On the notion of polemic social representations – theoretical developments and empirical contributions

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Abstract: *Within the rich research field informed by the social representations theory in social psychology, the concept of polemic social representations seems to have gained less attention. By inventorying the main theoretical developments and by showing some of the few empirical contributions to the concept of polemic social representations, this paper argues about the usefulness of the notion in analyzing social conflicts.*

Keywords: *polemic social representations; social representations theory; social conflict*

Theoretical references to polemic social representations

A classic definition for the concept of social representation considers it as "a form of knowledge, socially produced and shared, having practical ends, and competing for the construction of a common reality of a social ensemble" (Jodelet, 1989, p.36, our translation). It follows that a social representation is always the representation of something (object) belonging to someone (subject) and that it is social not only in the sense of the tautological definition referring to the social nature of the object itself, but becomes social in the very aspect of being shared (Jodelet, 1989). Polemical representations, the notion introduced by Moscovici in 1988, are always related to the limits of sharing of social representations in society as a whole due to the conflicting nature of relationships between groups.

In what can be called the fertile debate about the notion of social representations, which marked the period of revival of the social representations theory in European sociopsychological research in the eighties (de Rosa: 1992; Jodelet: 2008), one critical point referred to the insufficient conceptual clarification on the difference between collective and social representations (Jahoda: 1988), thus not justifying the replacement of 'collective' with 'social' in describing the phenomenon, as was proposed by Moscovici (1984). In his extensive answer to Jahoda's criticism, Moscovici (1988) made a specific point about the ways in which a representation can become social, which he considered to be directly related to the relations between group members. Moscovici suggested therefore a classification of representations into three types, depending on the different degrees of sharing them. The three types of representations envisaged he labeled *hegemonic, emancipated*, and *polemical*.

Hegemonic representations were defined as:

"Representations shared by all members of a highly structured group – a party, city or a nation – without their having been produced by the group. [They] prevail implicitly in all symbolic or affective practices. They seem to be uniform and coercive. They reflect the homogeneity and stability that the French sociologists had in mind when they called these representations collective." (p. 221).

Emancipated representations were considered:

"(…) the outgrowth of the circulation of knowledge and ideas belonging to subgroups that are in more or less close contact. Each subgroup creates its own version and shares it with others. These are *emancipated* representations with a certain degree of autonomy with respect to the interacting segments of society. They have a complementary function inasmuch as they result from exchanging and sharing a set of interpretations or symbols. They are social by virtue of the divisions of function and the information brought together and coordinated by their means." (p. 221).

Lastly, *polemical* representations were described as:

"There are representations generated in the course of social conflict, social controversy, and society as a whole does not share them. They are determined by the antagonistic relations between its members and intended to be mutually exclusive. These *polemical* representations must be viewed in the context of an opposition or struggle between groups and are often expressed in terms of a dialogue with an imaginary interlocutor." (p. 221-222).

The example used to illustrate this last type of social representations, was the representation of Marxism in France, where different versions of Marxism could be identified, each shaped by the polemic relations between believers and non-believers, or communist and liberals.

This differentiated view of social representations was considered to be in opposition to the uniform view which characterized collective representations and also more suited to characterize the current state of society.

Even if the main factor invoked by Moscovici for differentiating between the types of representations refers to the context of social relations existing between their holders, another important aspect is implied by these definitions, that is the degree of autonomy/

freedom individuals have in relation to different representations. In this sense, the classification suggested in 1988 followed another one, also tripartite, which Moscovici made two years earlier in an editorial to a special issue of the Italian journal *Psicologia e Società* (1986, cited in Galli: 2006). There, a differentiation was proposed between: *closed* social representations, whose elements are uniform and similar for all population; *agonal* or *critical* social representations, whose elements are more or less the same in an entire population, but whose significance is determined by contrasting values; *open* social representations, whose elements are distributed among various categories of the population, therefore it is required to combine them so that they can find their coherence.

We can easily see the resemblances between closed and hegemonic representations, between open and emancipated representations, and between agonal/critical and polemical representations. But the differences in labels are suggestive for the aspect which is prominent in defining them, i.e. degree of individual autonomy vs. social relations which characterize the context of interaction between individuals. While in the case of close/hegemonic representations the individuals' autonomy or freedom to choose them is rather absent, these representations being coercive, in the case of open/emancipated representations individuals and subgroups have the entirely liberty to create, communicate and make use of them. However, in the case of agonal/polemical representations the degree of autonomy for single individuals is not very clear. By mentioning this category on the second position in the classification Moscovici made in 1986, we might suppose that social representations of this type are something in-between *close* and *open* social representation with respect to the degree of liberty they imply, being uniform and coercive at the level of the group where they are shared, but diverse and autonomous at the level of society.

However comprehensible the taxonomic definition of social representations might be, the operational definitions of the different representation types, the relationships between them, and also the evolution of one social representation from one type or status to another, were not always very clear. This led to various conceptions about the three types of social

representations, sometimes even denying the categorization into hegemonic, emancipated, and polemic social representations in a strict Aristotelian sense.

