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# MADNESS

AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

D E N I S E J O D E L E T

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## Introduction

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Perhaps a single society, providing it was totally understood, might reveal the essence of all societies.

Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*  
(1957)

A transformation in psychiatric policy swings open the doors of the asylum, and the social situation which emerges overturns mental attitudes whose roots are to be found in the distant past. The insane, relegated for so long to the fringes of the community, reappear at its very heart. And what has become of the prejudices which justified their confinement? To borrow an image used by Lévi-Strauss, have we changed, without any intermediate stage, from the state of an “anthropoemetic” society which spews out the insane, exiling them beyond its frontiers, to that of an “anthropophagic society” which absorbs them? But will this not produce new phenomena displacing the rigour of society’s relationship to insanity from the institutional level to another level, that born of direct contact and the representations it engenders? Will the decrees of the politicians overcome the symbolic barriers as easily as they circumvented the material ones? Or might it be the case, as so often happens, that the liberal measures of the law, however beneficent in their aim, cannot be applied with impunity, because social sensibilities obey a different logic, one which threatens to paint the experience of otherness with the colours of unreason?

These questions lie at the heart of the story which this book seeks to reveal. It is a story which goes back to the very beginning of the century and unfolds in central France around an open psychiatric institution which places the mentally ill in the care of the family. Such an institution is known as a Family Colony. This story documents what happens, mentally, psychologically and socially, when the mentally ill take their place within the social fabric.

What do we see? On the one hand there are the locals, people from a range of occupations, good, law-abiding citizens. They call themselves *civilians*. On the other hand there are the *bredins*, the loonies, the traditional name for the



insane in the dialect of this region of France. It is in vain that they live on a free and equal footing in the rural community under the supervision of the Family Colony. They are the *non-civilians*. Marked by their membership of a psychiatric community, they are different. And a difference (whether it is national or ethnic in origin, based on colour or race or simply on language and way of life) has always invariably made those who manifest it seem alien to those who find in their territorial or cultural roots a natural reason for remaining with their own kind. It is true that a fundamental kinship exists between all situations in which different groups confront each other.

This kinship prompts us to ask whether common processes might lie behind these distancings which are always ready to appear, however remote the danger of contact; to ask whether these processes depend on political, economic and social factors as well as on the representations of the nature and constitution of otherness. This is the basis for the research which led to the reconstruction of the story of the life and the representations of a group of people confronted with insanity.

### *Three Questions in One*

Three preoccupations combine to form the fabric of this study: How do representations function in a confrontation of this type? How are the mentally ill received in the community? How does the relationship to otherness develop? These preoccupations, heterogeneous at first sight, converge to form a single question: how far do social representations of insanity take account of the relationship with the mentally ill who are the embodiment of otherness? A study of these representations in a context of a close relationship with the mentally ill might be expected to yield a clarification of the still ill-defined status accorded to the mentally ill by society, such as uncovering something about what we make of the other.

No attempt has yet been made to approach these three types of phenomena head-on, not even in social psychology. However, such an attempt is necessary. To understand why, let us take these phenomena in reverse order.

First, otherness, which interrogates our times. The otherness outside us: of regions, of peoples whose discovery extends our knowledge of man and questions our image of ourselves. The otherness inside: of groups, of people whose otherness is defined, in a deceitful or violent implementation, by the lines of social division.

It is the relationship with the internal otherness that concerns us here, the relationship between group and group, between body and body. This relationship is often considered simply as a relationship of differences which can be explained in two ways. The first is to derive the relationship to the other, a group or member of a group, from a process of differentiation which



finds its justification in a natural and social tendency to distinguish the self from everything else. From this point on, the other is only an empty form which is used to affirm one's identity. The second explanation has recourse to psychological traits such as the authoritarian character, or to social attitudes such as tolerance and intolerance, to account for the avatars of these relationships. These manifestations of autocentrism strip the other of all depth of being and life and, more importantly, prevent the understanding of the way people act. Equally, there appear to be social processes at work which, in defining as other that which is not me or mine, conceive of this other in a concrete negativity. This raises two questions: why is it that despite all resemblances of type and actual assimilation, the other is posited as such and remains so for us? What are the consequences of the other appearing to us in this way? To answer these questions it is necessary to examine the way in which this negativity is constructed. And this construction, an image whose contents are intimately fused with social practices, an image which in the world of social interaction furthers the process of differentiation and the work of alienation, comes from the field of study of social representations, which are constitutive of our relationship with the social world.

But let us continue. If the other is not reduced to a reliable void which allows people's identity to be posited, then otherness itself cannot be studied "in general terms". The construction of this negativity is always specified, even if we suspect that the processes of "defining as other" have a general validity and are supported by invariant psychological and social forces. Identifiable in our behaviour towards any and all others, this defining as other will be all the more instructive as a subject of study if it keeps us within our own society and refers to a case where the effects of cultural, racial or social difference cease to be of importance. Seen from this angle, the insane are a privileged case. However, that is not the only motive for choosing them as an object of research.

We still lack a unified viewpoint in our approach to the destiny of the mentally ill within society. Much has been written on the mentally ill without a lot being known about the fate reserved for these people by the public. Although descriptions abound, they are only poorly understood and the psychology of social representations has its own contribution to make to this topic.

Researchers have been interested in the perception of, and attitudes towards, the mentally ill for more than twenty years<sup>1</sup> and yet the results of their studies are neither conclusive nor coherent. Analysis of the psychiatric institution has become increasingly refined and effective following the lead set by Foucault (1971) and Goffman (1961). Not so with the analysis of the

<sup>1</sup> The literature in this field is too abundant for us to burden this introduction with references which have elsewhere been the subject of exhaustive reviews (Dufrancatel, 1968; Le Cerf and Sébille, 1975; Rabkin, 1979; Dulac, 1986). Our bibliography contains only a number of authors who are representative of the most specific trends in research during the past twenty years.



public response. The state of affairs has scarcely changed from that which Dufrancatel outlined in 1968: assessment of naïve conception by psychiatric knowledge, a knowledge which searches in this way for its own justification; an obsession with methodology which fails to question the presuppositions of the researcher; a vacuum in regard to the examination of social representations of mental illness. However, it is possible to make out a few shifts of emphasis, notably the decline of the interactionist view which finds in deviance the definition of the pathological and makes the mentally ill the object of a labelling process. Increasing attention is paid to a symptom-based interpretation of the behaviour of the mentally ill and to cases of purposeful coexistence with them.

