

## The Reach of Social Representations: Impact and Ramifications

Gina Philogene Sarah Lawrence College

Serge Moscovici's seminal *La Psychoanalyse, son image et son public* (1961/1976) is considered a key publication in the history of social psychology. It provides a clear roadmap for conceptualizing and investigating the synergy between the social and the cognitive aspects of individuals. It also reinforces an epistemological pluralism necessary to attain a full description of the dynamic social world. Indeed, by reintroducing the concept of representation in psychology, the book achieved its pursuit of calibrating social psychology at the level of a grand discipline that could serve as a point of conjunction for all the other social sciences.

“As Duveen pointed out in the Introduction to the English edition of *Psychoanalysis*, as we read this book we also see what a breadth of knowledge is necessary for the analysis of social representations – not only across the field of social psychology, but also sociology, anthropology, philosophy, epistemology, history and the history of science... But, when it comes to understanding the ways in which people make sense of their condition and their experience the divisions between academic disciplines necessarily appears somewhat arbitrary.” (Duveen, 2008 p. XVII).

The book (and the theory to which it gave rise) has had a phenomenal diffusion. It first made its weight felt in Latin America. It then embedded itself as the carrier for an alternative approach to mainstream social psychology in Europe. And it is now enjoying a powerful stride in Asia (especially Southeast Asia) and Africa. Missing in that list is North America. Actually, to be more precise, the United States, since social representation theory managed to build a strong presence in Mexico and Canada.

The impressive near-global reach of *La Psychoanalyse* attests to the vitality of the theoretical perspective it brings forth. The enthusiastic adoption of social representation theory, the perspective this book has brought forth, no longer just reflects the disenchantment of many with the “mainstream” perspectives. Perhaps more importantly, and certainly far more positively, it also offers an epistemological choice that provides its protagonists with new insights on the social dimensions of our life.

Social representation theory has challenged the orthodoxy of traditional approaches to social psychology by remaining a consistent presence offering an alternative. This theory is part of a broader dissension against “mainstream American psychology” which its critics generally accuse as being too individualistic. These voices of dissent emerged in the late 1950s when, as one of several French social psychologists at the time, Serge Moscovici proposed a social psychology that would be more culturally sensitive. He envisioned a social psychology that would ask radically different questions and use different methods of research to tackle relevant issues.

This European dissension finally crystallized in the 1970s. It was reinforced by waves of social unrest throughout the world (e.g. the Civil Rights Movement, the workers' movements, the feminist movement, as well as the students' movement) and influenced by the end of colonization of the early 1960s. While often conceived as a European response to the dominance of American models, this dissension is today no longer a

matter of a strict dichotomy between Europe versus North America. There have always been voices of dissent from the United States, such as the social constructionism of Kenneth Gergen (1970) or the critical social psychology of Philip Wexler (1983). Furthermore, an increasing number of European social psychologists have at the same time grown more sympathetic to the traditional, essentially psychological forms of social psychology so widespread in the United States.

Yet there is a distinction to be made between the theory of social representations and some of the

other alternatives proposed as remedy to an increasingly individualistic social psychology. While undeniably part of this broader alternative vision to the study of people in society, social representation theory emerged earlier, already in the 1950s, at the forefront of the postmodern movement. As a matter of fact, the issue of representations is an old question. It has been for a long time a central issue in philosophy of mind, psychology, anthropology, and many other fields. As recounted anecdotally by Jodelet (2008), it was in the French National Library that Moscovici stumbled across the 1943 book by Abbe Robert Lenoble on the philosophy of science, which helped propel his research agenda beyond collective representations to social representations. This innovation was the central idea he wanted to frame for his alternative social psychology.

While acknowledging our intellectual debt to Professor Serge Moscovici for giving us a vision as well as the tools to study our dynamic societies, I want to pursue two specific objectives with this chapter. First, I trace the resistance of American social psychologists in endorsing the theory of social representations. To do so, I will focus on an historical epistemology to explain such resistance. By emphasizing the importance of common sense thinking, which other social psychological approaches generally regard as erroneous, the complexity of the social representations theory has had to be matched by innovative methodologies, which have focused on the multi-dimensional quality of human thought.

