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Social Representations in and of the Public Sphere: Towards a Theoretical Articulation¹

SANDRA JOVCHELOVITCH

Envisaging public life--of which we know very well there is all too little--requires an almost childlike feeling of omnipotence.

Alexander Kluge

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I propose a dialogue between the theory of social representations and the notion of a public sphere. I believe that such a dialogue can furnish some genuine insights for an understanding of contemporary societies and of the social subjects who emerge from them. In the field of social psychology, the study of social representations has received a great deal of attention. The concept made its entrance in the discipline through the work of Serge Moscovici on representations of psychoanalysis in France (Moscovici, 1961). More than three decades later, research on social representations had developed sufficiently to produce a field of discussion in its own right. There are plenty of issues concerning the concept and the theory that need to be clarified and developed and it is within such a perspective that I locate my contribution here.

Research developed around the concept of social representations constitutes a new paradigm for the understanding of social-psychological phenomena. Drawing as it does on both sociological and psychological traditions, with ancestors as diverse as Durkheim, Piaget and Freud, the theory endeavours to counteract an individualistic perspective in the field of social psychology. It also aims to resolve many dichotomies such as those between (a) subject and object, (b) individual and society and (c) theory and method that have continued to plague social psychology. Over against a philosophy of the "pure" subject and a philosophy of the "pure" object, the theory of social representations emerges as a framework which centres its epistemic gaze on the relationship between the two. As such, it avoids being a social psychology of the isolated subject or a social psychology bereft of people. History, culture and society are not abstract structures or mere variables influencing the minds of people and the human subject is not homeless in the world. Thus, social psychology must focus on those processes which lie at the crossroads between the individual and society.

I look at the relationship between social representations and the public sphere taking into consideration these elements of the theory. This relationship is complex and must be unpacked carefully. I do that at two levels which, although related, must be analysed separately. The first concerns the *logic of production* of social representations. It concerns, therefore, social representations *in* the public sphere. I argue that the public sphere, as a space of intersubjective reality, is constitutive of social representations, in that it provides the ground for their emergence. The second level examines the problem of social representations *of* the public sphere, that is, how the public sphere itself becomes an object upon which social representations develop. The arguments I present in this paper to relate social representations--as specific social psychological phenomena--and the public sphere---as a specific social space---are rooted in the processes through which the human subject develops a self, creates symbols and opens up to the diversity of a world of others. Drawing on the concept of potential space (Winnicott, 1967), I propose a cross-level analogy between the development of symbols in the individual subject and the formation of social representations.

The two aspects of the problem--social representations in the public sphere and social representations of the public sphere--result in a very specific configuration. If, as I shall argue, social representations are bound to a public sphere, and if, at the same time, in the process of their construction, they form an objectified knowledge of the public sphere, then to look at their content and form is of crucial importance to any intellectual perspective concerned with the possibilities of common life, which goes beyond privatised interests without losing sight of the individual. This is the underlying presupposition that guides my effort here.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

In this section I discuss the links between otherness--as inter-subjectivity--and the public sphere in the constitution of social representations. I do so by discussing (i) the public sphere as the space of otherness and (ii) the place of otherness in the constitution of symbolic activity. I also discuss the extent to which (i) social representations build upon the representational activity of the human subject and (ii) social representations go beyond, and therefore are distinct from, the individual work of symbolic representation. I hope it will soon become clear that these distinctions are an analytical device. The emergence of the ontological human subject, with a proper sense of self, is bound to the emergence of symbolic activity, which, in turn, depends upon a social reality. The concept of potential space as proposed by Winnicott (1961/1974) can shed light on these intricate dialectics and I shall use it to guide my theoretical endeavour. Piaget (1964/1968) is another important source of

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my discussion. His account of the genesis of representations and their relationship to symbols develops in parallel with the process of "de-centring" which the human subject must undergo in order to construct herself. I believe that such a line of argumentation has two important implications;

(a) It debunks the idea of the individual as a private enterprise. The individual, in herself, is the outcome of a process of socialisation. Thus, my argument profits heavily from what Mead (1934) has shown, namely, individuation and socialisation are different aspects of one and the same process in the ontogenesis of human experience. The private individual is, rather, a historical form; it emerges in specific societies and tends to prevail in those societies where public life becomes highly privatised (Rose, 1989). When psychologists individualise the human subject to the extreme of individualism², they are acting out the pressures of a historical reality. It is faintly ironic that a stance that attempts to deny social reality is itself a social reality. Just like any other social actor, the psychologist cannot escape it.

