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Scientific Material



# European Ph.D

on Social Representations and Communication

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**Penser la vie, le social, la nature.  
Mélanges en l'honneur de Serge  
Moscovici**

sous la direction de

**Fabrice Buschini et Nikos Kalampalikis**

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## Context Manipulation and the Control of Social Representations

What puzzles those who only recently took up the study of social representations is that, in spite of the fact that most researchers emphasize the importance of the social context in the construction of social representations, the former is often conceived of in an objectivistic manner, as a neutral field. In the following I attempt to challenge this view by showing how an ideological context may induce an agent to adopt or even form a determinate set of representations of her social world. I begin with a few theoretical remarks concerning the relationship between context and agent from the standpoint of the production of social representations. Then I illustrate this connection using the example provided by the ideological context of Romanian communism.

### The Role Played by the Context in the Production of Social Representations

Serge Moscovici was the first to point out that social representations are “aspects of the social milieu”. He repeatedly claimed that they are collectively *produced* by their social context, by which he meant that both social representations and the ideologies upheld by them represent the output of certain groups, social classes, or cultures. However, he started cautioning us as early as 1961 against the temptation to focus solely on defining the notion of *agency* in the production of social representations, at the expense of the *motivation* of the agent who produced it in the first place. Rather than trying to find out “who” invented a certain representation, he suggests that it is more informative to work out “why” the agent did it and “for what purpose”, as these questions genuinely contribute to clarifying the constitutive processes of behaviour coordination in social communication. The priority shift in

the research agenda hereby advocated by Moscovici acknowledges the fact that representations contribute to the formation of social practices by underwriting the norms and values embraced by agents when entering actual collective relations.

In the preface to the 1984 handbook of social psychology Moscovici was also emphasizing that social psychology is a science of the ideological phenomena that underlie the systems of representations and attitudes of the agents, thus conditioning both the content of these social representations as well as the content of the habits and dispositions they are built upon. Moscovici was suggesting in that work that representations are not necessarily about something that is accurately and objectively captured in our picture of the world, but rather the result of the social practices that led to the constitution of these representations in the first place. Seizing on this claim, researchers who subsequently wrote on the matter of representations from a cognitive standpoint correspondingly attempted to fuse the "cognitive" and the "social" dimension of the representation into one synthetic formula. Their effort is aptly illustrated by the expression "socio-cognitive construction", which is commonly used in defining representations. From such a perspective, what all those who have attempted to define social representations share is that, although they acknowledge that representations are clearly "cognitive" in nature, they nevertheless concede that they are "social" by design. Doise (1990) competently summarizes the complexity of the relationship between these two different aspects of the representation by showing that representations preserve and, at the same time, are fashioned by, the social relationships in which agents engage. These relationships directly or indirectly convey a certain social competence that can be attributed to the agent. If one adopts this view, Jodelet's claim that representations are influenced by the social context from which they emerge, by their circulation, as well as by the symbolic function they fulfil in interaction, sheds a different light on the question of the objective nature and neutrality of our (representational) knowledge of the social world (Jodelet 1991).

Recent contributions analysing the "effect" of the context upon social representations (Abric and Guimelli 1998) further support the idea expressed above. According to Abric and Guimelli, the socio-global, ideological context, as well as the immediate, situational context of the agent, together shape a socio-historical world, which

induces the agent to process information and form sets of images, belief-systems, and representations of her world. The agent will learn how to interpret the significance of social phenomena and construct models of knowledge-organization by using representations that draw from her familiar context of reference. Abric and Guimelli drive this point home when claiming that the core system of all representations adopted by an agent is directly determined by the *ideological and historical context* of her group or community. The context shapes the representations of the agent by means of the collective memory of her community and the accepted system of norms shared by its members. The global context induces the adoption of certain norms of behaviour, determines the choice of evaluation grids and mobilizes or polarizes social agents according to a determinate social "logic" derived by the agent from her context. In turn, this logic directs and shapes the cognitive activity of the agent in accordance with what is deemed to be "normal" within the context with respect to the fundamental principles guiding this logic, by rationalizing the information derived from her situation and subordinating it to the context, and at the same time by rejecting the "abnormal", that is, what deviates from the logical principles of the context.