Michel-Louis Rouquette (1994) suggested that every social representation has a polemical value underlining the inter-group differences and intra-group identity. In analyzing social dynamics he argued that the 'conflict between groups' and the 'conflict between representations' are two substitutable expressions. Being also opaque to itself, a social representation stands always for 'a form of truth'. The practical consequence of the two aspects is that, when situated within inter-group relationships, the confrontation between representations implies the intervention of specific rhetoric and even polemics, everyone trying to undermine the other's position and to impose his own 'truth'. While clearly explaining how social representations in general work and how they are used to shape reality, determining thus even a conflicting social context, this conception about the existence of a polemic trait in every social representation makes problematic the classification of different representations types, or at least rejects the idea of polemical representations distinguishable from the other types.

A similar idea was expressed by Gerard Duveen (2000) in the introduction of the book of essays on social representations gathered from Serge Moscovici, that he edited. According to Duveen, social representations are "forms of collective ideation in conditions of modernity" (p. 8), and since modernity is characterized by "diverse centers of power which claim authority and legitimacy (…) the phenomenon of social representations can be seen as the form in which collective life has adapted to decentred conditions of legitimation. (…) Legitimacy is no longer guaranteed by divine intervention, but becomes part of a more complex and contested social dynamic in which representations of different groups seek to establish a hegemony." (p. 9) Even if there is no explicit reference to polemic representations we can interpret these considerations as also indicating an intrinsic polemic value of social representations in general.

These ideas directly relate to the functional aspects of social representations and to their obvious intentional character. The metaphor of the 'battle of ideas' suggested by Moscovici

(Moscovici & Marková: 1998) brilliantly condenses these thoughts about how social representations work. For Jost & Ignatow (2001) the most striking aspect of the social representations theory is that "groups develop social representations and attempt to influence others to adopt those representations as a way for achieving social and political goals" (p. 196). For these authors this function is precisely related to the polemical type of social representations, which they consider to be rather overlooked in the social representations research field.

Also defending that 'a social representation is a not a quiet thing' (Moscovici & Marková: 1998), Howarth (2006) stresses the role representations have in the ideological construction of social realities, by protecting some interests over others. The question of power immediately arises, since social representations act in a world where power is unequally distributed in the social sphere (Jovchelovitch: 2001). Thus, for Howarth, "hegemonic representations pervade the dominant social construction of reality; oppositional representations contest these versions". (p. 79). She makes a precise point in stating that social representations research should be devoted to the study of the role of conflict and dispute in shaping social representations, and that of the social and political consequences of different representations and the relationships between representation and social order: "This would demand the recognition of the reproduction of power in the reification and legitimization of social representations, as well as in the collaborative struggle for recognition and in possibilities for resistance and transformation. This would expose the dialectics of coding and transcoding, consensus and dispute, cooperation and conflict, imposition and resistance at the heart of all meaning, practice and communication. Without these tensions, representations would stagnate." (p. 80). However, we should notice that this author does not make full use of the classification into three representation types suggested by Moscovici, and, even if she insists on taking conflict as a context of studying social representations, no reference to the polemical type of social representations is made. On the contrary, she stresses the difference in status between hegemonic representations and all the others, which she calls *oppositional*, to point up the representation types pertaining to those who dominate and, respectively, to those

who are dominated in society.

Glynis Breakwell (2001) keeps the distinction between the three different representation types in discussing the scope for personal representations. She refers precisely to the degree of freedom that the different types give to individuals in constructing a personal representation. Hegemonic representations allow little individual variations, while emancipated and polemical representations suppose individual variations. Individual variation is based upon differential exposure within group contexts in emancipated representations, and upon the prevailing conditions of intergroup conflict in polemical representations. More than that, this author acknowledges an active role for individuals in mediating the emancipated and polemical representations, since "personal representations will be perpetually under pressure to change from the social representations which surround them. Individuals who are powerful (through position, expertise, or other route) are more likely to be able to retain their own personal representations and to be able to influence the development of social representations". (p. 275). Thus, this is judged to be the essential condition for innovation and change to take place.

Another idea brought about by this author in the same article regards the viability of the tripartite classification of social representations. She questions whether there are actually different types of social representations, or whether these are just different stages in the lifespan of a social representation, but without going into any further into this debate. However, in a later work (2007) Breakwell explicitly assumes the existence of these categories when discussing about social representations of hazards in the social amplification of risk framework (SARF). In function of what type the social representation of a specific hazard is, there are significant implications for the type of intervention needed to intensify or attenuate individuals' representations of that risk.

An explicit point for rejecting the classification into hegemonic, emancipated, and polemical representations in a strict Aristotelian sense is made by Li Liu (2004). Within the dialogical perspective in the study of social representations (Marková: 2000, 2003), Liu discusses the relationship between themata and different ways for sharing social representations. A central concept within the dialogical perspective is that of themata, defined as 'source ideas', 'primary notions', 'image concepts', 'first principles' or 'preconceptions' which generate social representations and also form their deep structure (Moscovici & Vignaux: 2000). Themata were also defined as "such oppositional categories which, in the course of history, become problematized; for one reason or another they become the focus of attention and a source of tension and conflict". (Marková: 2000, p. 446). For Liu, it is precisely the emergence of social representations from themata that makes problematic the classification of representations into three types. Rather, she considers that there are three ways of sharing a social representation (i.e. hegemonic, emancipated, and polemic) that can simultaneously apply to a social representation in a complementary way. To cite her fully, "Different layers and different aspects of a representation entail different ways of sharing. A representation is generated through hegemonic, widely shared themata, but it also involves more emancipated and polemical dimensions. The emancipated and polemical dimensions of a representation express the particular societal conditions of social actors who activate them in their specific contexts and in relation to diverse life spheres. At the same time, they reflect the broadly social, economic, political and ideological change and conflicts. Thus, a social representation may be, at one and the same time, hegemonic, emancipated or polemical." (2004, p. 261). This conception is defended by making reference to the social representation of quality of life in China, organized around the thema "Having/Being", historically rooted and widely shared in the Chinese culture and, thus, *hegemonic*, but which also contains, according to the author, elements of emancipated and polemic nature, which are linked to the different social positions of social actors. Thus, these non-hegemonic elements of the social representation are related to differences between rural and urban population of China, or between older and younger generations.

