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Dialogues in social psychology - Or, how new are new ideas?				
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Se la riflessione sui grandi orientamenti di una disciplina dovesse progredire in funzione delle critiche che le sono indirizzate, la psicologia, e in particolare la psicologia sociale, dovrebbe essere una delle disciplini i cui orientamenti generali sono i più meditati. E chissa, forse è chosì.

W. Doise, 1999, pg. 225

1. Dialogues in social psychology

W. Doise wonders whether social psychology can be considered a discipline whose fundaments have been highly meditated, and he decides that the right answer is probably *Maybe*. I would tend to agree with him. I am, however, prepared to defend that some of the more interesting and recent meditations about the discipline can be found in the written dialogue between Social Representations Theory and Discursive Psychology. And so, my first aim in this paper will be to discuss communalities and differences between these approaches through an analysis of their written dialogue. More specifically, I will examine some of the written exchanges that occurred during the '80s and the '90s between Moscovici and the group of Social Psychology, paying special attention to those from this group defending discursive approaches.

Before analysing this dialogue I will, however, need to briefly sketch its historical and conceptual context, in order to give an idea of the constraints within which it developed.

Allow me, thus, to put forward the idea that the conceptual space of social psychology (an expression borrowed from Harré, 1989) can be roughly defined with two axes and the resulting four quadrants. The first axis is related to the importance accorded to mental representation – some approaches take mental representation as the object of study, others argue for its dispensability. The second is related to the different assumptions about the origins of meaning – social or individual.

Figure 1
The conceptual space of social psychology

		individual construction of meaning
	Social Cognition	Behaviourism
mental representatio	n	mental representation should not be studied
Siloula de Studiea		should <u>not</u> be studied
	Social	Discursive
	Representations Theory	Psychology
		Social construction of meaning

Drawing the conceptual space of social psychology with these two axes allows for different traditions to be positioned into the four quadrants defined.

Proceeding counter-clockwise on this space, and starting from the oldest tradition, we find behaviourism – dispensing the study of mental representation and assuming individual experience as the source of meaningful behaviour. Although we are proceeding counter-clockwise, we are in line with chronology, since the next quadrant takes us to social cognition. Coming after behaviourism, this tradition assumes individual experience as the source of mental representations and elects these as the object of study. Approximately at the same time that social cognition was initiating its ascending influence over the discipline (McGuire, 1986), was Moscovici forging the concept of social representation – assuming at the time the importance of studying mental representations, and the idea that meaning is socially constructed. Finally, in the last quadrant is positioned a newer approach - discursive psychology –,

that dispenses the study of mental representations and assumes the social construction of meaning.

This conceptual space organized in four quadrants has, of course, to taken as a large scale map. That is, it has to be taken as a simplified version of a complex territory. Detail, alternative roads, hills and valleys are absent from most large scale maps. But these can, nevertheless, be useful guides to prepare our travels.

And so, using this space as a map to read the relationship between Social Representations Theory and Discursive psychology I will now try to give a brief overview of the dialogue between them during the last two decades.

Since I will be analysing a dialogue, I will be analysing communication. And for the analysis of communication, Moscovici (1976) has forged some concepts that I will be using. I will try to characterise the different voices in this dialogue by drawing on his ideas about communicative modalities – propagation, propaganda and diffusion – much in the manner of Doise (1987; 1993).

I will be arguing that in a first phase of the development of SRT Moscovici was talking to the group of social psychology as a whole and favouring propagation.

This first phase was a very long one. Moscovici's thesis was first published in 1961. By 1976 a (modified) reprint appeared. During the fifteen years that elapsed between the genesis of the concept and the re-print of 76, Moscovici had also been busy with texts about attitudes (1963), group polarization (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969) and minority influence (Moscovici & Faucheux, 1972).

He had been busy – let me risk an interpretation – with finding a place within the social psychology of the seventies. In the seventies in Europe the idea of a distinct European social psychology was kept alive in Bristol and some hoped in Paris. In North-America the official credo of an experimental social psychology had already

simultaneously substituted behaviour variables for cognitive ones and given rise to first critics (Gergen, 1973). Finding a place within the social psychology of the seventies meant that one had to take into account both European and American interlocutors, or (at least) both French and English speaking interlocutors. Well, in 1979 a meeting was held in Paris that tried to take all of these into account. Quoting Farr and Moscovici (1984), the aim of this meeting was: "to facilitate the diffusion of a knowledge of this tradition of research throughout the English-speaking world" (pg. x).

