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# In Defence of Representations<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

More than thirty years of research on social representations have produced an exceptionally fertile ground for our understanding of social phenomena. Be it for the critique it has provoked (Billig, 1988; Potter and Litton, 1985; Parker, 1987), or for the vigorous support it has elicited (Banchs, 1994; Jodelet, 1989; Moscovici, 1988; Farr, 1987), the theory of social representations is today one of the major frameworks constituting social psychological knowledge. Many would question its presuppositions but few, maybe no one, would claim it is unimportant. The controversies the theory has generated are highly germane to the social sciences in general and to social psychology in particular. Social psychologists have nothing to lose when engaging in heated debates about the presuppositions which guide their theoretical and empirical efforts. It is by engaging in such debates that our own practices can become objects of reflexivity and their underpinning elements can be exposed. Furthermore, inquiries about everyday practices and knowledges, the constructed character of human experience and the relationship between the subject and her society are not restricted to social psychology. In approaching such fundamental questions we are also transcending disciplinary boundaries and contributing to a much needed dialogue with the other human and social sciences.

In this paper I want to recover the notion of representation and defend its importance for understanding the relationship between the individual and society. I do so by advancing some ideas related to the development of the: theory of social representations and by taking issue with post-modern positions that reject and/ or misconceive representations. These are not, as one may suppose, separate aims. By elucidating aspects of the theory which, I believe, need to be made explicit, and by relating them to competing intellectual perspectives, I hope to contribute both to the demarcation of the space proper of the theory of social representations and to the reaffirmation of the importance of the notion of representation. As I hope to demonstrate, the theory of social representations can be a powerful instrument in the development of a clear conceptualization of the inter-play between the individual and society. Central to such an attempt is the notion of representation.

In what follows I proceed in two stages. First, I single out general presuppositions around which I believe the development of the theory of social representations ought to be continued. I am aware that the space opened up by the theory is far from homogeneous. There are examples of research being carried out under its umbrella that still draw on practices that compromise some of its basic assumptions (Allansdottir, Jovchelovitch & Stathopoulou, 1993; Wagner, 1994; de Rosa, 1994). Yet I contend that there is a sufficient body of theory and empirical evidence which combine to demonstrate the renewing character of social representations in social psychology, and my argument builds upon and seeks to develop this material. Secondly, and taking the first part of the paper as a background, I defend the notion of representation from the attacks to which it has been subjected by post-modern versions of social constructionism.

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## SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN SUBJECT AND SOCIETY

Elsewhere I have argued extensively that social representations are forms of symbolic mediation firmly rooted in the public sphere (Jovchelovitch, 1994; 1995b). The public sphere-as a space of intersubjective reality-is the terrain in which they are generated, crystallised and eventually transformed. This is the case, not only because public life provides the context within which social representations develop, but also because this same public life is a constitutive element in their formation. Public life, therefore, is one of the conditions of possibility for the emergence of social representations. Social representations emerge in spaces of inter-subjective reality; they are not the products of purely individual minds, even though they find expression in individual minds. Inadequacies in the conceptualisation of the relationship between the individual and society should not blind us; the individual and society are neither one and the same thing, nor is the one reducible to the other. Social representations have a social genesis, develop in a social space and function as part of social life. They certainly enshrine individual experience but they are not performed as individual actions. The theory of social representations must be dear in this regard; it looks at the social as a whole, and it is to the understanding of this totality-in what it produces of symbolic and meaningful experience-that the theory of social representations is dedicated.

The acknowledgement of the social as a whole, which accounts for the genesis of social representations, should not prevent a clear characterisation of the social and of its relationship to individual agency. The social is subjective and objective at one and the same time. On the one hand, it engenders in its dynamics historical, political and economic elements which constrain and narrow the possibilities of human action. In this sense, the social is a space of institutional boundaries and limits. Yet these limits are not absolute. For, on the other hand, the social is also a space where new possibilities are proposed, a space of communication, a space where self and other meet, explore each others' identities, construct symbols and express affects. In this sense, the social is also a space for transcending institutional boundaries and instituting new ones. The theory of social representations must make explicit its conception of the social-it is not an independent variable; it is not an external structure; it is not an influence. It is the very arena in which the subjective and objective sides of social representations take shape. The interplay between subjective and objective, and between agency and reproduction, which constitutes the social fabric is at the very heart of how social representations are formed. The theory must conceptualise this interplay and draw on consistent methodological devices to investigate it.

