Social Representations

Explorations in Social Psychology

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Edited by Gerard Duveen

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1

The Phenomenon of Social Representations*

I THINKING CONSIDERED AS ENVIRONMENT

(1) Primitive thought, science, and everyday understanding

The belief on which primitive thought - if such a term is still acceptable - is based is a belief in the 'mind's unlimited power' to shape reality, to penetrate and activate it and to determine the course of events. The belief on which modern scientific thought is based is the exact opposite, that is, a belief in the 'limitless power of objects' to shape thought, to wholly determine its evolution and to be interiorized in and by the mind. In the first case, thought is seen as acting on reality; in the second, as reaction to reality; in the one, the object emerges as a replica of thought; in the other, thought is a replica of the object; and if, for the former, our wishes become reality - or wishful thinking - then, for the latter, to think amounts to turning reality into our wishes, to depersonalizing them. But since the two attitudes are symmetrical, they can only have the same cause, and one with which we have long been familiar: man's instinctive dread of powers he cannot subdue and his endeavour to compensate for this impotence imaginatively. The one difference being that, whereas the primitive mind dreads the forces of nature, the scientific mind dreads the power of thought. In so far as the first has enabled us to survive for millions of years, and the second to achieve so much in a few centuries, we must assume that each, in its way, represents a true aspect of the relation between our inner and outer worlds; an aspect, moreover, which is well worth investigating.

* Translated by Sacha Rabinovitch.

Social psychology is obviously a manifestation of scientific thought and, therefore, when studying the cognitive system it postulates that:

(i) normal individuals react to phenomena, people or events in the same way as scientists or statisticians do and
(ii) understanding consists in information processing.

In other words, we perceive the world, such as it is, and all our perceptions, ideas and attributions are responses to stimuli from the physical or quasi-physical environment in which we live. What distinguishes us is the need to assess beings and objects correctly, to grasp reality fully; and what distinguishes the environment is its autonomy, its independence of us or even, one might say, its indifference to us and to our needs and desires. What are known as cognitive biases, subjective distortions, affective tendencies obviously do exist, as we are all aware, but they are precisely biases, distortions and tendencies in relation to a model, to rules, seen as the norm.

Yet it seems to me that some ordinary facts contradict these two postulates:

(a) Firstly, the familiar observation that we are unaware of some of the most obvious things, that we fail to see what is before our very eyes. It is as though our sight or our perception were dimmed, so that a given class of persons, either because of their age - e.g. the old for the young and the young for the old - or because of their race - e.g. blacks for some whites, etc. - become invisible when, in fact, they are 'staring us in the face'. This is how a gifted black writer describes such a phenomenon:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe, nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bones, fibre and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the 'bodiless' head you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed anything except me. (Ellison, 1965, p. 7)

This invisibility is not due to any lack of information conveyed to the eyeball, but to a pre-established fragmentation of reality, a classification of the people and things which comprise it, which makes some of them visible and the rest invisible.

(b) Secondly, we often notice that some facts we had taken for granted, that were basic to our understanding and behaviour, suddenly turn out to be mere illusions. For thousands of years men were convinced that the sun circled round a stationary earth. Since Copernicus we bear in our minds the image of
a planetary system where the sun remains stationary while the earth circles around it; yet we still see what our forefathers saw. Thus we distinguish the appearance from the reality of things, but we distinguish them precisely because we can switch from appearance to reality by means of some notion or image.

(c) Thirdly, our reactions to events, our responses to stimuli, are related to a given definition, common to all the members of the community to which we belong. If, while driving along a road, we see an overturned car, a wounded person and a policeman making a report, we assume that there has been an accident. We read daily about collisions and crashes in the papers under such a heading. Yet these are only 'accidents' because we define as such any involuntary interruption in the progress of a motor car which has more or less tragic consequences. In all other respects there is nothing accidental about a motor-car accident. Since statistical calculations enable us to assess the number of victims, according to the day of the week and the locality, motor-car accidents are no more due to chance than the disintegration of atoms in an accelerator at high pressure; they are directly related to a given society's degree of urbanization, the speed and number of its private vehicles and the inadequacy of its public transport.

In each of these cases we note the intervention of representations which either direct us towards that which is visible and to which we have to respond; or which relate appearance and reality; or again which define this reality. I do not wish to imply that such representations don't correspond to something we call the outside world. I simply note that, where reality is concerned, these representations are all we have, that to which our perceptual, as well as our cognitive, systems are adjusted. Bower writes:

We usually use our perceptual system to interpret representations of worlds we can never see. In the man-made world we live in, the perception of representations is as important as the perception of real objects. By a representation I mean a man-made stimulus array intended to serve as a substitute for a sight or sound that could occur naturally. Some representations are meant to be stimulus surrogates; to produce the same experience as the natural world would have done. (Bower, 1977, p. 58)

In fact, we only experience and perceive a world in which, at one extreme, we are acquainted with man-made things representing other man-made things and, at the other extreme, with substitutes for stimuli of which we shall never see the originals, their natural equivalents, such as elementary particles or genes. So that we find ourselves, at times, in a predicament where we require some sign or other which will help us to distinguish one representation from another or a representation from that which it represents, that is, a sign that will tell us: 'This is a representation,' or: 'This is not a representation.' The painter René Magritte has illustrated such a predicament to perfection in a painting where a picture of a pipe is contained in a picture that also represents a pipe. On this picture within a picture we can read the message: 'This is not a pipe' which indicates the difference between the two pipes. We then turn to the 'real' pipe floating in the air and notice that it is real while the other is only a representation. However, such an interpretation is incorrect since both are painted on the same canvas in front of our eyes. The idea that one of them is a picture which is itself within a picture, and thus a little 'less real' than the other, is totally illusory. Once you have agreed to 'enter the frame' you are already caught: you accept the image as reality. There remains none the less the reality of a painting which, hung in a museum and defined as an art object, provides food for thought, provokes an aesthetic reaction and adds to our understanding of painting.

As ordinary people, without the benefit of scientific instruments, we tend to consider and analyse the world in a very similar way; especially as the world with which we deal is social through and through, which means that we are never provided with any information which has not been distorted by representations 'superimposed' on objects and on persons which give them a certain vagueness and make them partially inaccessible. When we contemplate these individuals and objects, our inherited genetic predisposition, the images and habits we have learnt, the memories of them which we have preserved and our cultural categories all combine to make them such as we see them. So, in the last analysis, they are only one element in a chain-reaction of perceptions, opinions, notions and even lives, organized in a given sequence. It is essential to recall such commonplaces when approaching the domain of mental life in social psychology. My aim is to re-introduce them here in a manner which, I hope, will be fruitful.

(2) The conventional and prescriptive nature of representations

In what way can thought be considered as an environment? Impressionistically, each of us is obviously surrounded, both individually and collectively, by words, ideas and images which penetrate his eyes, his ears and his mind, whether he likes it or not, and which solicit him without his knowing it, just as the thousands of messages conveyed by electro-magnetic waves circulate in the air without our seeing them and are turned into words in a telephone receiver or into images on a television screen. However, such a metaphor is not entirely adequate. Let's see if we can find a better way of describing how representations intervene in our cognitive activity and to what extent they are independent of it or can be said to determine it. If we accept that there is
always a certain amount of both autonomy and constraint in every environment, whether natural or social — and in the present case it is both — let us say that representations have precisely two roles.

(a) First they conventionalize the objects, persons and events we encounter. They give them a definite form, locate them in a given category and gradually establish them as a model of a certain type, distinct and shared by a group of people. All new elements adhere to this model and merge into it. Thus we assert that the earth is round, we associate communism with the colour red, inflation with the decreasing value of money. Even when a person or an object doesn't conform precisely to the model, we constrain it to assume a given form, to enter a given category, in fact to become identical to the others, at the risk of its being neither understood nor decoded.

Bartlett concludes from his studies of perception that:

When a common and already conventional form of representation is in use before the sign is introduced, there is a strong tendency for peculiar characteristics to disappear, and for the whole sign to be assimilated to the more familiar form. Thus 'lightning flash' practically always fell into a common, regular zigzag form, and 'chin' lost its very sharp angle, becoming much more like ordinary conventional representations of this feature. (Bartlett, 1932, p. 106)

These conventions enable us to know what stands for what: a change of direction or of colour indicates motion or temperature, a given symptom does or does not derive from a disease; they help us to solve the general problem of knowing when to interpret a message as significant in relation to others and when to see it as a fortuitous or chance event. And this meaning in relation to others further depends on a number of preliminary conventions, by means of which we can distinguish whether an arm is raised to attract attention, to hail a friend or to convey impatience. Sometimes it is sufficient simply to transfer an object, or person, from one context to another, in order for us to see it or him in a new light and for us to wonder whether or not they are, indeed, the same. The most striking instance has been provided by Marcel Duchamp who, from 1912 on, restricted his artistic output to signing ready-made objects and who, by this single gesture, has promoted factory-produced objects to the status of art objects. A no less striking example is that of war criminals who are responsible for atrocities that will not easily be forgotten. Yet those who knew them, and were familiar with them both during and after the war, have praised their humanity and their kindness, as well as their routine efficiency, as being comparable to that of thousands of individuals peacefully employed in office jobs.

These examples show how each experience is added to a reality predetermined by conventions, which clearly define its frontiers, distinguish significant from non-significant messages and which link each part with the whole, and assign each individual to a distinct category. Nobody's mind is free from the effects of the prior conditioning which is imposed by his representations, language and culture. We think, by means of a language; we organize our thoughts, in accordance with a system which is conditioned, both by our representations and by our culture. We see only that which underlying conventions allow us to see, and we remain unaware of these conventions. In this respect, our position is very similar to that of the ethnic African tribe, of which Evans-Pritchard wrote:

In this web of belief every strand depends upon every other strand, and a Zande cannot get out of its meshes because it is the only world he knows. The web is not an external structure in which he is enclosed. It is the texture of his thought and he cannot think that his thought is wrong. (Evans-Pritchard, 1937, p. 194)

We may, with an effort, become aware of the conventional aspect of reality, and thus evade some of the constraints which it imposes on our perceptions and thoughts. But we should not imagine that we could ever be free of all convention, or could eliminate every prejudice. Rather than seeking to avoid all convention, a better strategy would be to discover and make explicit a single representation. Thus, instead of denying conventions and prejudices, this strategy would enable us to recognize that representations constitute, for us, a type of reality. We should seek to isolate which representations are inherent in the persons and objects we encounter and exactly what it is they represent. Among these are the cities we inhabit, the gadgets we use, the passers-by in the street and even the pure, unpolluted nature which we seek out in the country or enclose in our gardens.

I know that some account is taken of representations in actual research practice so as to describe more clearly the context within which the individual is called upon to react to a particular stimulus and to explain, more accurately, his subsequent responses. After all, the laboratory is one such reality which represents another, just like Magritte's picture within a picture. It is a reality in which it is necessary to indicate 'this is a stimulus' and not simply a colour or a sound, and 'this is a subject' and not a left- or right-wing student who wants to earn some money to pay for his studies. But we must take account of this in our theory. Hence, we must introduce to centre stage that which we had sought to keep in the wings. This might well be what Lewin had in mind when he wrote: 'Reality for the individual is, to a high degree, determined by what is socially accepted as reality' (Lewin, 1948, p. 57).

(b) Secondly, representations are prescriptive, that is, they impose themselves upon us with an irresistible force. This force is a combination of a structure which is present before we have even begun to think, and of a tradition which decrees what we should think. A child born today in any
Western country will encounter that of psychoanalysis, for example, in his mother's or the doctor's gestures, in the affection with which he is surrounded to help him through the trials and tribulations of the Oedipal conflict, in the comics he reads and later, in schoolbooks, conversations with classmates or even in a psychoanalytic cure, should he have recourse to one if social or educational problems arise. This is to say nothing of the papers he will read, the political speeches he will hear, the films he will see, etc. He will find a ready-made answer, in psychoanalytic jargon, to all his questions, and to each of his abortive or successful actions an explanation will be available which relates back to his earliest childhood or to his sexual desires. We have mentioned psychoanalysis as a representation. We could as easily have mentioned mechanistic psychology, or man-as-machine or the scientific paradigm of a particular community.

Whilst these representations, which are shared by many, enter into and influence the mind of each one of them they are not thought by them; rather, to be more precise, they are re-thought, re-cited and re-presented.

If someone exclaims: 'He's a fool!', stops, and then corrects himself, saying: 'No, I mean he's a genius,' we immediately conclude that he has made a Freudian slip. But this conclusion isn't the result of reasoning, neither does it prove that we have a capacity for abstract reasoning, since we have simply recalled, without thinking, and whilst thinking of something else, the representation or definition of what a Freudian slip is. We might, indeed, have such a capacity, and ask ourselves why the speaker in question used one word in place of another, without arriving at any answer. Thus, it is easy to see why the representation which we have of something is not directly related to our manner of thinking but, conversely, why our manner of thinking, and what we think, depend on such representations, that is, on the fact that we have, or have not, a given representation. I mean that they are forced upon us, transmitted, and are the product of a whole sequence of elaborations and of changes which occur in the course of time and are the achievement of successive generations. All the systems of classification, all the images and all the descriptions which circulate within a society, even the scientific ones, imply a link with previous systems and images, a stratification in the collective memory and a reproduction in the language, which invariably reflects past knowledge, and which breaks the bounds of current information.

Social and intellectual activity is, after all, a rehearsal or recital, yet most sociopsychologists mistakenly treat it as if it were amnesic. Our past experiences and ideas are not dead experiences or dead ideas, but continue to be active, to change and to infiltrate our present experience and ideas. In many respects, the past is more real than the present. The peculiar power and clarity of representations - that is, of social representations - derives from the success with which they control the reality of today through that of yesterday and the continuity which this presupposes. Indeed, Jahoda himself has recognized them as autonomous properties which are 'not necessarily identifiable in the thinking of particular individuals' (Jahoda, 1970, p. 42); a remark to which his companion McDougall subscribed, half a century earlier, in the terminology of his day: 'Thinking, by aid of the collective representations, is said to have its own laws quite distinct from the laws of logic' (McDougall, 1920, p. 74). Laws which, obviously, modify those of logic, both in practice and in outcome. In the light of history, of anthropology, we can affirm that these representations are social entities, with a life of their own, communicating between themselves, opposing each other and changing in harmony with the course of life; vanishing, only to re-emerge under new guises. Generally, in civilizations as divided and mobile as our own, they coexist and circulate through various spheres of activity, where one of them will take precedence in response to our need for a certain coherence in accounting for persons and things. However, a change occur in their hierarchy, or a given idea/image be threatened with extinction, our whole universe will be upset. A recent event, and the comment to which it gave rise, may serve to illustrate this point.

The American Psychiatric Association recently announced its intention to discard the terms 'neurosis' and 'neurotic' to define specific disorders. A journalist's comments on the decision, in an article entitled 'Goodbye Neurosis' (International Herald Tribune, 11 September 1978), are highly significant:

If the dictionary of mental disorders will no longer accept 'neuroses', we laymen can only do the same.

But consider the cultural loss: whenever someone is called 'neurotic' or 'a neurotic', it involves an implicit act of forgiveness and understanding: 'Oh, So-and-So is just neurotic' means 'Oh, So-and-So is excessively nervous. He didn't really want to toss the china at your head. It's just his way.' Or 'So-and-So is just neurotic' - meaning 'He can't help himself. He doesn't mean it every time he tosses china at your head.'