Still, Gillespie (2008), another scholar whose work on social representations is strongly informed by the dialogical perspective, keeps the classic distinction between the three types of social representations when describing the concept of alternative representations. For this author, the plurality of social representations in contemporary society makes

it necessary to conceive the existence of alternative representations, whose primary function is to make individuals who share a specific representations deal with and adapt to the plurality of other and potentially competing social representations. Simply defined as 'representations of other people's representations', alternative representations are considered to be dialogical sub-parts within certain representations that can either destabilize or, on the contrary, strengthen a particular social representation. According to Gillespie, hegemonic representations are completely devoid of alternative representations, since they are completely egocentric. On the contrary, alternative representations "only exist as dialogical shadows within polemical or emancipated representations. They are shadows in the sense of reflecting, usually in a distorted and very simplified form, the social representation of other groups. They are also shadows in the sense that they are firmly attached to what the speaker wants to say, and are a sort of inverse of what the speaker wants to say. Alternative representations are "alter" in the sense of being attributed to other people and in the sense of being foreign objects within the given representation. Alternative representations are the Alter within the given social representation." (p. 382). Evidence for alternative representations is given after reinterpreting data from Moscovici's famous *La Psychanalyse* (1961/1976). Gillespie ascribes emancipated social representations to diffusion and propagation, while polemical representations are assigned to propaganda, as communication systems or genres which characterized the different media originally analyzed by Moscovici. Gillespie considers an emancipated representation to be forged in a context of diverse alternatives with which it is constantly in dialogue. On the contrary, polemical representations are judged to have one major alternative representation which functions as a rhetorical counterpoint. Usually the alternative representation within a polemical social representation is a caricature, a straw man, and serves to the reinforcement of the in-group representation of the object. To illustrate this, Gillespie makes reference to the representation of psychoanalysis held by French communists interviewed in the fifties by Moscovici. For them, psychoanalysis was a kind of capitalist ideology. However their responses reveal the fact that they were aware of an alternative definition of psycho-

analysis, in fact a caricaturized working model of psychoanalysis, but which was outright rejected. The conclusion is that despite their ever presence within polemical representations, alternative representations are kept at a distance and not much dialogical interchange between the main representation and the alternative takes place, all this assuring the protection of the representation from the potential change implied by a dialogue with the alternatives. This is possible due to several *semantic barriers* that prevent such dialogue. Two of them, i.e. maintaining rigid opposition and transfer of meaning, were originally identified by Moscovici (1961/1976). Besides these two, Gillespie identifies prohibited thought, separation, stigma, undermining motives, and bracketing, all concurring to keep the alternative representation at distance.

Empirical contributions to the study of polemic social representations

Polemic social representations was a rather neglected concept in the field of social representations (Jost & Ignatow: 2001). By this we mean that it did not generate a systematic line of research within the paradigm. There are however some scholars who explicitly employed this notion in their empirical studies, some of them even trying to clarify or to develop the classification of social representation proposed by Moscovici in 1988. In this section we will briefly present some contributions to the study of polemic representations that we were able to identify in the social representations literature.

Five years after the article in which Serge Moscovici suggested the tripartite classification of social representations, the study of David Canter and Circe Monteiro (1993) was a first attempt to examine the different types of social representations. The authors launched the hypothesis of a network (lattice) of interrelating and overlapping social representations existing in a culture, which they considered inherent to the idea of distinguishing between hegemonic, emancipated and polemic representations. As a the theoretical implication of this premise, the authors considered that "it is the interplay of social representations that have enough in common to allow communication, but are also different enough to require accommodation or assimilation that creates the dynamics of society". (p. 225). A practical

implication arising from this conception was considered to be the finding of methodologies allowing the identification of social representations within a particular subgroup and of the representation's boundaries, i.e. where a representation "merges into the social representations of other subgroups whose world is distinct" (p. 226). A challenge for social representations theory has to be, according to these scholars, to see if it is possible to identify the range of people who share a particular representation and to establish ways for distinguishing between hegemonic, emancipated, and polemic representations.