Indeed, when Moscovici asked us “Is social representation an empirical concept or a theoretical concept?” he tried to articulate a distinction to social perception, social cognition, and social discourse (Moscovici, 2001). For him these associations are mainly empirical due to the use of observation as a method of measurements. However, social representation is not just an empirical concept; it is also a theoretical one. And therein lays the ideological schism between such a complex dialectical way of engaging research and the practice of conducting research here in the United States.

## **1. The crisis of social psychology**

Social psychology is one of the few disciplines capable of fully completing the synthesis between the individual and the social. Since the interplay between internal mechanisms and the constantly changing social world is actualized through the interconnectedness of individuals, social psychology should, and in fact has the responsibility to, be concerned primarily with the social nature of thought and the ways in which people change their society. One of the striking characteristics of our modern societies is precisely the changing nature of our reality and the acceleration of these changes in today's world.

Advances in communication, such as Twitter or Facebook, are multiplying the instances and forms of interaction existing between social agents.

This perspective of social life, anchored in the dynamic relations existing between individuals, is unique to social psychology. Indeed, it goes beyond the concerns of traditional sociology, which has often denied the creative participation of individuals. And it also goes beyond that of the cognitive and neuro-cognitive approaches, so dominant in psychology which tend to focus solely on the processes of information or how the brain relates to specific mental processes. Social psychology is therefore imperative for a full understanding of our reality.

This unique epistemological quality notwithstanding, social psychology has evidently not succeeded to realize the full potential of its mission. Since the 1970s a good number of influential social psychologists, many from European universities (Tajfel, 1972; Moscovici, 1972, 1986; Parker, 1987, 1990) but also some based in the United States (Gergen, 1973; 1985; Wexler, 1986; Gergen, 1989; Greenwood, 2004b), have discussed a crisis faced by the discipline. From our succession of lonely paradigms and methodologies without theories to our desperate search for universality and the rise of evolutionary or neurological explanations, many aspects of social psychology have indeed exposed the depth of a crisis. In its first hundred years social psychology has not managed to provide what was expected of it, namely an understanding of the constant duality between the social and the individual. That intersection between individual cognitive

existence and the social world should have been the most sought-after form of epistemology, for it sheds light on most dimensions of human reality.

Instead we are left with a social psychology imprisoned in an individualistic and positivistic psychology. As Greenwood (2004a) put it succinctly, the crisis in the field has always been “the disappearance of the social.” This self-imposed constraint has had a two-fold effect. On the one hand, social psychology has failed to address some of the questions of the general public, the social agents we have so often used as objects and subjects in our research. And on the other hand, it has not managed to bridge with the other social sciences, notably sociology and anthropology, forcing most other disciplines to create their own version of social psychology (Moscovici, 1984). So our loss is double. The other sciences do not need us, for they have invented their own social psychology. And the public does not seem to need us either, preferring instead the popularization of science when forming its common-sense thinking.

## **2- The Historical Roots of the Problem**

How has social psychology become a discipline still trapped by its focus on a de-contextualized individual and impaired by its own methodological obsessions? The field of social psychology is said to have originated at the end of the nineteenth century with the appearance of two pioneering publications, one by Gabriel Tarde (1890) and the other by Norman Triplett (1898). Tarde and other proponents of crowd psychology (LeBon, 1896) helped articulate the sociological side of social psychology by focusing primarily on the social processes of imitation. On the other hand, Triplett's focus was quite different as he set in motion the experimental agenda for social psychology.

Already here, at the very inception of the discipline, we can sense a duality in the field between a more socially inclined research focus and a more individualistic orientation.