By calling someone neurotic we place the burden of adjustment not on the someone, but rather on ourselves. It's sort of a call to kindness, to a sense of social generosity.

Would the same be true if the 'disordered' were tossing the china? We do not think so. To excuse So-and-So by citing his disorder - the specific category of his disorder to boot - is like excusing a car for faulty brake-lining - it damn well ought to be repaired and quick. The burden of adjustment would sit squarely on the disordered. No compassion would be asked of society at large, and naturally none would be forthcoming.

Think too of the self-esteem of the neurotic himself, who has long been comforted by the knowledge that he is 'just a neurotic' - quite a few pegs safely below a psychotic, but quite a few above the common run of men. A neurotic is below a psychotic, but quite a few above the common run of men. A neurotic is below a psychotic, but quite a few above the common run of men. A neurotic is below a psychotic, but quite a few above the common run of men.
Such cultural gains and losses are obviously related to fragments of social representations. A word, and the dictionary’s definition of this word, contain a means of classifying individuals, as well as implicit theories concerning their constitution, or the reasons for their behaving in one way rather than another— an almost physical image of each individual, which corresponds to such theories. Once this content has diffused, and become accepted, it constitutes an integral part of ourselves, of our intercourse with others, of our way of judging them, and of interacting with them; it even defines our place in the social hierarchy, and our values. If the word ‘neurosis’ were to disappear, and to be replaced by the word ‘disorder’, such an event would have consequences far beyond its mere significance in a sentence, or in psychiatry. It is our inter-relations, and our collective thought, which are involved and transformed.

I hope that I have amply demonstrated how, by setting a conventional sign on reality on the one hand, and, on the other, by prescribing, through tradition and age-old structures, what we perceive and imagine, these creatures of thought, which are representations, end up by constituting an actual environment. Through their autonomy, and the constraints they exert (even though we are perfectly aware that they are ‘nothing but ideas’) it is, in fact, as unquestionable realities that we are led to envisage them. The weight of their history, custom and cumulative content confronts us with all the resistance of a material object. Perhaps it is an even greater resistance, since what is invisible is inevitably harder to overcome than what is visible.

(3) The era of representation

All human interactions, whether they arise between two individuals, or between two groups, presuppose such representations. Indeed this is what characterizes them. "The paramount fact about human interactions," wrote Asch, "is that they are happenings, that they are psychologically represented in each of the participants!" (Asch, 1952, p. 142). Once this fact is overlooked, all that remain are exchanges, that is, actions and reactions, which are non-specific and, moreover, impoverished into the bargain. Always, and everywhere, when we encounter persons or things, and become acquainted with them, such representations are involved. The information we receive, and to which we try to give a meaning, is under their control and has no other significance for us than what they give it.

To enlarge the framework a little, we could maintain that what is important is the nature of change, whereby social representations become capable of influencing the behaviour of the individual participant in a collectivity. This is how they are created inwardly, for it is in this form that the collective process itself penetrates, as the determining factor, into individual thought. Such representations, thus, appear to us almost as material objects, in so far as they are the product of our actions and communications. They are, in fact, the product of a professional activity: I am referring to those pedagogues, ideologues, popularizers of science or priests, that is, the representatives of science, cultures and religions, whose task it is to create and transmit them, often, alas, without either knowing or wishing it. In the general evolution of society, these professions are destined to multiply, and their work will become more systematic and more explicit. Partly for that reason, and in view of all that this entails, this era will become known as the era of representation, in every sense of that term.

This does not undermine the autonomy of representations, in relation either to the consciousness of the individual, or even to that of the group. Individuals and groups create representations in the course of communication and cooperation. Representations, obviously, are not created by individuals in isolation. Once created, however, they lead a life of their own, circulate, merge, attract and repel each other, and give birth to new representations, while old ones die out. As a consequence, in order to understand and to explain a representation, it is necessary to start with that, or those, from which it was born. It is not enough to start directly from such-and-such an aspect, either of behaviour or of the social structure. Far from reflecting either behaviour or social structure, a representation often conditions and even responds to them. This is so, not because it has a collective origin or because it refers to a collective object, but because, as such, being shared by all and strengthened by tradition, it constitutes a social reality sui generis. The more its origin is forgotten, and its conventional nature ignored, the more fossilized it becomes. That which is ideal gradually becomes materialized. It ceases to be ephemeral, changing and mortal and becomes instead lasting, permanent, almost immortal. In creating representations we are like the artist, who bows down before the statue he has sculpted and worships it as a god.

In my opinion, the main task of social psychology is to study such representations, their properties, their origins and their impact. No other discipline is dedicated to this task, and none is better equipped for it. It was, indeed, to social psychology that Durkheim entrusted the task:

As for the laws of the collective formation of ideas, these are even more completely unknown. Social psychology, whose task it should be to determine them is hardly more than a term which covers all kinds of general questions, various and imprecise, without any defined object. What should be done is to investigate, by comparing mythical themes, legends and popular traditions, and languages, how social representations are attracted to or exclude each other, amalgamate with or are distinguishable from each other, etc. (Durkheim, 1895/1982, pp. 41-2)
Despite numerous further studies, fragmentary ideas and experiments, we are now no more advanced than we were nearly a century ago. Our knowledge is like a mayonnaise which has curdled. But one thing is certain: the principal forms of our physical and social environment are fixed in representations of this kind and we ourselves are fashioned in relation to them. I would even go so far as to say that, the less we think about them, and the less we are aware of them, then the greater their influence becomes. This is so much the case that the collective mind transforms everything it touches. Therein lies the truth of the primitive belief which has dominated our mentality for millions of years.

II  WHAT IS A THINKING SOCIETY?

‘We think through our mouths.’ Tristan Tzara

(1) Behaviourism and the study of social representations

We live in a behaviouristic world, practise a behaviourist science and use behaviourist metaphors. I say this without pride or shame. For I am not going to embark on a critique of what must, perforce, be called one view of contemporary man, since its defence or refutation is not, as far as I can see, the concern of science, but rather of culture. One neither defends nor refutes a culture. This said, it is obvious that the study of social representations must go beyond such a view, and must do so for a specific reason. It considers man in so far as he tries to know and to understand the things that surround him, and tries to solve the commonplace enigmas of his own birth, his bodily existence, his humiliations, of the sky above him, of the states of mind of his neighbours and of the powers that dominate him: enigmas that occupy and preoccupy him from the cradle, and of which he never ceases to speak. For him, thoughts and words are real – they are not mere epiphenomena of behaviour. He concurs with Fregé who wrote:

The influence of one person on another is brought about for the most part by thought. One communicates a thought. How does it happen? One brings about changes in the common outside world which, perceived by another person, are supposed to induce him to apprehend a thought and take it to be true. Could the great events of world history have come about without the communication of thought? And yet, we are inclined to regard thoughts as unreal because they appear to be without influence on events, while thinking, judging, stating, understanding are facts of human life. How much more real a hammer appears compared with a thought. How different the process of handing over a hammer is from communication of a thought. (Fregé, 1977, p. 38)

This is what books and articles are always hammering into our heads: hammers are more real than thoughts; attend to hammers rather than to thoughts. Everything, in the last analysis, is behaviour, a matter of driving stimuli into the walls of our organism, like nails. When we study social representations we study man, in so far as he asks questions and seeks answers or thinks, and not in so far as he processes information or behaves. More precisely, in so far as his aim is not to behave, but to understand...

What is a ‘thinking’ society? That is our question, and that is what we would like to observe and to understand, by studying (a) the circumstances in which groups communicate, make decisions and seek either to reveal or to conceal something, and (b) their achievements and their beliefs, that is, their ideologies, sciences and social representations. It could not be otherwise; the mystery is profound, yet understanding is the most common human faculty. It was at one time believed that this faculty was stimulated, first and foremost, by contact with the external world. But we have come increasingly to realize that it actually arises from social communication. Recent studies of very young children have shown that the origins and development of meaning and thought depend on social intercourse; it is as though a baby came into the world primarily equipped for a relationship with others, with its mother, its father and with all those who await it and care for it. The world of objects constitutes a backdrop for persons and their social interactions.

When asking the question: what is a thinking society? we refute at the same time the conception which, I believe, prevails in the human sciences, that is, that a society does not think, or, if it does, that this is not an essential attribute. The denial that society ‘thinks’ can assume two different forms: (a) by declaring that our minds are little black boxes, contained within a vast black box, which simply receives information, words and thoughts which are conditioned from the outside in order to turn them into gestures, judgements, opinions and so forth. In fact, we know perfectly well that our minds are not black boxes but, at best, are black holes, possessing a life and activity of their own, even when this is not obvious, and when individuals exchange neither energy nor information with the outside world. Madness, that black hole in rationality, irrefutably proves that this is how things are. The second form is (b) by maintaining that groups and individuals are always and completely under the sway of a dominant ideology which is produced and imposed by their social class, the State, the Church or the school, and that what they think and say only reflects such an ideology. In other words, it is maintained that they don’t as a rule think, or produce anything original, on their own; they reproduce and, in turn, are reproduced. Despite its progressive nature, this conception is essentially in accordance with that of Le Bon, who asserts that the masses neither think nor create; but that it is only individuals, the organised elite, who do so. Here we discover, whether we like it or not, the metaphor of the black box, except that now it is invested with ready-made
ideas, and no longer with objects. Such may be the case, but we cannot tell, for even if ideologies and their impact have been widely discussed, they have not been extensively researched. That much has been acknowledged by Marx and Wood. Yet in comparison with other areas, the study of ideology has been relatively neglected by sociologists, who generally feel more comfortable studying social structure and behaviour than studying belief and symbols (Marx and Wood, 1975, p. 382).

So what we are suggesting is that individuals and groups, far from being passive receptors, think for themselves, produce and ceaselessly communicate their own specific representations and solutions to the questions they set themselves. In the streets, in cafes, offices, hospitals, laboratories, etc., people analyse, comment, create, publicize spontaneous, unofficial ‘philosophies’ which have a decisive impact on their social relations, their choices, the way they bring up their children, plan ahead and so forth. Events, sciences and ideologies simply provide them with ‘food for thought’.

(2) Social representations

It is obvious that the concept of social representations has come to us from Durkheim. But we have a different view of it – or, at any rate, social psychology must consider it from a different angle – than does sociology. Sociology has, rather, has seen social representations as explanatory devices, irreducible to any further analysis. Their theoretical function was similar to that of the atom in traditional mechanics, or of the gene in traditional genetics, that is, atoms and genes were known to exist, but nobody bothered about what they did or what they were like. Similarly, one knew that social representations occurred in societies, but nobody worried about their structure or about their inner dynamics. Social psychology, on the other hand, is and must be preoccupied solely with both the structure and the dynamics of representations. For us, it is summed up in the difficulty of penetrating the interior to greatest possible detail; that is, in ‘splitting representations’, just as atoms and when he studied the child’s representation of the world, and his enquiry remains, to this day, exemplary. So what I propose to do is to consider a phenomenon what was previously seen as a concept.

Moreover, from Durkheim’s point of view, collective representations described a whole range of intellectual forms which included science, religion, myth, modalities of time and space, etc. Indeed, any kind of idea, emotion or belief which occurred within a community was included. This presents a serious problem for, by attempting to include too much, one grasps little; grasp all, lose all. Intuition, as well as experience, suggests that it is impossible to cover such a wide range of knowledge and beliefs. They are too heterogeneous in the first place and, moreover, they cannot be defined by a few general characteristics. As a consequence, we are obliged to add two significant qualifications:

(a) Social representations should be seen as a specific way of understanding and communicating, what we know already. They occupy in effect a curious position, somewhere between concepts, which have as their goal abstracting meaning from the world and introducing order into it, and perceptions, which reproduce the world in a meaningful way. They always have two facets, which are as interdependent as the two faces of a sheet of paper: the iconic and the symbolic facets. We know that: Representation = image/meaning; in other words, that it equates every image to an idea and every idea to an image. Thus, in our society, a ‘neurotic’ is an idea associated with psychoanalysis, with Freud, with the Oedipus Complex and, at the same time, we see the neurotic as an egocentric, pathological individual, whose parental conflicts have not yet been resolved. So, on the one hand, the word evokes a science, even the name of a classical hero, and a concept and, on the other, it evokes a definite type, characterized by certain features, and a readily imagined biography. The mental mechanisms set in motion in this instance, and which carve out this figure in our universe and give it a significance, an interpretation, obviously differ from those whose function it is to isolate a precise perception of a person or of a thing, and to conceive a system of concepts that explains them. Language itself, when it conveys representations, is located halfway between what is called the language of observation and the language of logic; the first, expressing pure facts – if such things exist – and the second, abstract symbols. This is, perhaps, one of the most remarkable phenomena of our time – this welding of language and of representation. Let me explain.

Until the dawn of the century, ordinary verbal language was a means both of communication and of knowledge; of collective ideas and of abstract research, since it was common to both common sense and science. Nowadays, non-verbal language – mathematics and logic – which has appropriated the sphere of science, has substituted signs for words, and equations for propositions. The world of our experience and of our reality has split in two, and the laws which govern our everyday world now have no obvious relation to those which govern the world of science. If we are much interested today in linguistic phenomena, this is partly because language is on the decline, just as we worry about plants, and nature and animals because they are threatened with extinction. Language, excluded from the sphere of material reality, re-emerges in that of historical and conventional reality; and, if it has lost its relation to theory, it maintains its relation to representation, which is all that it has left. Thus, if the study of language is increasingly the concern of social
psychology, this is not because the latter wants to imitate what has been happening in other disciplines, or wishes to add a social dimension to its individual abstractions, or for any other philanthropic motives. It is simply connected with the change which we have just mentioned and which links it so exclusively to our common, everyday method of understanding and of exchanging our ways of seeing things.

(b) Durkheim — true to the Aristotelian and Kantian tradition — has a rather static conception of these representations — somewhat akin to that of the Stoics. As a consequence, representations, in his theory, are like a thickening of the fog, or else they act as stabilizers for many words or ideas — like layers of stagnant air in a society's atmosphere, of which it is said that one could cut them with a knife. Whilst this is not entirely false, what is most striking to the contemporary observer is their mobile and circulating character; in short, their plasticity. We see them more as dynamic structures, operating on an assembly of relations and of behaviours which appear and disappear together with the representations, just as the disappearance from our dictionaries of the word 'neurotic' would also banish some feelings, a certain type of relationship towards a particular person, a way of judging him and, consequently, of judging ourselves.

I stress these differences for a purpose. The social representations with which I am concerned are neither those of primitive societies, nor are they survivals, in the subsoil of our culture, from prehistoric times. They are those of our current society, of our political, scientific, human soil, which have not always had enough time to allow the proper sedimentation to become immutable traditions. And their importance continues to increase, in direct proportion to the heterogeneity and the fluctuation of the unifying systems — official sciences, religions, ideologies — and to the changes which these must undergo in order to penetrate everyday life and become part of common reality. The mass media have accelerated this tendency, multiplied such changes and increased the need of a link between, on the one hand, our purely abstract sciences and beliefs in general and, on the other, our concrete activities as social individuals. In other words, there is a continual need to reconstitute 'common sense' or the form of understanding that creates the substratum of images and meanings, without which no collectivity can operate. Similarly, our collectivities could not function today if social representations were not formed that are based on the stock of theories and ideologies which they transform into shared realities, relating to the interactions between people which thus constitute a separate category of phenomena. And the specific feature of these representations is precisely that they 'embody ideas' in collective experiences and interactions in behaviour which can, more profitably, be compared to works of art than to mechanical reactions. The biblical writer was already aware of this when he asserted that the word became flesh; and Marxism confirms it when it states that ideas, once released amongst the masses, are, and behave like, material forces.