Also in the same spirit was published the volume edited by Forgas (1981), where Moscovici states: "we are firmly convinced that the view we have adopted is on the whole well founded and represents a uniquely European approach to the <u>study</u> <u>of social cognition</u>, different from and complementary to, recent North American research" (pg. 181-182, emphasis added). So, it is absolutely clear – SRT is speaking both for those who do not speak French and for those who live in North America, and for both reasons these texts are published in English. It is also clear that at this moment Moscovici envisages SRT as being compatible with social cognition, and aims at a conciliation of the theory with research developments from the latter. He therefore highlights the axis that SRT shares with social cognition – the importance accorded to mental representation. The 1981 text bears testimony to this project, namely in his analysis of anchoring.

But those who live in North America never really answered back to this propagation effort (Duveen, 2000) ¹. Some of those who speak English, on the other hand, did answer back throughout the '80s. From the direction of discursive

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¹ At least, not the effort connected with SRT. The efforts made in the area of social influence are obviously acknowledged in the fact that Moscovici is the author of the chapter on Social Influence of

approaches, Harré responded in 1984. Next came Litton & Potter (1985), Potter & Litton (1985), Parker (1987), Potter & Wheterell (1987) and Billig (1988).

Texts by Harré (1984), Parker (1987), and Billig (1988) seem to concentrate on the axis of agreement. They question SRT in order to ensure that its social dimension is not lost but deepened, and thus question some of the fundaments of the theory and some of the research directions it took.

Harré (1984) discusses how *social* we can consider a social representation when we study taxonomic groups, instead of structured groups.

Parker (1987) warns against taking certain directions of research, along whose lines the social dimension can be lost. Following Farr, he considers that there is a strong and a weak version of the theory. The strong version is patent in the importance Moscovici accords to the study of content, and Jodelet's contributions. The weak form of the theory "appears in Moscovici's defence of cognitive social psychology" (Parker, 1987, pg. 462) and Abric's proposals. Parker is writing after the propagation project of Moscovici has apparently met with some success. And it seems to be precisely against the conciliation of the theory with social cognition that he is writing: "I want to direct attention to the dangers that accrue when a new theoretical position (in this case 'social representations') is appropriated by, and rehabilitated within traditional social psychology" (pg. 447).

Billig (1988) argues that STR should analyse not only homogeneity, but also the co-existence of contradictory themes in common sense, and so should analyse representations not just as the product of dialogue, but also of argumentation and negation (pg. 74).

On the other hand, Potter & Litton (1985) and Potter & Wheterell (1987), consider mainly the axis of disagreement – cognitive representation -, and discuss the

Theory in order to dismiss it, and to substitute it by the study of interpretative repertoires. They try to spell out "the <u>advantages</u> of this analytic notion compared with social representations" (1987, pg. 155, emphasis added). They acknowledge that to cast "a coherently social, social psychology is exactly one of the espoused goals of social representations theory. However it is discourse analysis which offers a systematically non-cognitive social psychology as an alternative to the increasingly pervasive cognitive variety" (pg. 157).

In sum, some of these communications assume the characteristics of propagation – some aspects of the SRT can be kept, others ameliorated, and others dismissed. And other voices in this dialogue are speaking more in a spirit of propaganda – SRT should be altogether substituted by discourse analysis, and the concept of interpretative repertoires.

Moscovici did not answer all these communications directly and in writing. Harré, he answers (Moscovici, 1984b) stating that he thoroughly agrees that he studied taxonomic groups. But he adds that he also studied structured groups, when he analysed the French press. And he argues for the need to study both types of groups. The others, he does not answer until the '90s.

But as the '80s approach the end, Moscovici will publicly make very clear that the time of aiming at conciliating SRT with social cognition has come to an end. In 1988 and 1989 Moscovici publishes two texts in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*. Both are very critical of American social psychology. The fragmentary character of social cognition research and the subsidarization of social psychology to general psychology are focused. The two texts are also simultaneously very clear about Moscovici's commitment to the assumption of the social construction of meaning and about his defence of social psychology as a social science.

These two texts seem to mark an inflexion point in Moscovici's communication with the group of social psychology. From this moment onwards, social cognition will no longer be the object of a propagation-type communication, aiming at conciliating ideas from SRT with some of its ideas.

