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Social Representations and Mass Communication Research

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Apparently, things are clear. Social representations are shared, by definition. How do they acquire this property? Through communications of any nature, which spread them and finally allow them to settle. And given that mass communications affect, by definition too, a great number of people, they constitute the most important means of spread and settlement. It is not surprising then that the question of the relations between mass communications and social representations was addressed as early as in Moscovici's seminal work about psychoanalysis (1961). This question is not an extension of the theory of social representations to a new or marginal domain, but concerns its very foundations. For in fact the theory does not consider the media as mere distributors of stimuli which reach out more or less indiscriminately to everyone in contemporary societies. It is not content with just a description of appearances, it seeks to analyse their underlying logic.

Moscovici made a distinction between three communication systems in our societies, which he called propaganda, propagation and diffusion. The first aims to control opinion, typically in political matters; it always depends upon an institution of power and appears in a polemic context where several groups confront one another. War, of course, but also the regular functioning of modern democracies amply illustrate it. Propagation is developed as an instrument of regulation of beliefs and attitudes in a particular population, especially when it is confronted by new questions. A canonic example is that of the attempts by the Catholic Church to assimilate or interpret elements of modernity, notably with regard to economic or moral matters. Finally, diffusion minimizes social and ideological differences to unite the greatest number in an unspecialized mode of thinking; the high circulation newspapers in most developed nations are a typical example of this.

The main interest of those distinctions is to present mass media in terms of *systems*, that is of objective and functional constraints in which individuals as receivers and the media as producers are bound to a historical situation. From there, the description of mass communications in terms of stimuli or even of messages apt to be "received" by everyone appears singularly poor. Likewise, these distinctions show that speaking of mass communications in a general way

results from an abstract point of view which overlooks the complexity of social reality. It would be just as abstract to speak of "work" in general, for example, without taking into account the particular nature of the work, the conditions in which it is carried out, the differentiated values it conveys and the relations between groups which it implies.

One could believe that such theoretical clarifications are henceforth established. However, it is perhaps worthwhile to go over these ideas, for the common-places of common sense and its conceptual stereotypes exert a very strong influence, even inside science. It is well known too that social psychology sometimes persists in being more psychological than social. A recent handbook (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1992), for example, defines propaganda as "the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagand-ist". Such a definition, which only refers to interpersonal processes and considers them in psychological terms, neglects the specific nature of the systems of communication and representation, antecedent to any individual action. Propaganda can only be understood as an element in a strategy of power which is designed within a historical situation at one and the same time material, technological and ideological. To be convinced of this, one only needs to note that propaganda itself has a history in which these three components (the relations of force between groups, the available technical resources, and the configuration of ideologies) play an essential role. The fact that individual psychological reception processes are or are not the same in any kind of scenario is of little importance: for either they are the same (supposing that this could be proved) and so one can no longer understand the significance of concrete differences between cases of propaganda, or they are different and then nothing has been explained concerning the reasons for their specificity. So we must indeed look beyond individual processes, and this is what the theory of social representations, with its own methods and concepts, allows us to do.

THE CONCEPTS AND THEIR ACCESSORIES

The concepts of social representation and mass communication, although widely used, may still seem pretty loose from the point of view of the canons of scientific rigour. It is true that the different approaches in this domain often remain intuitive because they do not draw on a well-founded theory. Also, they are content with a syncretic apprehension which everyone seems to more or less share on account of one's direct experience. Such an approximation is obviously not without consequences. A survey of the literature, including the most recent, shows effectively that two naive questions usually arise in relation to this theme:

– How and how much do mass communications influence social represent-
ations?
– How and how much do mass communications reflect social representations?

Now, these two questions seem theoretically unsound for several reasons. First
because when trying to answer them, one goes almost compulsorily from contents
to contents, from the contents of mass communications to the contents of social
representations. To find, at least partially, one in the other (in either direction),
is a kind of tautology, since it is the same individuals who produce or receive
media and who convey or construct social representations. The term "individuals"
does not refer here to commutable "information processing systems", but to
subjects of the same cultural and ideological system. If mass communications
and social representations are both products, then it is fitting to examine the
common conditions and processes of their production rather than to look for,
in a purely descriptive manner, correspondences between them. Pure contents
processing offers only a documentary point of view, falsely naturalistic since it
holds to be established what remains precisely to be explained; it makes social
psychology akin to a mere psychography, even to journalism, which is perhaps
not exactly our ambition.