In order to illustrate this kind of empirical approach, the authors chose to study the social representations of occupations held by different groups of people living in three different residential areas of Brazil. The study was based on a rather complex methodology, strongly influenced by researches derived from place theory in environmental psychology, theory to which one of the authors, namely David Canter, had an important contribution (Bonnes & Secchiaroli: 1995). Instead of analyzing the explicit verbal expression of social representations of occupations held by subjects from different residential environments (favelas, public housing, and middle class neighborhoods) and with different social status, directly deriving from their place of residence, the authors analyzed the respondents' conceptual system as a result from different classifications made by them through a multiple sorting procedure. Twenty five manikins, with identical form but each labeled as holding a particular occupation, were presented to them; subjects were asked to specify what they considered to be the specific neighborhood of residence for people having the respective occupations, what they considered to be their specific social class, and what kind of occupations could their own children have. However complicated the data analysis procedure might have been[2], it is important to stress here how the two authors understood to interpret the results in terms of different types of social representations. Concretely, they considered the presence of a hegemonic representation in the case of unanimous agreement regarding the assignment of a residential area to a specific occupation (for example, if all respondents, regardless of their own social status and residential area, considered a politician as inhabiting middle-class neighbor-

hoods). Emancipated representations would imply differences between subgroups but of a complex kind, "any group which shared that representation would be expected to assign components of it to the same category" (p.232) (here the authors gave the example of the occupation "street-trader" which could be assigned a variety of residential areas by different subjects). Polemic representations were judged to lie something in between hegemonic and emancipated representations, revealing coherence within subgroups and distinction between them (for example, members of one subgroup should assign an occupation to the same city area as the others, but to a different city area to the other subgroups with whom they share a controversy). The empirical results were interpreted as indicating in all cases the presence of polemic representations of occupations in Brazilian society. The authors concluded: "The distinctions in representations across a general pattern of agreement suggest that, for the present context at least, most social representations may most closely fit what Moscovici called polemic, but in English this term carries the implications of conflict and belligerence. Yet, our analyses here suggest that many representations, if not all, may derive their social quality from the fact that they reflect interactions between groups. The question may be raised in a pluralist society of what the dynamics of social interaction can be if social representations are totally shared throughout a society. What can people have to say to each other? Perhaps there is a fourth type of social representation that covers most social representation, dynamic" (p. 246).

The methodological approach to the types of social representations presented above did not prove much validity over time, remaining, at least to our knowledge, singular in the literature on social representations. However, we have to recognize the merit of this study for being the first practical analysis addressing the tripartite classification of social representations and, to some extent, for remaining singular in its ambition to test its validity empirically.

In an article of Vala *et al.* (1998) the functional aspect of polemical representations was addressed; the mechanisms through which representations pertaining to opposite social groups are validated were stressed out. The authors considered that an important aspect of studying representations which oppose

groups is, besides the matter of content, also a matter of validity of such content. One of the mechanisms by which social representations of a group are supposed to be defended is made through intergroup differentiation of consensus. Another such mechanism refers to validation of polemic representations through intergroup differentiation of variability. In the first case, it is considered to be true (valid) what is consensual among in-group members and, on the contrary, invalid what is believed to be consensual among out-group. In the second case, it is the perception about in- and out-group members that counts for the validation of contrasting representations: the validity of what members of the in-group thing derives from the heterogeneity of those members; on the contrary, errors of the out-group are due to the homogeneity of its members. The first line of argument, discussed within the social psychological literature on social validation of beliefs and opinions, was considered to be insufficient: "if both groups have equally and widely consensual but opposite positions, their positions should be viewed as equally true because they are shared" (p. 474). This is why a second strategy, of inter-group differentiation of heterogeneity is usually employed, because "only the variability of the ingroup guarantees that consensus information is a reliable cue to validity" (*idem*). This mechanism functions on the basis of another representation: the validation of a representation which is polemic in relation to the representation held by the rival group is made by differently representing the in-group and the out-group subjects. In the representation of the object "in-group", its members are considered heterogeneous regarding their personal traits and attributes, but still homogenous regarding values and beliefs of the in-group. On the contrary, members of the out-group are considered to be homogeneous regarding their psychological traits (stereotypical) and less homogenous in their beliefs. Besides reference to the literature, this second strategy of validation was demonstrated in three semi-experimental studies set up both in a context of simple intergroup differentiation and in an open political conflict (during an electoral campaign).

Also in the nineties, the notion of polemic social representations was tackled in the studies analyzing the communication strategies of Benetton (de Rosa & Losito: 1996; de Rosa & Smith: 1998). In the early nineties the Italian company launched a very unusual form of advertising, one in which the commercial product or the brand name was entirely absent (de Rosa: 2001). The company based its communication strategy on critical advertising, addressing crucial social problems which were objectified through shocking images contained in posters. By creating public controversy, related to the specific issues addressed through advertisement, but above all to the publicity campaign itself, the company attained social visibility and ultimately reached its profit oriented goals. Advertising was seen as a communication genre which activated and diffused polemic (controversial) social representations about the appropriateness of such publicity: on one side it was strongly disapproved for being "necrophile", cynical and based on the principle of selling at any cost; on the other it was judged to be original, efficient, remarkable and socially beneficial. The associative network, using pictures from the campaign autumn-winter 92-93 and brand name as stimuli, was used for collecting empirical evidence of polemics. The results revealed a bipolarized attitude towards the images that constituted Benetton advertisement, with a trend for judging them negatively[3]. However, in spite of a major negative evaluation of the Benetton campaign, the representation of the Benetton brand remained mainly positive, confirming the success of the strategy "[selling] pullovers by provoking discussion on social issues" (de Rosa: 1998).