During the '90s Moscovici will try to deepen the communicative aspects of his original theory. He emphasized the social construction component, and tried to pursue new ways to make the study of representations more social (Moscovici, 1994; Moscovici & Vignaux, 1994; Moscovici & Markova, 1998; Moscovici, 1998; Moscovici, 1999). And towards the very end of the '90s Moscovici will also resume the dialogue with discursive psychology (1998; 1999), in a propagation-like style. He will make a distinction between static and dynamic social representations, and about the latter he will state that they are formed with the double aim of acting and evaluating, and do not presuppose that knowledge and action are two separated domains (1998, pg. 245). And he will also state that: "I have the idea that the majority of the research on discourse by Billig, Potter & Litton, does not contradict the theory of social representations. On the contrary, they complement it, deepen this aspect of it (the social construction of reality aspect). To ask then, whether language or representations is the better model can have no more psychological meaning then asking the question does a man walk with the help of his left leg or his right leg?" (1998, pg. 246).

Let us now hear other voices intervening in this dialogue in the '90s. In 1993, a volume was published that aimed at giving an overview of the empirical approaches to social representations. Before that, however, a number of theoretical meditations about the Theory are offered, and among these are texts from Billig (1993) and McKinlay et al. (1993). Also in the same volume, Doise comments these as follows:

"Billig adopts a strategy of propagation in Moscovici's terms: he tried to convince us that social representations theory should be adapted to his rhetorical approach" (pg. 163). For their part, "(McKinlay et al.) enter the debate on social representations rather in a spirit of propaganda. Apparently, they try to introduce an antagonism between the social representations approach and their conception of discourse analysis" (pg. 167). A position also apparent in a later text: "Although social representations theory has stimulated this important refocusing of psychological interest (in content and meaning), it is not free from the reductionism of social cognition" (Potter & Wetherell, 1998, pg. 140).

Harré takes a different position, when he defines himself as "a fellow traveller with Farr and Moscovici and their allies" (1998b, pg. 136), in a text where he draws a distinction between transcendent and immanent social representations. A distinction that does not seem to be very far from the one Moscovici presents in the same year, and that differentiates static from dynamic representations.

Again in the '90s, Parker (1998) joins this dialogue, and he is also clear about possible conciliations: "the social psychological theory of social representations was part of a sustained attempt by the discipline to develop fully social explanations of identity and shared knowledge. It is in many ways compatible with the framework used in this book" (pg. 40).

3.

In sum, divergence between the approaches concerns the importance that should be accorded to mental representation in order to devise a coherent program for the study of social psychology. Discursive psychology argues that we should only direct our questions to what happens between people, not inside them. Moscovici seems to be

arguing for an analysis of communication and language that cannot dispense representation altogether, even if it is <u>not</u> only on representations that are in the head that we should concentrate, but also on representations that are in the world (Farr, 1999).

As Billig has repeatedly stated, there are for every issue with social significance contradictory injunctions that co-exist in the great reservoir of common sense. New ideas are constantly thrown in the stream of common sense, new terms are coined and appropriated by the thinking society and this appropriation constantly defines and re-defines the meaning of these new terms, as well as the meaning of the old ones to which they connect. This process does not only happen in the "society" that is "outside" scientific disciplines. It happens whenever people think and argument, so it happens with social psychologists as well. New ideas are also constantly thrown into social psychology's heritage for thinking. There was a time when the idea of studying cognitive representations seemed a new idea, since behaviourism had dismissed it. From the seventies onwards it became an old idea, and the idea of studying language appeared as the new idea. The concrete features that these ideas took when employed by people in the dialogues that took place over these years helped shape their meanings. Some actualisations of the meaning of social representations – that is, some texts from the social psychological literature - present these as incompatible with discursive psychology. Other texts present them as compatible, even if only with restrictions. Some texts argue that only new ideas should be kept, others that new and old ideas can be conciliated. Others do not bother entering this dialogue, and still others argue for keeping only old ideas (Jahoda, 1988).

This can be considered another example of what Moscovici described when he was describing the different modalities of communicating about psychoanalysis in the French press. He was, in that somehow neglected part of the theory, describing different places from where to think and talk. These places have different characteristics that can be seen as offering pre-formatted platforms from where to think and argue about many socially relevant issues. At the same time, these platforms still allow for many creative transformations when individuals talk.

Recently Moscovici suggested that he had always considered the possibility of extending his ideas about communicative modalities to the interpersonal level: "My hypothesis in *La Psychanalyse* was that there are different systems of communication and conversation at the <u>interpersonal levels</u>, just as there is diffusion, propagation and propaganda at the 'mass level'; and that their rules or logic shape these social representations in specific ways" (Moscovici & Markova, 1998, pg. 402).

If we try to develop this idea, we can take the characteristics he identified for propaganda, propagation and diffusion as a map with which to attempt a first cartography of discourses. These characteristics can help us identify the complex ways in which old and new ideas are assembled together, included or excluded, in different discourses. They can help in the identification of different inter-group positions.

