

Book Review. Serge Moscovici, *Mon après-guerre à Paris. Chronique des années retrouvées (2019)*

GRUEV-VINTILA ANDREEA¹ and KALAMPALIKIS NIKOS²

¹ Laboratoire Parisien de Psychologie Sociale, University Paris-Nanterre, Paris, France

² Groupe de Recherche en Psychologie Sociale, University Lumière Lyon 2, Lyon, France

Mon après-guerre à Paris. Chronique des années retrouvées (My post-war in Paris. Chronicle of the years found) is Serge Moscovici's second autobiographical volume. It was edited and annotated by philosopher and historian Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, with the support of the Shoah Memorial, and published by the Éditions Grasset thanks to the perseverance of his sons, Denis and Pierre Moscovici. The manuscript was edited in French from handwritten notes in seven or eight languages found posthumously and is illustrated with superb photos from the family's personal archives. It won the "Influences" Ideas Prize 2019. Who is this young foreigner, 'person-less' (sans-personne), who arrived in Paris at 22 years old, carrying 'a legacy of 6 million dead'? How did he transform a traumatic life-course into a legacy of innovation, creativity and change? How did his gaze, coupled with a particular sensitivity that he called his radar, change the trajectory of social psychology, renovate its questions, lead to new scientific paradigms? How does his heritage touch us today, in the European and global context marked by extreme crises and threats? The story is captivating.

Keywords: Serge Moscovici, autobiography, social psychology, antisemitism, trauma

A POSTHUMOUS WORK

Mon après-guerre à Paris. Chronique des années retrouvées (*My post-war in Paris. Chronicle of the years found*) is Serge Moscovici's second autobiographical volume. It follows the first volume, *Chronique des années égarées: récit autobiographique* (*Chronicle of lost years: autobiographical story*) published in 1997. It was edited and annotated by philosopher and historian Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, with the support of the Mémorial de la Shoah (Shoah Memorial), and published by the Éditions Grasset thanks to the perseverance of his sons, Denis and Pierre Moscovici. The manuscript was edited in French from handwritten notes in seven or eight languages found posthumously and is illustrated with superb photos from the family's personal archives. It won the "Influences" Ideas Prize 2019.

Serge Moscovici writes about his arrival in Paris in 1948, as a young Jewish immigrant. He recounts the first years of his human and intellectual journey in post-war France, a society whose analyst he would become, as a founder of modern social psychology and a precursor of political ecology. The book is written with the voice, the questions and the humour of this man whose psychosocial, Proustian gaze still questions contemporary societies.

Who is this young foreigner, 'person-less' (*sans-personne*), who arrived in Paris at 22 years old, carrying 'a legacy of 6 million dead'?¹ How did he transform a traumatic life-course into a legacy of innovation, creativity and change? How did his gaze, coupled with a particular sensitivity that he called his radar, change the trajectory of social psychology, renovate its questions, lead to new scientific paradigms? How does his heritage touch us today, in the European and global context marked by extreme crises and threats? The story is captivating. This second autobiographical volume is easy and quick to read. Moscovici's regular readers discover once again their influential author and scientist, five years after his death, his very personal writing style, his experience of History. New readers discover the story of a man who observed post-war life in Paris while experiencing its significant incidents and encounters. The book includes a number of intimate insights, something that was rare even for those who knew Moscovici personally.

TRAUMA

As a survivor of the horrific pogroms and of anti-Semitism in Romania, he describes the psycho-traumatic explosion that occurred a few years later, once he became safe in Paris:

¹ All translations in English are the work of the author of the book review.

“My life was in perpetual imbalance, and in my eyes, this meant an unfair punishment which translated into all kinds of phobias and anxieties. But I had understood one thing: I should especially not sink into melancholy or else I would collapse” (p. 92).

His survival resources came from other victims. A few months earlier *‘the survivors in the DP camps had taught me that there is one thing that we must abhor more passionately than misery itself: resignation to misery’*. A commandment to resist out of the duty towards those who had resisted. *‘The psyche is an extraordinary entity: I had resigned to die, I resigned to live’* he writes. To connect to life, seeking to restore a feminine face of love to repair the wrong, while doubting and self-protecting. The face and name of love was Marie Bromberg-Moscovici, the mother of his two sons, a psychoanalyst herself. *‘I would have liked so much to be a man on the side of women’* writes Moscovici, whose reflection on the active minorities’ influence drew on his observations of feminism. *‘Unfortunately, I have become a man on the side of men’*.

TRANSFORMATION

Moscovici scrutinizes the mystery of post-war France’s sophisticated social scene through the particular gaze of a young broken refugee. He writes about the meaning of being Jewish: *‘My way of being Jewish? I would say a gift for stubbornness and a penchant for disobedience. And I never lived without a religious presence, or rather without the impetus of the believer, no matter if I became an atheist’*. It combined with his status as a foreigner and stateless person, which he kept until 1958.

‘There is yet another difference between an ordinary foreigner and a Jewish foreigner. The former faces xenophobia, contempt, humiliation, but rarely hatred. The Jews, however, face hatred and jealousy as passions. (...) What irresistible envy can Jews stir in the souls of others?’