Ivana Marková (1999) adds to and expands upon these ideas by claiming that social representations take shape, subsist, and evolve in a socio-cultural and historical context over a long period of time. Social representations are transmitted from one generation to another either informally, in the process of socialization (in everyday practice, by means of collective memory, individual behaviour or interaction, or by symbolic communication), or institutionally (in language, education, or through the legal system of a community). Social representations therefore presuppose that agents share common categorizations or *themata*.

The research on *themata* drawn upon by Marková shows us how social representations are "rooted" in the life of the individual. They depend on the historical evolution of a given phenomenon. Some *themata* are both deeply anchored in the personal life of the individual and are culture-dependent, thereby shaping common sense. This understanding leads us to a picture of the agent according to how the agent forms her social representations of the world while at the same time constructing the reality she comes into contact with. She internalizes the allegedly "objective reality" within her cognitive and

value systems by appealing to her personal history and set of references, which she appropriately relates to the context. As a result, the social representations of the agent are nourished by this context because of certain social, economic, and ideological conditions. Moreover, since the social representations produced by an agent depend upon a concrete situation (which includes the system of social relations, the hierarchy, and the social control, etc.), the *themata* position the individual within an ideological context.

Moscovici and Vignaux (1994) convincingly show that *themata* are transmitted by means of collective memory, as they are generated by previous discourses or representations. But discourses and representations are not necessarily objectively “inherited” from traditions in relation to which the social actors act as neutral receivers or “mirrors”. On the contrary, some discourse forms are specifically elaborated for certain public usages, as the experience of totalitarian regimes teaches us. Totalitarian and post-totalitarian regimes rely on developing social systems characterized by uniformity and discipline in thinking and communication. In order to reproduce themselves, they need to encourage “non-thinking” and a language of “non-communication”, which in turn are regulated by a system of specific rules (exemplified by the “guiding tables” or “instructional panels” used by the regime to “assist” citizens in finding their way in public life). The subject who follows these rules does not practice normal discourse and therefore cannot adopt the position of the informed producer of objective representations that neutrally reflect her social context. She does not represent the world, but instead reacts to a certain solicitation on the part of her political context with a formula which she took from the discursive forms already and specifically elaborated for her use by the power agents of the regime who construct the *themata* on which the reproduction of their power base relies.

The generation of the discourses and representations that influence the context of the agent can be easily understood if one considers that totalitarian regimes manipulate the underlying *themata* by encouraging agents to practise what Marková calls “oppositional thinking”. Marková is helpful again in clarifying this issue when researching the connection between the genesis of oppositional thinking and the refusal to acknowledge another. The lack of mutual recognition fuels oppositional thinking and, at the same time, generates social representations that can be used to influence and manipulate the social

context. Since social recognition is the basic *themata* that generates social representations, the refusal to recognize another, which manifests itself in oppositional thinking, appears to be the basic *themata* on which totalitarian regimes must rely when they manipulate representations, thereby influencing the context of the agents who appropriate and convey them.

Totalitarian regimes make use of oppositional thinking and discursively manipulate *themata* in order to influence and ultimately change the social context. Conversely, the social context in totalitarian regimes generates *themata* that consolidate the oppositional thinking of the agents and uphold their refusal to socially recognize another. The result is that the representations of the agent depend on the social context that hosts their production, whereas the context varies according to the success of certain *themata* in soliciting the formation of social representations that suit the interests of the regime. The latter observation is meant to give a provisional answer to the question concerning the neutrality of the social context in the production of representations, as well.

