relations develop in time? How could be externalized the pictorial social representations about any type of reality and especially about the self-others relationships?

Studies focused on the kernel of social representations such as that of Moliner and Martos (2005) used linguistic material to investigate the relationships between the "central" and peripheral" aspects of targeted terms and revealed the complex interaction between the central and the peripheral elements in generating the meaning of social representations. The logical and semantic relationships among the terms were used to identify the characteristics of the social representations. However, the authors warn about the limitations imposed by the use of the linguistic material. It is interesting that most studies on social representations carried out across cultures are limited to verbal material. For instance, this is the case with the study on social representations that guide the parental decisions that deal with the drug consumption of their teenage children (Nuño-Gutiérez & González-Forteza, 2004).

Because visual images of social spaces, social relationship, values, institutions and even natural objects and processes contain social elements and/or are influenced by social conditions they can be considered as belonging to the category of social representations that are theoretically connected with the Piagetian (1923/1962, 1960, 1962) concept of schema that involves images, self-made models and mental pictures that might be verbalized or not.

The visual expression of social representations is extremely important for the present comment stimulated by the article co-authored by Sen and Wagner that resorts to images (figures, pictures, etc.) as its prime tool for collecting data. Why? Because starting with Moscovici's pioneering study about social representations on psychoanalytical concepts such as that of "complex" *the targeted social representations and especially the means to study them were verbal*. It is important to mention also the value *of musical images* as alternatives to verbal representations mainly because the "musical social representations" (in form of vernacular tunes) might be related to core elements of the individual and societal identities.

The study on hetero-referential representations carried by Sen and Wagner has the great merit to resort to significant pictorial stimuli that capture essential traits of recent social, religious, and political events and to explore the pictorial forms of social representations. Even if the images are provided by the researchers they are not artificially constructed by the experts but selected by *them from a huge cultural pool of images that represent major recent social events* or, at least, might be related to major social events even if such images were generated long time ago. The iconic stimuli selected by Sen and Wagner have symbolic meaning and a high emotional load (2006, pp. 2.6-2.10) being relevant for the relationships between two communities.

Sen and Wagner discuss also the value of the images for the understanding of those social representations that might have roots in the myths of origin. It seems that within this context some of the images selected by Sen and Wagner express or at least imply the distinction between "*sacred*" and "*profane*" spaces. This polarity explored by Eliade (1959) seems to be useful for many areas of modern life and conflicts including the economic activity approached from the perspective of the virtues that are implied by its different forms (McCloskey, 2005). Images represent a sensitive tool able to identify the borders between the sacred and profane as the insiders conceive them.

The images have been easily recognized and understood by the respondents. This fact that suggests that the images have been well integrated in the worldview of the respective communities and within the set of iconic representations that refer to the relationships between the two communities. It also suggests that these images are integrated in the collective memory of the two communities. The method used by Sen and Wagner and the easiness with which the pictures were recognized by the respondents opens the way for a theoretical inquiry of the *balance between the verbal (linguistic, figurative) and the visual (iconic, pictorial, figural, map-like) components of social representations*. This empirical hard fact deserves an explicit exploration in the future studies based on the fruitful procedure imagined by Wagner and Sen. Even if the data collection, and the processing and interpretation of the iconic data are much more difficult than the verbal data the use of images provides valuable information on social representations that is not accessible by other means.

Sen and Wagner worked out *a narrative model* of the hetero-referential relationships focused on the emotional reactions of the respondents and of their interpretations of the pictures. The narrative model makes visible *two distinctive story lines* and the "emotional resonance" implied in these story lines (p. 2.18) that belong to one and the same macro-narrative reconstructed by the researchers based on the information provided by the use of iconic stimuli. The macro-narrative model helps to reconstruct the social representations of the two groups and to identity the shifts within each community between feelings of "triumph" and feelings of "humiliation" that are depicted within a zero-sum framework. This model allows for better understanding the dynamic of identity elements during this inter-group conflict. At the same time the narrative model that sums up the main results of the research imposes some limits produced by the fact that during the data collection and during the interpretation of the findings the authors restrained their research to the verbal dimensions of the social representations. Despite the fact that the stimuli were visual due to the verbal character of the collected reactions the social representations are forced again into a linguistic frame. Would it be possible to expand this research in a more explicit visual mode? I think yes.

I would dare to suggest the following main options. Firstly, an inspection of the collected material in order to identify and codify all those elements in the verbal answers that refer explicitly to images, graphic, iconic elements. If such elements are identifiable one might asks how many are based on visual images that do not originate in the pictures manipulated by the

researchers. Secondly, it seems reasonable to ask the respondents to arrange themselves the pictures according to their own way of perceiving the relationships between the two communities. So, in this case each respondent could organize the 15 pictures according to his/her own mode of understanding, feeling, and viewing the relations between the two communities. After it each respondent might be asked to provide his own interpretation of his/her arrangement of the pictures. Thirdly, one could try to stimulate the expression of personal iconic representations about the same events. This might be a more time consuming process and it could be carried out by different means, including collections of photographs (images) stored and/or produced by the respondents.

It is important to remind ourselves of the fact that there is historical evidence that reveals that since ancient times different cultures used specific visual images to represent the social self and its relationships with the individual self (Assmann, 2002, pp. 167-174). There are many studies interested in issues of social identity at the individual and interpersonal levels that used images created by the insiders, by the respondents. For instance in the landmark study about adolescents' theories about the development of their relationships with parents carried out by Pipp, Shaver, Jennings, Lambron & Fischer (1985), subjects were asked *to produce their own drawings* ("figural representations") of the relationships between them and one of their parents. A different approach, which stimulates the active participation of the insiders is the technique of "photographing self" introduced by Ziller (1990).

Also there were introduced abstract pictorial representations of self-other relationships as it is the case with the *Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale* (Aron, Aron & Smollan, 1992). The researcher imagined the pictures while the respondent (subject, participant, etc.) must select one of these pictures. Agnew, Loving, Le and Goodfriend (2004) developed a procedure that takes into account more components of the self-other relationships, as it would be personal, physical, work, and social, which might not always overlap in the same degree. How could mental pictures about self-others relationships in particular and about the social space in general be externalized, "objectified"? The technique of the *social auto-graph* is one of the possible solutions to this problem: it asks individuals to generate and express (build, draw, lay out) *replicas* as accurate as possible of their *own mental images* about their social relationships (Mamali, 1984/1986).

The imaginative and fruitful approach worked out by Sen and Wagner and the significant findings of their research point out also toward the value of participative research within the field of social representations. It is clear that the visual stimuli facilitated the involvement of the respondents in the project as did the interviewing situation as such. Also the study invites to explore with the same means the research value of images that are selected by the insiders (members of the two communities). If we take into account the achievements of participative and action research (Chataway, 1994; Galtung, 1977; Gusti, 1968; Liu & Liu, 2000; Merton, 1972; Stahl, 1974) and Moscovici's idea that social representations are not just copies of social reality but they can be factors of social change than it follows that it might be useful develop procedures able to offer to the insiders means to express their own pictures, images, visual representations. In this way the area of what can be called *pictorial social representations* might reveal more of its explanatory and practical resources.

In conclusion, the use of pictorial stimuli and possibly the stimulation of pictorial representations covers a less explored area of social representations and potentially might lead to gaining significant knowledge about the *pictorial (iconic, visual, map-like, figural) social representations*. This represents in itself a step in the exploration of the complex processes that characterize thinking and acting communities.

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