Furthermore, the different places for arguing that each modality offers also carry different implications for how social consensus is discursively constructed. From the theory (and also Vala, 2000) it is directly possible to deduce that those advocating new ideas in a propaganda-like style will present new ideas as lacking general consensus. And those arguing for conciliation, as well as those favouring older ideas, will present the same new ideas as comparatively more consensual.

I will now try to illustrate some of these aspects with data from a project we conducted on how people talk about the environment and nature (Castro & Lima, 1999; Castro, 2000; Castro & Lima, 2001).

Since we wanted to see how new and old ideas are differently inter-related, this theme was particularly adequate to our aims, because ecological ideas, in the form they have nowadays, are frequently presented as new ideas. One of the more influential traditions in the study of public positions about the human-nature relationship even defends that new ecological ideas are thoroughly and rapidly substituting old anthropocentric ideas all over the world (Dunlap, 1993; Dunlap & Mertig, 1995; Furman, 1997). Instead of assuming that this substitution is thus smoothly taking place, we decided to take seriously the assumptions that: (1) old and new ideas tend to co-exist and to interact; (2) this interaction assumes different formats, opening up different places from where to think and argue.

We started this project with a questionnaire that included the classical scale used to analyse the ecological beliefs of the public – the NEP scale (Dunlap et al., 1992). But instead of assuming that each individual had to answer either in the ecological or in the anthropocentric direction, considering these as mutually exclusive, we assumed that all four combinations were possible – people could position themselves as espousing only the new ecological ideas, only the old anthropocentric ideas, both of them, or neither of them.

And the four positions were found (Castro & Lima, 2001). So afterwards we hypothesized that these four positions would also be apparent in the discourses of the same persons, when participating in focus groups. That is, we were also expecting four different discourses. These would present the characteristics of communicative

modalities, as Moscovici synthesises them: "la diffusion tend a favoriser l'eclosion *d'opinions* sur des problemes specifiques, la propagation édifie des *attitudes* susceptibles de marquer aussi bien les representations que les conduites (pg. 401). (...) la propagande est plus concrete, elle ne se contente pas de renouveler la signification d'un *comportement*, *elle tend á le crér ou á le renforcer*." (1976, pg. 402).

One discourse would present the characteristics of discourses that argue only for new ideas, rejecting old ones – dichotomization, focus on behaviour and minority status attributed to the self. That is, the characteristics of Propaganda. Another would present the characteristics of propagation – conciliation of new and old ideas and focus on attitudes. The other two would focus on the level of beliefs, highlighting uncertainty in the area of environmental problems, and would present the characteristics of diffusion.

Furthermore, the discourse most clearly connected with the defence of old ideas would also depict ecological ideas as majority ideas. That is, ideas that everybody espouses and therefore have no differentiating identity value.

In the material obtained with the groups, we identified four different discourses – the *Action*, the *Conciliation*, the *Resistance* and the *Human Species* discourses. Lack of space prevents me from presenting the lively descriptions of the environment and nature that were characteristic of each. I would only like to highlight two ideas.

The first concerns the way each discourse depicts the characteristics of communicative modalities. The Action discourse focuses on behaviour vigilance and behaviour modification, in order to deal with environmental problems, presented as a catastrophic certainty. It presents ecological ideas as new ideas that should not be conciliated with old anthropocentric ideas. The Conciliation discourse presents

environmental problems as serious, but as solvable through education and information, attitude change, and through the conciliation of ecological and economic interests. The catastrophic potential of environmental problems is, for both the Resistance and the Human Species discourses, still a controversial matter, a matter of opinion.

We could, thus, say that the Action discourse presents Propaganda characteristics, the Conciliation discourse presents Propagation characteristics and both the Resistance and Human Species discourses present some features of Diffusion.

However, it should be noted that the Resistance discourse also depicts ecological ideas and behaviours as only another instance of education and respect, and as already so consensual that "one already feels like resisting them, in the name of human values".

And it is here that we reach the second idea I would like to highlight. It has to do with how social consensus about the environment is differently presented in the two discourses of Action and Resistance.

Here are two examples of how the Resistance discourse presents social consensus:

CF2 – (When my friends and I are discussing the environment) I think, we all, we all agree, and the positions are so, are so clear, and so, so, similar, in what regards the environment... that it is a matter of respect...

M - You all agree about the environment, is that it?

CF2 - Yes ... and, and ... experiences are so similar... ... so similar that it is difficult to start an argument, we say, that's it, that's it... And, well, end of conversation, everybody says that's it, everybody thinks the same. (pg. 36)

CF1 – It is obvious... if we think about debating it with people, actually, it probably isn't... it is not very debated, because it appears as evident.