(b) It maintains a perspective on the individual subject as someone capable of agency and of creative action upon the world. The claim that the individual subject constitutes a domain of understanding and analysis in his own right does not necessarily entail an individualistic approach.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE AS THE SPACE OF OTHERNESS

There are basically two historical moments that are considered to be paradigmatic for the notion of a public sphere (Habermas, 1990). These two moments correspond to the fully developed Greek city-state and to the transformations which occurred in Europe from the seventeenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century. Although the notions of public with which we deal today were shaped in the process of the rise, transformation and eventual disintegration of the so-called bourgeois public sphere, notions defining what is to be considered public and what is not—that is to say, what is private—can be found in a more distant past which goes back to Ancient Greece. Indeed, as Habermas points out, "since the Renaissance the model of the Hellenic public sphere, as handed down to us in the form of Greek self-interpretation, has shared with everything else considered 'classical' a peculiar normative power." (Habermas, 1990:4)

I would suggest that this peculiar normative power to which Habermas refers derives its strength from the peculiarity of the Greek experience itself. Arendt (1958) traces back the meanings and the structural configurations of the public sphere in Greece, highlighting the extent to which its original understanding has been lost. In a way her work is a critique of all Western philosophers, who preferred to speak of Man as a universal category rather than of human plurality (Schürmann, 1989).

It is in the light of Arendt's work that I would like to identify some of the normative elements permeating the experience of the Greek public sphere. According to Arendt, to live among people in a human fashion presupposes the possibility of escaping from the realm of mere necessity to a quite different domain—the domain of action or politics in which people realise their capacities for speech and action. The condition for both speech and action is human plurality, "the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (1958:7). It is because people are different—and yet the same—that action and speech become necessary: if we were all identical there would be no need to communicate or to act upon an unvarying sameness; if we had nothing in common at all speech would lose its very basis and action would cease to justify itself. It is indeed in the experience of plurality and in the diversity of different perspectives—which, nevertheless, can lead to a consensus among the public that the meaning of the public sphere is to be found. Arendt points out that the term public indicates two interrelated, but not identical, phenomena: it signifies first, that what is public can be seen and heard by all and is accessible to the largest possible number of people; second, it means the world itself, to the extent that it is common to all people and different from each person's own private place within that world. Hence the public realm as the common world establishes the links that both relate and separate people, that bring them together and yet prevent them from falling over each other (Arendt, 1958:50-52).

At the same time public life provides the necessary conditions for both history and permanence in that its public nature allows for the survival of whatever can be saved from the natural destruction of time. The public space does not exist for one generation alone and is not confined to the living. Although it is the space people enter when they are born and leave behind when they die, it transcends the life cycle of anyone generation. Its immortality comprises its capacity to produce, to maintain and eventually to transform a history preserved in artefacts and in the narratives of people's actions. If people were to remain isolated within their own private space neither history nor political life would be possible. It is the arena of public life which provides the conditions not only for discovering the common concerns of the present but also for identifying what the present owes to the past and what hopes it has for the future.

² See Allport, G.W. (1985). The historical background of modern social psychology. In G. Lindzey & E. Aronson (eds) *A Handbook of Social Psychology* (vol. 1, 3rd ed, pp. 1-46) Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley. Allport defends strongly the non-existence of social psychological phenomena which would go beyond the individual as the centre of analysis. See also Brock, A. (1992). Was Wundt a 'Nazi'? Volkerpsychologie, Racism and Anti-Semitism. *Theory and Psychology*, 2, (2), 205-223, for a very interesting discussion of Allport's essay and his extreme animosity towards all forms of collective psychology including Durkheim's theory of collective representations.

Furthermore, the public realm is the very space that makes dialogue possible, since its reality is plural, that is, it depends upon the presence of a multitude of different perspectives. Although the world is common to all, everyone present has a different position within it and these positions can never coincide. The only possibility of convergence in perspectives depends upon the outcome of a process of speech and action that contains both the similarities and the differences between people—that is, dialogue.