We know almost nothing of this alchemy which transmutes the base metal of our ideas into the gold of our reality. How to change concepts into objects, or into people, is the enigma which has preoccupied us for centuries and which is the true purpose of our science as distinct from other sciences which, in fact, enquire into the reverse process. I am well aware that an almost insuperable distance separates the problem from its solution, a distance very few are prepared to bridge. But neither shall I cease to repeat that if social psychology does not try to bridge this gap, it fails in its task and thus will not only fail to progress but will even cease to exist.

To sum up: if, in the classic sense, collective representations are an explanatory device, and refer to a general class of ideas and beliefs (science, myth, religion, etc.), for us they are phenomena which need to be described and to be explained. They are specific phenomena which are related to a particular mode of understanding and of communicating — a mode which creates both reality and common sense. It is in order to stress such a distinction that I use the term 'social' instead of 'collective'.

(3) Sacred and profane sciences; consensual and reified universes

The place which representations occupy in a thinking society is what concerns us here. Formerly, this place would have been — and up to a point was — determined by the distinction between a sacred sphere — worthy of respect and veneration and so kept quite apart from all purposeful, human activities — and a profane sphere in which trivial, utilitarian activities were performed. These separate and opposed worlds which, in varying degrees, determine within each culture and each individual the spheres of their own and foreign forces; that which we can alter and that which alters us; the opus proprium and opus alienum. All knowledge presupposed such a division of reality, and a discipline which was concerned with one of the spheres was totally different from a discipline which was concerned with the other, sacred sciences having nothing whatever in common with profane sciences. Doubtless it was possible to switch from the one to the other, but this only occurred when the contents were blurred.

This distinction has now been abandoned. It has been replaced by another, more basic distinction between consensual and reified universes. In the consensual universe, society is a visible, continuous creation, permeated with meaning and purpose, possessing a human voice, in accord with human existence and both acting and reacting like a human being. In other words, man is here the measure of all things. In the reified universe, society is transformed
into a system of solid, basic, unvarying entities, which are indifferent to individuality and lack identity. This society ignores itself and its creations, which it sees only as isolated objects, such as persons, ideas, environments, and activities. The various sciences which are concerned with such objects can, as it were, impose their authority on the thought and experience of each individual and decide, in each particular case, what is true and what is not. All things, whatever the circumstances, are here the measure of man.

Even our use of the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘they’ can express this contrast, where ‘we’ stands for the group of individuals to whom we relate and ‘they’ – the French, scholars, State systems, etc. – to a different group, to which we do not, but may be forced to, belong. The distance between the first and the third person plural expresses the distance which separates a social place from personal place. This lack of identity, which is at the root of modern man’s and ‘they’, to oppose ‘we’ to ‘they’; and thus one of one’s inability to connect the one with the other. Groups and individuals try to overcome this necessity either by identifying with ‘we’, and thus enrolling themselves in a world apart, or by identifying with ‘they’, and becoming the robots of bureaucracy and the administration.

Such categories as consensual and reified universes are unique to our culture. In a consensual universe society is seen as a group of individuals who are equal and free, each entitled to speak in the name of the group and under its laws. Thus, no one member is assumed to possess an exclusive competence, but each can acquire any competence which may be necessary. In this respect, everybody acts as a responsible ‘amateur’ or ‘curious observer’, in the catch phrase of the last century. In most public meetings, places these amateur politicians, doctors, educators, sociologists, astronomers, etc. are found expressing their opinions, airing their views and laying down the law. Such a state of affairs requires a certain complicity, that is, linguistic conventions, questions that must not be asked, topics that can or cannot be ignored. These worlds are institutionalized in the clubs, associations and cafés of today as they were in the ‘salons’ and academies of the past. The waning art of conversation is what they thrive on. This is what keeps them going and encourages social relations which otherwise would dwindle.

In the long run, conversation creates nodes of stability and recurrence, a communality of significance between its practitioners. The rules of this art maintain a whole complex of ambiguities and conventions without which social life could not exist. They enable individuals to share an implicit stock of images and of ideas which are taken for granted and mutually accepted. Thinking is done out loud. It becomes a noisy, public activity which satisfies the need for communication and thus maintains and consolidates the group whilst conveying the character each member requires of it. If we think before speaking and speak to help ourselves think, we also speak to provide a sonorous reality to the inner pressure of those conversations through which, and in which, we bind ourselves to others. Beckett has summed up the situation in Endgame:

Clov: What is there to keep me here?
Hamm: Conversation.

And the motive is profound. Whoever keeps his ears pinned back in those places where people converse, whoever reads interviews with some attention, will realize that most conversations are about highly ‘metaphysical’ problems – birth, death, injustice, etc. – and about society’s ethical laws. Thus they provide a permanent commentary on major national, scientific or urban events and features, and are therefore the modern equivalent of the Greek chorus which, though no longer on the historical stage, remains in the wings.

In a reified universe society is seen as a system of different roles and classes whose members are unequal. Only acquired competence determines their degree of participation according to merit, their right to function ‘as physician’, ‘as psychologist’, ‘as trade unionist’ or to abstain, in so far as ‘they have no competence in the matter’. Permutations of roles, the ability to take somebody else’s place, are so many ways of acquiring competence or of isolating oneself, of being different. Thus we confront each other, within the system, as pre-established organizations, each with its rules and regulations, whence the compulsions we experience and the feeling that we cannot alter them at will. There is a proper behaviour for each circumstance, a linguistic formula for every confrontation, and, needless to say, the appropriate information for a given context. We are bound by that which binds the organization and which corresponds to a sort of general acceptance and not to any reciprocal understanding, to a sequence of prescriptions and not to a sequence of agreements. History, nature, all those things which are responsible for the system are equally responsible for the hierarchy of roles and classes, for their solidarity. Every situation contains a potential ambiguity, a vagueness, two possible interpretations, but their connotations are negative, they are obstacles we must overcome before everything becomes clear, precise, totally unambiguous. This is achieved by processing information, by the processors’ lack of involvement and the existence of appropriate channels. The computer serves as the model for the type of relations which are thus established, and its rationality, we can only hope, is the rationality of that which is computed.

The contrast between the two universes has a psychological impact. The boundary between them splits collective and, indeed, physical reality in two. It is readily apparent that the sciences are the means by which we understand the reified universe, while social representations deal with the consensual.

The purpose of the first is to establish a chart of the forces, objects and events
III The Familiar and the Unfamiliar

To understand the phenomenon of social representations, however, we must begin at the beginning and advance step by step. Up to this point, I have done no more than suggest certain reforms and tried to vindicate them. I couldn’t avoid stressing specific ideas if I wanted to defend the point of view I was upholding. But, in so doing, I have demonstrated the fact that:

(a) social representations must be seen as an ‘environment’ in relation to the individual or the group; and

(b) they are, in certain respects, specific to our society.

Why do we create these representations? What, in our motives for creating them, explains their cognitive properties? These are the questions we shall tackle first. We could respond by recourse to three traditional hypotheses: (i) the hypothesis of desirability, that is, an individual or a group seeks to create images, to make up sentences that will either express or conceal his or their intentions, these images and sentences being subjective distortions of an objective reality; (ii) the hypothesis of imbalance, that is, all ideologies, all concepts of the world, are means of solving psychic or emotional tensions due to a failure or a lack of social integration. Thus they are imaginary compensations which are aimed at restoring a degree of inner stability; and (iii) the hypothesis of control, that is, groups create representations so as to filter information derived from the environment and thus to control individual behaviour. They function, therefore, as a kind of manipulation of thought and of the structure of reality, similar to those methods of ‘behavioural’ control and of propaganda that exert a compulsive coercion on all those to whom they are directed.

Such hypotheses are not entirely devoid of truth. Social representations may indeed answer a given need; respond to a state of imbalance; and further the unpopular but inerradical domination of one section of society over another. But these hypotheses have, none the less, the common failing of being too general; they do not explain why such functions should be fulfilled by this method of understanding and communicating rather than by some other, such as science or religion, for instance. Thus we must seek a different hypothesis, less general and more in keeping with what researchers in the field have observed. Moreover, for want of space, I can neither elaborate my reservations nor justify my theory any further. I shall have to expose, without more ado, an intuition and a fact I believe to be true, that is, that the purpose of all representations is to make something unfamiliar or unfamiliarity itself familiar.

What I mean is that consensual universes are places where everybody wants to feel at home, secure from any risk of friction or strife. All that is said and done there only confirms acquired beliefs and interpretations, corroborates rather than contradicts tradition. The same situations, gestures, ideas are always expected to recur, over and over again. Change as such is only perceived and accepted in so far as it provides a kind of liveliness and avoids the stifling of dialogue under the weight of repetition. On the whole, the dynamic of relationships is a dynamic of familiarization, where objects, individuals and events are perceived and understood in relation to previous encounters or paradigms. As a result, memory prevails over deduction, the past over the present, response over stimuli and images over ‘reality’. To accept and understand what is familiar, to grow accustomed to it and make a habit of it, is one thing; but it is quite another to prefer it as the standard of reference and to measure all that happens, and is perceived, against it. For, in this case, we don’t simply register what typifies a Parisian, a ‘respectable’ person, a mother, an Oedipus Complex, etc., but this awareness is also used as a criterion to evaluate what is unusual, abnormal and so on, or, in other words, what is unfamiliar.

In fact, for our friend the ‘man in the street’ (now threatened with extinction, along with strolls in the streets, and soon to be replaced by the man in
The Phenomenon of Social Representations

front of the TV set), most of the opinions derived from science, art and economics which relate to reified universes differ, in many ways, from the familiar, handy, opinions he has constructed out of bits and pieces of scientific, artistic and economic traditions and from personal experience and hearsay. Because they differ, he tends to think of them as invisible, unreal — for the world’s reality, like realism in painting, is largely a matter of limitations and/or convention. Thus he may experience this sense of non-familiarity when frontiers and/or conventions disappear; when distinctions between the abstract and the concrete become blurred; or when an object, which he had always thought of as abstract, suddenly emerges in all its concreteness, etc. This may occur when he is presented with a picture of the physical reconstruction of such purely notional entities as atoms or robots or, indeed, with any atypical behaviour, person or relation which might prevent him from reacting as he would before the usual type. He doesn’t find what he expected to find, and is left with a sense of incompleteness and randomness. It is in this way that the mentally handicapped, or people belonging to other cultures, are disturbing, because they are like us and yet not like us; so we say they are ‘uncultured’, ‘barbarian’, ‘irrational’ and so on. In fact, all banned or remote things, topics or persons, those which have been exiled to the very frontiers of our universe, are always endowed with imaginary characteristics; and they preoccupy and disturb precisely because they are there without being there; perceived without being perceived; their unreality becomes apparent when we are in their presence; when their reality is forced upon us — it is like coming face to face with a ghost or with a fictional character in real life; or like the first occasion when we see a computer playing chess. Then, something we had thought of as a fancy becomes reality before our very eyes; we can see and touch something we were precluded from seeing and touching.

The actuality of something absent, the ‘not quite rightness’ of an object, are what characterize unfamiliarity. Something seems to be visible without being so; similar, while being different; accessible, yet inaccessible. The unfamiliar attracts and intrigues individuals and communities while, at the same time, it alarms them, compels them to make explicit the implicit assumptions that are basic to consensus. This ‘not quite rightness’ worries and threatens, as when a robot that behaves exactly like a living creature, although it lacks life itself, suddenly becomes the Frankenstein monster, something both fascinating and terrifying. The fear of what is strange (and of strangers) is deep-rooted. It has been observed in young children during the third quarter of their first year, and a number of children’s games are really a means of overcoming this fear, of controlling its object. Phenomena of mass panic frequently stem from the same cause and are expressed in the same dramatic movements of flight and distress. This is because the dread of losing customary landmarks, of losing touch with what provides a sense of continuity, of mutual understanding, is an unbearable dread. And when otherwise

is thrust upon us in the form of something ‘not quite’ as it should be, we instinctively reject it, because it threatens the established order.

The act of re-presentation is a means of transferring what disturbs us, what threatens our universe, from the inside to the outside, from far off to near by. The transfer is effected by separating normally linked concepts and perceptions and setting them in a context where the unusual becomes usual, where the unknown can be included in an acknowledged category. Thus when trying to define and make more accessible the psychoanalyst’s dealings with his patient — that ‘medical treatment without medicine’ which seems eminently paradoxical to our culture — people will compare it to a ‘confession’. The concept is thus detached from its analytical context and transposed to one of priests and penitents, of father confessors and contrite sinners. Then the method of free association is likened to the rules of confession. In this way, what had first seemed offensive and paradoxical becomes an ordinary, normal process. Psychoanalysis is no more than a form of confession. And later, when psychoanalysis has been accepted and is a social representation in its own right, confession is seen, more or less, as a form of psychoanalysis. Once the method of free association has been separated from its theoretical context and given religious connotations it ceases to be surprising and disturbing and assumes instead a very ordinary character. And this is not, as we might be tempted to believe, a simple matter of analogy but an actual, socially significant merging, a shifting of values and feelings.

In this case, as well as in others we observed, the images, ideas and language shared by a given group always seem to dictate the initial direction and expedient by which the group tries to come to terms with the unfamiliar. Social thinking owes more to convention and memory than to reason; to traditional structures rather than to current intellectual or perceptive structures. Denise Jodelet ([1989a]/1991) has analysed the reactions of the inhabitants of various villages to the mentally handicapped people who were placed in their midst. These patients, because of their almost normal appearance, and notwithstanding the instructions the villagers had received, continued to be seen as alien, despite the fact that their presence had been accepted for many, many years and that they shared the villagers’ daily life and even their homes. Thus it became apparent that the representations to which they gave rise derived from traditional views and notions and that it was these that determined the villagers’ relations with them.

However, though we are able to perceive such a discrepancy, no one can do away with it. The basic tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar is always settled, in our consensual universes, in favour of the former. In social thinking, the conclusion has priority over the premise, and in social relations, according to Nelly Stepheine’s apt formula, the verdict has priority over the trial. Before seeing and hearing a person we have already judged him, classified him and created an image of him, so that all the enquiries we make and
our efforts to obtain information only serve to confirm this image. Moreover, laboratory experiments corroborate this observation:

The common errors which subjects make suggest that there is a general factor governing the order in which such checks are carried out. Subjects seem to be biased toward attempts to verify a conclusion, whether it is their own initial answer, or they are given them by the experimenter to evaluate. They seek to determine whether the premises could be combined in such a way as to render the conclusion true. Of course, this merely shows that conclusion and premises are consistent, not that the conclusion follows from the premises. (Wason and Johnson-Laird, 1972, p. 157)

When all is said and done, the representations we fabricate - of a scientific theory, a nation, an artefact, etc. - are always the result of a constant effort to make us familiar with something which is unfamiliar. And through them we overcome it and integrate it into our mental and physical world which is thus enriched and transformed. After a series of adjustments, that which was far away seems close at hand; that which seemed abstract becomes concrete and almost normal. However, while creating them we are always more or less aware of our intentions, since the images and ideas by means of which we grasp the unusual only bring us back to what we already knew and had long been familiar with and which, therefore, gives a reassuring impression of déjà vu and déjà connu. Bartlett writes: 'As has been pointed out before, whenever material visually presented purports to be representative of some common object, it contains certain features which are unfamiliar in the community to which the material is introduced, these features invariably suffer transformation in the direction of the familiar' (Bartlett, 1932, p. 178).