This perspective, which is less symbolist and more "objectivist", may seem like the counterpart to the one which emphasized the institutional constraints moulding the development of the psychiatric patient. On the contrary, the two are moving in different directions. Whereas the contestation of a psychiatric power and the consequent functioning of psychiatric institutions and their staff have been called into question, this new perspective has moved from a sceptical distrust of the public to an ostrich-like serenity.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, most research into attitudes towards the mentally ill has gathered increasing amounts of evidence of public prejudice, its ability to reject and its resistance to information campaigns. Today, these results are open to criticism from a number of angles. On the one hand, the validity of attempts to analyse and modify attitudes has been questioned. Not only are they said to be unreliable and ineffective; they are also claimed to lead to results opposite to those expected because they accentuate the awareness of extreme cases which themselves arouse reactions of fear and refusal. Other critics emphasize the prejudicial role of medical officialization which is seen as provoking rejections which would otherwise not exist. The psychiatrization of answers is thought to elicit negative responses which contradict the spontaneous practices of the everyday world. The response is to advocate the policy of the *fait accompli*: to place the mentally ill in the social world and then wait and see; t'is approach will work out better than the alarmism of the 1960s would have led one to believe.

The transformations made in psychiatric practice, with the opening of hospitals and the development of a community therapy sector, are responsible for a change of perspective which, however, fails to focus on the real problem of the relationship with the mentally ill. That is the problem of the representation of their illness and their condition, out of which their otherness and their social status are constructed.

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<sup>2</sup> A special edition of *Psychologie Médicale* (15), which appeared in 1983 and presented the deliberations of an international symposium on attitudes to mental illness, is illustrative of the current ambiguity in the analysis of social reactions to mental illness.



If we look at it in more detail, this change of perspective goes beyond merely recording the consequences of a new policy which returns the mentally ill to the fabric of society. It corresponds to a change of paradigm in the approach to intergroup relations. Attention is shifted away from attitudes and towards behaviour, partly as a result of the failure of researchers to demonstrate the effects of the former on the latter. To illustrate this change of paradigm, let us cite two famous experiments conducted within this sphere, that of Griffin (1961) and that of Lapière (1937). By blackening his skin, the first demonstrated the systematic, conventional character of the "colour line" and racist attitudes in the South of the United States. For many years, his experience fuelled the pessimism concerning racial prejudice. Nowadays, we prefer to share the belief of the second, that behaviour is more positive than attitude. Lapière, together with a Chinese couple, succeeded in gaining admittance to 250 hotels and restaurants, 92% of whose proprietors had, in a questionnaire completed earlier, answered that they would refuse a Chinese entrance to their establishment.

This is what should be done, one might think, in the case of the mentally ill. Mental health programmes must *de facto* lead to changes within the population (Katsching and Berner, 1983), as is proved by results obtained in Canadian cities, made famous by research carried out by Cumming in 1959, on account of their negativity towards insanity and their resistance to change (Wattie, 1983). And yet many questions remain unanswered. The truth of this can be judged from, amongst other examples, the experimental closing of psychiatric hospitals in Italy following the 1978 reform which, inspired by Basaglia's ideas, was swept forwards by a wave of popular consent. It took only two years for fear of the insane and their "demonic character" to grow; for the families to develop a feeling of "victimization" and demand protection. And despite the increase in available information and a greater sensitivity of opinion, we see today an acknowledged fall in the all-round care accorded to the mentally ill (Bertolini *et al.*, 1983). The results of research conducted in North America confirm this tendency (Dulac, 1986). We observe that, if in the last twenty years the quality of people's knowledge of mental illness and the accuracy of their appreciation of symptoms have improved, then the image of the mentally ill is simultaneously becoming increasingly associated with the idea of danger. Equally, at the same time as the expression of social distancing is diminishing, we are witnessing a growing tendency to avoid contact with the mentally ill. Attempts to reintegrate "deinstitutionalized" patients into society reveal that communities develop a high degree of resistance as soon as the numbers of such patients grow. Rapid saturation of the social environment leads to their concentration in reserved or increasingly isolated areas.

To account for these contradictions, we have to progress further in the analysis of the public response to contact with the mentally ill. As we shall see, to have recourse to attitudes such as tolerance or intolerance is to fail to



perceive the heart of the problem, whilst to confine oneself to the formal acceptance of the presence of the insane on the social scene is a way of evading the question. Those authors who advocate the *fait accompli* of this copresence are not unaware of this fact. Indeed, it seems as if they are formulating a self-fulfilling prophecy, expecting that what is denied does not exist or, going further, that the prejudices, left-overs of outdated beliefs, will die out by themselves. We shall have the opportunity to demonstrate that this is not the case. On the contrary, the evolution of the psychiatric system and psychiatric therapeutics could well provoke social responses and reactivate visions of insanity which place the fear of otherness and the defence of integrity at centre stage. Whence the importance of exploring a facet of the relationship with insanity which has as yet remained largely free of study, namely its ideal and symbolic dimensions.

The path leading to these dimensions is the study of the social representations which bear on insanity and the insane. This study will be crucial to our progress in so far as we see in it the key to an understanding not just of the methods of treatment, the way the mentally ill are treated and located in society, but also of the way in which otherness is constructed. This is a perspective which differs from the dominant trends in the study of the relationship between society and insanity.

