Social Representations Theory And Critical Constructionism: Insights From Caillaud's Article

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The aim of this paper is to highlight the role that Social Representations Theory (SRT) could play in the debate on the critical potential of social constructionist perspectives. We draw upon some of the arguments raised by Caillaud (this issue), mainly concerning such a sensitive topic as environmental issues, to highlight some crucial points of that debate. As is well known, one of the goals of the social constructionist movement has been to take a more critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge (Gergen, 1985; Burr, 1995). It aims to show that our understanding of the world is by no means neutral or value-free; it is instead the result of historical and cultural specificities, which operate ideologically. In this vein, the social constructionist approach raises the question of social transformation and emancipation, as well as the problems of power and social inequality, in close consonance with the scope of the more general critical approach in psychology (Tolman & Maiers, 1991).

However, broad discussions have been undertaken on the positioning of constructionism within the so-called realism-relativism debate (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999). Widely diffused is the opinion that relativism, especially in its more radical and discursive forms (e.g. Edwards, Ashmore, & Potter, 1995), loses its critical strength: by showing that all apparent truths can be contested and de-constructed, relativism treats all realities as roughly equivalent to one another. The result may be a conservative attitude: research cannot take any critical stance because none of the truths can be considered as more valuable from a socio-political point of view.

It can be argued, to the contrary, that the goal of emancipation and transformation of society could be better pursued by means of some sort of *critical* realism, which, even though assuming that all forms of knowledge are social constructions, recognizes that these constructions interact with a real world. Such a reality is transfactual: it is independent of our representations, being grounded on specific and historically defined properties of social organization that we may intend to change (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002; Cruickshank, 2003).

SRT could be considered as a good example of a fruitful merge between a critical stance and a constructionist approach. As many have pointed out, in agreement with the original suggestions of Moscovici (1972; 1984), social representations provide the connection between the world and our everyday consensual understanding of it, including the potentiali to address social problems and foster interventions and change. As Howarth (2006) highlights, SRT has the conceptual tools to criticise the social order, and could be considered as a modern theory of social change, amounting to a sort of social psychology of power. Exemplary in this regard is the framework proposed by Elcheroth, Doise, and Reicher (2011), who link SRT with social identity, enacted practices and institutionalised social structures, and highlight the critical contribution that SRT provides to political psychology: "SR approach is different because it will not only aim to explain how social reality is reproduced, but also how it can be transformed: It is about collective resistance and social change, as much as about collective oppression and social reproduction." (p. 747).

In this vein, social representations have been studied as part of communicative practice that constitutes public spaces, being for this reason permanently permeated by power relationships. In particular, following Moscovici's suggestion (1994) "to loosen the link with semantic communication, which is too exclusive, and take more interest in pragmatic communication" (p. 165), the focus of attention shifts from the description of what is shared to the understanding of why, by whom and to what extent. Social representations can thus be conceived as contextualised communication acts, and reproduction or resistance emerge in the acceptance or breaking of shared presuppositions. As Jovchelovitch (1996) puts it: "Some accounts provide one version of reality, other accounts provide a different one; what they express is already the outcome of symbolic struggles that are related to the larger struggles of any given society" (p. 127). In a broader sense, the study of social representations could effectively contribute to the development of a more critical societal approach in psychology,

helping to understand the articulation of levels of analysis, as well as the historical contextualisation of psychological processes (Staerklé, 2011).

We find the echo of these tensions and of these intersections in many of the points touched on by Caillaud (this issue). Studies at the intersection between construction of the environment, cultural hegemony and power are not exclusive to SRT; however, we would like to stress three passages in her paper which show the bridge between SRT and critical stances: Moscovici's reflections on human-nature relationships, the dialogical nature of thoughts, and the functions of social representations.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES: HISTORICITY, DIALOGICALITY AND FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

History Of Human Nature Relationships

A first point that bridges socially constructed and historically grounded accounts of reality is Moscovici's contribution to understanding the long-term transformations in human-nature relationship. Research examining human-environment relationships shows that the so-called New Environmental Paradigm (which should be based on egalitarian human-nature relationships) is increasingly endorsed in western societies (Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, & Jones, 2000). Other authors suggest that conflicting images, discourses and myths of nature co-exist (e.g. Davis & Lewicki, 2003; Dake, 1992; Korfiatis, Stamou, & Paraskevopoulos, 2004; Macnaghten, 1993), and that shared cultural repertoires are mobilised by conflicting groups to provide locally valid understanding of groups' identities, power relationships, risk hazards, and conflict management strategies (Sarrica, 2011; Williams, 2004).