It is as though, whenever a breach or split occurred in what is usually perceived as normal, our minds healed up the wound and refashioned it within that which had been without. Such a process reassures and comforts us, restores a sense of continuity in the group or individual threatened with discontinuity and meaningfulness. That is why, when studying a representation, we should always try to discover the unfamiliar feature which motivated it and which it has absorbed. But it is particularly important that the development of such a feature be observed from the very moment it emerges in the social sphere.

The contrast with science is striking. Science proceeds in the opposite way, from premise to conclusion, especially in the field of logic, just as the aim of the law is to ensure the trial's priority over the verdict. But it has to rely on a complete system of logic and proof in order to proceed in a manner that is quite foreign to the natural process and function of thought in an ordinary consensual universe. It must, furthermore, lay down certain laws - uninvolved, repetition of experiments, distance from the object, independence from authority and tradition - which are never fully applied. To make the permutation of both terms of the argument possible, it creates a wholly artificial milieu by resorting to what is known as the rational reconstruction of facts and ideas. Then, to overcome our tendency to confirm what is familiar, to prove what is already known - a tendency which hampers research and the avoidance of error - the scientist is required to falsify, to try to invalidate his own theories and to confront evidence with counter-evidence. But that is not the whole story. Since it has become modern and has broken off with common sense, science is successfully occupied in constantly demolishing most of our current perceptions and opinions, in proving that impossible results are possible and in giving the lie to the bulk of our customary ideas and experiences. In other words, its object is to make the familiar unfamiliar in its mathematical equations as well as in its laboratories. And in this way it proves, by contrast, that the purpose of social representations is precisely that which I have already indicated.

IV. ANCHORING AND OBJECTIFYING, OR THE TWO PROCESSES THAT GENERATE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

(I) Science, common sense and social representations

Science and social representations are so different from each other and yet so complementary that we have to think and speak in both registers. The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard observed that the world in which we live and the world of thought are not one and the same world. Yet we cannot help yearning for a single, identical world and striving to achieve it. Contrary to what was believed in the nineteenth century, far from being the antidote to representations and ideologies, the sciences now actually generate such representations. Our reified worlds increase with the proliferation of the sciences. As sciences, information and events multiply, they have to be duplicated and reproduced at a more immediate and accessible level by acquiring a form and energy of their own. In other words, they are transferred to a consensual universe, circumscribed and re-presented. Science was formerly based on common sense and made common sense less common; but now common sense is science made common. Unquestionably, every fact, every commonplace conceals within its very platitude a world of knowledge, a digest of culture and a mystery that make it both compulsive and fascinating. 'Can anything be more appealing,' asked Baudelaire, 'more fruitful and more positively exciting than a commonplace?' And, we might add, more collectively effective? It isn’t easy to make unfamiliar words, ideas or beings usual, close and actual. To give them a familiar face, it is necessary to set in motion
the two mechanisms of a thought process based on memory and foregone conclusions.

The first mechanism strives to anchor strange ideas, to reduce them to ordinary categories and images, to set them in a familiar context. Thus, for instance, a religious person tries to relate a new theory or the behaviour of a stranger to a religious scale of values. The purpose of the second mechanism is to objectify them, that is, to turn something abstract into something almost concrete, to transfer what is in the mind to something existing in the physical world. The things the mind’s eye perceives seem to be before our physical eyes and an imagined being begins to assume the reality of something seen, something tangible. These mechanisms make the unfamiliar familiar, the first by transferring it to our own particular sphere where we are able to compare and interpret it, the second by reproducing it among the things we can see and touch and thus control. Since representations are created by these two mechanisms it is essential that we understand how they function.

Anchorizing. This is a process which draws something foreign and disturbing that intrigues us into our particular system of categories and compares it to the paradigm of a category which we think to be suitable. It is rather like anchoring a stray boat to one of the buoys in our social space. Thus, for the villagers in Denise Jodeler’s study, the mental patients placed in their midst by the medical association were immediately judged by conventional standards and compared to idiots, tramps, spastics or to what in the local dialect were known as ‘loonies’ (‘bredins’). In so far as a given object or idea is compared to the paradigm of a category it acquires characteristics of that category and is readjusted to fit within it. If the classification thus obtained is generally accepted, then any opinion that refers to the category will also refer to the object or idea. For instance, the aforementioned villagers’ opinion of idiots, tramps and spastics is transferred, unmodified, to the mental patients. Even when we are aware of a certain discrepancy, of the approximation of our assessment, we cling to it, if only to preserve a minimum of coherence between the unknown and the known.

To anchor is thus to classify and to name something. Things that are unclassified and unnamed are alien, non-existent and at the same time threatening. We experience a resistance, a distancing when we are unable to evaluate something, to describe it to ourselves or to other people. The first step towards overcoming such resistance, towards conciliating an object or person, is taken when we are able to place it or him in a given category, to label it or him with a familiar name. Once we can speak about something, assess it and thus communicate it – even vaguely, as when we say of someone that he is “inhibited” – then we can represent the unusual in our usual world, reproduce it as the replica of a familiar model. By classifying what is unclassifiable, naming what is unnameable, we are able to imagine it, to represent it. Indeed, representation is, basically, a system of classification and denotation, of allotting categories and names. Neutrality is forbidden by the very logic of the system, where each object and being must have a positive or a negative value and assume a given place in a clearly graded hierarchy. When we classify a person among the neurotics, the Jews or the poor, we are obviously not simply stating a fact but assessing and labelling him. And, in so doing, we reveal our ‘theory’ of society and of human nature.

In my opinion, this is a vital factor in social psychology which has not received all the attention it deserves; indeed, existing studies of the phenomena of evaluation, classification, categorization (Eiser and Stroebe, 1972) and so forth fail to take into account the substratum of such phenomena or to realize that they presuppose a representation of beings, objects and events. Yet the process of representation involves the coding of even physical stimuli into a specific category, as an enquiry into the perception of colours in various cultures has revealed. Thus scholars admit that individuals, when shown different colours, perceive them in relation to a paradigm – though such a paradigm may be totally unknown to them – and classify them by means of a mental image (Rosch, 1977). In fact, one of the lessons contemporary epistemology has taught us is that any system of categories presupposes a theory which defines and specifies it and specifies its use. When such a system disappears, we are entitled to assume that the theory too has disappeared.

However, let us proceed systematically. To classify something means that we confine it to a set of behaviours and of rules stipulating what is, and is not, permissible in relation to all the individuals included in this class. When we classify a person as a Marxist, an angler or a reader of The Times, we confine him to a set of linguistic, spatial and behavioural constraints and to certain habits. If we then go so far as to let him know what we have done, we will bring our influence to bear on him by formulating specific demands related to our expectations. The main virtue of a class, that which makes it so easy to handle, is that it provides a suitable model or prototype to represent the class and a sort of photo-kit of all the individuals supposed to belong to it. This photo-kit represents a sort of test case that sums up the features common to a number of related cases, that is, it is, on the one hand, an idealized conflation of salient points and, on the other, an iconic matrix of readily identifiable points. Thus most of us, as our visual representation of a Frenchman, have an image of an undersized person wearing a beret and carrying a long loaf of French bread.

To categorize someone or something amounts to choosing a paradigm from those stored in our memory and establishing a positive or a negative relation with it. When we switch on the radio in the middle of a programme without knowing what it is, we assume it is a ‘play’ if it is sufficiently similar to P, when P stands for the paradigm of a play, that is, dialogue, plot, etc. Experience shows that it is much easier to agree on what constitutes a
paradigm than on the degree of an individual's resemblance to it. From Denise Jodelet's enquiry it emerges that, although the villagers were of one mind as to the general classification of the mental patients living with them, they were much less united in their opinion as to each patient's resemblance to the generally accepted 'test case'. When any attempt was made to define this test case, innumerable discrepancies came to light which were not usually obvious, thanks to the complicity of all concerned.

By and large, however, it can be said that classifications are made by comparing individuals to a prototype generally considered to represent a class, and that the former is defined by his approximation to, or coincidence with, the latter. Thus we say of certain personalities — de Gaulle, Maurice Chevalier, Churchill, Einstein, etc. — that they are representative of a nation, of politicians or of scientists, and we classify other politicians or scientists in relation to them. If it is true that we classify and judge people and things by comparing them to a prototype, then we will inevitably tend to notice and select those features which are most representative of this prototype, just as Denise Jodelet's villagers were more clearly aware of the mental patients' speech and behavioural 'oddities', during the ten or twenty years of their stay, than of the general pleasantness, diligence and humanity of these unfortunate people.

Indeed, anyone who has been a journalist, a sociologist or a clinical psychologist knows how the representation of such and such a gesture, occurrence or word can clinch a news item or a diagnosis. The ascendancy of the test case is due, I believe, to its concreteness, to a kind of vividness which leaves such a deep imprint in our memory that we are able to use it thereafter as a 'model' against which we measure individual cases and any image that even remotely resembles it. Thus every test case, and every typical image, contains the abstract in the concrete, which further enables them to achieve society's main purpose: to create classes from individuals. Thus we can never say that we know an individual, nor that we try to understand him, but only that we try to recognize him, that is, to find out what sort of person he is, to what category he belongs and so forth, which really means that anchoring too involves the priority of the verdict over the trial and of the predicate over the subject. The prototype is the quintessence of such priority, since it fosters ready-made opinions and usually leads to over-hasty decisions.

Such decisions are generally reached in one of two ways: by generalizing or by particularizing. At times a ready-made opinion comes to mind straight away and we try to find the information or 'particular' that fits it; at others, we have a given particular in mind and try to get a precise image of it. By generalizing, we reduce distances. We select a feature at random and use it as a category: Jew, mental patient, play, aggressive nation, etc. The feature becomes, as it were, coextensive with all the members of this category. When it is positive, we register our acceptance, when negative, our rejection. By particularizing, we maintain the distance and consider the object under scrutiny as a divergence from the prototype. At the same time, we try to detect what feature, motivation or attitude makes it distinct. While studying the social representations of psychoanalysis, I was able to observe how the basic image of the psychoanalyst could, by the exaggeration of a specific feature — wealth, status, relentlessness — be modified and particularized to produce that of 'the American psychoanalyst', and that sometimes all these features were stressed at the same time. In fact, the tendency to classify either by generalization or by particularization is not, by any means, a purely intellectual choice, but reflects a given attitude towards the object, a desire to define it as normal or aberrant. That is what is mainly at stake in all classifications of unfamiliar things — the need to define them as conforming to, or diverging from, the norm. Besides, when we talk about similarity or dissimilarity, identity or difference, we are really saying precisely that, but in a detached form which is devoid of social consequences.

There is a tendency, among social psychologists, to see classification as an analytic operation involving a sort of catalogue of separate features — colour of skin, texture of hair, shape of skull and nose and so on, if it is a question of race — to which the individual is compared and then included in the category with which he has most features in common. In other words, we would adjudicate his specificity or non-specificity, his similarity or difference according to one feature or another. And little wonder that such an analytic operation should have been envisaged, since only laboratory examples have been considered to date, and systems of classification which bear no relation to the substratum of social representations, for example, the collective view of what is thus classified. It is because of this tendency that I feel I should say something more about my own observations concerning social representations which have revealed that when we classify we always compare to a prototype, always ask ourselves whether the object compared is normal or abnormal in relation to it and try to answer the question: 'Is it as it should be or not?'

This discrepancy has practical consequences. For, if my observations are correct, then all our 'prejudices', whether national, racial, generational or what have you, can only be overcome by altering our social representations of culture, of 'human nature' and so on. If, on the other hand, it is the prevailing view that is correct, then all we need do is persuade antagonistic groups or individuals that they have a great many features in common, that they are, in fact, amazingly similar, and we will have done away with hard and fast classifications and mutual stereotypes. However, the very limited success of this project to date might suggest that the other is worth trying.

On the other hand, it is impossible to classify without, at the same time, naming. Yet these are two distinct activities. In our society, to name, to bestow a name on something or someone, has a very special, almost a solemn
significance. In so naming something, we extricate it from a disturbing anonymity to endow it with a genealogy and to include it in a complex of specific words, to locate it, in fact, in the identity matrix of our culture.

Indeed, that which is anonymous, unnameable, cannot become a communicable image or be readily linked to other images. It is relegated to the world of confusion, uncertainty and inarticulateness, even when we are able to classify it approximately as normal or abnormal. Claudine Herzlich (1973), in a study on the social representations of health and illness, has admirably analysed this elusive aspect of symptoms, the often abortive attempts we all make to contain them in speech, and the way they evade our grasp as a fish slips through the wide meshes of a net. To name, to say that something is this or that – if need be, to invent words for the purpose – enables us to fabricate a mesh that will be fine enough to keep the fish from escaping, and thus enables us to represent this thing. The result is always somewhat arbitrary but, in so far as a consensus is established, the word's association with the thing becomes customary and necessary.

By and large, my observations prove that to name a person or thing is to precipitate it (as a chemical solution is precipitated) and that the consequences of this are threefold: (a) once named, the person or thing can be described and acquires certain characteristics, tendencies, etc.; (b) he or it becomes distinct from other persons or things through these characteristics and tendencies; and (c) he or it becomes the object of a convention between those who adopt and share the same convention. Claudine Herzlich's (1973) study reveals that the conventional label 'fatigue' relates a complex of vague symptoms to certain social and individual patterns, distinguishes them from those of illness and health and makes them seem acceptable, almost justifiable to our society. It is thus permissible to talk about our fatigue, to say we are suffering from fatigue and to claim certain rights which normally, in a society based on labour and welfare, would be forbidden. In other words, something which was formerly denied is now admitted.

I was able to make a very similar observation myself. I noticed that psychoanalytical terms such as 'neurosis' or 'complex' give consistency, and even reality, to states of tension, misadjustment, indeed of alienation which used to be seen as halfway between 'madness' and 'sanity' but were never taken very seriously. It was obvious that once they had been given a name they ceased to be disturbing. Psychoanalysis is also responsible for the proliferation of terms derived from a single model, so that we see a psychic symptom labelled 'timidity complex', 'sibling complex', 'power complex', 'Sardanapalus complex', which, of course, are not psychoanalytic terms but words coined to imitate them. Simultaneously the psychoanalytic vocabulary becomes anchored in the vocabulary of everyday life and thus becomes socialized. All that had been disturbing and enigmatic about these theories is related to symptoms or to persons who had seemed disturbed and disturbing.
stated in an interview); and so on and so forth. Conflict stands for another type of relationship and is always implicit in any description of contrasting pairs: what the term 'normal' implies and what it excludes; the conscious and the unconscious part of an individual; what we call health and what we call illness. Hostility is also in the background whenever we compare races, nations or classes. And relations of strength and weakness frequently define preferences where hierarchy enters the various categories of names. I quote at random, but it would be worthwhile to explore in detail the ways in which the logic of language expresses the relation between the elements of a system of classification and the process of naming. More suggestive patterns might emerge than those with which we are acquainted at the moment. Our present patterns are, anyhow, too artificial from a psychological point of view, and socially devoid of meaning. The fact is that if we visualize stability as a kind of friendship or conflict as outright hostility, it is simply because they are more accessible and concrete in such forms and can be correlated with our thoughts and emotions; we are thus better able to express them or to include them in a description which will be readily intelligible to anyone. This is the result of routinization – a process which enables us to pronounce, read or write down a familiar word or notion in the place of, or in preference to, a less familiar word or notion.