In fact, until now social representations of mental illness have attracted little study. They are rarely approached head-on and their manifestations are seldom investigated in their entirety. Certainly, we do encounter them in historical and ethnological works on the popular practices and knowledge which bear on insanity (Charuty, 1985), in the examination of the institutions and agents who are entrusted with their care (Morvan, 1988) or with reference to the areas of behaviour which are affected (Giami *et al.*, 1983). But it is important that social representations should be accorded the central position which they claim in the effort to understand society's approach to the mentally ill. We also know that the various masks and forms of insanity have peopled society's imagination as far back in history as we care to delve (Bastide, 1965), and this fact is related to the treatments society has reserved for the insane (Foucault, 1967). Similarly, recent research has shown the coherence of systems of representation of mental illness across different cultures or sub-cultures along with their articulation in the practices developed in the course of everyday life or within a professional framework (Bellelli, 1987).

This state of affairs is based partly on the fact that the attention of researchers has been primarily fixed on the role of the practices and ideologies of psychiatry in the control of mental deviance. Such a perspective subordinates representations to definitions and to the social rejection of illicit behaviour engendered by social and cultural antagonisms. The consequence is a reduction of scientific interest in the response of a public dispossessed of its traditional methods of exerting control, swept from the scene by the



intervention of a medical authority into whose hands it commits itself. In future, changes to the institutions and the therapies they apply will reinvest this response with its social significance by giving it control of the position of the ill outside the official domains to which it was once banished. What is more, although attempts have been made to show how the criteria for the exclusion of the insane have been determined in relation to the struggles and schisms within the social body, little has been made of the conflicts which can generate the presence of people considered to be deviant because of their psychiatric categorization. These conflicts are decisive for the fate of the mentally ill and lead us to an understanding of the "profound level" of society's "intimate life" and "dramas", assuring us "access to its most fundamental and real relationships and to the practices which reveal the dynamic of the social system" (Balandier, 1971, pp.6-7).

This situation can also be explained by the fact that social representations have not always been considered to be a legitimate object of scientific investigation. There are two reasons for this. On the one hand, they were thought to reveal secondary phenomena, effects or reflections of social, economic, ideological and other processes considered decisive in themselves. On the other hand, it was feared that no analytical tools were available which could enable us to pass beyond the level of a mere description of expressive images of cultural attitudes. This was to ignore the contributions made by the study of social representations which was introduced to the field of social psychology by Moscovici (1961) and which finds an echo in other psychological and social disciplines. Evidence of this is provided by, amongst other things, a collective work (Jodelet, 1989) which gives a perspective of the scope of the ideas which originated with Durkheim and the body of research which has built up over a period of twenty years. Nowadays the importance and feasibility of the study of the production and the efficacy of representations within a social whole have ceased to be a subject for doubt. All that is required is a careful definition of the conditions for its empirical implementation.

This is the direction we have taken. We are following the path traced by Moscovici in his research into the representation of psychoanalysis in which social representations are conceived of as "theories" which are created and operative at a social level. This research focused on the involvement of social representations in the construction of everyday reality, in the behaviour and communications which evolve from it and in the way of life and means of expression of the groups within which these representations are forged. Our path gives us a sight of one aspect, to use an analogy with an architectural project, which is predominantly that of a psychosociology of knowledge. This is what is engaged in the perspective developed by Moscovici. We shall concentrate specifically on an examination of a naïve theory of insanity and the insane and on the analysis of the latter's formation and appearance in a defined social context. There are two reasons for choosing this perspective.

First, the existential significance of mental illness leads to suppositions



about its nature, its causes and its consequences both for individuals and their surroundings. Yet there exists no real "hard core" of knowledge about this affliction and the scientific and medical world has been unable to agree on any homogeneous position. Thoughts, judgements, opinions on the subject frequently lead the thinker back to an autonomous social construction in which expert, legitimate knowledge plays only a minor role, despite the flow of knowledge resulting from the commitment of the insane to the medical and institutional authorities from the nineteenth century onwards. What is more, the vague and unresolved map of the psychiatric world offers the public little reassurance, a state which will favour the proliferation and survival of the vagaries of everyday common sense. From this point of view, mental illness is an ideal vehicle for the study of social thinking and its functioning.

Second, these elaborations on mental illness, if they are to be spontaneous and removed from the sphere of expert knowledge, cannot be formed arbitrarily in a social void. Considered in relation to an object of crucial relevance to the field of social interactions, they have a social basis, are of practical significance and exhibit the properties of a true understanding which has something to say about the state of the world around us and guides our actions within it. However, we still need to treat such elaborations as social insights and remain aware of their relevance to individual and group behaviour. This requirement is reaffirmed by the criticism directed at research into attitudes towards mental illness. The validity of past research has often been contested because it has reestablished the categories of the psychiatric approach and imposed them on the public, whose own categories it has disregarded. Researchers today, however, have recognized that evaluative attitudes are grounded in shared representations and beliefs, and are seeking the causes of collective practices in the cognitive dimensions of the social response, linked as it is to historical and socio-ecological factors.

We, too, shall progress on two fronts, on the one hand seeking to pinpoint the conceptions which shape the relationship with the mentally ill, while on the other trying to define how the context in which this relationship is anchored furthers the development of such conceptions. In a word, we shall approach representations as the product, expression and instrument of a group in its relationship with otherness. This closes the circle linking our three questions. Representations of insanity will help us to understand how the otherness of the mentally ill is conceived, whilst the examination of a concrete situation of contact with the mentally ill will reveal the manner in which these representations are formed and function.