Now, once we acknowledge the societal nature of the processes generating social representations, we must take them seriously. That means taking into account the crucial connections between genesis, development and structures in the conceptualisation and investigation of social representations. Society not only provides a context for the production of social representations, but also impinges upon the development and structure of social representations with a constitutive power. Social representations, of course, feed back into society, contributing to the establishment of the constantly evolving relationship between the material and the symbolic. The trade-offs between societal forces and the symbolic fields expressed by social representations raise a number of important issues related to the understanding of the structure and social functioning of social representations. These are:

### (i) Genesis, Process and Structure

The relationship between genesis, process and structure encompasses, at a conceptual level, the total phenomenology of social representations. In order to understand their structures one needs to understand the processes which account for their becoming. Piaget's view on the relationship between genesis and structure can be extremely informative in this regard (Piaget, 1968). As he pointed out, all structures (from mathematical groupings to relations of kinship) are systems of transformation which, far from being mere aggregations, are in fact, organic totalities. Structures, therefore, do not stand still but move and evolve continuously. Against the dichotomy between processes and structures that so

often has characterised the debate on social psychology, a proper understanding of social representations involves the acknowledgement of the inseparable relationship between process and structure. In this way we clearly see why interaction, relationships, and communicative practices are processes that mark, as it were, from the very beginnings, the structure of the entities we analyse. Processes and structures can only be properly understood in relation to each other.

#### (ii) Change and Constancy in Social Representations

Once we consider structures as systems of transformation, the problem of change and constancy in social representations comes to the fore. There is an extensive body of empirical research that shows how change and constancy operate in the structure of representational fields (Abric, 1984, 1994; Flament, 1989; Jodelet, 1991; Guimelli, 1994; Rouquette & Guimelli, 1994). It is not accidental that Jodelet's now classical study on representations of madness ends by asking whether 'we really left behind us that "immense magical conclave" of which Mauss spoke?' (1991: 302). As her research brilliantly shows, we did not. The persistence of immemorial meanings and practices associated with the insane is still at the core of the representations the community develops to cope with the mad. My own study on social representations of public life in Brazil also showed that, at the centre of contemporary representations of public life, there remains the problematic link between self and other, typical of Latin American societies since their very inception (Jovchelovitch, 1995a). Indeed, it was around images of contaminated and corrupt blood giving rise to a corrupt and hybrid being-the-Brazilian-that representations of public life were organised. "We get what we deserve" or "corrupt beings give rise to corrupt forms of life" are statements still voicing today the imperatives of the past, and indeed, of the archaic stock of symbols comprising the Latin American social imaginary.

Research such as this shows that, contrary to what some critics (Potter & Litton, 1985) may suppose, it is not the theory of social representations that confers a stable, indeed practically consensual, dimension to significance in social life. What the theory does is to acknowledge the tendency of societies and institutions (and even individuals) to perpetuate themselves—a process which also works within symbolic fields (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Thus the semantic networks which organise representational fields retain a degree of constancy in accordance with the historical features of the societies in which they emerge. In this sense, they are inseparable from the particular stock of meanings and practices that, in each given society, will circumscribe the action and speech of social actors. But these fields also vary according to the positionings that different social actors hold in relation to the social fabric, and the web of interactions they produce. The semantic networks that organise the representational fields can acquire diverse configurations, which differ in their complexity and in how immediate experience is drawn upon to represent a given object. In this sense, social representations are inseparable from the dynamics of everyday life, where the mobile interactions of the present can potentially challenge the taken-for-granted, imposing pockets of novelty on traditions coming from the past. The weight of reflexivity in the construction of representational fields (Joffe, 1995), and of diversity in relation to permanence (Spink, 1993), confirms the innovative dimension of social representations. These two aspects, constancy and change, are integral to the formation of social representations. They allow for the existence of contradictory representational fields, which interact and compete in the public sphere. Past history and present reality are in a dialectical relationship, and together conspire to evoke a possible future. The capacity to evoke alternative realities, through reflexivity and dialogue, is an important element in the workings of social representations.