## The Construction of the Context

How can one obtain a controlled reaction from the social agent in totalitarian regimes? The obvious answer seems to be: by providing her with selected and channelled information, that is, by placing the individual in contexts that are specifically designed to obtain such reactions. To stimulate the elaboration and fixation of shared representations one must group individuals together in structures that are artificially created and well-controlled, to engage them in common actions that share goals which are already prescribed for them. If the representational process cannot be detached from the activities in which social agents engage, it follows that social representations include and structure the cognitive elements that result from the concrete relations with the social context. The relationships between individuals are not, as I said, neutral; they are determined by the position-taking that engages their actional competence, which in turn is acquired in a certain context (social, psychological, or ideological). If one desires that the agent harbour certain attitudes and ways of behaving, one must offer her the opportunity to learn only certain cognitive schemes, and place

her in controlled conditions. She will thus learn how to cope with a single type of world, which she will consider to be the only "real" one because she has never enjoyed access to an alternative. According to such a functionalist view of the world, any other face of reality that will be presented to her will be related to, and altered by, the familiar system of references of the agent (Abric 1994).

The meaning of the world depends on the individual's interpretation of it. A representation is not a simple mirroring of reality but an organization thereof, according to specific circumstances (social and ideological context, immediate finality of an action, etc). For this reason, when members of a group share a theory, for instance, the theory acquires the characteristics of a "prototype" and thereby of a "type of organization" (Flament 1994). The theory (that is, the system of representations it endorses) becomes a guide for action that coordinates the social actions and relations of social agents. For this reason, it can be considered a "preliminary system of decoding reality, as it determines our anticipations and expectations".

The main point raised by these remarks is that under the effect of a situation the social agent perceives reality not objectively, as it is "in itself", but in a deformed and partial manner, even an irrational one. The effect of the situation on the agent has a particular significance, as it explains why an individual embraces certain ideas and not others. Her ideas and representations function as a mechanism of perception, a cognitive filter that sorts the information and sets up strategies for action. The social position of the social agent leads to an effect of perspective. She cannot perceive the nuances of her reality, but instead views it through the lenses of the perception-mechanism that she internalizes. For instance, if one places a determinate set of dispositions, values, options, or ideas before the eyes of the individual who occupies a certain social position, these may well produce a blinding effect that nourishes her passions and encourages her to behave irrationally. From this moment on, the agent "ideologizes" whatever she is faced with, or else "psychologizes" everything in accordance with her deforming evaluation apparatus. Deconchy calls the information that is induced by the social field and immunizes the individual against other ideas, attitudes, or conducts "ideological orthodoxy".

In the following I will illustrate with four examples the process of ideological indoctrination of social agents within Romanian Communism. Local differences aside, this also reflects the situation of



other former Communist societies. The goal of this exercise is to point to a situation in which the production of representations by agents is directly influenced and even controlled by the social context to which the agent belongs. In the cases which I examine, neither the context is neutral, nor the social representations of this context are objective, as some researchers of the phenomenon seem to assume.

### *A. The Control of Education*

After 1989, a document of the NKVD (the secret service that preceded the KGB) that functioned as a handbook for Party representatives who served in the satellite countries of the Soviet Union in the period immediately following World War II was found in Poland. The “top secret” document, dated 6 February 1946, synthesizes in only a few pages the entire “philosophy” behind the full Soviet takeover in the economy, politics, culture, social life, military and education in the newly “liberated” countries (Buzatu 1991). In the forty-five years since its creation and distribution, all of the recommendations it contains have been consistently applied, with the exact results that the authors of the document had anticipated. Article 35 of this document, for instance, fully illustrates the programme to pervert the educational systems of the occupied countries:

One must eliminate from professional and secondary schools, but especially from high schools and universities, all popular teachers. They must be replaced with our people. One must analyze the differences between the disciplines of study, diminish the documentary material, and eliminate Latin, Greek, philosophy, logic and the study of genetics from high schools. When teaching history, one must not emphasize the greatness of the kings or their service in the interest of their country. Rather, one must focus on their base character and highlight the struggle for freedom of the oppressed masses. One must encourage the narrow specialization of all high schools.

Paragraph 45 informs us about the system of student selection at university level: “All faculties must be filled with students from the lowest social classes, as they are not interested in perfecting their education at the highest level, but rather in getting a diploma”.