### *Representation, Knowledge and Social Practice*

To apply the standpoint of a psychosociology of knowledge in the approach to the relationship between a community and those members which it considers alien is not to adopt a resolutely "rational" and intellectualist point



of view to the detriment of other dimensions, notably the institutional, symbolic, axiological and affective. On the contrary, it is an attempt to embrace in their totality the processes which bind the life of groups to a social ideation, by applying the properties of the idea of representations, a concept which has become crucial in the explanation of psychological and social functioning, of individual and collective action. Such an approach cannot fail to establish connections between trends of research which have developed the notion in a similar manner but which have never effectively converged in the comprehension of a concrete social milieu. In fact the importance of representations has been well-known in all the domains of the human sciences for more than a decade. But from psychology to the social sciences, the concept has become bound up with so wide a range of meanings that it is possible to speak either of its explosion or its dilution. Drawing from the phenomena discovered within intrapsychic processes or within the mental constructs of society, in cognition or ideology, in private behaviour or public action, it has given birth to a wide range of conceptions and has become part of the approach to a variety of problems. However, a common ground can still be discerned among these tendencies: the recognition of the pertinence and efficacy of representations in the process of explaining behaviour. And as I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere (Jodelet, 1985), it is possible to find kinships and correlations in these various fields which clear the path towards a unified approach whose development will no doubt lead back to social psychology, a discipline which mediates between the psychological and the social, the individual and the collective. In particular, social psychology faces a double challenge: to think of the social in terms of the cognitive and the properties of cognition as something social, and to think the affective part of social thought.

An analysis of the results of research in the different disciplines reveals that although, here and there, certain properties of representation have become firmly established, they are always incomplete. In spite of agreeing on the fact that representation is a form of knowledge, we still have trouble accounting for its full conceptual implications, that is to say the extent to which it is implicit, as a psychological and cognitive phenomenon, in the dynamics and energies of social interaction. Let me present some rapid sketches of the current state of the study of representations.

If cognitive psychology has shed light on the structural properties of representations, then the dominance of models based on the processing of information and the computational study of artificial intelligence has produced or strengthened a conception of the mental process severed both from social bonds and from psychical and corporeal bases. Based on the representation of knowledge in a computer, human knowledge is conceived as a process of modelling certain aspects, traits, relationships of the represented world. This knowledge is analysed as a *structure* – by distinguishing between its contents and forms (declarative knowledge) and its operations (procedural knowledge) – whose retention emphasizes the



importance of *memory*. However important it might be, this formalization, subordinating as it does psychological analysis to the constraints of information technology, has failed to take account of a number of aspects of representation.

First, its symbolic aspect. Knowledge is studied without any evaluation of its correspondence to reality (Mandler, 1983) and without drawing any implications from the fact that the representation "takes the place of" and signifies an aspect of the world, to itself or to others. By neglecting the referential and communicative functions of representation, we arrive at a hypothetical formalization in which the intra-mental is closed on itself. Now, as is evident from an examination of the best-known formulations of this perspective (for example, Minsky, 1977; Schank and Abelson, 1977), the omission of the symbolic aspect from the theoretical model has led to the necessity of reintroducing it to take account of cognitive functioning in real situations. The postulated structures (*frames, scripts* etc.) can only be applied with the help of the language, experience and knowledge shared within a particular culture. This is confirmed by other authors dealing with knowledge of the world and the conceptualizations introduced by language (for example, Johnson-Laird and Wason, 1977; Miller, 1978). This suffices to underline the necessity of including the social dimension and the aspect of communication in any model of knowledge. If we also view matters from the standpoint of works which analyse the conditions of comprehension and linguistic exchange (for example, Clark and Haviland, 1974; Flahaut, 1978; Grice, 1975; Searle, 1983) we encounter the postulation of a collective medium (cultural background, tacit knowledge, conventions, etc.) which is social in its representation. The time has come to treat it as such, and in this way to correct the inadequacies emphasized by Cicourel (1973):

The problem of signification, as it is tackled in modern philosophy, in linguistics, in psychology, and in anthropology, is that the fact that knowledge is socially distributed is not made evident.

What is more, this kind of cognitive isolationism, which focused on the *what is known* and *how it is known*, says nothing about the *who knows it* and the *perspective from which they know it*. Consequently the expressive function of the representation and its relationship to affective and emotional life is eliminated, an error whose gravity is repeatedly underlined in the relevant scientific literature. Also little interest is shown in action or in the body which supports it. And yet the motor, postural and imitative basis of representations has been brought to the fore in connection with cognitive functioning and its development (Bruner, 1966; Jodelet, 1979; Piaget, 1972, 1962; Wallon, 1942). These omissions prevent any recognition of the role of the social bond in the formation of knowledge, of the affective investment in cognitive organization or of the drives underlying the emergence of the



semiotic environment (Green, 1984). Difficulties result when it comes to dealing with the relationship between representation and practice and with the articulation of thought at the level of desire and negative affects. This is the task in which psychosociology is currently engaged within a clinical environment inspired by psychoanalysis. The work performed by Kaës (1976, 1980) is an example. Nor should it be forgotten that Durkheim had already insisted on the importance of the physical foundations of individual and collective representations, their bond with the emotions, with the phenomena of social memory – for which neither cognitive psychology nor the neurosciences can account (Changeux, 1987) – and with social customs and ritualizations.

Finally, the cognitivist perspective has brought about a dissociation of cognitive representation and social representation by means of a double opposition. First, between processes which refer solely to intra-individual mechanisms and contents which are deemed to form the distinctive mark of the social, with the affirmation of scientific precedence for the study of the processes, given the cultural and historical variability of the contents (Codol, 1984; Denis, 1976 and others). Second, the cognitive is opposed to the ideological, whose social representation is seen to take on the nature of the empirical. Researchers have even gone so far as to affirm the secondary character of the cognitive component in the latter, and indeed of the danger of autonomy and reduction involved in its recognition (Robert and Faugeron, 1978; Ramognino, 1984). Corresponding to different visions of the place of the individual and the social in the production of representations, this dissociation fails to grasp the specificity of representational phenomena in the sphere of ideology (Jodelet, 1985) and can account for neither the characteristics of social cognition nor the cognitive conditions of ideological functioning.

