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Review of *Psychoanalysis: Its image and its public* by Serge Moscovici

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The theory of social representations has now become a key approach in European and Latin American psychology, though English audiences often find the theory to be too abstract and too vague. This is partly the result of the unavailability of an English translation of Moscovici’s classic study, originally published in 1961 and based on research done in the 1950s. With the belated English publication of Moscovici’s *Psychoanalysis: Its image and its public* we see that all the major concepts of the theory – objectification, classifying, naming, anchoring, cognitive polyphasia, etc. – have already made their appearance in this publication as tools to interpret his rich data. The data itself was collected in order to answer the very concrete question of *how and why did the odd invention of a little known Viennese psychiatrist, psychoanalysis, come to be assimilated into the social fabric of French society?* Indeed, psychoanalysis infiltrated everyday language, the interpretation of mundane human behaviour and was used as a tool for social groups to advance their own interests.

At a more general level, the book deals with what happens to scientific knowledge (in this case psychoanalysis) as it becomes public knowledge, the collective coin, common sense. Moscovici makes a strong case for understanding common sense on its own terms, as serving its own functions, not as a degenerative, distorted or vulgarized form of science – even today this “deficiency” model makes up 90% of studies in the public’s understanding of science. Instead, common sense socializes science by using it to “shape social behaviour and orient social communication” (p30). What is of interest to the public about nuclear weapons, bird flu and genetically engineered food is not so much the technical aspects of the science but how it might impact on their lives.

Common sense and science have their own ‘logics’ but each can be a source of inspiration for the other. At the time of the book’s publication the sociology of science was in its infancy and its focus tended to be on science as an extension of and corrective to common sense.¹ Science was thought to be the last and highest form of knowledge, an elite knowledge that might eventually displace the illusions of the crowd. It was believed that science was inspired by common sense – e.g. physic’s concept of ‘force’ is derived from the image of an agent pushing – but once a scientific account was formulated it would eventually destroy its source. By re-evaluating common science Moscovici opens up a new domain of study – it is now legitimate to study science becoming common science, a process unique to the modern world.²

Let us, at this point, consider precisely what Moscovici discovered as psychoanalysis (science) was creatively assimilated by the French public into common sense. Part I of the book presents extensive questionnaire and interview data concerning people’s understanding and attitude toward psychoanalysis. Ask people, “what is psychoanalysis” and they will tell you that the personality is split between ‘conscious’ and ‘unconscious’, ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’, ‘false’ and ‘authentic’, ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’, ‘superficial’ and ‘fundamental’ and the goal of psychoanalysis is “laying bare of an authentic personality” (p60), an idea that elaborates Freud’s ‘making unconscious conscious’. ‘Repression’ and ‘suppression’ are understood to be expressions of the conflict between the two parts of the Self, and

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¹ The 1961 edition was filled with references to sociologists of knowledge. However, in the 1976 edition, from which the English translation was made, these references are replaced with mostly psychologists.

² The modern character of social representations is why Moscovici (1984) elsewhere refers to them as a ‘phenomenon’, not simply as a theory.
the result of their workings is a ‘complex’. No where in this common sense model do we find Freud’s central and unifying concept, the ‘libido’ – a situation comparable to leaving ‘gravity’ out of Newton’s theory. Psychoanalysis is not being taken on as a whole; instead, its different elements are being selected and reconstructed in this new logic.

The fact that social representations are processes, not things, is often lost in translation. Researchers to often ask, “What are the representations of x?” rather than “by what processes is x produced and maintained?” We would do better to speak of social representing, which occurs through the dual processes of objectification and anchoring.