In 1908 two widely circulating textbooks, both noteworthy for using the term “social psychology” in their respective titles, reinforced this duality by highlighting a sociological approach to social

psychology (Ross, 1908) in direct contrast to a psychological interpretation of social psychology (McDougall, 1908). Floyd Allport (1924) famously declared that there is no psychology of groups which is not essentially and entirely a psychology of the individual. With that statement Allport cast a shadow on how the field would proceed from there. The popularity of experimental methodologies in psychology at that time forced researchers to emphasize quantifiable measurement in the development of social psychology. More generally, the history of social psychology is really a testimony to the constant struggle between a sociological social psychology and a psychological social psychology.

This brief look at the field’s early origins allows us to trace the beginning of the marginalization of the social within social psychology. The 1930’s and the threat of war in Europe changed the faith of psychology as a result of a massive exodus of many psychologists who were fleeing the Nazi menace. Most of them settled in America. That systematic “brain drain” of European thinkers to North America had a strong impact on the field, especially the practical, yet socially oriented research program of Kurt Lewin. This opening did, however, not last long as it gave way to the Cognitive Revolution of the 1950s, which emphasized an individual-centered perspective and insisted that the only way to do social psychology was through laboratory experimentation.

When Gestalt psychology and the phenomenological perspective took hold in the United States, they opened the way for the cognitive era of psychology. Primarily a reaction against behavioristic principles, the cognitive revolution decentralized the hegemonic position held thus far by the proponents of the Watsonian approach. This paradigmatic shift, crystallized in the switch from a stimulus-response model to a stimulus-organism-response model, provided ironically within psychology a fertile ground for an even more individualistic perspective, with a singular focus on a de-contextualized person. This perspective, still the dominant one in psychology, has been incorporated within social psychology with the rise of social cognition and social cognitive neuroscience (Lieberman, 2007). We were then only a step away from the use of explanations for

social phenomena that derived from genetic arguments, evolutionary determinism, and neurological reasoning. All these in fact are modern expressions of Social Darwinism which has always found deep roots in the United States, as a perfect ideological legitimization of individualism (Bellah, 1996; Lasch, 1995; Degler, 1991).

These currently prevailing approaches lend themselves to an exacerbated depiction of the individual, which eliminates the social dimension of our existence as interconnected agents. This reduction has put the very notion of the social in psychology in question to the point of Greenwood’s aforementioned conclusion that the social has vanished from mainstream American social psychologies. Furthermore, the need to employ empirical methods and preferring quantitative ones to infer causal and correlational relationships

has dominated the field.

### **3- The Impact of Social Representations**

Echoing at this point again Moscovici's voice of 1961, we wish to argue forcefully that social psychology needs to assert, or more precisely reassert, a primary focus on an individual within his or her social context. Such a perspective is obviously anchored on the idea that individuals do not form their thoughts in isolation but as a result of influence from each other. And this is the basic idea, which the social representation approach introduced and highlighted.

Social representations are societal constructions, socially elaborated and collectively shared to structure opinions, beliefs, and knowledge about social phenomena. In this way they ultimately help construct our reality and shape how we think or talk about social issues. In other words, they derive from the inter-connectedness of individuals, resulting from processes of reference through which we conceive the world around us.

Social representations theory has done two things to distinguish itself from the other approaches in social psychology. First, it has broken the barriers of tradition within the discipline of social

psychology by relying heavily on common sense to understand society, offering a more dynamic vision of social existence in constant change and flux. Secondly, by being a general theory which applies to a broad range of concrete situations, it has provided us with insights into key aspects of modern life. That focus has allowed us to converse with anthropologists as well as proponents of the other social sciences.

These two fundamental distinctions from the rest of social psychology have allowed the theory to tackle and clarify difficult issues. The principal issues in question here concern the tension between the reified universe and the consensual universe comprising modern culture (science vs common sense), the relation between language and thought, and the inter-actional dynamic between individuals and the impact of their social setting. Such points of junction between cognition and culture, or the individual and the social, are the central focus of social representation theory.