#### (iii) Identities and Social Representations

Related to the mobility and the symbolic struggles of different representational fields (which, as I mentioned above, are constructed by different social positionings), we find social representations intertwined with the processes of identity construction. To construct social representations involves, at the same time, proposing an identity and an interpretation of reality. This is to say that, when social subjects construct and organise their representational fields, they do so in order to make sense of reality,

to appropriate and interpret it. In doing so, they state who they are, how they understand both themselves and others, where they locate themselves and others, and which are the cognitive and affective resources that are available to them in a given historical time. Social representations, therefore, tell us about who is doing the representational work. This can be fully appreciated if we consider the trade-offs between representational work and identificatory work. The complex interactions between self and other are the basis of both phenomena. There is no possibility of identity without the work of representation, just as there is no work of representation "without an identificatory boundary between the me and the not-me. It is in the overlapping space of the me and the not-me that both representations and identities emerge. Furthermore, social representations are a network of mediating social meanings which lends texture and material to the construction of identities. In their research on the development of representations of gender in young children, Duveen & Lloyd (Duveen & Lloyd, 1986; Duveen, 1994) have shown that constructing an identity is always a process permeated by social representations. It is by confronting the symbolic environment that precedes the child, that she will experience the limits and possibilities which define the constitution of the self. In the process of coming to know the social world and becoming an actor in that social world, children acquire not only a sense of identity, but also a sense for the world outside of themselves.

#### (iv) Cognition, Affect and Action

Social representations are structures that comprise, simultaneously and inextricably, cognition, affection and action. Cognition is a network of representations which, as I shall argue later in this paper, does not necessarily equate with classical interpretations of cognitive phenomena. In fact it is rather ironic that those colleagues who most strongly, and correctly for that matter, advocate distinguishing between scientific accounts fail to realise that the problem of cognitive individualism lies in classical cognitive theories and not in the phenomenon of cognition. As soon as we step out of Anglo-Saxon cognitive theories, cognition (and representation) is not necessarily a dirty word. To know, anything and anywhere, is a creative and meaningful act: it is a movement of social subjects towards their social world, which far from being mere information processing, involves action, passion and otherness. Refusals to theorise cognition paradoxically grant to mainstream cognitive theories the last word about one of the most important capacities of human subjectivity.

The theory of social representations is concerned with cognition and for that it should make no apologies. For representations at once involve and construct social 'knowledges' (*savoirs*). These are forms of knowing that circulate in society, which are part of erudite, scientific and popular culture, which mingle, feed back into each other, and emerge as social resources for a community to make sense of its reality and to know what is going on. Representations are also made of affection, because to know involves the desire to know or the desire not to know, involves investment and passion towards the object of knowledge and the act of knowledge. To represent something is not the arid construction of a 'cognitive map'; it is an act that comes 'from people who think and feel, who have motives and intentions, who hold an identity and live in a social world. And finally action, because cognition and affection are activities which involve subjects engaging in, speaking of, relating to, and so forth. These activities are social practices—they involve actions of all kinds. As Jodelet (1989: 43) has pointed out 'qualifier ce savoir de "pratique" réfère a l'expérience à partir de laquelle il est produit, aux cadres et conditions dans lesquels il l'est, et surtout au fait que la représentation sert à agir sur le monde et autrui'. Here, social representations are acts of affection and knowledge founded in everyday experience and therefore replete with social practices. The distinction between practices, cognition and affection is only important for the purposes of analyses and maintenance of complexity, but it should not become the basis for constructing dichotomies when accessing human experience.