These recommendations were applied to the letter in Romania. The regime gradually eliminated from schools all disciplines of study that

were deemed to contribute to the formation of independent thinking, high schools became narrowly specialized (there were metallurgical schools or schools exclusively specializing in preparing the workforce for the textile industry or telecommunications), the weight of the humanities was drastically diminished, there were precise instructions for politicizing classes by stigmatizing “bourgeois culture” and praising the achievements and superiority of socialism, and the choice and editing of handbooks fell under the control of the Party apparatus. Professors lost their jobs and in many cases even their freedom, and the selection of both teachers and university students exclusively relied on their “file” and on the “purity” of the social class to which the candidate belonged. The consequences could be seen immediately: the appearance of subservient and bureaucratic conduct, the depersonalization of social relations, and the restriction or even annulment of individual initiative and creative behaviour. Repetition and impersonal reproduction became the only possible reactions of students. The impact was so powerful and deep that after 1989 most of the teachers – the former students – developed a strong resistance to innovation by rejecting any initiative towards reform that seemed to threaten the paternalistic and bureaucratic style that they had learned in their own formative years (Neculau 1995).

### *B. The Drift of the Opinion Leaders and the Formation of the New Elite*

In the post-war years, artists, writers, scientists and social scientists were all pressured into supporting the policy of the Communist Party. Some of them resisted for a while, whereas others quickly joined its ranks.

The “betrayal of the intelligentsia” is not a new topic. More than eighty years ago Julien Benda (1928) pointed an accusing finger at those intellectuals who betrayed their vocation by yielding to political passions, race hate, or ideological prejudice. The “betrayal” is relevant however not because of the numbers involved, but rather in view of the impact of this example on public opinion. In the past decade, a Romanian historian of literature, Ana Selejan, has taken upon herself to follow Benda’s example by researching the moral demise of leading intellectuals (mostly under physical or psychological pressure)

immediately after the establishment of communism (Selejan 1992). The consequences of the witch hunt she describes are frightening. Denunciation campaigns, "polemics" that resulted in the imprisonment of the participants frightened intellectuals into either withdrawing from the public sphere or joining the choir of the apostles of the new ideology. Furthermore, the opportunistic behaviour of several important writers, philosophers, or social scientists who had previously dominated the cultural scene and decisively influenced opinion formation in public matters, opened up a wide gap between intellectuals and their audience, and built up an insidious attitude of resignation that pervaded public consciousness and eventually led to the undermining of any desire to find alternatives to and to resist internalizing the types of conduct that were encouraged by the regime.

In parallel with this process of elimination and/or conversion of the (intellectual) elite, the Communist regime set up its own system of elite formation. If, in the beginning, the most important positions in the state were occupied by people who were devoted to the "cause" (even if they often lacked elementary schooling), in time these experiments proved to be counterproductive and pointed to the need of producing an elite that was both devoted to the regime and competent. To correct the problem, the Party organized its own schooling system, which was designed to politically indoctrinate people who appeared to be devoted to the main principles of Party ideology, before sending them to take up assignments in the state hierarchy or to continue their formal education. The main function that the "*cadre*" (Party staff) – as they were called – were meant to fulfil was to introduce and defend the policy of the Party in every sector of social life, and to help develop the main feature of the "socialist conscience" that the Party was most interested to instil, namely obedient and authoritarian behaviour. The *cadre* were responsible for Party propaganda and were charged with organizing and supervising the classes of compulsory "ideological education" for both students and adults; they overlooked the activity of specialized personnel; they organized and conducted sessions of "criticism and self-criticism" that the Party members had to attend on a regular basis in order to "reinforce" their political convictions and correct their occasional ideological deviations or lapses; they led the "revolutionary marches" and, in general, they were the ones who displayed "revolutionary vigilance" by unmasking the counter-revolutionary plots of the "enemy of the people" (Gheorghiu 1992).