By recalling Moscovici's reflections on nature (Moscovici, 1968, 1976), Caillaud (this issue) shows the myopia that sometimes affects social psychology and, more importantly, invites us to reflect on the links between Moscovici's theoretical contributions and the need for historical contextualisation underlined by critical perspectives. Indeed, Moscovici's environmentalist side puts to the forefront the *long durée* of transitions, which inform psychosocial processes. Moscovici identified few epistemological shifts – defined as 'states of nature' – that manifest the co-evolution of society and nature. The first state could be defined 'organic', and represented nature as an organism (e.g. personified by nymphs), with its own agency, to be interpreted and venerated. Mechanistic conceptions transformed this view of nature; it was no more a moral agent but a patient, a set of resources to be used. This vision became dominant with the achievements of engineering and mechanical developments,

which allowed a better control of nature and made possible its intensive exploitation (e.g. coal). It is only in modernity that nature has been conceived as something that can be not only controlled but even modified for the purposes of human beings. This cybernetic state requires the trust in the primacy of science that can master nature and manipulate the invisible, for example as in modern physics (e.g. nuclear power) or biology (e.g. DNA decryption). The tensions that we currently observe between alternative myths of nature, the emergence of environmental conflicts, may thus be interpreted as the emergence of a new state of nature, which could be called 'society for nature'. On the one hand, the emergence of this new state is connected with new forms of spirituality that deeply affect the social representations of nature and of human beings, and on the other hand it underlines the importance of political actions and activist prefigurative movements that are fostering such a transition in their practices (Carman, 2015). Exemplary in this sense is the transition town movement that combines a cultural redefinition of the qualities associated with rurality (Halfacree, 1995), and with the quest to reconfigure structures of production, consumption and delivery of goods, energy and food (Kenis & Mathijs, 2014; Biddau, Armenti, & Cottone, 2016).

Dialogicality

A second theme discussed in Caillaud's article is the dialogical epistemology underpinning Moscovici's work. As is known, dialogicality constitutes a well-established line of research in SRT (Markova, 2003; 2008), and probably offers the clearest connection with critical approaches. In particular, as regards environmental issues, the interconnection between environmental and power issues comes from an 'ecolinguistics' perspective (Harré, Brockmeier, & Mühlhäusler 1999). As summarised by Stamou and Paraskevopoulos (2004) "Ecolinguistics examines the relations of language with the environment, which includes both the study of the role of the environment in language (ecology of language) and that of the function of language in environmental issues (language of ecology)" (p. 40). As a corollary, research in this field may be grouped into those who focus on the grammar and those who concentrate on the use of 'Greenspeak' (Harré et al., 1999). Critical approaches fall among the latter. It is important to stress here how dialogicality can be enacted (and operationalised in research methods) not just at the interpersonal but also at the intergroup level. In this sense, the wind rose model (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008) clarifies that "the subject is always a collective of conscious selves and others, who come together for a project of common intentionality" (p. 345). This model reinforces the bridge between SRT and intergroup contexts, which was clear

in the project of what was once called European social psychology (Tajfel, 1984). From this perspective, the issues of power, hegemony, regulation and conflict, which are central to critical analysis, enter SRT and vice versa.