Moreover, relating contents to contents generally has a simple correlational
value as far as it is not inscribed in an analysis of processes (genetic or dynamic in
accordance with the case), enlightened by a theory. Clearly, a descriptive diachrony
is not sufficient by itself for this purpose: when it is said, for example, that the
representation of the ideal family has changed since the fifties *since* the media no
longer present it in the same way, what exactly is the meaning of this "since" (or
any other conjunction of coordination or subordination)? Likewise, when the
contents of advertisements are analysed to find the contents of mentalities, a simple
operation of conversion is being carried out which does not prove anything and
which does not inform us at all about the processes. Here and everywhere else,
coincidence and analogy, whatever their salience, have no explicative virtue. To
say that "A is like B," even supposing it were true, does not explain why it is so and
makes evident no necessity. This appears particularly clear with the notion of
"reflect," often used in the study of mass communications: is it the media which
reflect representations or the reverse? It is clear that answering "both" without
carrying forward the analysis is equivalent to giving up all pattern of real intelligibil-
ity. This answer is no more than a means of evasion. The same situation is found
again concerning representations when one focuses upon the behaviours they
inspire or which inspire them. Thus Wagner (1994) notes that, in most empirical
work on social representations, "verbal data used to assess the contents of a
representation as independent variable are logically equivalent to data obtained
from the "dependent" overt behaviour".

But the two radical criticisms which can be addressed to the common
perspective in this field are the following.

On one hand, it must be stressed that social representations provide a *fundamental* concept for the understanding of sociability, at the same level as the division of labour or social belonging. Social life, in the widest sense, has become scientifically inconceivable, in the strongest sense, if representations are not taken into account, and the introduction of this concept was a considerable progress in sociology. All Durkheim's works, in particular, are evidence of this, and, more recently, Bourdieu's as well as most of the work carried out in the domain of the sociology of knowledge. To stress the point again, representations and sociability are in a relation of mutual implication. This is an essential point. On the contrary, mass communications are only a circumstance or a feature of modernity: a circumstance when they are considered and examined through a particular content or a type of media at a given moment; a feature, as a technical reality defining interchange conditions. It follows, at the very least, that these two concepts are not at the same level in the theoretical architecture of our discipline. No more than the social divison of labour for instance, do social representations as a concept depend upon a descriptive and circumstantial category centered on a particular content or coming from a technological classification. Cognitive and social structures are not so precarious. In fact, it is these structures which provide objects for science, and so it is important to keep distinct the case and the class, the example and the rule, the moment and the period. To say it a little more frankly, we cannot see how and how much mass communications could change the *nature* or the basic func-tions of social representations. And the fact that they could change, here and now, their explicit, circumstantial modalities of manifestation is ascribable to truism.

On the other hand, one must not neglect, even if the temptation of doing so seems strong among some psychologists, the founding historicity of social representations. This is defined by two aspects which could be said to be dialectic if the term was not a bit out of fashion: inheritance and dynamics. From one side, the weight, but the advantage too, of what is received or what compels; from the other, the ability and the requirement to change. These two complement-ary aspects of the general definition of history have to be taken into account theoretically and empirically.

Either positive or negative, beneficial or handicapping, inheritance forms the most obvious data for the sociologist. Paradoxically, it has not been till now extensively studied by the social psychologist, more sensitive to his immediate perceptions and more fascinated by the illusion of individual autonomy. In cognitive terms, it refers to the fact that every social representation relies upon themata (a notion owed to Holton, 1973, for the history of the sciences and naturalized in our field by Moscovici and Vignaux, 1994), epistemic schemes (Rouquette, 1994), pre-existing institutions and verbal habits. Thus, social representations are elaborated and situated inside a continuity that historians, precisely, can help us to grasp.