As such the protagonists of this theory have effectively traced changes, thereby addressing very well the constantly innovative nature of modern societies. The theory captures the dialectical, multi-dimensional, and dynamic dimensions of the social world – all qualities which the mainstream perspectives in American social psychology have had a difficult time to shed light on.

Over the last half century, starting with the publication of *La Psychoanalyse*, social representation theory has experienced rapid growth and diffusion across the globe. Its spread has been further aided by its notable incorporation within other fields, such as anthropology and history. A meta- theoretical analysis (De Rosa and D'Ambrosio, 2008) has illustrated convincingly the exponential growth curve during the past five decades. In terms of its presence in the field of social psychology alone, social representations went from 75 publications (refereed journals, books, and conference presentations) in the 1960s to 3189 publications during the 1990s. Parallel to its spread in the field's

publication outlets Moscovici's theory has also found anchors in a variety of

academic programs and research centers, such as the "European Ph.D. on social representations and communication" launched in 1992.

#### **4- The Resistance of Mainstream Social Psychology**

With his book *La Psychoanalyse* Moscovici opened new avenues of discovery, providing us with a useful way of theorizing, validating those theories, and applying them pragmatically to relevant societal issues. Moscovici himself qualified his approach not as a model, nor as a paradigm and not even a perspective, but as a 'regard.' What this implies is the potential of having formulated a "grand theory" which seeks an overall explanation of social life, history, and human experience.

Such "grand theories," with their dual ambition of fully exploring societal dynamics and historical grounding of human experience, run counter to the positivist nature of traditional research methods which require a socially de-contextualized individual solely defined for the purpose of experimentation and thus created outside of his or her temporally and spatially bound context (Danzinger, 1990; 1994). Bringing a narrower, more mechanical perspective to bear in placing any such grand theory outside their grasp, mainstream social psychologists have complained of Moscovici's social representations theory as either "too vague" or "too broad" (Eiser, 1986; McGuire, 1986; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Jahoda, 1988; Valsiner, 1998).

But the schism is deeper than just a matter of scope. Moscovici's approach is inherently dialectic as it grapples with the mutually determinant interaction between individuals and their respective social setting. The mainstream alternative, by contrast, remains trapped in the Cartesian mind- body dichotomy. In addition, it has been dedicated to Auguste Comte's emphasis on the scientific method ever since Gordon Allport had designated this French philosopher of science as the legitimate ancestor of social psychology (Farr, 1991). These two biases inherent in the Anglo- Saxon mainstream end up separating the individual from the social to maintain the illusion of being scientific and describe universal laws. The mainstream's positivist argumentation and

empiricist orientation simply cannot come to terms with dialectically conceived and socially centered "grand theories." Moscovici's theory of social representations thus met the same fate of marginalization as happened to an earlier predecessor carrying yet another grand theory of society, Kurt Lewin and his "field theory" (where "field" refers to all the forces acting on an individual in a particular time). In fact, in 1968 Morton Deutsch, a former student of Lewin, declared field theory as well as all other grand theories of social psychology "moribund."

Exacerbating the failure of social representation theory to take root in the United States beyond a few critical social psychologists (M. Fine, P. Wexler, followers of Ignacio Martín Barró's liberation psychology) are several additional constraints put on mainstream social psychologists in the United States and increasingly also elsewhere. Ideological markers, such as the APA Manual of Style or the propensity for excessive specialization within American social psychology, make it even more difficult, if not impossible, for proponents of social representations to be adequately represented in American journals.

The APA Manual of Style, to which all practicing psychologists have to adhere to, imposes a rigid set of rules on academic writing exercises which goes beyond constraining creativity to impact in determining fashion on all the different parameters of published articles or books. There is thus no more space for more imaginative publication formats, which has destroyed the expository and argumentative platform of the essay.

The drive towards overspecialization encouraged in American universities is well inscribed in the functionalist spirit of American psychology, supported by grants from foundations and validated through professional licensing. This increase of specialization is creating disconnected theories and islands of researchers that are becoming more and more estranged from one another. The narrow focus of these research exercises creates often replication, in which graduate students specialize in the research areas of the advisors and seldom, if ever, exploring beyond their field of specialization. As a result we are left with theoretical and methodological fragmentation.