Directly related to conflicts raised about environmental issues, the study of Twigger-Ross and Breakwell (1999, cited in Breakwell: 2001) analyzed how a community responded to a potential waste incinerator, planned to be built in an already highly industrialized area. The plans for introducing the new facility raised opposition from environmental groups like Greenpeace and Friends of Earth. The research focus of the study was on the consent of local residents for the new incinerator, which was studied in relation to their perception of the risk entailed by it, their trust in governmental regulation of such risk, the image they held about the company, and their concern about the environment and acceptance of "green" beliefs. The results showed that local residents were divided in their representations of the risk and, what is more, that the representation they reproduced depended upon the extent to which

respondents identified themselves with environmentalist groups or the company seen as a traditional and trusted employer in the area. These results suggest that "polemical representations of risk are most significantly mediated by identity processes" (Breakwell: 2001, p. 282). This kind of approach of polemic representations, linked to the identity process theory elaborated by one of the authors (Breakwell: 1986), demonstrate that individuals reject social representations that might threaten aspects of their identity, the feeling of belonging to various groups (environmentalists, company) determining rival social representations.

More recently, the idea of representations of polemic nature constructed with the purpose to protect individual and group identities is maintained also by Deaux and Wiley (2007). They illustrate it with reference to the representation of citizenship constructed by the immigrants who reject being called and represented as 'illegal citizens' due to the fact they came illegally in the country. The new representation is a conflicting alternative as it introduces a change in meaning from 'illegal citizens' and using instead 'undocumented citizens', like in the United States, or 'sans papiers', in France.

A research line which employed the distinction between hegemonic, emancipated, and polemic social representations can be found in different studies on social representations of history, one example being the work of James Liu and collaborators about social representations of history in multiethnic societies (Liu *et al.*: 1999; Liu *et al.*: 2002). These studies linked social identity theory with the theory of social representations and emphasized the relevance of studying social representations of history for the understanding of the present state of inter-group relations from a cultural perspective, thus outlining "how the past weights on the present" (Liu & Hilton: 2005). History is seen as providing raw materials for symbols that can either unite, divide or something in between. In the first case these symbols are part of hegemonic representations; in the second case they inspire polemic representations; and in the third case they are contained in emancipated representations (Liu: 2004). The three different types of representations of history are described as follows:

"When social representations [of history] are hegemonic, or consensual among all groups, they are treated as though they were a reality. (…) They can be used to understand how strong consensus allows societies and peoples to move together as one, and enact culture specific solutions to their problems. When something that is social is treated as though it were a reality, it has the power to create new realities through social policies. (…)

By contrast, when social representations of history are polemical, or in serious disagreement across different groups, they indicate the presence of historically rooted conflict. One group may have an historical grievance against another group, and this may require special treatment to resolve. Polemical representations indicate "fault lines" in society where the relationships between groups may become tense or break. (…)

The final type of social representation is emancipated. This means that different versions co-exist in different groups of society, but they are either generally not in conflict, or only in conflict under limited circumstances" (Liu: 2004, pp 9-10).

The empirical findings confirmed in one case the existence of polemic representations of history held by members of an ethnic minority group (i.e. Maori population in New Zeeland) which confront the hegemonic representation of New Zeeland's history of the dominant group (Paheka – European descendants in New Zeeland), as identified from the list of important historical events cited by different subjects. However, a kind of conceptual ambiguity is to be found in the description of the representation of Maori subjects, judged to be both "emancipated from and polemical to that of Paheka students" (Liu *et al.*: 1999, p. 1042). More consensual representations of history were found among different ethnic groups in Malaysia and Singapore, suggesting that multi-ethnicity is not a sufficient condition for polemic representations about history to emerge. The lack of polemics on specific political issues (e.g. the border demarcation between Singapore and Malaysia) may explain the absence of polemic representations. Also, a higher control exercised by the state on education, media and freedom of speech (as it happens more in Eastern societies rather that in the West) can block alternative views about history to be expressed, and thus polemic representations to emerge (Liu *et al.*: 2002).

Another study inspired from the same research area focused on the historical represen-

tations in Taiwan (Huang *et al.*: 2004). The authors found evidence for both consensus (regarding main historical events) and disagreement (regarding the evaluation of political leaders) in the representation of Taiwan's history, concluding that this representation is a blend of consensus and controversy which further causes ambivalence towards Taiwanese national identity (see also Huang: 2010).

In a more recent study, Liu and Atsumi (2008) addressed the question of polemic representations in a wider context determined by international relations between Japan and China. Here again, the representations of history and the remembrance of the historical conflict between the two states, as circulated in dominant narratives within each nation and mobilized by current political agenda, are considered to forge a present state of affairs in bilateral relations between the two countries. An important practical aspect is outlined: conflict resolution depends on the type of representation political actors make circulate. Moreover, representations are transformed depending on the pragmatic goals and interests each country has. For example it is considered that Japan's objectives on the long term regarding its relations to China may determine the construction of less polemic representations about the history of the interactions between them. This idea, pointing to the intentional character in shaping social representations of history resembles the idea of representational politics (Sen & Wagner: 2005) discussed below.