Beyond and Above Epistemic Functions

The analysis of social representations in terms of long lasting transformations, dialogicality, intergroup relationships and intentionality requires widening the scope of functions that are usually ascribed to social representations. Symbolic coping and identity functions are strictly linked with the communicative nature of social representations, which serve as the common ground that contributes to effective communication and define the boundaries of the 'us', those who share the same understanding of reality. Other functions have been suggested though, which are fundamental for survival and self-protection (Breakwell, 2001), including social sharing of emotions (Pennebaker & Harber, 1993) and preserving self-efficacy through defence mechanisms (Joffé, 1996). Social representations further serve power functions: they can be mobilised to empower or disempower communities, to resist against stigma, to re-construct continuity and meaningful connections with one's own past (Howarth, 2006). Again, the connection with critical theory's historical realism emerges especially when we look at these functions diachronically and at how intergroup and intergenerational relationships are intertwined with long-term effects that social representations have for community empowerment (Brondi, Sarrica, Cibin, Neresini, & Contarello, 2012; Sarrica, Roseti, Brondi, Cervelli, & Leone, 2016). This is evident even in extreme contexts such as in the immediate and medium term aftermath of earthquakes, when the transfactuality of reality – i.e. the material destruction of entire cities – interacts with societal efforts aimed at provide meaning to and coping with the contextual and social disruption of everyday life. Social representations in these contexts serve a number of functions, which evolve together with the changes in reality: from initial cognitive coping and social sharing of emotions, to splitting mechanisms exemplified by irony, to preservation of identity and empowerment processes during the post-emergency phases (Sarrica et al., in press).

THE NEXT MOVE: SRT AND ENVIRONMENTAL HERMENEUTICS

Many of the topics examined so far, and the way in which SRT could contribute to them, point the way to establishing further connections between this theory and the growing field of *environmental hermeneutics* (Mugerauer, 1995; Clingerman, Treanor, Drenthen, & Utsler, 2014). Grounded in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, this approach assumes that people make sense of their lives by placing themselves in a normative context of meaningful things (Drenthen, 2016) and highlights the role of interpretation in human relation with the environment. In their interpretative efforts, people confront themselves with a world that has already its significance, being infused with meanings rooted in larger narrative contexts, which pre-exist the hermeneutic effort. Thus, even though the interpretation may be considered as a constructive task, it does not operate in a social vacuum, with reference to intrinsically meaningless objects, nor does it consider equivalent all possible interpretations. On the contrary, the hermeneutic approach aims to study and compare conflicting interpretations of environment, whose contrast is politically relevant. Given this sensitivity for conflicts of interpretations and for the role of action, environmental hermeneutics could easily express a "critical" attitude (Van Buren, 1995).

The attention towards supporting one or another among competing interpretations recalls important themes of the abovementioned debate, in particular the ethical and social justice dimensions of social constructions, together with the intertwining of interpretation and action. Drawing upon Ricoeur's view of ethics in relation to different conceptions of "good life", Bell (2014) develops an environmental version of ethics related to environmental identity, which is in turn the source of environmental action. So, different views of humanity and selfhood correspond to different interpretation of the natural world and of right actions in regard to the environment. Moreover, according to Bell, action itself is something that should be interpreted. As Bell maintains referring to Ricoeur: "Meaningful action is separated from its intention, separated from the agent, and open to a range of interpretations – these interpretations likewise being open to the interpretive model of the hermeneutic circle" (p. 147).

In sum, we may conclude that the pragmatics of communication help construct a bridge from SRT towards critical perspectives, and that the points touched by Caillaud in terms of historicity, dialogicality and functions of social representations help form the keystone of this bridge. Taking this road opens of course a number of questions; above all, we believe, concerning the relationships between ethics and environmental action. The contribution developed by Bell within the emerging field of environmental hermeneutics

seems, in this regard, promising. In our opinion, it is coherent with the concept of state of nature proposed by Moscovici, as well as with the dialogicality of SRT. Moreover, it introduces the issue of *right* actions in relationship with the environment and of the non-equivalence of alternative interpretations, a point raised within SRT by a number of authors (see for example, Buijs et al., 2012).

More generally, the fruitful interaction between SRT and the hermeneutical approach, in a critical perspective, is particularly evident if we consider the special emphasis that the latter places on dialogicality as a primary source of developing interpretations, as well as a constitutive basis of the so-called environmental identity (Utsler, 2014). The relationship between the dialogical dimension of our understanding of the world and the construction of our social identity has been widely recognised in the SRT tradition. In the same way, within a hermeneutical framework, experiences and practices related to the environment may contribute to the structuring of personal and social identity by enhancing specific interpretations of environmental problems and human-nature relationships (Clayton & Opotow, 2003). The diffusion, negotiation and sharing of these interpretations, often based on specific social representations, largely contribute to the manner in which communities understand themselves, develop a common identity and support useful pro-environmental behaviours. The role of researchers from such a perspective is thus to make salient the implicit, to provide a historical perspective, to consider whose interpretations are included in the field, to give voice to marginalised communities, and finally to favour the re-presentation of the once imposed reality.

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