(v) Mediation and Social Representations

The fifth element to be singled out here refers to the mediating nature of social representations. Social representations are neither centred on isolated individuals nor centred in society as an abstract space: they are processes of mediation. This, I believe, is one of the most important aspects of social representations which needs to be highlighted. Western philosophy has so insistently imposed its tradition of focusing either on the subjective or on the objective that the space of interplay between the two is often ignored. However, it is exactly in this space that we can better understand the roots of symbolic activity and of social representations. The concept of potential space, as proposed by Winnicott, is crucial in this regard (Winnicott, 1958) and I have discussed its usefulness in understanding the workings of social representations (Jovchelovitch, 1995b). The potential space, the space of symbols, both links and separates the subject and the object-world. Thus, it is of the essence of the potential space to acknowledge a shared reality—the reality of others. Yet it is a creative acknowledgement, which retains the imaginative and signifying character of human agency. Social representations also express this space. It is in the space of mediation between social subjects and alterity, where they struggle to make sense of and to give meaning to the world, that we find the workings of social representations. Thus social representations emerge and circulate in a space of inter-subjective reality.

(vi) Communicative Practices, Power and Social Representations

And last, but not least, there is a structural relationship between the communicative practices of the public sphere, social representations and the uses of power. Social representations live and die through the media, conversations, narratives, rituals, myths, patterns of work and art, among many other forms of social mediation. These forms of social mediation play an important role in the constitution of both public life and social representations. Each of them is related to the production of public spaces and, therefore, to social representations. On the one hand, social representations develop through the media, through conversations, through narratives, and many other forms of social mediation. On the other hand, these are forms of communicative practice that characterise, and constitute, public spaces. In looking at the production of social representations in such practices, it becomes clear that they are permeated permanently by relations of power. The construction of accounts, for instance, is never a neutral business. 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. Some groups have a greater chance than others to assert their version of reality. The asymmetrical situation of different social groups must be considered seriously, for different people bring different resources to bear when it comes to imposing their representations. Research being carried out by the LSE Social Representations Group has consistently found the need to thematise how power relations invade the organisation of social representations. These empirical findings hopefully will translate into further theoretical development. Joffe's (1994; 1995) work on AIDS, in particular, calls our attention to the impact of unequal distribution of power in the forging of representations associated with excluded groups. Her research is a vigorous example of how domination operates in symbolic fields: if for some people representations of AIDS work as a means of keeping distance from threatening others, for the others so represented, these representations emerge as an identity fraught with blame and self-discrimination. In fact, these social imperatives can be found in the very structure and content of the representations formed - something which takes us back to the interplay between structure, processes and genesis.

The elements above are obviously inter-related and should not be understood as separate from each other. They encompass some of the vast range of issues arising from the production of meaning in social fields, a process which is at one and the same time structured and structuring. As structured structures, social representations are bound to the context of their production and, as with any social phenomena, they cannot escape the limits imposed by society and history. And yet, as structuring structures, social representations are an expression of the agency of social subjects who engage, think,

feel, talk and eventually transform the contexts in which they find themselves. This conceptualisation takes us back to the framework Jodelet (1989) has proposed as the field of study of social representations. She demonstrated how the conditions of production and circulation of social representations relate to their processes and states, which in turn, relate to their epistemological status. The questions such a model posed still hold today: "Who knows and from where does one know? How and what does one know? About whom and with which effect does one know? (Jodelet, 1989:43, my translation). Recognising their full significance for research and theoretical development is a necessary task.

## FAREWELL TO REPRESENTATIONS: BEHAVIOURISM BY THE BACK DOOR?

As I have argued above, the theory of social representations provides a powerful tool for conceptualising the mediating nature of representations. In this section I turn to consider the far-reaching implications of the rejection of representations as proposed by social psychologists who adopt a post-modern stance. Let me say from the very beginning that I have no doubt that we owe to the post-modern approach in psychology a radical critique of many of the underlying assumptions that operate in scientific knowledge, guiding-often unconsciously-our codes of practice, our urge to know, to explain and, in the most extreme and illusionary cases, to predict (Ibanez, 1991; Gergen, 1985; Shotter & Gergen, 1989)<sup>2</sup>. These assumptions comprise the stuff that all of us, to some extent, have been made of in our courses of psychology. To understand their full implications for what we do, and how we do what we do, is part of any exercise in reflexion and self-reflexion. However, I think that a more careful examination of the accounts proposed by our social constructionist colleagues will show that the fields of critique and questioning in social psychology are not homogenous. Differences do exist and they need to be made explicit.