This last remark applies in part to the treatment of representations in the social sciences. Recent trends in anthropology, history and sociology (see in particular Augé, 1979; Bourdieu, 1982; Duby, 1978; Faye, 1973; Godelier, 1984; Héritier, 1979; Michelat and Simon, 1977) accord representations the status of an originating factor in the constitution of social orders and relationships, the shaping of collective behaviour and the transformation of the social world. But at the same time we observe, with a few exceptions (Sperber, 1985; Douglas, 1986), a tendency to play down the truly cognitive aspects of representation whilst emphasizing its semantic, symbolic and ideological aspects or, alternatively, the performative properties of the speech which carries it.

Due emphasis should be placed on the decisive contribution brought by these currents of research when they demonstrate the intimate interaction of mental productions and the material and functional dimensions of group life. This contribution consists primarily of: the transcendence both of a hierarchical stratification of the levels of the social structure and of a linear



determinism of the nature of thought in accordance with its infrastructural conditions; and the enlightenment of the place of representations in social practices which, within each social grouping, precisely characterize the specific forms of implementation or transformation of a process of structural organization. It is a contribution which has renewed the approach to the social production of knowledge and its relationship to social practices. However, even if in all cases we approach representations as “knowledge”, “theories”, “versions”, “visions” of reality, which enable individuals and groups to interpret and master that reality, to justify or to invalidate its orderings and the position we occupy within them; even if we see in them phenomena which exert a genuine influence on the institution and evolution of societies, it still remains true that, as the representations do not form the central object of these theorizations, their status as “cognitive forms” is not elucidated. This knowledge is seen as a content which is operative in relation to processes which are exterior to it: discursive logic which assures its “acceptability” in social exchange (Faye); the “ideo-logical” process which simultaneously defines both the intellectual and the social order (Augé); the “performative magic” of the utterances which legitimize the cohesion and the dynamic of groups (Bourdieu), etc. No questions are asked about the cognitive properties of these contents which, generated within society, favour their adoption into a community and their operation in the social totality.

Nevertheless, in order to see how representations function within this totality we are forced to return to these cognitive properties and consider them in the light of the notion of *structure*. Here I refer to the “formal structures” in social narratives (Faye); the “organizational schemata” at the heart of material and discursive practices (Godelier); the “constitutive schemes”, some of them “universal”, which articulate the practical, symbolic and ideological registers (Augé, Héritier). Duby, in a discussion of the feudal imagination, has detailed this role of representation as “heart”, “latent structure”, “simple image” of the social organization, ensuring the transition from speculative systems to ideologies. Here, as in the importance accorded to language and the circulation of speech, we see how the social sciences and cognitive psychology can join forces under the banner of social psychology.

In effect social psychology, together with developments in the study of social representations, provides the means for theorizing representations without contradiction – not just as content but also as structure and cognitive form, expressive of the subjects who constructed them – in terms of their relationship to symbolic and ideological processes, and to social dynamics and energetics. This is the potential which we shall attempt to realize by putting the concept to work within a concrete social totality in which a relationship with otherness has been formed. We shall see how, to an extent determined by their position and their personal investments and passions, the members of that society link the different registers of collective life within a



socially marked construct which enables them to manage their contact with otherness. It is an enterprise which seeks to benefit from the implications of research into social representations and to surmount certain difficulties which continue to be a stumbling block for such research. We shall identify the main thrusts of this research without entering into a detailed discussion of the work which is currently the object of numerous discussions (the most recent include: Doise and Palmonari, 1986; Farr, 1984, 1987; Farr and Moscovici, 1984; Herzlich, 1972; Jodelet, 1984, 1989; Moscovici, 1976, 1981, 1982, 1984).

In Moscovici's seminal model we find elements which, widely corroborated in the field of study which has grown up around social representations, furnish us with irrefutable premises. In particular, the role of these phenomena in the institution of a consensual reality and their socio-cognitive function in the integration of the novel and in the shaping of communication and behaviour. There is also the fact that representations can be studied in two ways. Globally: when we concentrate on the positions held by social subjects (individuals or groups) towards objects whose value is socially asserted or contested, representations are treated as *structured fields*, that is to say as contents whose dimensions (information, values, beliefs, opinions, images etc.) are delimited by an organizing principle (attitude, norms, cultural schemata, cognitive structure etc.). Specifically: when we concentrate on them as modes of knowledge, representations are treated as *structuring nuclei*, that is to say, knowledge structures orchestrating the totality of significations relative to the known object. The first perspective finds an echo in numerous enquiries conducted within real environments. The second has shown itself to be a paradigm of considerable value when generalized or applied to the study of social thought in the laboratory or in the field. This approach has made it possible to discern the constituent processes of representation and to identify its specific forms and effects in terms of cognitive organization.

The constitutive processes of objectification and anchoring are related to the formation and functioning of social representations and contribute to an explanation of the conditions for their emergence and circulation, namely social interaction and communication. As our primary aim is to emphasize that these processes provide the means of conceptualizing the intervention of the social in cognitive elaboration, we shall restrict ourselves to mentioning in more detail their "moments" in the presentations cited above. Objectification explains representations as a *selective construction*, a *structuring schematization*, a *naturalization*, that is to say as a cognitive whole which retains, from the information provided by the external world, a limited number of elements linked by relationships which form them into a structure responsible for organizing the field of representation and which is accorded the status of objective reality. The process of anchoring which comprehends a *grounding in the system of thought*, an *allocation of meaning*, an *instrumental-*



ization of knowledge, explains how new information is first transformed and integrated into the ensemble of socially established knowledge and into the network of significations available to society for the interpretation of the real, and then reincorporated in the form of categories which serve to guide both understanding and action. There are two points to emphasize here. This analysis permits us to describe the structural nature of representations, not as a hypothetical organization obeying an empirical, mechanistic model of information processing as cognitive psychology would suggest, but as the result of interaction between experiential data and the social frameworks within which they are apprehended and memorized. At the same time, this analysis allows us to recreate the genesis of representations and to find in their origins and functions a law of organization. This represents an advance on the approach of the social sciences which, in their observations, identify structures but are unable to account for the specific structures except to appeal to mental universals replicated at differing symbolic levels, or through recourse to linguistic models.