The first process of objectification integrates elements of science into social reality– i.e. ontologizes science. Psychoanalytic ideas become real things. As Freud blurred the distinction between the pathological and normal, “now we no longer simply say of someone that he is stubborn and quarrelsome; we also say that he is aggressive and repressed” (p. 56). Objectification is a process of projecting representations onto the world, giving them a concrete almost physical image. This imagistic core to representations is a distinctive characteristic of the logic of common sense. One can almost touch a ‘complex’ and see the ‘unconscious’. In objectification, elements of psychoanalysis are naturalized and then used to categorize the world – e.g. our automatic and mechanical labelling of a linguistic mistake ‘a Freudian slip’.

The second major process, anchoring, explains how science is used to model and express social relations, as a tool for social groups to advance their interests. Moscovici describes it as a defensive manoeuvre, circling around an unfamiliar object deciding what aspects to reject and familiarize ourselves with. The familiarization is rather like the ‘structural mapping’ described by metaphor researchers, in which an object (e.g. life) is metaphorically understood through another (e.g. a journey) (see Lakoff, 1987). Psychoanalysis is likened to more familiar activities such as conversation and confession. Familiarization is never neutral; it always feeds into the projects of existing social groups. Thus, there are different representations of psychoanalysis for Christians, Marxists, French, Americans, ethics, politics, etc.

This leads us to Part II of the book, Moscovici’s content analysis of the French press. Here we see the process of anchoring in action, as different groups position themselves in relation to psychoanalysis. In the 1950 the French press was highly differentiated between Liberals, Catholics and Communists, providing Moscovici an excellent opportunity to compare the respective representations and forms of communication practiced by the groups.

The liberal press communicates its representation through diffusion, which has an equal relationship between addresser and addressee because its goal is to please the public and attract readers. It distances itself from psychoanalysis through “irony, growing reservations about psychoanalysis, the creation of an aura of humour and references to specialists” (p. 217) which leads its readers to develop opinions about psychoanalysis.

In contrast, the Catholic press attempts to propagate a particular representation of psychoanalysis through communication that is authoritative (not authoritarian) and serious. There are direct parallels between psychoanalytic practice and Catholic confession, creating a situation in which Catholics must accept some aspects of the new science while at the same time differentiating it from their own practice. The resulting image is one that separates psychoanalytic therapy from Freud’s ‘theory of
man,’ accepting the former and rejecting the latter. This creates a certain attitude toward psychoanalysis.

Lastly, propaganda, the form of communication adopted by the Communist press, does not engage with psychoanalysis, but rather immediately slots it into the ‘bad’ column of its dichotomized view of the world. Psychoanalysis is always referred to in combination with ‘American,’ ‘bourgeoisie,’ ‘capitalist’ or ‘pseudo-science’. In time any word in this semantic cluster brings to mind the rest and thus this form of communication leads to stereotypes.

In sum, different representations of psychoanalysis are constructed in the mass media through different group interests (Liberal, Catholic and Communist) using different communication genres (i.e. diffusion, propagation and propaganda) leading to different psychological outcomes (i.e. opinions, attitudes, and stereotypes). Psychoanalysis becomes a cultural symbol appropriated and moulded to particular needs, like a tool shaped and sharpened to do a specific job. This conceptualization of groups might be fruitfully used by Social Identity Theorists, who emphasize the cognitive process of self-categorization in group membership. Moscovici’s study can add to this an analysis of groups through the communicative genres that sustain them and through content of representations developed in them.

To immerse oneself in Psychoanalysis: Its image and its public is to enter into a rich new world of social psychological inquiry complete with distinctive epistemological, methodological and interpretational directives. It gives us powerful new questions like “how does science turn into common knowledge?” and provides us with fertile ground for answering old questions and formulating new ideas: What is a group? Are all groups based on the same social psychological processes? How are cultural symbols used to creatively construct new identities and realities? How do we utilize different forms of knowledge in our everyday lives? And how do we unite human psychology with contemporary social and cultural questions?

To conclude, Moscovici’s classic work has been known for a long time now but only superficially. The English publication of this massive study has the potential to radically change our own representation of social representations and the task of psychology more generally.

References