This brief inventory of cognitive resources and constraints is obviously not definitive. But it already allows us to take a fresh look at representational phenomena and to deepen our understanding of them. For instance, the contemporary representation of the ideal group, centered on friendship and equality, cannot be dissociated from the French Revolution and the institutional diffusion of its ideas for two centuries. The social representation of madness (Jodelet, 1989) is not elaborated from beginning to end by our contemporaries, but is founded on very ancient conceptions of the relations between body and soul. The current ideas about psychological balance feed on the same thema as the balance of forces in physics, the balance of exchanges in biology or economy, etc. One also frequently encounters oppositions which are considered as evident and are used as pillars and supports for all kinds of constructions of social thinking: for example, masculine–feminine or active–passive, natural–cultural, internal–external or personal–situational, etc. Previously, Billig (1991, 71 sqq.) insisted upon the relevance of "opposing pairs" to describe the processes of social thinking.

More basically, epistemic schemes organize the very *form* of everyday knowledge to make it sensible, communicable and acceptable. They are in a certain manner the a priori forms of social understanding. Thus, the "labelling scheme", which consists in linking properties to a name rather than doing the reverse, is at work in a great number of representations: for instance, "madness" and "mental illness" do not call up the same attributions, "nazism" and "national-socialism" do not induce the same judgments of acceptance, the designations of actors, ends and means differ with the political parties, etc. (Rouquette, op. cit.). It is possible to give almost as many examples as there are representations which have been studied up to now.

Nevertheless, these inherited instruments, materials and contents do not impose a plain and irresistable mechanism of reproduction. First because the cognitive world is a complex one which generates its own capacities of renewal or rearrangement. But mainly because social thinking always responds to the evolution of objective situations: modifications in the environment, technical changes, political decisions, conflicts, etc. This kind of dynamics is not only an interesting or absorbing possibility for the researcher (see Guimelli, 1994). It depends upon the very nature of the functioning of representations, in the core of communication: a representation in action is not a static configuration, but a series of evolutive "moments" (see Rouquette, *op. cit.*) in accordance with situations. Its function is to maintain the stability of the perceived and conceived world, but also to integrate the changes which can occur in this world. It is true that it seeks preferentially confirmation or corroboration; but when it is deceived, it fits the situation, for the situation is stronger. If this were not the case, representations would never have changed since the beginning of human societies.

Clearly, it is the same historicity, with the same resulting properties of resistance and plasticity, of imposition and emergence which works in mass

communications, always situated between repetition and transition. They prolong and innovate, repeat and inform, reflect and distort, not according to the accidents of a more or less developed creativity, but in proportion to the determinations and possibilities issued from a social state. History is not made by the media, it provides them with their reason, their appearance and the very role which they seem to play within it. Likewise, social thinking is not a continuous creation which owes nothing to history, nor is it a series of aberrations which the progress of education could correct. As in the theatre, the momentary position of the actors and the immediate state of their acting cannot make one forget the writing of the play or the constraints of the stage. It is exactly in this area that the articulation between mass communications and social representations occurs. The question is not to wonder whether one acts upon the other, but what is acting upon one *and* the other. The famous circularity or mutual selection existing between media and their audiences offers no other sense: people do not choose media that choose them, but the relation between them comes from determinations which are deeper and appear also in other fields.

All these arguments lead us to consider mass communications not as available contents or as technological determinations which could operate *per se*, but as social apparatuses of practices related to others (for instance electoral practices), and placed in history. We deal with a true *millieu* inside which people act, imitate, control and influence reciprocally in a permanent way. Tarde, then Lazarsfeld, and later Menzel and Katz, to name only some classic works, all taught us the same lesson: messages are never received solitarily nor without background. The individual isolated in front of his newspaper or his screen appears like a fiction. The solitary citizen confronting propaganda too. Not only do cognitive processes of reasoning arise solely in social interplay (see for instance Doise, 1993), but they are also collectively marked with regard to the values they treat, the procedures they follow and the results they achieve. In a word, the social stage is intrinsically social.

One may believe, therefore, that the study of mass communications must be regulated according to the corresponding variables instead of disintegrating into the sole analysis of intrapersonal processes. The apparent evidence of observation which provides a reader, a listener, a television viewer or an experimental subject, must not conceal the fact that we are dealing with systems in which an individual only constitutes one part, and moreover this part only acts in relation with others. Every communication is surpassed by the communications which precede it and others which follow it. Every communication contains, on one hand, the reference to a shared memory, and on the other hand the possibility of a shared revival.