Also focusing on inter-group relations, Ragini Sen and Wolfgang Wagner (2005) considered the religious cleavage in Indian society as a starting point for the study of social representations of historical events. Their analysis – based on interviews with 20 Hindu and Muslim males, pictures depicting dramatic historical events being used as stimuli in the course of the interviews – demonstrated the antagonism in the appraisal and significations attributed to symbolic events by members of the two conflicting religious groups. However, the preferred term to label this kind of representations was not "polemic". The authors proposed instead a new label, that of "hetero-referential representational systems". These are considered to occur when "two groups refer to the same series of events which are represented in a '180 degrees' antagonistic fashion and in a manner of a zero-sum game by each group.

Each group's enjoyable experience entails the other's group loss and each group's painful experience entails the other's joy" (ibid, p. 2.19). Conflicting situations determined by claims for a geographic area, for resources, for ideological or religious supremacy may fuel such antagonism between historical ethnic groups or even states. For delineating the new proposed concept reference is made to both polemic representations (Moscovici: 1988) and holomorphic representations (Wagner: 1995a; Wagner & Hayes: 2005), hetero-referential representations being "polemic because they imply antagonism in interaction and access to resources" and "holomorphic because each of the two groups is not only aware of its own course of action and justification thereof, but also has some general knowledge of patterns of perception, feelings and judgment and the course of action of the other group" (p. 2.19).

There is another important idea in this study that is worth mentioning here, one which regards the process of construction of social representations in a conflicting context. In the particular socio-historic context determined by Hindu-revivalism in India, the historical social representations identified from interviewing lay subjects are judged to be the results of representational politics rather than that of a representational work implying the discursive elaboration of representations in a consensual group. The evident intentional character of representational politics, seeking to produce affective connotation and symbolic meaning, is judged to be most effective. It seems that the conflicting context leaves little room for lay representations to emerge. Rather, members of the conflicting groups share prefabricated representations specially created for serving power interests and communicated through populist rhetoric, maintaining thus the tensions existing in society.

Finally, the last example of research about historical representations that also touched on the subject of polemic representations can be found in Páez *et al.* (2004) and Valencia *et al.* (2004) studies on social memory in the case of a traumatic episode in Spanish recent history, namely the Spanish Civil War. Generational differences were found in lay representations of the negative event. The emotional and temporal distance from this traumatic event was judged to explain a certain dynamism of social representations; polemic representations were

considered to transform into hegemonic ones, especially for subjects at a third generation distance from the traumatic event.

In an ethnographic study carried out on families of Israeli soldiers exposed to health risks during their training in military service, Ben-Asher (2003) also used the distinction between different types of social representations and tried to demonstrate the dialog function in the evolution from hegemonic and emancipated representations of the Israeli army (Israeli Defense Forces) to polemic representations. The author considered that initially hegemonic representation of the Israeli Defense Forces – in a country with a long history of military conflicts and where military service, apart from being compulsory, is seen as an essential civic duty and constitutes a national Zionist narrative – account for high levels of faith in the army by soldiers and their parents, who consent by signing a contract of trust to leave absolute responsibility for the safeguard and welfare of their children/soldiers to the army, in the absence of any information regarding military activities. New information regarding the training naval commando soldiers in polluted waters and the health risks involved – contained in emancipated representations constructed by small sections of society and the media – was seen as clashing the "hegemonic notion of absolute faith in the contract of trust with army" (p.6.4) and, as a result, parents of risk exposed soldiers gather around to form an associative group and start to construct through their dialogue polemic representations opposed to the official version of authorities' hegemonic representation.

The evolution of social representations is seen in a linear way, passing through all the three types of representations described by Moscovici (1988). First, hegemonic representations are challenged by emancipated representations which emerge from new information. Then it is assumed that social change occurs when emancipated representations evolve into polemic representations "that render the self-evident existence of hegemonic representations impossible, at least for some members of the group, and call for innovation and change" (p.6.4). Confronted with the information about the health risk and at the same time with the initial refusal of state authorities to take responsibility to tend to sick soldiers and their families, parents gathered in an orga-

nization which acted both as a support group and as a pressure group in the new conflicting context with authorities. During their meetings and through social interaction a polemic representation of the army was considered to emerge. The reorganization of social representation into a polemic one undergoes a process of creating group identity, a parents' group, which gives to the group internal empowerment and the capability to face new circumstances. However, after the official recognition of the state's responsibility to care for the sick soldiers and for the families of soldiers who died after training in contaminated water, the parents' organization ceased to exist and at that point, the study concludes, parents "preferred to return to the hegemonic representations of the army as a foster parent, which are shared by Israeli society as a whole" (p.6.4).