The analyses performed by social psychology have advanced the discipline in two directions: by examining the social mechanisms which determine how the terms of the structure are selected and by deepening the structural properties of social representations. In the first case, in an attempt to account for the accentuation or suppression of certain characteristics or dimensions of the represented objects, a number of authors have studied the effects of values particular to a social group or culture, namely the effects of normative constraints linked to the position occupied by the social actors within an institutional system, or of collective models which allow individuals to give a meaning to their social experiences (see in particular Chombart de Lauwe, 1984; Gilly, 1980; Herzlich, 1973; Kaès, 1968; Jodelet, 1984; Moscovici, 1961; Robert, Lambert and Faugeron, 1976). In the second case, laboratory research has brought to light certain aspects of the composition of this structure, while distinguishing between central and peripheral elements of social representations in order to study their relationship with behaviour and its transformation (see in particular Abric, 1988; Flament, 1984, 1987).

However, despite the extraordinary progress achieved by researchers in this field, we should note that we do not yet possess a unified perspective allowing us to theorize about the representational phenomena at work in the life of groups. There are two types of limitation to be noted. The study of representational production suffers a restriction in its field of exploration to the extent that research has sought a direct link between the social position of individuals and their cognitive constructions in relation to a specific sector of activity. At the same time, this study also suffers from the difficulty of establishing a link between representation and practice in so far as it has almost exclusively concentrated on the expressive value of representation with regard to the lived experience of the subjects, with no evaluation of the significance of the cognitive construction as a definition of the object through

which these subjects are situated (Jodelet, 1985, 1987). The structural study of representations, despite its greater degree of generality and its demonstration of the effect of certain structural elements in the shaping of action, suffers from its failure to cast light on the question of the genesis of representations.

At the intersection of the diverse points of view examined all too briefly in this short survey, it is possible to discern some more exhaustive avenues of investigation. It is these we shall follow, fixing our attention on a number of central problems. That of comprehending the interrelationship of the cognitive and expressive aspects of a representation shared by a group with reference to an object such as mental illness which involves the emotions and identity of each of its members; that of examining the way in which social conditions, language and communication are involved in the formation, manipulation or preservation of a system of representations, in particular in the selection and organization of the elements which give it cohesion; that of delimiting the conditions under which this structure is operative in the establishment of a consensual vision and the orientation of individual and collective behaviour, in particular the cognitive conditions necessary if we are truly to account for the social efficacy of representations and their articulation at the symbolic, axiological and ideological levels. To this end we shall treat representations as a form of social thought whose genesis, properties and functions have to be viewed in relation to the processes which affect social life and communication, the mechanisms which tend towards the definition of the identity and specificity of social subjects, individuals or groups, as well as the energies which underlie the relationships formed by these with one another. If we are to implement such a perspective which unites the psychological and social approaches we must concentrate on real social contexts and adopt a multidisciplinary standpoint.

### *One Field, One Perspective, One Method*

This has led us to search for a field of study which will allow us to identify the conditions under which representations emerge and function, and their place and role in the dynamic of interactions with the mentally ill. Responding to requirements concerning the validity of an analysis of social relationships to insanity as much as of an analysis of representations, we have chosen to work within a context in which a situation of daily contact with the mentally ill is effectively realized. From the choice of real situations, we have selected a geographically and institutionally circumscribed social framework in which both representation and practice are based on an entire past and present life of proximity to the mentally ill: the Family Colony of Ainay-le-Château. Within this institution, more than a thousand psychiatric hospital patients are placed in nearly five hundred local homes distributed over thirteen



*communes*.<sup>3</sup> With the exception of Dun-sur-Auron, this Family Colony is the only one of its kind in France and is reminiscent of that in Gheel, in Belgium, whose long history served as an example.

In both locations an entire social system has established itself and functions around the presence of the mentally ill with the benefits they bring and the problems they cause. It is this fact which invests such a field of study with all its validity. The diffusion of the mentally ill throughout the social space, their participation in local life, the variety of their contacts with the population enable us to observe, as if through a magnifying glass, the phenomena which emerge in a diffuse and fragmentary way within the framework of our everyday lives. What is more, a long-established institution reveals forms of coexistence with insanity which have already stabilized and allows us to examine how and why they were formed. In this way we have at our disposal a rare chance of comparing our approach with that of other social sciences.

As we shall see, this approach was inspired by certain of their methods. Their viewpoint, and the anthropological viewpoint in particular, has clarified many aspects of the ideal and practical realities which we have discovered, illustrating what Sapir said about the "subtle interactions" between "systems of ideas which have their roots in global culture and those which the individual creates for himself as a result of his special spheres of participation": "The more we examine these interactions, the more difficult it becomes to distinguish between society as a cultural and psychological entity and the individual member of society whose culture he must espouse. If we are to be realistic we should never formulate any propositions of social psychology whose premises are based in the traditional opposition between individuals and society. It is almost always more correct to form an image of the exact nature and the implications of a constellation of ideas which forms the counterbalance to anthropology's 'cultural model', to establish its relationship to other constellations, to see how it is modified by the process of contact and, finally and most importantly, to locate the precise position of this constellation" (1967). And it seems to us that this centrifugal movement of opening to the social sciences should be accompanied by a centripetal movement back towards social psychology. Sapir again: "By choosing to examine the practical problems of behaviour and not the ready-made problems posed by classical areas of specialization, we arrive in the field of social psychology which is no more social than individual. It is, or should be, the seminal science which gives rise to both the impersonal and abstract problems formulated by anthropology and the indiscreet probing into the heart of human behaviour which constitutes the work of the psychiatrist" (*ibid.*).

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<sup>3</sup> French urban or rural administrative district. Roughly equivalent to the area administered by a British district council [Translator's Note].