Gergen (1985) has been one of the principal exponents of the rejection of the notion of representation in social psychology. In his account of the social constructionist movement in modern psychology, he states: "This movement begins in earnest when one challenges the concept of knowledge as a mental representation. Given the myriad of insolubles to which such a concept gives rise, one is moved to consider what passes as knowledge in human affairs. At least one major candidate is that of linguistic rendering. (. . .) These renderings to continue an earlier theme, are constituents of social practices. From this perspective, knowledge is not something people possess somewhere in their heads, but rather, something people do together (. . .) In effect, we may cease inquiry into the psychological basis of language (which account would inevitably form but a subtext or miniature language) and focus on the performative use of language in human affairs" (Gergen, 1985; 270). Or: "The mind (Coulter, 1979) becomes a form of social myth; the self-concept (Gergen, 1985) is removed from the head and placed within the sphere of social discourse" (. . .) "what is taken to be psychological process at the very outset becomes a derivative of social interchange." (. . .) "The explanatory locus of human action shifts from the interior region of the mind to the processes and structure of human interaction." (Gergen, 1985: 271).

More recently Shotter (1993) has argued at great length against the idea of knowledge as representational, preferring instead the idea of responsive forms of talk. He insists that 'in our classical paradigm, we tend to think of proper knowledge as being in the heads of individuals, as being representational, systematic, ahistorical, as formulated in visual (metaphorical) terms, as separate from the knower, and as being about objects existing over against the knower' (1993: 463). Throughout his discussion of a noncognitive and sensuous dimension of human conversation, there is an underlying emphasis on the difference between something that happens "within" individuals, "in their heads", and

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<sup>2</sup> However, it should be noted that the critique of scientific reason did not begin with post-modernism. One of the most important features in the development of modern reason-insistently denied by post-modern theorists-is its capacity to produce its own critique. The work of the Frankfurt School remains paradigmatic in this regard.

what happens "between individuals", in the outside social world. This kind of knowing, he notes, is practical and can move people-it is not an influence on their intellects but on their beings (1993: 463). The consequences of the above positions are many and cannot be discussed in full here. There are, however, two inter-related issues arising from this type of conceptualisation (or 'account') upon which I wish to comment. The first is the failure to step out de facto of the traditional paradigm of cognition and representation. Cognition and representation appear as phenomena simply equated to cognitive theories of a Cartesian kind--something compatible indeed with the post-modern refusal to see distinctions between theories and their empirical referents. The irony here is the process of legitimation that grants to a *particular* theoretical approach to cognition and representation the full authority to account for the experience of knowing and representing. What one sees here ultimately is the denial of phenomena because of one classical paradigm, which of course, is not the only paradigm (Markova, 1982). The second issue, intrinsically related to the first, is the proposed shift from the "within" to the "without". I could not agree more with Gergen and Shotter when they state that the explanatory locus of human action is human interaction or the "between". I do not understand, however, why they fail to use the explanatory power of human interaction to conceptualise the "within". It is here, I contend, that they get haunted by the very ghosts they are trying to put to rest. Let me expand on this.

When John Watson launched his behaviourist manifesto (Watson, 1930) he created a cleavage which, during the history of psychology, has set social reality in opposition to both the individual and mental processes. A mind without a history and a history without a subject seem to be the joint outcomes of an over-sharp distinction between a psychology of behaviour and a psychology of the cognitive subject. By postulating that behaviour is public and consciousness is private, Watson was not only calling for a psychology without introspection. He was also providing the foundations of a psychology without a subject that, following the example of the natural sciences, sought its status as a domain of science by rejecting subjective categories. It is widely acknowledged that 'the cognitive turn' did not challenge the split.<sup>3</sup> Classical cognitive theories-where a representation is a mental reflection of the outside world in the mind, or a mark of the mind that is reproduced in the outside world-are fully embedded in this cleavage, and the weight of this inheritance certainly cannot be easily dismissed. In this history we find more than a compartmentalisation between mind and behaviour, and between individual and society. We also find a very precise conception of the individual, as a person closed in and identical with herself, stripped of contradictions and comfortably centred upon herself. Around her own privileged central point, this subject has been sovereign and everything else surrounding her could only be understood as external, as other.