One merit of this study is that it emphasizes the role of environmental hazards in generating polemical social representations. However, a certain misuse of the concepts related to the types of social representations which can lead to some confusion is to be noted. For example, the "silence breaker" parents group constructs a "hegemonic" representation with regard to the new parents group, necessary for the group's cohesiveness, but "polemic" regarding the surrounding social institutions (p. 6.8). Then, after explaining the linear evolution from hegemonic to polemic representations, all this through the intermediary of emancipated representations, the study shows how parents of naval commandos "adopt the universal hegemonic representation of parental obligation to safeguard their children" (p.6.8). The author introduces thus a distinction between "state's hegemonic representations" and "universal hegemonic representations", the latter remaining unchallenged. The emphasis put by the study on communication processes rather than on content of social representations makes it difficult to wholly seize the nature and structure of polemic representations. It is also not very clear why and how in this case emancipated representations are considered to evolve into polemic ones. The initial refusal of the authorities to acknowledge their responsibility is cited as a source of dispute with authorities and as a reason for building polemic representations by the parents of soldiers who have been directly exposed to water pollution. But the parents' polemic representations are considered

to come into conflict with the same parents' hegemonic representations of the army. Due to the resolution of the dispute parents abandon polemic representations and "return" to the hegemonic ones, the only evidence for this furnished by the study being the dissolution of the contesting parents organization after the state authorities fulfilled their demands. This assumption may be considered both evasive and intriguing: it is hard to acknowledge that hegemonic representations, with their stability in society and coercive character as described by Moscovici (1988), once challenged still remain unchanged.

In a more recent study, Ben-Asher and Lebel (2010) further employed the distinction between different types of social representations in their analysis of another public controversy in Israeli society, this time related to a law stipulating the loss of entitlement to rehabilitation for IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) widows once they remarried. The confrontation between IDF widows and state institutions, considered to be a struggle between a republican-collectivist and a liberal-individualist perception of social policy, was analyzed in terms of hegemonic, emancipated and polemic representations co-existing in the public discourse on the issue. The concrete manifestations of these three types of representations in the specific context studied are summarized as follows: hegemonic representations are dominant narratives which embed the conviction in the social ethos of the 'IDF spirit', entailing the central value of sacrificing one's life for the state, and the state's commitment to care for its wounded and for the bereaved families; emancipated representations are new information, or 'winds of change' that challenge the traditional view, manifested in the case of IDF through widows forming a new intimate relationship aiming to contest the previsions of the restrictive law; polemic representations are thought to emerge precisely because of the clash between hegemonic representations and emancipated ones and are manifest through a strong criticism of the state. Several statements, identified in internet talkbacks and considered to illustrate the different types of social representations held on the issue, were tested for agreement in a wider public. The analysis revealed that indeed social representations of different status (i.e. hegemonic, emancipated and polemical) co-exist in social thinking. This would suggest that the

three categories of social representations are not mutually exclusive, nor even evolve and transform in a linear way as was previously suggested (Ben-Asher: 2003).

With the overall intention to cross a communication barrier between social representations theory and studies derived from social cognition Angelica Muchi-Faina (2004) applied Moscovici's distinction between hegemonic and polemic representations to the research in the domain of inter-group relations and social stereotypes. The social representation of women was identified from definitional traits ascribed by male and female students. The author followed the hypothesis that if one removes from a representation of a group or category the hegemonic elements it is possible to seize the polemical elements, considered to be typical in inter-group representations. According to this author the distinction between two different "levels" of a social representation, i.e. hegemonic and respectively polemic (p.609), permits the dissociation of the aspects linked to the social stereotypes from the aspects of in-group favoritism. "Hegemonic elements" and "polemical elements" are established according to their frequencies of appearance in the responses of the subjects. "Polemical elements" are found in the differences in women's traits mentioned by the members of the in-group (female students) and of the out-group (male students). Hence, Moscovici's differentiation between types of social representations is reduced to the difference in status of the elements of a single social representation. However, the study concludes, consensual elements cited by both groups investigated are thought to be part of a hegemonic representation of women, shared within the whole culture, whereas representations linked to group membership are polemical. This kind of approach to the different categories of social representations is consonant with Li Liu's suggestions (2004) that hegemonic and polemic features may coexist within the same social representation due to the antinomy entailed by themata as source ideas for social representations.

Polemic social representations – a useful tool for analyzing conflicts

The brief overview of studies which employed the classification of social representations suggested by Moscovici (1988) and ex-

plicitly focused on the polemical type of social representations was intended to demonstrate the variety of thematic areas in which this concept was used. What reunites them is the conflicting context in which polemical representations normally occur. While we do not want to comment on why not all studies which analyzed intergroup conflicts from a social representations perspective made also use of the concept of polemic representation[4], we would like to mention, as last example, the study of di Giacomo (1980), written before the concept of polemic representation was suggested by Moscovici, which can be considered a good example of research which stresses the role of conflict for studying the dynamics of social representations. Di Giacomo analyzed the social representations emerged in a protest of students from a Belgian university and tried to find out what could explain its failure. The representations that students held about the protest movement itself, about the leaders of the movement and their strategies were identified from data obtained through the free associations technique. It was found that the majority of students rejected the ad-hoc created protest committee, which they considered incompatible with them regarding symbols, beliefs, and norms. This explained the students' lack of adhesion on the long term, which ultimately determined the failure of the protest movement. Criticism has been raised that the analysis of di Giacomo did not trace the development of the incompatible social representations or that it did not explore the form of communication or the process of social interaction in the generation and transformation of such representations (Purkhardt: 1993). With or without this, the results of di Giacomo's study were indeed interpreted in terms of a struggle between discrepant (polemical) sets of social representations (Wagner: 1995b).