The Party staff, the future *nomenklatura*, were trained at the Superior Party School. In the beginning, the schooling period lasted approximately six months and was meant to produce the personnel for the “ideological war” which the Party waged against the bourgeoisie. Beginning in 1949, the formative process was extended to two years and included two specializations: propaganda and mass-media. The graduates were appointed directors or professors in regional Party schools, press editors, or professors of social sciences in institutions of higher education. At the end of 1950, the graduates numbered fifty thousand, all of whom became *cadre* and were assigned to key positions in various fields (Ioan 1992).

The system became better and more “modern” over time, as standards of excellency were established that were meant to address the relative ideological sophistication of the newer recruits and the needs of the Party to reach out to the younger generation (Ioan 1995). Additionally, the Party school (later renamed the “Stefan Gheorghiu” Academy, after the name of a former high-ranking Communist leader) was charged with “recycling” the elite – that is, with refreshing the ideological convictions of Party or non-Party members through periodic crash courses, summer schools, etc. Institutionalized Party indoctrination became increasingly tighter until it eventually encompassed and efficiently controlled the entire population of the country.

### C. The “Pitesti” Experiment

A special case of the practice of changing the inner structure of the personality of social agents involved “re-educating” the students who were detained in political prisons such as the one in Pitesti (a small town in sub-Carpathian Romania), in the decades of Stalinist Communism. The method relied on recruiting collaborators among the detained students, who were subsequently “asked” to “convince” their peers to turn themselves in by confessing to real or imaginary thought crimes. The collaborators-torturers were the first to be re-educated. They were then “encouraged” to make use of their “know-how” and further “educate” their cellmates. The repeated beatings, the humiliations, the isolation, the cruel and inhuman punishments that could not be prevented even by full confession, the frequent bullying quickly led to irreversible changes of personality in the prisoners (Ierunca 1996).

The specific of this “experiment” consisted in developing elaborate torture techniques to totally break the subjects. There were several stages in the re-education process. The first stage, also called “external unmasking”, presupposed that the prisoner affirm his Party loyalty by denouncing all “connections” that were intentionally or accidentally left out in the initial interrogation by the secret police. The second stage, the “internal unmasking”, amounted to turning in all those who helped the prisoner to cope with everyday life during detention. Third, the prisoner was asked to “morally unmask” herself by renouncing her family, friends, or religious beliefs. Finally, as a newly elected member of the “Organization of Prisoners with Communist Convictions”, she was required to prove that her re-education was successful by re-educating her best friend. Such methods made it impossible for any released prisoner – or for her friends or relatives, for that matter – to preserve any individuality or independence of thinking. Their representations were modified to fully respond to the demands of the context to which they had the misfortune to belong.

The experiment conducted in Pitesti was not singular in the first two decades of the Communist regime approximately three million people were arrested in Romania, 300,000 of whom died in prison. An important percentage of the country’s population, not including family, friends or acquaintances, was trained into silent obedience through primitive terror and uncontrolled fear. It goes without saying that the social context was also decisively altered.

#### *D. The Psychological Aspects of Line Waiting*

During Ceausescu’s dictatorship, the experience of the line provided the dominant topic for the everyday conversation of Romanians. Waiting in line for no matter what (food, rare books, entertainment, to pay taxes, or to be paid) played an essential role. The participants in this social ceremony internalized specific adaptive behaviours. The common individual could not acquire anything valuable without going through the ritual of line waiting.

The line represents, of course, a symbol of social alignment, giving up one’s individuality or immersing oneself in the anonymity of the crowd. At the same time however, the line helped develop unexpected human values, special techniques of communication by distant

signalling (the imminent arriving of the food truck, for instance), and an instinctive sense of interpersonal warmth and human solidarity. An observer of the phenomenon half-mockingly tried to analyse the psychological aspects of line waiting by classifying lines according to their dimension ("feeble", "moderate", "thick"), shape ("lines", "columns", "crowds"), and state of mind of the participants ("candid", "desperate", "mad", "fearful") (Sicoe 1992). The line feeds the growth of intense feelings and brings out a certain spirit and a specific culture (such as the culture of joke-telling) that changes the attitude of the victimised population by inciting it to identify scapegoats for its misfortunes (and thus allowing individuals to decline their own responsibility). According to Sicoe, the line is a unique species of living social organism with a "brain", "body" or "tail" that on the one hand incorporates, and on the other hand develops, the human qualities of the individuals that compose it: a winner's mindset, a taste for social achievement, the disappointment of being left out, direct or diplomatic aggressivity, etc. Sicoe even identifies behavioural characteristics according to the temperament of the participants in the line: the choleric tends to become leader and organizer, whereas the melancholic turns into a victim.