Now in a rather transversal way this is precisely what can be identified in the post-modern turn in psychology. By turning its gaze away from the centric and unified mind conceived of by traditional reason, and by finding a new centre in the "out there" of social practices, post-modern psychology inadvertently recreates the very classical dichotomy between the subject and the social world. Social practices here become subjectless and mindless practices and the social construction of reality (which, of course, is not a post-modern invention) seems to emerge without authorship. Thus it is not accidental that, from the initial rejection of the idea of representation, because of 'the myriad of insolubles' which it implies (which is a curious justification for the abandonment of a concept, to say the least), Gergen goes as far as proposing, along with a postmodern stance, the "death of the subject" (Shotter & Gergen, 1989). In their haste to kill the centric, unified and private subject proposed by the classical rationalism of positivistic psychology, advocates of post-modernism end up killing everybody. And strange as it may seem, there appears a new *centre*: discourse. Subjects are nothing but positions in discourses, inhabitants of or embedded within discourses (Shotter & Gergen, 1989). Stripped of any ontological status, the psychological subject is left in a void having to face her performative actions (linguistic actions) as the only possible locus of inquiry. Psychological processes and the mind itself are no longer to be conceptualised, and discourses: and social practices are approached as performative action.

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<sup>3</sup> Bruner (1990) gives a detailed account of the twistings and turnings of the "Cognitive Revolution", showing how the introduction of computation as the guiding metaphor pushes the emphasis away from meaning and its construction, towards information and its processing.



Now, how does this differ from the classical split between internal and external, between subjective and objective, between mind and behaviour? Is this not a new façade for the old and quite modern empiricism of Watson's behaviourism? Why, one is led to think, should our post-modern colleagues allow classical cognitivism to have the ultimate say in theorising about psychological processes, such as representational activity and the construction of knowledge? These questions remain unanswered by post-modern social psychologists.

While the current mood of scepticism concerning psychological theorising is understandable if one considers the deep scars of an essentialist, a-historical and a-social conception of the subject and of psychological processes, I would contend that a critical re-appraisal is not necessarily equivalent to the wholesale dismantling of psychological processes. After the insights offered by Freud, Mead, Piaget and Vigotsky, just to cite some of the thinkers who revolutionised our ways of conceptualising the mind and its processes, it is hard to sustain the notion that the mind is just a myth or a derivative of social exchange. The fact that these thinkers were never fully incorporated-let alone properly read-into mainstream psychological research says a great deal about the vicissitudes of history and of culture in the development of psychology (Farr, 1991a, 1991b). This, however, should not overshadow another fact: In spite of the diversity of their approaches, they all conceived of the subject as someone whose body can only be kept alive, whose needs can only be fulfilled, and whose self can only develop within the community of others in which she is born. It is only by going through the pains and gains of interacting in a human community that the human infant will become a self capable of speaking, desiring, representing, cognising and interacting. It is precisely the radical comprehension of the profound connectedness between self and other that guided the rupture with a Cartesian paradigm in psychology, and permitted the emergence of non-positivist, non-individualist theoretical constructs about the space proper of psychological phenomena including, of course, the mind and representations (Markovà, 1982; Farr, 1981).

In effect, it is precisely at this point of understanding that the innovative and reinvigorating character of the theory of social representations lies. In the first section of this paper I have discussed in detail why this is the case. Central to all the elements I have addressed is the underlying issue of the relationship between self and society. The dualism between subject and society is a false problem for the theory. First and foremost, because Moscovici thought both with and against Durkheim. With Durkheim he understood the power of social reality, its relative autonomy and transcendence over human agency. Yet, against the dominant stream that marked the history of psychological knowledge, he sought in Freud, Piaget, and then Vigotsky (Moscovici, 1989) ways of conceiving how psychological phenomena construct-and yet are constructed by-social reality. The importance of minorities in displacing cultural canons and imposing new forms of life provides strong evidence for the power of human agency and makes one wonder about the extent to which Moscovici's previous work on minority influence is constitutive of his particular reading of Durkheim.<sup>4</sup> For the theory of social representations the subject and the psyche are not pre-given substances, nor are historical societies constraining forces apart from the people who comprise them.