The focus on the notion of polemic social representations leads us to the assumption that that there are indeed three distinct types of social representation and not just different dimensions contained by a social representation, as was suggested by Li Liu (2004). Although polemical representations may be generated by the same themata, we consider that we should treat them as being different representations and not just dimensions in a single social representation. When discussing about the generative force of themata, Moscovici (2001, p. 33)

made a clear point in sustaining that "social representations occur in pairs, each one having its alternative, such as sacred and profane representations in religion or standard and non-standard paradigms in science. When we say that a representation is shared, we mean that it is normative, not that it is unique". Polemical representations are always related to the limits of sharing of social representations in society as a whole due to the conflicting nature of relationships between groups (Moscovici, 1988).

Nevertheless we should admit that a representation could qualify to all three types but in distinct periods of time (Breakwell: 2001). Polemical social representations occur in a context determined by conflict between different groups and concur to the maintaining of such conflict. We can imagine that when the context changes and the conflict becomes obsolete polemical representations turn into emancipated ones.

However, in contemporary societies we should expect to find more evidence for polemic representations rather than for hegemonic ones. This idea was explicitly stated by Vala (1992, p. 70): "When studying a social representation in our societies, the hypothesis that these are different and conflictual representations about the same object is probably today heuristically more valuable than the hypothesis that an object is represented in an hegemonic way (…). Its consensuality within the groups is constructed and deconstructed side by side with the conflictuality which crosses the social relations and the strategic activity of individual and groups actors".

In a recent article of Elcheroth, Doise, and Reicher (2011), while encouraging the adoption of the social representations approach in the realm of political psychology, the authors make a specific point in defending that social representations theory must be seen as a theory of power, in the sense that by shaping representational systems individuals or groups (political leaders, activists, or, related to our case, we would say economic actors, like a corporation) seek to create social realities that serve their vision or interests. To make this point clear, let us fully cite these authors: "Representations do not simply arise spontaneously from looking at the world, we have argued. We are constantly presented with representations from leaders and activists through the medium of mass communications. To argue that social

knowledge is rooted in practice and, in part at least, used in order to move people to create new social practices (indeed, to argue that the source of social power lies in the creation of forms of social knowledge) is to suggest that the various forms of knowledge are embedded in a process of mobilization and that change depends upon effective mobilization. That is, people do not come to understand the world through a neutral process of contemplation. Rather, they are enjoined to see the world in particular ways. This then leads us to think in terms of those who mobilize and those who are mobilized." (p. 745). We find here similarities with the idea of Sen and Wagner (2005) that it is representational politics that shapes polemical representations.

In this light, it is easy to defend that the communication genre which characterizes the transmission of polemical social representations by conflicting actors is that of propaganda. Propaganda, envisaged by Moscovici (1961/1976) in relation to the circulation of the social representation of psychoanalysis in French communist press during the fifties, was defined as "a modality of expression of a group in a conflicting situation and the instrumental elaboration, with the intention of action, of the representation that the group makes about the object of conflict" (p, 442, our translation). By creating social representations, propaganda seeks to control opinion and shape behaviours. The cognitive organization of representations originated in propaganda makes them be simplified and distorted versions of reality, built upon dichotomized themes, and, thus, highly stereotypical.

When searching for an operational definition for polemical social representations one must keep in mind that a necessary condition for polemical representations to occur is a situation characterized by inter-group conflict. There are two situations that can be envisaged in relation to the history of the conflict characterizing the situation. First, the conflict between groups may exist already, having historical or ideological roots. In this situation, the antagonistic relations will concur to the creation of opposing social representations of a given object that will further maintain the conflict. A second situation that can be envisaged is the emergence of a new and problematic object that raises polemics. In this case representational processes that will divide groups can

take place (Flament & Rouquette: 2003; Raudsepp & Wagner: 2012). This will concur to the creation of polemical representations that not only maintain the conflict but can also be considered as the very sources of the conflict itself.

Then, besides the conflicting context, in order to be able to highlight polemical representations one must look at the content and structure of such representations. Different or even antonymic contents may sure be a clue of polemical representations. But the focus only on the content might be a trap. Within the structuralist approach it is considered that two representations about a same object are different when they don't have the same central core (Abric: 2001a, 2001b, 2003). It can thus happen that two representations defined by similar content be radically different if the organization of their content into the central core and peripheral elements is different. According to Flament and Rouquette (2003), in order to judge two representations as being opposite there is not even need to consider that one is contrary to the other. To be considered opposite, hence polemical, their central cores should not be the same and, in addition, that "the thematic valorization of at least one element from the central cores should be opposite for the groups" (p. 37).

Endnotes:

[1] Asist. univ. dr., Universitatea Creştină „Dimitrie Cantemir", Bucureşti.

[2] Data was analyzed with a non-metric multiple scaling procedure, the Partial Order Scalogram analysis by the use of coordinates (POSAC)

[3] Calculations were based on the polarity indexes obtained by the images

[4] For example, in the recent book edited by Ivana Marková and Alex Gillespie (2012) which was especially dedicated to the study of trust and conflict from a social representations perspective, the notion of *polemic representation* was mentioned only once. It was mentioned (only one time) in a study of Raudsepp and Wagner which focused on the analysis of the escalation of an inter-ethnic conflict in Estonian society around a symbolic issue. But it was totally absent in the analyses of the conflicts in Cyprus (Psaltis) or Georgia (Wertsch & Batiashvili).

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