More precisely, mass communications are above all *social practices which construct public spaces*. From the point of view of interpersonal interactions, one can refer here both to the structuring of audiences, manifested by the role of opinion leaders, and to the importance of conversations in everyday life. Nothing is

more ordered than these, if one thinks about the norms, the common meanings and the like-minded opinions which they mobilize. Moreover, opinion leaders as well as conversation partners are never just anybody: their action, co-action or reaction, and even their mere presence are only possible upon the basis of pre-existing social structures, and within the framework of an inherited culture. Receiving a message is not "information-processing", but taking a position in an already organized social sphere. It is exactly the same for professional decision-making, which depends more on the systems of socially shared representations than on the logical analysis of the tasks (Michit, 1995). Obviously, these practices are learnt and reinforced on the basis of specific social belonging. So, there are not on the one hand mass media as technical devices and on the other their receivers, all supposed equivalent, there are concrete and socially differentiated relations among people.

For social representations, these practices, as well as others (see Abric, 1994), are at the same time holding territories and levers of change. Holding spaces, first, because it is in the course of these practices that social representations are confirmed, reinforced and extended. The essential purpose of propaganda, propagation and diffusion is not to innovate, but to preserve and prolong. Most of the time, they reinforce attitudes and beliefs. However, these practices can also end in change because they meet new information and are obliged to assimilate, in a more or less adaptive manner, the modifications of the world. But neither holding nor change flow from individual initiatives. And neither holding nor change are pure technical effects. It is a psychological or a technological shortcoming to imagine that the very nature of mass communication is finally psychological or technological. It is exactly the same error which led to industrial working being considered as a matter of human relations or a list of ergonomic problems. Such thinking can, at times, achieve some useful effects or some partial descriptions, but the benefits are almost non-existent from an anthropological point of view.

THE STRUCTURAL PERSPECTIVE

A crucial point of the theory is that social representations are bound to the mode of existence of a group or a type of group; they contribute to building the reality they perceive and about which, incidentally, they confront each other. Likewise, mass communications as systems of practices are bound to the specificity of a group (and therefore, in particular, to its situation relative to other groups). The "objectivity" of the "message" has no more importance in any other case than the objectivity of the source—the existence of Freud's texts—in the case of psychoanalysis studied by Moscovici, and that is why the "objective" analysis of the "messages", particularly the lexicographic ones, are generally of limited interest. One can establish for example that the terms used

in the media about various topics are more abstract for desirable ingroup and undesirable outgroup behaviors than for undesirable ingroup and desirable outgroup behaviors (Maass *et al.*, 1994). But if not referred to the theory of social representations and to an analysis of ideologies, such a result appears as a simple cognitive bias, supposedly characteristic of all individuals outside of their differentiated social belonging. One can see neither the function nor the reason for it, quite simply because this function and reason are not situated at the level of intra-individual processes. Symetrically, as we have already pointed out, the "objectivity" of the message is none other than the understanding and the use which is made of it within a particular group at a given moment. Only the couple message-audience (the population of "receivers" being socially located) can make sense. In relation to a thematic object, the media it frequents perform a useful function for the group, that is a function relevant to its practices. They permit it to integrate novelty into the frame of its attainments, beliefs and interests. They also permit it to try and feel cohesiveness, to confirm belonging to an ideological community, to set up or feed a polemic relation, etc. All these possibilities are diverse, even if they always lead to practices. That is what Moscovici showed by distinguishing between propaganda, propagation and diffusion as systems in which exchanges take meaning and value. We can see that it is neither a question of technique nor a question of individual cognitive capacities. Once more, speaking about "mass communications" in general, without differentiating their specific functions in the eyes of the groups and according to the themes, refers only to an abstraction without any relevance.

Another point, complementary to the previous, is the ability to guide the research in our field insofar as it wishes to break away from pure interpretative description. This could be reached by relating to the structural properties of social representations the specific characteristics of mass communications at a given moment. To treat representations as structures probably offers one of the rare ways to obtain general results, disengaged at last from anecdotes. And on the other hand mass communications are questioned here about their relation to *social knowledge as a fundamental concept*, not as a side issue.