At this point, the theory of representations entails two consequences. First of all, it excludes the idea of thought or perception which is without anchor. This excludes the idea of so-called biases in thought or perception. Every system of classifications and of the relations between systems presupposes a specific position, a point of view based on consensus. It's impossible to have a general, unbiased system any more than there exists a primary meaning for any particular object. The biases that are often described do not express, as they say, a social or cognitive deficit or limitation on the part of the individual but a normal difference in perspective between heterogeneous individuals or groups within a society. And they cannot be expressed for the simple reason that their opposite – the absence of a deficit or of a social or cognitive limitation – does not make sense. This is equivalent to admitting the impossibility of a social psychology from the point of view of Sirius, as those of yesteryear wanted it to be who pretended, at one and the same time, both to be in society and to observe it from the outside; who affirmed that one of the positions within society was normal and all the others deviations from it. This is a totally untenable position.

Secondly, systems of classification and naming are not simply means of grading and labelling persons or objects considered as discrete entities. Their main object is to facilitate the interpretation of characteristics, the understanding of intentions and motives behind people's actions, in fact, to form opinions. Indeed, this is a major preoccupation and groups, as well as individuals, are prone, under certain conditions, such as over-excitement or bewilderment, to what we might call interpretation mania. For we must not forget that to interpret an unfamiliar idea or being always requires categories, names, references in order that it may be integrated into Gombrich's 'society of concepts'. We fabricate them for this purpose as meanings emerge, make them tangible and visible and similar to the ideas and beings we have already integrated and with which we are familiar. In this way, pre-existing representations are somewhat modified and those things about to be represented are modified even more, so that they acquire a new existence.

Objectifying. The English physicist James Clerk Maxwell once said that what seemed abstract to one generation becomes concrete to the next. Amazing, incredible theories which nobody takes seriously turn out to be normal, credible and brimming with reality at a later date. How such an improbable fact as a physical body producing a reaction at a distance, in a place where it is not actually present, could become, in less than a century, a common, unquestionable fact, is at least as mysterious as its discovery – and of far greater practical consequence. We might indeed improve on Maxwell's statement by adding that what is unfamiliar and unperceived in one generation becomes familiar and obvious in the next. This is not simply due to the passage of time or to habit, though both are probably necessary. This domestication is the result of objectification, which is a far more active process than anchoring, and one which we will now discuss.

Objectification saturates the idea of unfamiliarity with reality, turns it into the very essence of reality. Perceived at first in a purely intellectual, remote universe, it then appears before our eyes, physical and accessible. In this respect we are justified in asserting, with Kurt Lewin, that every representation realizes – in the proper sense of the term – a different level of reality. These levels are created and maintained by a collectivity and vanish with it, having no reality of their own; for instance, the supernatural level, which was once all-pervasive and is now practically non-existent. Between total illusion and total reality there is an infinity of gradations which must be taken into account, for we created them, but illusion and reality are achieved in exactly the same way. The materialization of an abstraction is one of the most mysterious features of thought and speech. Political and intellectual authorities, of every kind, exploit it to subdue the masses. In other words, such authority is based on the art of turning a representation into the reality of a representation, the word for a thing into a thing for the word.

To begin with, to objectify is to discover the iconic quality of an imprecise idea or being, to reproduce a concept in an image. To compare is already to picture, to fill what is naturally empty with substance. We have only to compare God to a father and what was invisible instantly becomes visible in our minds as a person to whom we can respond as such. A tremendous stock of words is in circulation in every society referring to specific objects, and we
are under constant compulsion to provide their equivalent concrete meaning. Since we assume that words do not speak about 'nothing', we are compelled to link them to something, to find non-verbal equivalents for them. Just as most rumours are believed by virtue of the saying: 'There is no smoke without fire,' so a collection of images is created by virtue of the saying: 'Nobody speaks about nothing.'

Yet not all the words that constitute this stock can be linked to images, either because there are not enough images readily available, or because they call to mind taboos. Those which, owing to their ability to be represented, have been selected, merge with, or rather are integrated into, what I have called a pattern of figurative nucleus, a complex of images that visibly reproduces a complex of ideas. For example, the popular pattern of the psyche inherited from psychoanalysis is divided in two, the unconscious and the conscious — reminiscent of more common dualities such as involuntary-voluntary, soul—mind, inner—outer — located in space one above the other. It so happens that the higher brings pressure to bear on the lower and this 'repression' is what gives rise to the complexes, it is also noteworthy that the terms represented are those that are best known and most commonly employed. Yet the absence of sexuality or libido is perhaps surprising since it plays such a significant part in the theory and is liable to be heavily charged with imagery. However, being the object of a taboo, it remains abstract. I have indeed been able to establish that not all psychoanalytic concepts undergo a similar transformation, not all are equally favoured. Thus it seems that a society makes a selection of those to which it concedes figurative powers, according to its beliefs and to the pre-existing stock of images. Thus I noted some time ago: 'Though a paradigm is accepted because it has a strong framework, its acceptance is also due to its affinity with more current paradigms. The concreteness of the elements of this "psychic system" derives from their ability to translate ordinary situations' (Moscovici, [1961]/1976).

This does not, by any means, imply that changes do not occur subsequently. But such changes take place during the transmission of familiar outlines that gradually respond to the recent intake, just as a river bed is gradually modified by the waters flowing between its banks.

Once a society has adopted such a paradigm or figurative nucleus it finds it easier to talk about whatever the paradigm stands for, and because of this facility the words referring to it are used more often. Then formulae and clichés emerge that sum it up and join together images that were formerly distinct. It is not simply talked about but exploited in various social situations as a means of understanding others and oneself, of choosing and deciding. I showed (Moscovici, [1961]/1976) how psychoanalysis, once popularized, became a key that opened all the locks of private, public and political existence. Its figurative paradigm was detached from its original milieu by continuous use and acquired a sort of independence, just as a well-worn saying is gradually detached from the person who first said it and becomes an unmediated fact. Thus, when the image linked to a word or idea becomes detached and is let loose in a society it is accepted as a reality, a conventional one, of course, but none the less a reality.

Although we all know that a 'complex' is a notion whose objective equivalent is highly vague, we still think and behave as though it were something that really existed when we assess a person and relate to him. It doesn't simply symbolize his personality or his way of behaving, but actually represents him, is his 'complexed' personality and way of behaving. Indeed, it can be said unequivocally that in all cases, the transfiguration has been achieved, then collective idolatry is a possibility. All images can be endowed with reality and efficiency to start with and end up by being worshipped. In our day, the psychoanalyst's couch or 'progress' are ready examples of this fact. This occurs to the extent that the distinction between image and reality is obliterated. The image of the concept ceases to be a sign and becomes a replica of reality, a simulacrum in the true sense of the word. Then the notion or entity from which it had proceeded loses its abstract, arbitrary character and acquires an almost physical, independent existence. It has the authority of a natural phenomenon for those who use it. Such is precisely the complex, to which as much reality is generally conceded as to an atom or a wave of the hand. This is an example of the word creating the means.

The second stage, in which the image is wholly assimilated and what is perceived replaces what is conceived, is the logical outcome of this state of affairs. If images exist, if they are essential for social communication and understanding, this is because they are not (and cannot remain) without reality any more than there can be smoke without fire. Since they must have a reality we find one for them, no matter what. Thus, a sort of logical imperative, images become elements of reality rather than elements of thought. The gap between the representation and what it represents is bridged, the peculiarities of the replica of the concept become peculiarities of the phenomena or of the environment to which they refer, become the actual referent of the concept. Thus everyone, nowadays, can perceive and distinguish a person's 'repressions' or his 'complexes' as if they were his physical features.

Our environment is largely composed of such images, and we are forever adding to it and modifying it by discarding some images and adopting others. Mead writes: 'We have just seen that imagery which goes into the structure of objects, and which represents the adjustment of the organism to environment which are not there, may serve toward the reconstruction of the objective field' (Mead, 1934, p. 374).

When this takes place, images no longer occupy that peculiar position somewhere between words which are supposed to have a significance and real objects to which only we can give a significance, but they exist as objects, they are what is signified.
Culture—though not science—incites us nowadays to make reality out of generally significant ideas. There are obvious reasons for this, of which the most obvious, from society's point of view, is to appropriate and make common property of what originally pertained to a specific field or sphere. Philosophers have spent a lot of time trying to understand the process of transfer from one sphere to another. Without representations, without the metamorphosis of words into objects, there can clearly be no transfer at all. What I said about psychoanalysis is confirmed by painstaking research:

By objectifying the scientific content of psychoanalysis society no longer confronts psychoanalysis or the psychoanalyst, but a set of phenomena which it is free to treat as it pleases. The evidence of particular men has become the evidence of our own senses, an unknown universe is now familiar territory. The individual, in direct contact with this universe without the mediation of experts or their science, has progressed from a secondary to a primary relationship with the object, and this indirect assumption of power is a culturally fruitful action. (Moscovici, [1961]/1976, p. 109)

Indeed, we thus find incorporated, in an anonymous manner, in our speech, our senses and our environment elements that are preserved and established as ordinary everyday material, the origins of which are obscure or forgotten. Their reality is a blank in our memory—but isn't all reality one? Don't we objectify precisely so as to forget that a creation, a material construct is the product of our own activity, that something is also someone? As I said: 'In the last analysis, psychoanalysis could be dead and buried, yet still, like Aristotle's physics, it would permeate our view of the world and its jargon would be used to describe psychological behaviour' (Moscovici, [1961]/1976, p. 109).

The model for all learning in our society is the science of mathematical physics or the science of quantifiable, measurable objects. In so far as the scientific content, even of a science of man or of life, presupposes this sort of reality, all the beings to which it refers are conceived according to such a model. Since science refers to physical organs and since psychoanalysis is a science, then the unconscious, for example, or a complex will be seen as organs of the psychic system. Therefore a complex can be amputated, grafted and perceived. As you can see, the living is assimilated to the inert, the subjective to the objective and the psychological to the biological. Every culture has its basic device for turning its representations into reality. Sometimes people and sometimes animals have served this purpose. Since the beginning of the mechanical age, objects have taken over and we are obsessed with a reverse animism that peoples the world with machines instead of living creatures. Thus we could say that where complexes, atoms or genes are concerned we don't so much imagine an object as create an image with the help of the object in general, with which we identify them.

However, no culture has a single, exclusive device. Because ours is partial to objects, it encourages us to objectify everything we come across. We personify indiscriminately feelings, social classes, the great powers, and when we write we personify culture, since it is language itself that enables us to do so. Gombrich writes:

It so happens that Indo-European languages tend to this particular figure which we call personification, because so many of them endowed nouns with a gender which makes them indistinguishable from names for living species. Abstract nouns in Greek, in Latin, almost regularly take on the feminine gender and so the way is open for the world of ideas being peopled by personified abstractions such as Victoria, Fortuna or Justitia. (Gombrich, 1972, p. 125)

But chance alone cannot account for the extensive use we make of the peculiarities of grammar, nor can it explain their efficiency.

This can best be done by trying to objectify grammar itself, which is achieved very simply by putting substantives—which, by definition, refer to substances, to beings—in the place of adjectives, verbs, etc. Thus attributes or relationships are turned into things. In fact, there is no such thing as a repression, since it refers to an action (to repress a memory), or an unconscious, since this is an attribute of something else (the thoughts and desires of a person). When we say that someone is dominated by his unconscious or suffers from repression as if he had a goitre or a sore throat, what we really mean is that he is not conscious of what he does and thinks; likewise when we say that he suffers from anxiety we mean that he is anxious or behaves anxiously.

However, once we have chosen to use a noun to describe a person's state, to say that he is dominated by his unconscious or suffers from anxiety rather than that his behaviour betrays a given particularity (that he is unconscious or anxious), we add to the number of beings by adding to the number of nouns. Thus a tendency to turn verbs into nouns, or a partiality for these among grammatical categories of words with similar meanings, is a sure sign that grammar is being objectified, that words don't merely represent things but create them and invest them with their own properties. In these circumstances language is like a mirror that can separate appearance from reality, separate what is seen from what is and represent it immediately in the form of an object's or a person's visible appearance, while enabling us to assess this object or person as if they were not distinct from reality, as if they were real—and particularly one's own self, to which one has no other way of relating. Thus the nouns we invent and create to give an abstract form to complex substances or phenomena become the substance or the phenomenon, and that is what we never cease to do. Every self-evident truth, every taxonomy, every reference in the world represents a crystallized set of significances and tacitly
acknowledged names; their tacitness is precisely what ensures their chief representative function: to express first the image and then the concept as reality.

To have a clearer understanding of the consequences of our tendency to objectify, we might consider such dissimilar social phenomena as hero-worship, the personification of nations, races and classes, etc. Each case involves a social representation that transmutes words into flesh, ideas into natural powers, nations or human languages into a language of things. Recent events have shown that the outcome of such transmutations can be sinister and disheartening in the extreme for those of us who would like all the world's tragedies to have a happy ending and to see right prevail. The defeat of rationality and the fact that history is so sparing with its happy endings should not deter us from examining these significant phenomena and especially from the conviction that the principles involved are simple and not dissimilar to those we have considered above.

Thus our representations make the unfamiliar familiar, which is another way of saying that they depend on memory. Memory's density prevents them from undergoing sudden modifications on the one hand and, on the other, allows them a certain amount of independence from present events—just as accumulated wealth protects us from a hand-to-mouth existence. It is from this padding of common experiences and memories that we draw the images, language and gestures required to overcome the unfamiliar with its attendant anxieties. Experiences and memories are neither inert nor dead. They are dynamic and immortal. Anchoring and objectifying are therefore ways of handling memory. The former keeps it in motion; since it is inner-directed it is always putting in and taking out objects, persons and events which it classifies according to type and labels with a name. The second, being more or less other-directed, draws concepts and images from it to mingle and reproduce them with the outside world, to make things-to-be-known out of what is already known. It would be appropriate to quote Mead again here: 'The peculiar intelligence of the human form lies in this elaborate control gained through the past' (Mead, 1934, p. 116).