His anchor became the small group of outsiders formed with Isac Chiva and Paul Celan, a trio cemented by *‘a rage to live and a need to take revenge on death’*. Isac Chiva, born in 1925 in Romania, who later became Claude Lévi-Strauss' right-hand, remained one of Moscovici's most loyal, lifetime friends. Paul Celan, the *‘heartwounded poet’*, born in 1920 in Romania, a witness and survivor of Nazism, killed himself in Paris in 1970. He is considered

one of the greatest German language poets in post-war Europe. According to Moscovici, their subversive marginality came from their propensity *‘to change the questions and make connections that could seem academically unusual in the eyes of the French’*. How those questions changed the social psychology paradigm and especially at what cost and with what tumult, is what we learn in the book.

This *‘trio of aliens’* was a luminous, indestructible link in those years of cold, hunger, loneliness and labour. Laughing through tears, Moscovici notes with his unique *bitterer gelehther* (bitter laughter), a *leitmotif* of the book:

“I could now count on Paul and Chiva. But they themselves struggled with their own difficulties: Paul’s hotel room had just been repainted in yellow with a flower wallpaper that was driving him nuts, and Chiva had relapsed from his primary infection. As for me, it must be admitted that nothing is more monotonous, poorer, nor more repetitive than a depressed person’s complaint” (p. 183).

These *‘three Romanian Jewish refugees with no return, no family and no money’*, *‘educated by the terror of history’*, who *‘had just understood that they were the last Jews in Europe’*, formed a community of destiny and sorrow, an active minority in Moscovici’s scientific terms. They began to work (sewing machine, shoe manufacturer counter...), and decided to get out of it together at all costs. In the summer of 1948, they enrolled at the Sorbonne.

For the young Moscovici there were *‘on one side the hard sciences, on the other, philosophy. All the rest, humanities and social sciences, were a terra incognita’*. At a time when it had lost its early twentieth century appeal, psychology appeared as a new territory to him, and the recent Bachelor created at the Sorbonne in 1947 became a solution for his resident papers in France. *‘Everything would be invented’* he wrote. Moscovici fondly remembers his first paper published in 1953 in the *Bulletin de Psychologie*, *‘a forum open to young researchers’*, alongside Claude Lévi-Strauss and Daniel Lagache, the only professor who taught social psychology, and later his supervisor.

He writes that he chose to study psychology because of the discrepancy between “society as Marx saw it with his telescope and that which Proust described through his microscope” (p. 116). He recalls the role played in his choice by what he calls: *‘the events through which I had just gone in Romania’*, which commanded him to *‘to unravel the mystery of such collective hysteria, which also had me taught that an individual or a group could resist the deadliest*

ideologies, hence the interest, in my eyes, of working on social representations'.

If trauma is a loss of meaning, then the book is perhaps a contribution to one of the most important functions of psychology, restoring meaning (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). It sheds a light on the deeper significance of Moscovici's contributions to social psychology: "In retrospect, I think that I imported into my later reflection those two collective experiences, Zionism and Communism, the attraction for the few and the fascination for the many. The communist experience served as a sting for *The Age of Crowds* (1981); for the *Psychology of active minorities* (1979), it was the Zionist movement. In fact, my past never ceased to secretly labour in my work" (p. 59).

TRANSMISSION

Serge Moscovici has repeatedly stressed social psychology's strategic position to answer the political and social questions of contemporary societies. The book reveals his mature retrospective gaze on the young man who had crossed the great History in the mid-twentieth century with his singular and own traumatic history, both of which nourished his thinking, transformed psychosocial paradigms, and opened transdisciplinary borders.

His sons, in their beautiful afterword, mention their wish to find their father's handwritten notes in the years that followed those recalled in the book, in which he became worldwide known through his research, personality, ideas, and teaching. May their wish come true to cultivate Serge Moscovici's unique and precious, charismatic and founding legacy, which continues to inspire generations of humanities and social sciences researchers around the world. Flaubert, to whom Moscovici was attached, wrote: '*The man is nothing, the work everything*'.

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ANDREEA GRUEV-VINTILA is Associate Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Paris-Nanterre (LAPPS) (France). She conducts research on sense making under extreme circumstances and on the social psychological foundations of power, resistance and violence, using a social representational, trauma informed approach. She is the first social psychologist to win a French national research agency grant to study violent radicalism in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015. She co-edited with Adrian Neculau the Romanian edition of Serge Moscovici's *Social Influence and Social Change*, published at Polirom (Iasi).

E-mail: aernstvi@parisnanterre.fr

NIKOS KALAMPALIKIS is Full Professor of Social Psychology at the University Lumière Lyon 2 (UR GRePS) (France). His current work on social representations focusses on symbolic practices of kinship and gift. He edited Serge Moscovici's last two books in French (*Reason and Cultures*, 2012; *The Scandal of Social Thought*, 2013), both published at the Editions of the EHESS. More recently (2019), he edited *Serge Moscovici: un regard sur les mondes communs* (Serge Moscovici: a look at common worlds) and *Serge Moscovici: Psychologie des représentations sociales* (Serge Moscovici: Psychology of social representations).

E-mail: nikos.kalampalikis@univ-lyon2.fr