This heart of human behaviour, when addressed to the mentally ill, is not always easy to grasp. And most importantly, we have found that what we discover is not always easy to formulate. Equally, it seems to us that those who were confronted by a similar situation at Gheel encountered the same difficulty. The results available from this great research project, conceived and orchestrated by Léo Srole from 1960 onwards,<sup>4</sup> suggest that we might feel a certain embarrassment at uncovering realities which are at odds with what might have been expected from an experiment in the family care of the mentally ill based on a religious tradition going back to the Middle Ages. Similarly, a large number of silences hover above the reassuringly bright descriptions of the public life of the insane in the city (Roosens, 1977). We shall conduct our examination resolutely, even if it means demonstrating how a civil society can turn into a totalitarian one.

The concern of our investigation, which extended over a period of four years, into a context of proximity with the mentally ill was to identify at all levels of social life the forms which the relationship with insanity assumes, the conditions for its acceptance and the representations associated with it. Our path has thus taken us around a long spiral, encompassing the history of the institution and leading from the phenomena observable on the public stage to the processes determining the integration of the patients into the social fabric and to the interactions which have established themselves in the private sphere. In every case we have attempted to give voice to representations and practices, seeking to lay bare the psychological and social forces which underlie both the one and the other.

This project has necessitated the implementation of a complex methodology, related to the methodology of the community monograph and armed with procedures drawn from ethnography, history, social psychology and sociology. The theoretical reasons, detailed elsewhere (Jodelet, 1985), for choosing this option were of two orders. Certain inadequacies generally observed in field studies of social representations had to be overcome, as these affect the reliability of the collected material and thus the conclusions which are based on it. We need only think of certain criticisms levelled, in particular, at enquiries conducted by questionnaire or interview: notably the imposition on the population of the researcher's appreciation of the problem, his preconceptions and categories; the hypothesis of the transparency of speech; the enclosure of speech cut off from its productive context and its relationship to practice; the prevalence of accommodating or socially desirable replies or, again, rationalizations of the effectively adopted positions; the intuitive character of interpretations; hermeneutic interpretation of meaning without a mastery of the mechanisms which allow significations to emerge. To avoid these pitfalls it was necessary to return

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<sup>4</sup> "The Gheel Family Care Research Project" (Srole, 1962) which has been supported by a number of foundations, both American and Belgian.



representations to the context in which they emerge and function. On the other hand, we wanted to have access to all the phenomena involved in the processes of representations (communications, structural and institutional basis of social relations, cultural models of behaviour, material and symbolic practices, ideological systems . . . ). Seen from this point of view, the monographic method of study which has proved to be so fruitful in social psychology (Arensberg, 1954; Redfield, 1955; Becker *et al.*, 1961; Goffman, 1961 etc.), because it addresses a community in its totality and defines a field of analysis which is investigated in all its dimensions, seemed to us to be a profitable approach despite having fallen into disuse. In order to avoid an accumulation of observations which might threaten to overburden the monograph with the unique and the particular, we have complemented it with approaches designed to identify the mechanisms affecting the psychological and social life which has crystallized around a psychiatric institution and its inhabitants. This was the basis for the development of the phases and operations of the research project which we shall briefly present here.

First, observation through engagement in community life was maintained for the full duration of the investigation, with the aim of discovering the forms of the contact established with the mentally ill in different places and on different occasions: on the public stage (in the streets, at local ceremonies and celebrations); in socially frequented places (shops, cafés, church . . . ); in private places where people meet the patients and put them to work. Such immersion in the environment has made possible an exhaustive survey of the collective and individual behaviour shown towards the mentally ill and of the stability or variation of such behaviour in accordance with the varying conditions of contact.

Second, two avenues were followed in the reconstruction of the history of the institution and the consequences of its development within the environment in which the placements were carried out. The first consisted of an analysis of the literature relating to the Family Colony from its creation, in particular in a meticulous examination of the annual reports given by its doctor-directors to its supervisory body, the French *Assistance Publique*. The second was the commitment to gathering the testimonies of witnesses occupying key positions both inside and outside the boundaries of the placement project (a specialist in regional folklore and history, leading local figures, councillors, officials of local associations). This has made it possible to identify the factors which have contributed to local acceptance of the system, those which have led to its rejection or condemnation, the psychological labours which the placement community has applied to itself in order to surmount the fears and conflicts thrown up by contact with insanity, the tensions which have characterized contact with the hospital and the images associated with dealings with the mentally ill.

Third, the organization and functioning of the system of family placement of patients and the conceptions of it formed by different actors were studied by questioning a representative sample of the medical and para-medical hospital staff. Of particular value was the contribution of the "visiting nurses" who are responsible for liaising between hospital, patients and the "foster parents" who are in charge of their accommodation and supervision. As bearers of the group memory, witnesses of real-life experiences of cohabitation with the patients, vectors for the transmission of the rules and customs which shape life in the placement homes, these nurses enabled us to discover their forms and principles, along with the signification of certain deviations from explicit norms and of certain dysfunctions.

Four, the two preceding phases of study have served to construct an instrument for the survey and description of the totality both of the placement families (493) and of the patients (1,195). This questionnaire, administered with the aid of the visiting nurses, has provided information on:

The placements: position, distance from the headquarters of the Family Colony, type of accommodation, level of comfort, length of time functioning as a placement, scope of accommodation, rotation of the accommodated patients, living conditions available to the lodgers (work, extent of association with family life, shared meals etc.).

The foster parents: age, origin, profession, childhood experience of contact with the mentally ill, family composition, number, sex, age of children etc.

The lodgers: age, psychiatric category, length of time in the Colony and in the placement, sociability rating, professional activity etc. The results of this enquiry, consisting in part of the quantitative data referred to in the text, have made it possible to identify the factors and tendencies which shape the functioning of placements and the relationship between the foster parents and the lodgers, and to identify objective indicators of the relationship with the mentally ill. It was this information which served as a basis for the selection of the sample for the in-depth interviews which were conducted during the final phase of the enquiry.