American social psychologists pursuing academic careers are, like anyone else teaching at U.S. universities, subject to the rules of tenure - a decision which yields either lifelong employment or imminent dismissal. This "all or nothing" decision obliges prospective tenure candidates to compile a significant publication record during the first seven years of one's academic career. Success in that pursuit depends in our field also on getting grants, adding to the already considerable power of various grant-providing foundations in shaping what work the profession should prioritize and what subjects of interest get sidelined for lack of support.

These filtering mechanisms in academe crystallize with special force around the Impact Factor which has come to play a crucial role in creating research trends as a proxy measure for the relative importance of a specific journal or contribution within the field. It does so by measuring each year the average number of citations to articles published in science and social science journals. Often critically reviewed as a confirmation bias, the Impact Factor has come to shape the field as an important way of evaluating the state of the discipline. By virtue of its quantifiable nature it has been enthusiastically endorsed as objective. It is a positivist 'Whig' approach, which takes the number of citations as proxy for the importance of academic journals, the merit of published papers, and of individual researchers. The collective belief in the credibility of the Impact Factor has created a constraining atmosphere, which undermines the pursuit of alternative approaches to social psychology. This normative influence has forced scholars to comply with the dominant trend, thus making the diffusion of social representations theory even more complicated.

## **5- Concluding Remarks**

Social psychology, especially as practiced in American academe, pursues a specific and tightly circumscribed variant of its discipline, one that is firmly anchored within the individual-centered and neuro-cognitive traditions of psychology within which it is embedded. Mainstream social psychology creates thereby a gap that is hierarchically structured between the reified world of

science and the common-sense world that (social) psychologists try to sustain the

illusion of affecting change with their research agenda and empirical approaches. One may argue, as has Moscovici (1984), that these biases alienate the field from its own constituents to produce a succession of lonely paradigms in which the public is rarely interested. That pursuit rests more often than not on an exclusive claim to truth which does not give credence to alternative approaches and paradigms in social psychology. Hence the Impact Factor and other filtering mechanisms with which to marginalize different ways of looking at social-psychological phenomena as "not scientific."

A good recent example of such sanctioning occurred with the publication of Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* (2005). Grabbing the attention of the public, this much-discussed book put into a coherent frame several research works concerning the role of unconscious processes in decision making. As a bestseller it highlighted the relevance of social-psychological knowledge. Mainstream social psychologists, however, gave it a much less welcoming reception. Gladwell's dissemination of knowledge in popular culture has been virulently objected to by the academic community, as evidenced by the recent attack of Steven Pinker (2009) in the *New York Times Book Review* who accused Gladwell of "putting science lipstick on the pig of anti-science populism."

In light of this split within our discipline, it is perhaps not so surprising that social representations theory has had such a difficult presence in American social psychology where the mainstream version of the field gets built and propagated probably more aggressively than elsewhere. Much like Lewin's field theory, an earlier variant of social psychology that faced similar marginalization in the United States, Moscovici's social representation theory has proven an otherwise irresistible approach to explore change and the dynamic interplay of individuals within their social setting. When it emerged fifty years ago with publication of Moscovici's seminal *La Psychoanalyse*, it was ready for a global launch as proven with its steady and considerable dissemination in Europe, Latin America, Northern Africa, and parts of Asia.

In the face of such a broad expansion, the multiplicity of domains and topics addressed by social representation theory has provided us with crucial insights into social life. Notwithstanding the complexity of the theory, the concluding knowledge it generates has impacted on the lives of many people. Similar to participatory action research and other critical social psychologies, it elucidates issues that have been previously neglected by virtue of not fully recognizing the agency of participants in our research studies. Providing us with the true picture and the real stories of people's lives, it has had a similar effect as Lewin in changing people's lives and making a difference. This strength should highlight the impact the theory has had on understanding society.

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