M – What do you mean, evident?

CF1 – It is, it is..., because it is a pacific theme. We can discuss (the Portuguese primeminister) and, indeed, because it is a polemic theme, and there are always... we can discuss abortion and there are big arguments, when actually, well, if we talk about the

Amazonian forest burning, we all go, Oh, What a shame, how incredible that it is burning! Isn't it? (pg. 37)

And now here are some examples of how the Action discourse presents social consensus:

CP4 – And so, someone isolated, two or three people in a street are worried with the environment, compared with a thousand or two thousand, it is almost nothing ... The results of what one sees... they demonstrate that we are a minority, isnt' it? (pg. 38) CP2 – we are very few, this is not enough, a lot more were needed (pg. 37) MP2 – I think we have a small amount that, yes, yes sir, would agree with what we are saying, and the great majority, I think this is indifferent to them (pg. 25)

The same pattern is apparent when, with a questionnaire, people are asked to estimate the percentage of the Portuguese population that would answer as they do.

Table 1

Mean of the percentages estimated for the Portuguese population, by the direction of the beliefs expressed, for those that answer affirmatively

Beliefs Estimated percentage of the Portuguese population that:	Predominance of orientation to the new ecological ideas	Predominance of orientation to the old anthropocentric ideas	
Uses recycled paper The following the second seco	27.6	35.8	t(88) =-2.28, p<.03
 Is in favour of making the environment a priority Agrees that the balance of Nature 	49.0	57.6	t(138)=-2.0, p<.05
is fragile and easily upset	53,5	61,9	t(155)=-2.1, p<.04

5. Conclusion

Both daily informal exchanges and institutional practices have opened for us a number of possibilities for thinking and arguing about controversial and relevant social issues. We can argue in a manner that rejects old ideas, in a manner that rejects new ideas, in a manner that conciliates both of them or in a manner that is suspicious of both. These can be seen as pre-formatted places from where to align our arguments in different ranks. And it seems to be possible to identify these places if we take the

characteristics of communicative modalities as a map for a first approach of the territory.

But these are also places that are not totally pre-given. They allow for creativity, and respond to the *Zeitgeist* in particular manners.

Discursive work done around the question of social consensus could be envisaged as one of the manners of responding to the *Zeitgeist*, or, more specifically, to those dimensions that the *Zeitgeist* defines as non-(directly)opposable. Ecological ideas nowadays seem to be ideas that no one wishes to clearly reject. A blatantly non-ecological discourse is difficult to sustain in many forums. And so, arguing for non-ecological courses of action, or ideas, implies having to circumnavigate these in complex ways. Presenting ecological ideas as absolutely consensual, even hegemonic, and actually not as new as all that, since they are simply another instance of respect and education, can be taken as an example of such a circumnavigation effort. An effort that clearly resonates with Billig's analysis of how defining an issue as totally non-controversial is a way of making it a non-issue – for what is there to be discussed about something that has already achieved total consensus and is no more than an old idea in a new guise?

For their part, those who speak from a revolutionary, or propaganda, position are not prepared to concede that these ecological ideas are old, much less that they are consensual. They are, on the contrary, polemic, calling for action and able to differentiate the self from others.

A parallel with what happens in the dialogues amongst social psychologists can also be drawn from these circumnavigation efforts. That social psychology ought to be *social* is an idea that is inscribed in the 'genetic' code of the discipline. Who will wish to say that his/her social psychology is not social? However, the definitions of

what is *social* in social psychology may, and do, vary. For social cognition it is evident that the social dimension is present in the discipline, that is a non-controversial or consensual issue, since its object is the *social mind* (Markus & Zajonc, 1985). From this position, it is possible to argue that what SRT presents as a new idea of *social*, is nothing more than an <u>old</u> idea in a different guise, and not a very good one (Jahoda, 1988). But from another position we can say that the idea of *social* in social representations theory is still not new enough, because it is not compatible with what is really a new idea – that the mind should <u>not</u> be our object of study (Potter & Wheterell, 1987; 1998). And still from another position, we can say that the idea of *social* in SRT has to be deepened in order to better accommodate new ideas about the importance of focusing also on language and its interactive use (Billig, 1988; 1993; Harré, 1998).

All of these can of course be called subtleties, but can we really say that our social life does not unravel around many such subtleties? And can we really disagree with Moscovici when he states that: "When one looks at the variety of representations in existence, one is struck by two things: man's obstinate rediscovery and reiteration of the same themes and his extraordinary prolificness in inventing ideas, urged on by a poetic instinct" (1984, pg. 967). Or, perhaps, would we wish to object only to the last six words?

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