V RIGHT-WING CAUSALITIES AND LEFT-WING CAUSALITIES

(1) Attributions and social representations

Farr (1977) has rightly pointed out that there is a relation between the way we picture a thing to ourselves and the way we describe it to others. Let us therefore accept this relation while noting that the problem of causality has always been crucial for those concerned with social representations, such as Fauconnet, Piaget and, more modestly, myself. However, we consider the problem from a very different angle to that of our American colleagues—American being used here in a purely geographical sense. The transatlantic social psychologist bases his enquiries on the theory of attribution and is mainly concerned with how we attribute causes to the people and things that surround us. It would hardly be an overstatement to say that his theories are based on a single principle—man thinks like a statistician—and that there is only one rule to his method—to establish the coherence of the information we receive from the environment. In these circumstances a lot of ideas and images—indeed, all those society provides—either do not tally with statistical thinking and so are seen as negligible since they cannot be fitted in, or else blur our perception of reality such as it is. They are, therefore, purely and simply ignored.

The theory of social representations, on the other hand, takes as its point of departure the diversity of individuals, attitudes and phenomena, in all their strangeness and unpredictability. Its aim is to discover how individuals and groups can construct a stable, predictable world out of such diversity. The scientist who studies the universe is convinced that there exists a hidden order under the apparent chaos, and the child who never stops asking 'Why?' is no less sure of it. This is a fact; if, then, we seek an answer to the eternal 'Why?' it isn't on the strength of the information we have received, but because we are convinced that every being and every object in the world is other than it seems. The ultimate aim of science is to eliminate this 'Why?,' whereas social representations can hardly do without it.

Representations are based on the saying: 'No smoke without fire.' When we hear or see something we instinctively assume it is not fortuitous but that it must have a cause and an effect. When we see smoke we know that a fire has been lit somewhere and, to find out where the smoke comes from, we go in search of this fire. Thus the saying is not a mere image but expresses a thought process, an imperative—the need to decode all the signs that occur in our social environment and which we cannot leave alone so long as their significance, the 'hidden fire,' has not been located. Thus, social thought makes extensive use of suspicions which set us on the track of causality.

I could give any number of examples. The most notable are those trials where the accused are presented as culprits, wrongdoers and criminals, and the proceedings only serve to confirm a pre-established verdict. The German or Russian citizens who saw their Jewish or subversive compatriots sent to concentration camps or shipped to the Gulag islands certainly didn't think they were innocent. They had to be guilty since they were imprisoned. Good reasons for putting them in prison were attributed (the word is apt) to them because it was impossible to believe that they were accused, ill-treated and tortured for no reason at all.

Such examples of manipulation, not to say of the distortion of causality, prove that the smokescreen is not always intended cunningly to conceal repressive measures, but may indeed even draw our attention to them so
that onlookers will be led to assume that there were undoubtedly very good reasons for lighting the fire. Tyrants are usually masters of psychology and know that people will automatically proceed from the punishment to the
criminal and the crime so as to make these strange and horrible occurrences tally with their idea of trial and justice.

(2) Bi-causal and mono-causal explanations

The theory of social representations makes the assumption, based on innumerable observations, that we generally act on two different sets of motivations, in other words, that thought is bi-causal rather than mono-causal and establishes simultaneously a relation of cause to effect and a relation of ends to means. This is where the theory differs from attribution theory and where, in this duality, social representations differ from science.

When a phenomenon recurs we establish a correlation between ourselves and it and then find some meaningful explanation that suggests the existence of a rule or law yet to be discovered. In this case the transition from correlation to explanation is not stimulated by our perception of the correlation or by the recurrence of the events, but by our awareness of a discrepancy between this correlation and some others, between the phenomenon we perceived and the one we had anticipated, between a specific case and a prototype, between the exception and the rule; in fact, to use the terms I have previously employed, between the familiar and the unfamiliar. This is indeed the decisive factor. To quote Maclver: ‘It is the exception, the deviation, the interference; the abnormality that stimulates our curiosity and seems to call for an explanation. And we often attribute to some one “cause” all the happening that characterizes the new or unanticipated or altered situation’ (Maclver, 1942, p. 172).

We see a person or a thing that does not tally with our representations, does not coincide with its prototype (a woman prime minister), or a void, an absence (a city with no hoardings), or we find a Muslim in a Catholic community, a physician without physic (a psychoanalyst), etc. In each case we feel challenged to find an explanation. On the one hand, there is a lack of recognition, on the other a lack of cognition; on the one hand, a lack of identity, on the other, a statement of non-identity. In these circumstances we are always obliged to stop and think and finally to admit that we don’t understand why this person behaves as he does or that object has such-and-such an effect.

How can we answer this challenge? This primary causality to which we spontaneously turn depends on finalities. Since most of our relationships are with live human beings, we are confronted with the intentions and purposes of others which, for practical reasons, we cannot understand. Even when our car breaks down or the apparatus we are using in the laboratory doesn’t work, we can’t help thinking that the car ‘refuses’ to go, the hostile apparatus ‘refuses to collaborate’ and so prevents us from pursuing our experiment. Everything people do or say, every natural disturbance, seems to have a hidden significance, intention or purpose which we try to discover. Likewise, we tend to interpret intellectual polemics or controversies as personal conflicts and to wonder what reason there can be for the protagonists’ animosity, what private motives are at the bottom of such antagonisms.

Instead of saying: ‘For what reason does he behave like that?’ we say: ‘For what purpose does he behave like that?’ and the quest for a cause becomes a quest for motives and intentions. In other words we interpret, look for hidden animosities and obscure motives such as hatred, envy or ambition. We are always convinced that people don’t act by chance, that everything they do corresponds to a plan, whence the general tendency to personify motives and incentives, to represent a cause imagistically as when we say of a political dissident that he is a “traitor”, an ‘enemy of the people’, or when we use the term ‘Oedipus Complex’ to describe a certain type of behaviour, etc. The notion becomes an almost physical ‘agent’, a performer who, in certain circumstances, carries out a precise intention. And this notion comes to embody the thing itself rather than being seen as a representation of our particular perception of this thing.

Secondary causality, which is not spontaneous, is an efficient causality. It is dictated by our education, our language, our scientific view of the world, all of which tend to make us divest the actions, conversations and phenomena of the outside world of their share of intention and responsibility and to see them only as experimental data to be studied impartially. Therefore we tend to gather all the information we can about them so as to classify them in a given category and thus identify their cause, explain them. Such is the historian’s attitude, the psychologist’s or indeed any scientist’s. For instance, we infer from a person’s behaviour that he is middle-class or lower-class, schizophrenic or paranoid; thus we explain his present behaviour. Proceeding from effect to cause, on the basis of information we have gleaned, we relate one to the other, ascribe effects to specific causes. Heider had already shown, long ago, that a person’s behaviour derives from two different sets of motivations, inner and outer, and that the latter derive not from the person but from his environment, his social status and from the compulsions other people exert over him. Thus the person who votes for a political party does so by personal conviction; but in some countries such a vote may be compulsory and to vote for a different party or to abstain from voting entails expulsion or imprisonment.

So, to sum up the way in which the process of attribution operates, we might say that, first and foremost, there exists a prototype which serves as a measuring-rod for events or behaviours that are considered as effects. If the effect conforms to the prototype it is assumed that it has an exterior cause; if not, if the effect does not conform, the cause is assumed to be specific and
inner. A man wearing a beret and carrying a long loaf of French bread under his arm is a Frenchman, since such is our representation of the type. But if the person turns out to be an American he no longer conforms to this model and we assume that his behaviour is singular or even aberrant since it is not true to type.

Obviously all this is grossly oversimplified; what actually takes place in the mind is not so easily inferred. But I wanted to make the following fact clear: in social representations the two causalitys act in concert, they merge to produce specific characteristics and we constantly switch from one to the other. On the one hand, by seeking a subjective order behind apparently objective phenomena, the result will be an inference; on the other, by seeking an objective order behind apparently subjective phenomena, the result will be an attribution. On the one hand, we reconstruct hidden intentions to account for a person’s behaviour: this is a first-person causality. On the other hand, we seek invisible factors to account for visible behaviour: this is a third-person causality.

The contrast between these two kinds of causality should be stressed, since the circumstances of social existence are often manipulated for the purpose of showing up either the one or the other, for example, to pass off an end as an effect. Thus, when the Nazis set fire to the Reichstag they did so to make their persecutions look, not like the execution of a plan, but like a result whose cause was the fire supposedly lit by their opponents and whose smoke concealed a very different fire. Nor is it uncommon for a person to provoke, on a minor scale, a fire of this kind to obtain promotion, for instance, or even a divorce. Moreover, these examples enable us to see that attributions always involve a relation between ends, or intentions, and means. As MacIver says: “The why of the motivation lies, often obscurely, behind the why of objective” (MacIver, 1942, p. 17).

The biological and social sciences try to reverse the psychological order of the two questions and to present motivations as causes. When they examine a phenomenon they ask to what purpose does it correspond? What function does it fulfill? Once the purpose or function has been established they present the former as an impersonal cause and the latter as the mechanism it triggers off. Such was Darwin’s procedure when he discovered natural selection. The term causalization would be apt in this case, suggesting, as it does, that ends are disguised as causes, means as effects and intentions as results. Relations between individuals, as well as those between political parties or groups of any kind, make extensive use of this procedure whenever the behaviour of other people has to be interpreted, whenever, in fact, the question ‘Why?’ has to be answered. And the answer given often suffices to set minds at rest, to preserve a representation, or to convince an audience that was only too ready to be convinced.

(3) Social causality

To sum up, a theory of social causality is a theory of the attributions and inferences individuals make and also of the transition from the one to the other. Clearly, such a transition is inseparable from a scientific theory that deals with this phenomenon. However, psychologists are in the habit of studying either attributions or inferences and of ignoring the transition between them. Thus they ascribe causes to an environment or to an individual each seen independently, which is just as ridiculous as studying the relation of an effect to its cause without first formulating a theory or defining a paradigm to account for this relation. This very peculiar attitude has its limitations, as I hope to prove with the following example.

Attribution theory gives a number of reasons to account for why an individual attributes certain behaviours to another person and other behaviours to the environment — to the fact that Peter is good at games or else that he lives in the suburbs, for example. But, as we noted earlier, these are based on a single principle: man is a statistician and his brain works like an infallible computer. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, would see such behaviours as the simple rationalization of hostile or kindred feelings since, for the psychoanalyst, all our assessments are based on emotions. This trivial example clearly illustrates the fact that any explanation depends primarily on the idea we have of reality. It is this idea that governs our perceptions and the inferences we draw from them. And it governs our social relations as well. Thus we can assert that when we answer the question “Why?” we start from a social representation or from the general context in which we have been led to give this specific answer.

Here is a concrete example: unemployment at the moment is widespread and each of us has at least one unemployed man or woman among his personal acquaintances. Why doesn’t this man or woman have a job? The answer to this question will vary according to the speaker. For some, the unemployed just don’t bother to find a job, are too choosy or, at best, unlucky. For others they are the victims of an economic recession, of unjustified redundancies or, more commonly, of the inherent injustice of a capitalist economy. Thus the former ascribe the cause of unemployment to the individual, to his social attitude, while the latter ascribe it to the economic and political situation, to his social status, to an environment that makes such a situation inevitable. The two explanations are utterly opposed to each other and obviously stem from distinct social representations. The first representation stresses the individual’s responsibility and personal energy — social problems can only be solved by each individual. The second representation stresses social responsibility, denounces social injustice and advocates collective
solutions for individual problems. Shaver has noted such reactions even in the United States:

Personal attributions about the reason for welfare lead to speeches about 'welfare chisellers', appeals for a return to simpler days or the Protestant ethic, and laws designed to make needed financial assistance more difficult to obtain. Situational attributions, on the other hand, are likely to suggest that expanded government-supported employment, better job training, and increased educational opportunity for all will provide more lasting reductions in public assistance. (Shaver, 1975, p. 133)

However, I do not entirely agree with my American colleague. I myself would reverse the order of the factors involved, stressing the primacy of representations and saying that it is these, in each case, that dictate the attribution either to the individual or to the society. By so doing, I obviously do not deny the idea of rationality and a correct manipulation of received information, but simply maintain that what is taken into account, the experiences we have, that is, the causes we select, are dictated, in each case, by a system of social representations.

Thus I come to the following proposition: in the societies we inhabit today, personal causality is a right-wing explanation and situational causality is a left-wing explanation. Social psychology can't ignore the fact that the world is structured and organized according to such a division and that there is a permanent one. Indeed, each of us is necessarily compelled to adopt one of these two kinds of causality together with the view of the other which it entails. The consequences which derive from such a proposition could not be more precise: the motives for our actions are dictated by, and related to, social reality, a reality whose contrasting categories divide human thought as neatly as do dualities like high and low, male and female, etc. It had seemed that motivation could be ascribed to a simple thought-process and now it turns out to be determined by environmental influences, social status, one person's relation to other people, his preconceived opinions, all of which play their part. This is highly significant and, once it has been accepted, it precludes the existence of supposedly neutral categories of personal and situational attribution and replaces them by definitely right- or left-wing categories of motivation. Even if the substitution does not hold in all cases it is generally observable.

Experiments carried out by certain psychologists (Hewstone and Jaspers, 1982) confirm the notion of such a substitution. Here, for instance, is a typical example: the American psychologist M. J. Lerner has suggested that we explain someone's behaviour on the premise that 'People only get what they deserve.' This has come to be known as 'the just world hypothesis'. He sees this as an almost innate way of thinking. The Canadian psychologists Guimond and Simard tried to substantiate this theory, and were not surprised to find that such an attitude was mainly that of people belonging to a majority or a ruling class. On the other hand, there was no trace of it among those who belonged to minorities or underprivileged classes. To be precise, they were able to establish that English-speaking Canadians tended to see the French Canadians as responsible for their status and provided individualistic explanations. French Canadians, however, held the English Canadians responsible and their explanations involved the structure of society itself.

If a laboratory experiment can be taken as an example of what occurs in society we might improve somewhat on these findings. Dominating and dominated classes do not have a similar representation of the world they share but see it with different eyes, judge it according to specific criteria, and each does so according to their own categories. For the former, it is the individual who is responsible for all that befalls him and especially his failures. For the latter, failures are always due to the circumstances which society creates for the individual. It is in this precise sense that the expression right-wing/left-wing causality (an expression which is as objective and scientific as the dualities high/low, person/environment, etc.) can be applied to concrete cases.

(4) Conclusions

By restricting itself to an individual and an inductive frame of reference, attribution theory has proved less fruitful than it might otherwise have been. This state of affairs could be remedied by: (a) switching from the individual to the collective sphere; (b) abandoning the idea of man as statistician and of a mechanistic relation between man and the world; (c) reinstating social representations as necessary mediators. Suggests have already been made to improve the theory (Hewstone and Jaspers, 1982). However, we must bear in mind that causality does not exist on its own, but only within a representation that vindicates it. Nor should we forget that when we consider two causalities we have also to consider the relation between them. In other words, we should always seek those super-causes that have a dual action, both as agents and as efficient causes, which constitute this relation. Each of our beliefs, thought-processes and conceptions of the world has a cause of this kind to which we have recourse as a last resort. It is in this we put our trust and it is this we invoke in all circumstances. What I have in mind are words such as 'God', 'Progress', 'Justice', 'History': they refer to an entity or a being gifted with social status and acting both as cause and as end. They are notable in that they account for all that happens in every possible sphere of reality. There is no difficulty in identifying them, but I think we would be hard put to explain the part they play and their extraordinary power.
I am convinced that, sooner or later, we shall achieve a clearer idea of causality. And I shall consider our present enquiries concluded, even if their final aim is not achieved, when psychologists have at their command a common language which will enable them to establish a concordance between the forms of thought of individuals and the social content of those thoughts.