The most typical assumption of the structural theory is the distinction of a central and a peripheral system in social representations (see for instance Abric, 1993). The central system is essential in the philosophical sense; it gives to a representation its coherence and its permanence; it is also the basis of consensus inside a given social group, and plays a normative role resulting in judgments, behaviours and judgments about behaviours. On the contrary, the peripheral system admits interindividual variations; it can be locally and/or temporarily modified, and it constitutes, in sum, the adaptative system of a social representation as well as the place for idiosyncrasies. Consequently, it is here that changes first occur. But basically, two social representations do not differ from one another unless their central systems differ. The rest is only a matter of slight differences or more or less contingent circumstances. This point of the theory,

which consists in distinguishing varieties and types, thus allows us to stop making an indefinite inventory of representations at the collective level as well as at the interindividual level. At last, we have a criterion of classification at our disposal which enables us to leave the domain of description for that of systematization.

Without going into the methodological details, the following are some examples of the questions we can therefore ask ourselves:

(i) Do the contents of the media sample considered concern the central or peripheral elements of the corresponding representation? How does the media sample treat these central and peripheral elements? As Flament (1994a, p. 114) underlines, "the structuralist theory (. . .) states, as a principle, that two representational discourses (which can differ on several points) correspond to a unique representation if and only if they refer to a strictly identical central nucleus". In other words, simply making evident discursive differences (or iconic differences, etc.) is not necessarily pertinent if a theory of social representations does not shed light on them. A surface difference does not necessarily reflect a structural difference. At the level of actions, at last, the inductive role of the media at a given moment is certainly not the same depending on the structural role of the elements which they treat.

(ii) As far as the evolution of situations requires it, individuals are led to develop, in order to preserve their representations, typical "reasoning patterns". Such as, for instance, "strange schemes" (Flament, 1989), which are made of four components: recalling the normal, the designation of the strange element, the recognition of a contradiction and the proposition of a rationalization. We can take the example of the representation of identity of Gipsies (see Mamontoff, 1995). An important component of this identity is expressed by the norm according to which a Gipsy never steals from another Gipsy (the normal). But it happens that some Gipsies do so (strange element). This is obviously contradictory. It is because these Gipsies are no longer real Gipsies and, as they are settled, they now live in contact with drugs, which create their need for money (rationalization). Other examples can easily be found in everyday conversations and, of course, in the media. These schemes, and others, can be formalized (Guimelli and Rouquette, 1993; Rouquette and Guimelli, 1995), the particular contents being only instantiations of general structures. We can therefore ask ourselves: which of these schemes do the media considered present and reinforce, and how do they do it?

(iii) More generally, what rhetorical resources are used, in relation to the structural properties of social representations As Billig (1991, p. 72) points out, "the rhetorical approach links the processes of thinking to those of argumentation, for it suggests that deliberative thought is internalized argumentation." What interests us particularly here, are the vectors and modalities of this "internalization," which refers to the notion of inheritance mentioned earlier. One could study along these lines how themata and epistemic schemes are introduced and instantiated.

(iv) How are objectification and anchoring, as general processes in social representations (Moscovici, op. cit.), constituted and expressed in everyday conversation about an object presented by the media? Etc.

Let us take the example of the social representation of work. It is obviously an important theme, on which we are starting to accumulate some data and which seems to be in evolution in our societies at the present time (Flament, 1994b). This representation is apparently organized today round two elements: remuneration and pleasure. One works first to earn one's living, of course, and it is a central element, maybe unique, but also to find personal satisfaction in one's activity. This second aspect seems to be becoming more widespread today, even if there is probably inference, and no doubt in a complex way, with the preoccupations related to unemployment. Perhaps we will have, in this case, a representation in the process of transformation.

Applied to this particular case, the former questions would become the following:

– How do media treat, at a synchronic and diachronic level, the components of the social representation of Work? Is there a difference of salience between central and peripheral elements?

– In this respect, what are the differences between the media in relation to the groups they are aimed at?

– Is the possible conflict between pleasure and remuneration or between unemployment and search for pleasure expressed by strange schemes? If so, what type of rationalizations are used?

– Which objectifications of Work (images, symbols, examples, references) are most often given in a particular situation of communication? Etc.

The amount of research to be done is no doubt immense, but we can already make some conjectures about its organization, and that might be sufficient to trace the essential lines of a programme.

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