Secondly, the theory of social representations innovates because it builds upon the notion of representation and re-introduces it in social psychology freed from the sterility of the model of information processing. Jodelet (1991) has discussed with great propriety the symbolic dimension of representations and the extent to which conceptualisations of representational activity can differ from mainstream cognitive approaches. Furthermore, there is a great deal of work produced around the notion of representation, showing that its most powerful resource is to be located at the crossroads between the subject and society (Kaës, 1984; Giust-Desprairies, 1988; Giami, 1989; Elliot, 1992). A representation, and I will repeat for the sake of the argument, is the activity of someone, who constructs a psychic substitution of something which is *alter*, other, to oneself. The subject and the object, therefore, do not coincide. There is a difference between them, and in order to bridge this difference, a representation emerges. This process does not involve a mirroring between the subject and the object; rather, it involves at one and the same time a work of constructing links and preserving differentiation

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<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Rob M. Farr for calling my attention to the impact of minority movements in the development of Moscovici's thought.

between self and alterity. A representation links self and other and yet, by the same token, it differentiates self and other, for a representation is something that stands *in place of* something else. Representation thus is both a *mediation* that links presence and absence and a *boundary* that, in separating what is present from what is absent, allows for differentiation and meaning to emerge.

Representations thus bridge the subject and the object-world. They express both the subject and the world because they are a product of their relationship. It follows that the subject here is not in a centred position. She is defined neither from within nor from without. Ex-centric in her very constitution and unable to coincide fully with that which she is not, the subject is condemned to search for mediations: Action, Word, and Other constitute-in an intricate relationship-these mediations. To represent occurs in this space of mediations. In it a representation finds its conditions of possibility and its mode of functioning, and it is only under the sign of violence or immediate coincidence that it would fail to occur. It is in the meeting point of union and separation between the subject and the object (object here means others and things) that representations are formed and this is precisely why they retain at one and the same time their potentially imaginative, constructive character and their referentiality to the world. To suggest that they accentuate the dichotomy between the individual and society is the same as suggesting that the individual and society are either reducible to each other or unrelated to each other. To suggest that representations are dead is to suggest the final nirvana: a world of perfect coincidence for everyone and of everything. In this world there is indeed no subject. Everything slides into everything else; similarities, nuances and differences no longer have any meaning and, excuse me, but in such a world everything goes. Limits and boundaries are just lost illusions of modernity, any collective normativity loses its *raison d'être*, and because every story is just as good a story as any other whatever appears as an attempt to construct a joint account becomes coercive.

This is why post-modern arguments that claim simultaneously the "death of the subject" and of representations centred in the sovereignty of discourse cannot ultimately be sustained. I think that here we differ, because for the theory of social representations neither the subject, nor representations, nor, for that matter, discourse itself are conceived of in terms of bipolar oppositions or as entities to be understood from within themselves, but in terms of contradictory relationships that give them substance and mark the process of their constitution.

The issues discussed above are, I believe, on the agenda of social psychologists. They are necessary not only because they define an internal space of conceptualisation and interpretation for social psychological phenomena that, in the past, has often been undermined (or perhaps denied), but also because they involve social psychology in a necessary dialogue with other social sciences. The current efforts to consider the workings of society as constitutive of psychological phenomena are welcomed and long overdue. Yet they should not deny ontological status to the mind, whose life itself is a cultural phenomenon. The theory of social representations can make a strong contribution to a substantive social psychology; it offers the means of understanding, if only through the awareness of a social-psychological dimension, those affects, 'knowledges' and practices whereby people construct the bonds of difference and solidarity that still today sustain the idea of community.

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