VI A Survey of Early Research on Social Representations

(1) Some common methodological themes and links with other social sciences

The body of research on which these theories are based and from which they evolved is somewhat restricted. But it is all we have to date [i.e. in 1984]. Whatever the specific objective of these enquiries has been they have, however, always shared the following four methodological principles:

(a) To obtain material from samples of conversations normally exchanged in a society. Some of these exchanges deal with important topics, whilst others concern topics that may be foreign to the group – some action, event or personality, about which or whom they wonder ‘What’s it all about?’, ‘Why did it happen?’, ‘Why did he do it?’, ‘What was the purpose of that action?’ – but all tending towards mutual agreement. Tarde (1910) was the first to maintain that opinions and representations are created in the course of conversations as elementary ways of relating and of communicating. He demonstrated how they emerge in specially reserved places (such as salons, cafés, etc.); how they are determined by the physical and psychological dimensions of those encounters between individuals (Moscovici, 1967) and how they change with the passage of time. He even elaborated a plan for a social science of the future which would be a comparative study of conversations. Indeed, the interactions that naturally occur in the course of conversations enable individuals and groups to become more familiar with incongruous objects or ideas and thus to master them (Moscovici, [1961]/1976). Such infra-communications and thought, based on rumour, constitute a kind of intermediate layer between private and public life and facilitate the passage from the one to the other. In other words, conversation is at the hub of our consensual universes because it shapes and animates social representations and thus gives them a life of their own.

(b) To consider social representations as a means of re-creating reality. Through communication individuals and groups give a physical reality to ideas and images, to systems of classification and naming. The phenomena and people with whom we deal in everyday life are not usually raw data but are the products or embodiments of a collectivity, an institution, etc. All reality is the reality of someone or is reality for someone else, even if it be that of the laboratories where we carry out our experiments. It would not be logical to think of them otherwise by taking them out of context. Most of the problems we face in the course of our social and intellectual pursuits are not derived from the difficulty of representing things or people, but from the fact that they are representations, that is, substitutes for other things or other people. Thus before embarking on a specific study we must enquire into the origins of the object, and consider it as a work of art and not as raw material. Though, to be precise, it is something re-made, re-constructed rather than something constructed anew since, on the one hand, the only reality available is that which has been structured by past generations or by another group, and on the other, we re-produce it in the outside world and thus cannot avoid distorting our inner images and models. What we create, in fact, is a referent, an entity to which we refer which is distinct from any other and corresponds to our representation of it. And its recurrence – either during a conversation or in the environment (for instance a ‘complex’, a symptom, etc.) – ensures its autonomy, rather as a saying becomes independent from the person who first said it when it has been repeated often enough. The most remarkable result of this re-construction of abstractions as realities is that they become detached from the group’s subjectivity, from the vicissitudes of its interactions and therefore from time, and thus they acquire permanence and stability. Isolated from the flow of communications that produced them, they become as independent from these as a building is independent from the architect’s plan or the scaffolding employed in its construction.

It might be opportune to point out a few distinctions that should be taken into account. Some representations concern facts and others ideas. The first displace their object from an abstract to a concrete cognitive level; the second, through a change of perspective, either compose or decompose their object – they may, for instance, present billiard balls as an illustration of the atom, or consider a person psychoanalytically as divided into a conscious and an unconscious. Yet both create pre-established and immediate frames of reference for opinions and perceptions within which objective reconstructions of both persons and situations occur automatically and which underlie individual experience and thought. It is not so much the fact that such reconstructions are social and influence everybody that is surprising and has to be explained, but rather that sociability requires them, expresses in them its tendency to pose as non-sociability and as part of the natural world.

(c) That the character of social representations is revealed especially in times of crisis and upheaval, when a group or its images are undergoing a change. People are then more willing to talk, images and expressions are
livelier, collective memories are stirred and behaviour becomes more spontaneous. Individuals are motivated by their desire to understand an increasingly unfamiliar and perturbed world. Social reconstructions appear unadorned, since the divisions and barriers between private and public worlds have become blurred. But the worst crisis occurs when tensions between reified and consensual universes create a rift between the language of concepts and that of representations, between scientific and ordinary knowledge. It is as though society itself were split and there is no longer a means of bridging the gap between the two universes. Such tensions can be the result of new discoveries, new conceptions, their popularization in everyday speech and in the collective awareness — for instance, the acceptance by traditional medicine of modern theories such as psychoanalysis and natural selection. These can be followed by actual revolutions of common sense which are no less significant than scientific revolutions. The way in which they occur and reconnect one universe with the other casts some light on the process of social representations and gives exceptional significance to our enquiries.

(d) That the people who elaborate such representations be seen as something akin to amateur ‘scientists’ and the groups they form as modern-day equivalents to those societies of amateur scholars that existed about a century ago. Such is the nature of most unofficial gatherings, discussions in cafes and clubs or political reunions where the modes of thought and expression reflect the curiosities that are voiced and the social links that are established at the time. On the other hand, many representations derive from professional works that are addressed to this ‘amateur’ public; I am thinking of those pedagogues, popularizers of science and journalists of a certain kind (Moscovici, 1961/1976) whose writings make it possible for anyone to see himself as a sociologist, economist, physicist, doctor or psychologist. I myself have been in the situation of Agatha Christie’s doctor who observes: ‘Psychology’s all right if it’s left to the psychologist. The trouble is, everyone is an amateur psychologist nowadays. My patients tell me exactly what complex problems and neuroses they’re suffering from, without giving me a chance to tell them.’

Perhaps, after all, this volume is appearing too late in the day. Indeed, a number of my theories concur with those of various schools of sociology and of the sociology of knowledge in English-speaking countries. Farr (1978, 1981) refers, in a couple of articles, to the relation between the theories outlined above and theories of attribution, the social construction of reality, ethnomethodology, etc. However, from another point of view this volume seems to be appearing at just the right time for a reassessment of the field of social psychology in relation to related disciplines.

It cannot be denied that the programme for a sociology of knowledge, though often discussed, has not even begun to be realized. Indeed, works such as that of Berger and Luckmann (1966) refer to a theory of the origins of common sense and of the structure of reality, but I believe that this theory, unlike my own, has not been tested. As to ethnomethodology, it originated from the distinction between the ‘rationality’ of science and the ‘rationality’ of common sense as applied to everyday life. It has examined this distinction by deliberately splitting the social fabric and then, in the light of attempts to restore the tissue’s unity, exposing the social norms and conventions that constituted its continuity and texture. Once again, the result is a structure of reality stemming from a generally shared choice of rules and conventions.

I myself, on the other hand, have found it more rewarding to take advantage of the breaks which occur naturally and which reveal the propensity of both individuals and groups to intervene in the normal sequence of events and to modify their development, and how they achieve their aim. In this way, it is not only the rules and conventions that come to light, but also the ‘theories’ on which they are based and the languages that express them. In my opinion, this is essential — social regularities and harmonies figure in a common representation and cannot be understood independently. Besides, the work of construction in which the sociologists are interested consists mainly, in our societies, in a process of transformation from a reified to a consensual universe, to which everything else is subordinated.

I have chosen these two examples to underline the affinities, but a number of others could be added. What they all have in common is their concern for social representations, and investigators would do well to recall Durkheim’s advice: ‘Since observation reveals the existence of a type of phenomenon known as representation with specific features that distinguish it from other natural phenomena, it is impractical to behave as if it didn’t exist’ (Durkheim, 1895/1982).

Today a high proportion of the sociological imagination is preoccupied with consensual universes even to the extent of being more or less restricted to them. Such an attitude may be justified in that it fills a gap left by social psychology. But it would be better if there was a regrouping of disciplines around this ‘type of phenomenon known as representation’ clarifying the task of sociology and giving to our own discipline the breadth of scope it so badly needs.

(2) A brief review of some of the major field studies

In a recent publication I had the pleasure of noting that, at last, American psychologists are prepared to acknowledge, though without actually naming them, the importance of social representations: ‘Such tacit, global theories, as well as many more specific theories, including theories about specific individuals or classes of individuals, govern our understanding of behaviours, our
casual explanation of past behaviour and our predictions of future behaviours' (Nisbett and Ross, 1980).

Or, we might add, serve to conceal, ignore and replace behaviour. And since Gedankenexperiments or Gedankenbehaviours are at least as important in everyday life as they are in science, it would be a mistake to ignore them simply because they explain and predict nothing. But a lack of interest in anything written in languages other than English or in experiments carried out in another country -- a lack of interest which, a generation ago, would have disqualified any scholar, whether in the United States or elsewhere -- leads them to assert with total confidence:

There has been surprisingly little research on those beliefs and theories shared by the mass of people in our cultures. Heider (1958) was perhaps the first to emphasize their importance, and Abelson (1968) was the first (and nearly only) investigator to attempt to study them empirically. What little research has been done on people's theories has focused on individual differences in belief and theories. (Nisbett and Ross, 1980)

Now it so happens that, at these precise dates, research on 'people's theories' was thriving and producing widely acclaimed results. I do not suggest that such research was superior to that mentioned, or even excellent in itself, but simply that it occurred and was not restricted to the study of 'individual differences'. If investigators in our field continue to see the whole of science represented by that of their own country, there will always be a Joe Bloggs or a Jacques Dupont to invent everything, like Ivan Popoff before them, which is something we can very well do without.

As we said, it is during the process of transformation that phenomena are more easily perceived. Therefore we concentrated on the emergence of social representations: either starting from scientific theories -- so as to follow the metamorphosis of the latter within a society and the manner in which they renewed common sense -- or from current events, experiences and 'objective' knowledge which a group had to face in order to constitute and control its own world.

Both starting-points are equally valid since, in one case, it is a question of observing the effect of a change from one intellectual and social level to another and, in the second, of observing the organization of a complex of quasi-material objects and environmental occurrences that an implicit representation normally encapsulates. The mechanisms involved are, anyhow, identical.

Common sense is continually being created in our societies, especially where scientific and technical knowledge is popularized. Its content, the symbolic images derived from science on which it is based and which, rooted in the mind's eye, shape common speech and behaviour, are constantly being touched up. In the process the store of social representations, without which a society cannot communicate or relate to and define reality, is replenished. Moreover, these representations acquire an even greater authority as we receive more and more material through their mediation -- analogies, implicit descriptions and explanations of phenomena, personalities, the economy, etc., together with the categories required to account for the behaviour of a child, for instance, or of a friend. That which, in the long run, acquires the validity of something our senses or our understanding perceive directly always turns out to be the secondary, modified product of scientific research. In other words, common sense no longer circulates from below to on high, but from on high to below; it is no longer the point of departure but the point of arrival. The continuity which philosophers stipulate between common sense and science is still there but it is not what it used to be.

The spread of psychoanalysis in France provided a practical example on which to start our investigations into the genesis of common sense. How did psychoanalysis penetrate the various layers of our society and influence our outlook and behaviour? What modifications did it undergo in order to do so? We investigated methodically the means by which its theories were anchored and objectified, a system of classification and of the naming of persons and behaviours was elaborated, a 'new' language stemming from psychoanalytic terms was created and the part played by bi-causality in normal thinking. Apart from this, we explained how a theory shifts from one cognitive level to another by becoming a social representation. We naturally took political and religious backgrounds into account and stressed their role in such transitions. Finally, our enquiry enabled us to specify the way in which a representation shapes the reality we inhabit, creates new social types -- the psychoanalyst, the neurotic, etc. -- and modifies behaviour in relation to this reality.

Simultaneously we studied the problem of mass communications and their role in establishing common sense. In this case, common sense could be elevated to the rank of a major ideology, for such is the status of psychoanalysis in present-day France -- comparable, in every way, to that of an official creed. It became clear that, as far as evolution is concerned, the presence of a social representation constitutes the necessary preliminary to the acquisition of status. Moreover, we can state quite definitely the order of the three phases of this evolution: (a) the scientific phase of its elaboration from a theory by a scientific discipline (economics, biology, etc.); (b) the 'representative' phase in which it diffuses within a society and its images, concepts and vocabulary are recast and adapted; (c) the ideological phase in which the representation is appropriated by a party, a school of thought or an organ of state and is logically reconstructed so that a product, created by the society as a whole, can be enforced in the name of science. Thus every ideology has these two elements: a content, derived from below, and a form from above that gives common sense a scientific aura. Other investigations
were concerned with more scientific theories (Ackermann and Zygouris, 1974; Barbichon and Moscovici, 1965), and our findings contributed to the formulation of a more general theory of the popularization of scientific knowledge (Roquepio, 1974).

In a second series of studies we examined more specifically the dynamics of technical and theoretical changes. To put it briefly, during the years 1950 to 1960, a vast diffusion of medical techniques and theories occurred in France as a result of an increase in medical consumption. Together with a new doctor–patient relationship, a whole new attitude to health and the body was rapidly transforming long-standing images and theories. One of the first to study the situation was Claudine Herzlich in her work on the representations of health and illness. Her purpose was to highlight the emergence of a system of classification and interpretation of symptoms in response to what must some day be acknowledged as a cultural revolution in our views of health, illness and death (Herzlich, 1973). If one is nostalgic to see the disappearance of death from our awareness and from our rituals, this dates from the time when confidence in the scientific powers of medicine was established.

A further study dealt with the social representation of the body. This revealed that our perceptions and conceptions of the body were no longer suited to the reality that was taking shape, and that a major upheaval was inevitable. We therefore analysed these representations, and in due course, under the influence of youth movements, the women’s liberation movement and the spread of biodynamics, etc., ways of seeing and experiencing the body were radically changed. By taking up our enquiry again after this profound change of representations had occurred, we were able to take advantage of something akin to a natural experiment. Indeed, a significant cultural revolution having taken place, we were in a position to observe its effects, step by step, and to compare what we had previously observed to what was now the case. In other words, we began to grapple with the problem of modification in social representations and of their evolution. This constitutes the bulk of Denise Jodelet’s work (1984) at the moment. But she was well prepared for such an investigation as a result of her study of mental patients farmed out among the inhabitants of various French villages. By observing this fostering over a period of some two years, she was able to describe, in great detail, the development of the relationships between villagers and patients and how, by its very nature, it gave rise to discriminations aimed at ‘situating’, in a familiar world, the mental patients whose presence was eminently disturbing. These discriminations, moreover, were based on a vocabulary and on social representations which had been delicately elaborated by the small communities. These communities felt somehow threatened by the harmless beings who had been placed in their midst by personal misfortune and institutional routine.

Finally, a wholly original study by René Kaës (1976) on group psychotherapy shows, on the one hand, how such groups produce certain types of representation concerned with what constitutes a group and how it functions, and, on the other, how such representations reflect the group’s evolution. There is no doubt that they have a cultural, not to say a scientific significance and it is somewhat surprising to see them surface in such circumstances. None the less, the fact remains that such representations canalize the flow of emotions and of fluctuating interpersonal relationships.

Denise Jodelet’s collaboration with Stanley Milgram (Jodelet and Milgram, 1977; Milgram, 1984) on the social images of Paris proves that urban space, or the raw material of everyday life, is utterly determined by representations and is by no means as fictitious as we tend to believe. Moreover, it admirably confirms our contention that thinking is an environment, since nothing could be more pregnant with ideas than a city. The theories expressed in the first four sections of this essay have been corroborated by this first generation of investigations. Others bearing on culture (Kaës, 1968), intergroup relations (Quaglino, 1979), educational methods (Gorin, 1980), etc. elaborated certain aspects we had overlooked, while studies of the representations of the child stressed the heuristic importance of the subject as a whole (Chombarde Lune, 1971).