Fifth, in effect, by reversing the usual sequence of studies of representations which progress from the qualitative to the quantitative, we expected to master in their entirety the elements intervening in, or revealing how, the community positions itself with regard to the Colony and its inhabitants, in order to explore the representations involved in its mode of conduct.

In order to assure a systematic study of social representations and to verify certain hypotheses formulated on the basis of our investigations, we interviewed a sample number of the foster parents, selected in accordance with the criteria of representativeness and significance. The representative status of the sample was assured by a sampling rate higher than 10% (65 placements were visited out of 493). Within this sample, groups of foster



parents were contrasted according to the indicators which emerged from the statistical enquiry so as to control the differences in representation likely to correspond to differences in the situation and the functioning of placements and in the relations established with the patients.

Both for reasons of locality and to ensure the validity of the information collected, the conduct of the interviews was inspired by the methods used in the ethnographic study of cultural behaviour (Maget, 1962). This consisted in going from the particular to the general, via descriptions of patients and stories of everyday life, in order to obtain reflections on mental illness. In this respect the "placement log", a register of all the lodgers who have stayed in the placement together with their dates of arrival and departure, proved to be a useful instrument. Referring to the individuals mentioned in the log, we asked for a description of behaviour and symptoms, for explanations of the illness and its causes and for judgements of the patient's practical and relational capabilities etc. Moreover, this helped to reveal the traces left in the memory by the various patients. In this way we could determine that the rare remembered cases corresponded to prototypical portraits. The large number of the forgotten illustrated how frequently it proved impossible to discern the characteristic pathological signs or how often patients were relegated to the ranks of the anonymous. The interviews also included questions on the everyday conduct of life in the placement and on the causes underlying certain habits and practices revealed by the statistical enquiry or by earlier observations (in particular everything having to do with measures used to isolate the patients and to separate their personal belongings and items which they had touched). The explanation of these practices has enabled us to bring hidden representations to light, thus revealing the system of relations with the mentally ill in its entirety.

This means of progress has answered the need to place our approach to representations in context in order to reveal the conditions under which they form, their manner of functioning and their involvement in the development of the institution, as well as in the practices and behaviour applied to mental illness. It has also sanctioned an explanation of the significations attached to mental illness. This explanation is closely bound up with the local system of behaviour and knowledge, avoids unfounded or fallacious speech and, as Wittgenstein (1961) predicted, returns

words and phrases to themselves, that is to say to the elementary situation in which they are used.

But, above all, this combination of the ethnographical approach and an in-depth sociopsychological investigation has shown itself to be heuristic in nature, leading us to make unexpected discoveries. Since from the very beginning of the enquiry our approach drew attention to surprising behaviour – most noticeably in connection with the administration of medicines,

patients' contact with the water reserved by the population for personal use and the treatment of items and belongings touched by the patients – it has been a determining factor in the discovery of secretly held ideas. These notions, at odds with the reassurances concerning the non contagious nature of mental illness propagated by official statements to which our interviewees overtly adhered, reveal a belief in the transmission of insanity by the bodily fluids and anything which has been in contact with them. By concentrating for a part of the interview on habits associated with life with the patients, we were able to obtain information which would otherwise have remained hidden in spontaneous discussion. We thus succeeded in opening the door on a background of tacit representations which are decisive in regulating contact with the insane.

This enquiry, which was conducted at the beginning of the 1970s in what was apparently a highly specific community, has revealed fundamental aspects of our relationship to otherness. Our discoveries concerning the belief in contamination through the bodily fluids finds an echo today in the fears generated by AIDS and certain discriminatory modes of behaviour which have grown from them. This is reminiscent of the symbolic processes through which things are placed in the category of "other", processes which are based on the defence of an identity and which appeal to knowledge rooted in the social memory. It is this we shall try to account for whilst traversing the spiral at the heart of the history and life of this community, whose fate it was to live with the insane. Our journey will take us from an examination of the material and psychological bases of the social institution created around the family placement of the mentally ill (first part), to the forms assumed by their introduction to a social context within a community which invents ways of adapting an exogenous population without truly assimilating it (second part), to conclude at their representational base and the way in which it is linked to the material, symbolic, axiological and ideological registers which characterize the social dynamic and to the affective dimensions of group life (third part).

In reconstructing the events and facts in this life history of a collective at grips with a danger from within, we have followed a progression from the most external to the most intimate, one which enabled us to explore, not without difficulty or resistance, the heart of a secret masked by the veil of habit. In so far as it is possible, we have left it to the actors to describe their own story. Not all the actors; only a few of the mentally ill were interviewed. This was the price we had to pay for entering an environment swift to erect barriers in the face of the alien and in the face of those who approach the *bredins* or give them credit. However, it has been enough to hear the long train of speech describing life with them to understand their fate and the reasons for it. The people whose conversations we quote are not identified, not even fictitiously. The experience shared by the population and the common vision they themselves have made of it are so homogeneous that we



often thought we were listening to a single voice. This has enabled us, moreover, to respect a minimum of anonymity.

In fact, the institution we describe is unique in France. It is easily identifiable. It would thus have been pointless to disguise its name or location. This honesty will, we hope, compensate for the risk of indiscretion. All the more so, since these risks have been erased by the time it has taken to make public a study some of whose results we have long hesitated to recount. Many of those whom we met will certainly have died by today. Witnesses of the founding of the Colony, they helped us to a better understanding of the innermost core of a situation which, in the present, has revealed itself in abrupt and obscure terms. We honour their memory as we also thank those who might recognize themselves in this story even if, for some of them, it has now taken on the colours of the past.

From what is said today, it seems that recent years have seen a change in the institution. Yet the photographs recently displayed in the press and on television testify to the fact that the realities we describe here remain. It is for this reason that we have not sought to modernize the description of the world which we encountered nearly twenty years ago and whose characteristics throw the phenomena which have been revealed into full relief. Perhaps this will provide a spur for new investigations in this field with the aim of observing what might have changed.