The phenomenon of the line reproduces on a small scale the features of the wider social context and therefore provides an occasion for action, self-assertion and confrontation, a form of risk-taking, and a means of socialization. Those who refuse its rituals (the privileged, the profiteers, or the intellectuals) are despised and marginalized by the line-waiting mainstream. As a symbol of crisis and imbalance, the line can function as a social regulator by encouraging compromise and withdrawal. By accepting the line as a natural phenomenon, the individual inevitably learns rules of internalization and adopts the required conducts and habits that attach her to a certain hierarchy of values. She becomes the object of social learning and transmission (Dubois 1994), thereby adopting the norms of behaviour elaborated by the political system of the country by means of the social context that provides her with a "natural" environment.

## The Manipulation of Social Representations

Modern Romania enjoyed an authentic parliamentary system for a short period of time only, from 1888, when the first Constitution was adopted, until 1938, the year in which King Charles II resorted to an authoritarian regime in order to contain the ascent to power of Fascist parties and to strengthen his own hold on Romanian political life. His regime was succeeded by three other dictatorships, the brief but violent Legionnaire rule of 1940, the militaristic regime presided over by Marshall Antonescu that lasted until 1944, and finally, after some feeble attempts at resuscitating democracy in the aftermath of World War II, the Communist regime (and especially the two periods of hard-line governing that defined it in its early and later years, the Stalinist decade and the decade of Ceausescu's National-Communist rule). This means that several generations had no direct exposure to the benefits of democratic rule, which further explains why they perceived Communist society as an irreversible and "objective" life-world. They engaged in a deep activity of reorganizing their social representations according to the types of social experience I describe above and by adapting their behaviour in accordance with such experiences. When the regime managed to suggest a type of behaviour that its subjects deemed acceptable, the norms of behaviour as well as the changes in attitude and world representation they fostered were quickly legitimated and internalized.

This phenomenon is explained by Flament (1994) in the following way: the agent justifies her behaviour by invoking the unusual circumstances of her suddenly changed context. When the circumstances are deemed reversible, the agent hopes for a reversal of fortunes and a return to normalcy, which makes her resist the change of her social context. However, when conditions are perceived as irreversible, the agent loses hope. She does not change the social representation of her context instantly, though. For a while, the agent engages in a process of adjustment and conservation of energies until it becomes clear to her that what she initially perceived as being unusual and reversible is in fact not so. In time, the agent attempts to recover her cognitive balance by trying to find ways of rationalizing her behaviour when faced with unexpected, strange circumstances. Thus she discovers "important and serious reasons" that explain the transformation of her

context and justify her adjustment to it. In the case of Communism, as we discussed above, agents invoked historical determinisms, the excessively long time it took for revolutionary changes to wear off, or the reluctance of the Western powers to become entangled in the muddy political affairs of the "East" in order to explain away their initial transgressions and justify their own change in behaviour, values, belief-system, etc. Eventually, the old core of social representations is finally adapted to the demands of the context, either by their gradual structural transformation, or by a change in content. As a result, the new context forces the agent to rethink her previous representations and even provides her with models to accomplish this transformation. The Marxist explanation of the primacy of social-historical conditions over personal initiative in individual development is the case in point here, as (according to Marxist definitions) "the social specific is transplanted onto an individual who does not generate personality (on her own), but rather carries over attributes that are specific to her determinate socio-historical context" (Popescu-Neveanu 1978).

Flament's explanation provides an accurate reflection on how the social context influences and even determines the way an agent either takes up or else produces social representations. The ideological context of Romanian Communism makes no exception to this rule.