VII THE STATUS OF REPRESENTATIONS: STIMULUS OR MEDIATOR?

1) Social representations as independent variables

J. A. Fodor writes:

It has been a main argument of this book that if you want to know what response a given stimulus is going to elicit you must find out what internal representation the organism assigns to the stimulus. Patently, the character of such assignments must in turn depend upon what kind of representational system is available for mediating the cognitive processes of the organism. (Fodor, 1975)

A healthy concern with both the theory and the fact of representations can now be observed more or less everywhere. Thus what takes place within a society has become a major preoccupation rather than simply how it creates and transforms the environment. But although such concern exists it is, none the less, essential to guard against traditional half-measures like those comprising the injection of a minimum of subjectivity and thought into the ‘black box’ of our brains or simply adding a surplus of soul to our dehumanized, mechanized world.
Indeed, if Fodor’s text—which sums up a wide assortment of writings—is read with some attention, the use of two words cannot fail to astonish: ‘internal’ and ‘mediating’. These terms imply that representations relay the flow of information coming to us from the outside world; that they are mediating links between the real cause (stimulus) and the concrete effect (response). Thus they are mediating, or chance causes. This reconditioned behaviour, to which we always resort at difficult times, is a clever piece of tinkering, but it is ad hoc, by definition, and not very convincing.

Here, we must stress the firm stand the theory of representations has taken in this respect: as far as social psychology is concerned social representations are independent variables, explanatory stimuli. This does not mean that, for instance, where sociology or history is concerned, what for us is explanatory does not itself require explaining. \(^1\) It is readily obvious why this should be so. Each stimulus is selected from a vast variety of possible stimuli and can produce an infinite variety of reactions. It is the pre-established images and paradigms that both determine the choice and restrict the range of reactions. When a child sees its mother smile it perceives a number of different signs—wide-open eyes, distended lips, movements of the head—which incite it to sit up, scream, etc. Such images and paradigms portend what will appear to the actor or the spectator as stimulus or response: the child’s arms stretched towards the mother’s smiling face or the mother’s smiling face lowered towards the child’s outstretched arms.

Emotional reactions, perceptions and rationalizations are not responses to an exterior stimulus as such, but to the category in which we classify such images, to the names we give them. We react to a stimulus in so far as we have objectified it and re-created it, at least partially, at the moment of its inception. The object to which we respond can assume a number of aspects and the specific aspect it does assume depends on the response we associate with it before defining it. The mother sees the child’s arms stretched out to her and not to someone else when she is already preparing to smile and is aware that her smile is indispensable to the child’s stability.

In other words, social representations determine both the character of the stimulus and the response it elicits, just as in a particular situation they determine which is which. To know them and explain what they are and what they signify is the first step in every analysis of a situation or a social encounter, and constitutes a means of predicting the evolution of a group’s interactions, for instance. In most of our experiments and systematic observations we in fact manipulate representations when we think we are manipulating motivations, inferences and perceptions, and it is only because we do not take them into account that we are convinced to the contrary. The laboratory itself, where a person comes in order to be the object of an experiment, represents both for him and for us the prototype of a reified universe (see Farr, 1984). The presence of apparatus, the way the space is organized, the instructions he is given, the very nature of the undertaking, the artificial relationship between experimenter and subject, and the fact that all this occurs within the context of an institution and under the aegis of science, reproduce many essential features of a reified universe. It is quite clear that the situation determines both the questions we will ask and the answers these will elicit.

(2) Social representations in laboratory settings

Some investigations have sought to restore meanings and representations to laboratory settings and to corroborate, as far as possible, the theoretical postulate of their autonomy, without which both experiment and theory must forgo much of their significance. In 1968 Claude Faucheux and I tried to prove that representations shape our behaviour in the context of a competitive game. We based our experiments on familiar card games. The one variant we introduced was that some of the subjects were told they were playing against ‘nature’, while others were told their opponent was ‘chance’. The first term evokes a more reassuring, comprehensible and controllable image of the world, while the idea of chance, underscored here by the presence of a pack of cards, recalls adversity and irrevocability. As we expected, the subjects’ choice, and especially their behaviour, differed according to their representation of their opponent. Thus most of the subjects confronted with ‘nature’ spent some time studying the rules and working out some kind of strategy, whereas those subjects who faced ‘chance’ concentrated all their attention on the pack of cards, trying to guess what card would be dealt, and didn’t worry about the rules of the game. The figures speak for themselves: 38 out of 40 of those playing against ‘nature’ were able to rationalize the rules, while only 12 out of 40 of the others were able to do so (Faucheux and Moscovici, 1968).
Thus our inner representations, which we have either inherited from society or fabricated ourselves, can change our attitude to something outside ourselves. Together with Abric and Plon (Abris et al., 1967) we carried out another variant of this experiment. Here one group was told they would play against a computer, that the choices they would make would be programmed and that the computer, like themselves, would have to try to accumulate a maximum of points. The other group's aim was identical but in their case they were told they would play against another student like themselves, whose choices would be communicated to them by telephone. Once again, we observed different, or even contrasting, strategies and rationalizations according to the group. Understandably, a more cooperative relation to the other than to the computer emerged. Further experiments by Codol (1974), concerned with the anchoring process of various representations of the self, of the group and of the task to be accomplished, cast a peculiar light on their variety and impact in a competitive situation. Abric (1976), in a very ambitious and systematic experiment, dissected each of these representations and showed why they behaved as they did. An account of the wide range of results obtained was published in 1984.

In another series of equally convincing and straightforward experiments, Flamet, in collaboration with Codol and Rossignol (Codol and Flamet, 1971; Rossignol and Flamet, 1975; Rossignol and Houel, 1976) considered the same problem at another, more significant level. Indeed, social psychology is largely concerned with the discovery of so-called universal mechanisms which, written in our brains or in our glands, are supposed to determine our every action and thought. They occur in society without being social. They are, furthermore, formal mechanisms quite unrelated to an individual or a collective content of any kind or to the history responsible for such a content. One of these supposedly unique and universal mechanisms is that of coherence and stability. This suggests that individuals try to organize their beliefs into internally coherent structures. Consequently, we prefer stable to unstable structures. The implied postulate can be stated thus: positive and negative interpersonal relations are determined by the principle of stability. The two propositions that sum it up — 'My friends' friends are my friends' and 'My enemies' enemies are my friends' — serve as immutable laws, unrelated to any implicit meaning and independent of any particular circumstance. In other words, the two axiomatized sayings form the basis of a syntax of relations between people and determine their own semantics or pragmatics.

Doubtless it was already obvious, before Flamet, that such propositions apply only to 'objects' having a common frame of reference or those situated along a cognitive dimension (Jaspar, 1965). But Flamet's use of the theory of social representations enabled him to go both further and deeper. To begin with, he showed that each individual, who has to assess the relation between a number of other individuals, possesses a range of representations of the group to which they belong and of the kind of links that exist between them. These may be conventional or even somewhat mythical (e.g. the fraternal or Rousseauist group, etc.). The principle of stability will characterize such relations only if a person already has the notion of a basic, egalitarian, friendly group in mind. Then he will try to form a coherent opinion of the members that constitute it. In other words, it is only in a social context of this kind that 'my friends' friends' must necessarily be 'my friends'. In such cases, Heider's principle of cognition and affectivity expresses only the particular group's collective norm and internal links, but not a general tendency. Indeed, Flamet appositely shows that it is the representation of such a principle that gives particular prominence to the friendliness and egalitarianism of its members, and not the reverse. In representations of a different kind of group, friendliness and egalitarianism are not necessarily linked and do not have the same significance. Finally, it seems that the function of the stability principle consists in creating a social paradigm of positive and negative interpersonal relationships and that its significance depends on this paradigm, which simply means that the principle of equilibrium, far from determining, is itself determined by how the context of interpersonal relations is represented. And it is not really surprising that this had not emerged earlier.

Many contemporary studies in social psychology take as their paradigm such a group of like-minded people tending to have similar opinions and tastes and anxious both to avoid conflicts and to accept the status quo. But what they overlook is the fact that such a group is an objectification of the traditional, mythical notion of an ideal community. In this case, the tendency towards stability and coherence can well be seen as a determining factor of interpersonal relationships. But, if we then compare this social representation of the group to others, we will soon realize that such 'general' tendencies are really peculiar to it, that we have mistaken the effect for the cause. The enquiries carried out by Flamet and his Aix-en-Provence team have made it possible for us to reinterpret Heider's theories through a reassessment that takes into account the social and historical dimension of our perceptions and opinions of others.

We have referred only to a restricted number of experiments. Yet each of them proves, in its specific field (competition, awareness of others, etc.) that our postulate has a wide significance. Rather than motivations, aspirations, cognitive principles and the other factors that are usually put forward, it is our representations which, in the last resort, determine our reactions, and their significance is thus that of an actual cause. Through them society behaves somewhat in the manner of Marcel Duchamp; like this painter with his ready-made objects, it sets its signature on society-made processes and thus modifies their character. We hope to have demonstrated that, indeed, all the elements of the psychic field are reversed once the social signature has been set on them.
The lesson to be drawn from the above is that the present manner of proceeding—which we owe to Muzaffer Sherif and which consists in showing how psychic mechanisms are turned into social processes—should be reversed. For such is the process of evolution itself and, by following it, we shall be better able to understand it. It is only logical to consider that social and public processes were the first to occur and that they were gradually interiorized to become psychic processes. Thus, when we analyse psycho-social processes we discover that they are psycho-social. It is as though our psychology contained our sociology in a condensed form. And one of the most urgent tasks of social psychology is to discover the one in the other and to understand this process of condensation.

**Final Observations**

I cannot conclude this exposition without mentioning some of the more general implications of the theory of social representations. First of all, the study of these representations should not be restricted to a mere shift from the emotional to the intellectual level and they should not be seen as solely pre-or anti-behavioural. If this were the case, there would be no point in dwelling on them. No, what is required is that we examine the symbolic aspect of our relationships and of the consensual universes we inhabit. For all ‘cognition’, all ‘motivation’ and all ‘behaviour’ only exist and have repercussions in so far as they signify something, and signifying implies, by definition, at least two people sharing a common language, common values and common memories. This is what distinguishes the social from the individual, the cultural from the physical and the historical from the static. By saying that representations are social we are mainly saying that they are symbolic and possess as many perceptual as so-called cognitive elements. And that is why we consider their content to be so important and why we refuse to distinguish them from psychological mechanisms as such.

In other words, we noticed, on various occasions, that social psychology tends to single out a simple mechanism, take it out of its context, and then to ascribe a general value to it—just as instincts were once singled out for a similar purpose. Some of these are pseudo-mechanisms, such as ‘stability’ or ‘coherence’, which appear to explain what they actually define. Since thought naturally tends to substitute order for disorder, simplicity for diversity, etc., to assert that thought tends towards coherence amounts to little more than saying that thought tends towards thought. Other mechanisms, such as ‘dissonance’, ‘attribution’, ‘reactance’, etc., are seen as universal and are applied to all possible social fields, categories or contents. They are supposed to process certain information and to produce different information, no matter what. When assessing the majority of studies carried out on this basis, Herbert Simon concluded: ‘When the processes underlying these social phenomena are identified, as they are in the chapters of this book, particularly those of the second and third parts, they turn out to be the very same information processes we encounter in non-social cognitions’ (Carroll and Paine, 1976).

This is a disturbing coincidence, for either the social has an existence and meaning which must produce certain effects, or the study of these information processes, as isolated mechanisms, is a mistake that creates the illusion of a possible and easy contact with the essence of reality.

Social representations, like scientific theories, religions or mythologies, are the representations of something or of someone. They have a specific content—specific implying, moreover, that it differs from one sphere or one society to another. However, these processes are significant only in so far as they reveal the birth of such a content and its variations. After all, how we think is not distinct from what we think. Thus we cannot make a clear distinction between the regularities in representations and those in the processes that create them. Indeed, if we follow in the footsteps of psychoanalysis and anthropology we should find it much easier to understand what it is that representations and mechanisms have in common.

The second implication—and one which could have been foreseen—can be expressed in a few words: the study of social representations requires that we revert to methods of observation. I have no intention of criticizing experimental methods as such. Their value is indisputable when studying simple phenomena that can be taken out of context. But this is not the case for social representations which are stored in our language and which were created in a complex human milieu. I am well aware that a number of my colleagues despise observations which they see as a cowardly abdication of scientific rigour, a sign of prolixity, laziness and fuzziness. I believe that they are over-pessimistic. Social psychology is no longer what it was half a century ago. Since then, we have come to appreciate the requirements of theory, of the accurate analysis of phenomena; but we have also come to appreciate the reverse, that is, the limitations of theories that explain only what can be experimented upon and of the experiment as something to which reality is made to adjust. And what we require of observation is that it will preserve some of the qualities of experiment while freeing us from its limitations. It has succeeded in doing so for ethology, anthropology and child psychology, and we see no reason why it should not have similar results in social psychology.

But clearly, something more is at stake than the comparative merits of one method or another. And this has to be said unambiguously; quite apart from its technical merits, experiment has come to stand for the exclusive association of social psychology with general psychology and for its departure from sociology and the social sciences. Doubtless such was not the intention of its founders, but that is the way in which it has evolved. Furthermore, its syllabi of research and teaching turn out psychological experts who are sociological
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The phenomenon of social representations plays a central part, and this is what they have in common. If we add to these certain aspects of a sociology of everyday life - which has not, moreover, been adequately formulated - we might reconstruct a general science which would encapsulate a whole galaxy of related investigations. I see it as a concrete realization of Vygotsky's remark: 'The problem of human thought and language thus extends beyond the limits of natural science and becomes the focal point of historical human psychology, i.e., of social psychology' (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 95).

This would be a science of consensual universes in evolution, a cosmogony of physical human existence. I do not ignore the difficulties of such an undertaking, nor the fact that it may be unrealizable, any more than I ignore the gap between such a project and the modest achievements that are our own to date. But I cannot see this as a sufficient reason for not considering it and setting it forth as clearly as possible in the hope that others will share my faith in it.

Notes

1 Editor's note: Moscovici is referring to a painting by Magritte which may be less familiar to English-speaking readers. The better-known picture dates from 1926 and shows a simple image of a pipe with the legend 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' written below it. In 1966 he produced another painting called 'Les Deux Mysteres' ('The Two Mysteries') in which the 1926 painting is shown on an easel in a plain room with a second image of a pipe floating in the air above it. Questions of representation related to both these pictures are discussed extensively by Michel Foucault (1983).

2 Experiments by Tversky and Kahneman (1974) have happily succeeded in proving that this assumption is unfounded and owes its popularity to a misunderstanding that stems from artificial tenets.

3 We discuss social representations again after we have outlined the criticisms levelled at the concept of attitude which is, by definition, a mediating cause. In this way we hope to demonstrate the autonomy of social psychology and to include in the collective context a theory (i.e., that of attitudes) that has become too individualistic. The work of Jaspers and Fraser (1984) lends much weight to this point of view.