The liberal model of the public sphere in bourgeois society lies at the heart of the debate concerning such issues as democracy, citizenship, political participation and so forth. Taking Habermas' (1990) work as their starting point, social scientists of different disciplines have queried both the denotation and the connotation of his model of the public sphere. In what sense does it epitomise the principles of freedom, equality and solidarity, that since the eighteenth century, are the cornerstones of western rationality? Habermas' work is centred on the emergence, development and transformation of the bourgeois public sphere and remains the most complete account to date of this new category of capitalist society. In it, Habermas defines the public sphere as a space where citizens meet and talk to each other in a fashion that guarantees access to all. It is a sphere where the principle of accountability is developed. At the same time, it implies a dialogue among citizens which incorporates a number of ideal features such as: i) debate in the public space must be open and accessible to all; ii) the issues at stake must be of common concern, mere private interests are not admissible; iii) inequalities of status are to be disregarded; and iv) the participants are to decide as peers. The outcome of such a public debate, then, would be public opinion considered as a consensus reached through free debate about common life. The use of reason as the guide for public debate was another novelty in the liberal model of the public sphere; through it, society as a whole generates a knowledge of itself. Habermas is here concerned to demonstrate and to discuss how the critical functions of the public sphere are weakened through its structural transformation. Although his critique is sharp and trenchant, Habermas, in describing how the public realm unfolds in modern societies, demonstrates how it evokes a commitment—as a space that can be recovered; as an ideal that guides the rationalisation of power through public discussion (Habermas, 1992).

There are a number of important criticisms of Arendt's and Habermas' accounts, most of which relate to their alleged idealisation of the public sphere. It is in the feminist literature that we can find the sharpest critique to both Arendt and Habermas (Pitkin, 1981; Landes, 1988; Dietz, 1990; Ryan, 1992; Fraser, 1992). These critiques basically contend that the bourgeois public sphere never came to actualise its presuppositions and its utopian potential was never fully realised; the actualisation of the public sphere depended upon a number of exclusions, the most important of which was gender. Habermas has responded to these critiques recognising that the "growing feminist literature has sensitized our awareness of the patriarchal character of the public sphere itself. . ." (1992:427). However, neither Habermas nor expressive feminist theorists would be willing to deny the importance of the public sphere as a guiding concept in democracy. Fraser points out its importance as an arena for both dialogue and political participation which is not purely guided by the logic of market exchange (1992). And Benhabib (1992; 1993) goes further stating that feminists have lacked a critical model of public and private spaces and therefore "rather than just criticising Habermas' theory, it would be more appropriate for them to form an alliance with it. The public sphere, thus, is discussed today both as a guiding concept in the political project of establishing a radical democracy *and* a historical phenomenon, open to evaluation and critique.

It is in the light of the constitutive aspects of the public realm that I suggest its correspondence with otherness as an inter-subjective space. The public sphere as a space that exists because of human plurality, as a space that is sustained because of human diversity, as a space that introduces the notion of accountability and finds its expression in dialogue, brings to the fore the dialectics between the one and the other and highlights the necessity of taking into account a theory of the self in assessing the quality of both public and private lives. For who am I but the self the others present to me? The mirror as an object of self-confrontation reminds us of the myth of Narcissus and remains a sign of how deceitful the juxtaposition of images can be when only controlled by one's own eyes. Confrontation is possible due to another mirror in everyday life—the face of an other, the eyes of an other, the gesture of an other. The fact that humans can interrogate themselves and can use different territories and devices to reflect their own identities just demonstrates that beyond any form of isolationism or individualism, the possibility of true individuality lies in the presence of others. The importance of a community follows from that. It evinces a sense of "we" in the constitution of the individual self, which attests that private lives do not emerge from within but in relationships, that is, in public.

But if public life is a constituent element in the genesis and development of individual lives, it can also cast light on those specific social-psychological phenomena that are firmly rooted in public life. Harré (1981) draws on the public and private spheres to discuss cognitive processes involving essentially socially distributed effects and conditions. Harré's analyses illuminate the subjective aspects of public' action, in which private individuals assemble to perform rituals of knowing and recognition, of claims, demands and social roles. It is hard to imagine how those processes could take place in the absence of a public arena, where the presence of others guarantees the basic condition for them to occur. More than that, it is through the actions of social actors, performing acts evoked by the demands of a generalised other, that the public sphere appears as the space in which a community as a whole can develop and sustain a knowledge of itself.

SYMBOLIC ACTIVITY

The relationship between the concept of social representations and representational activity *per se* is ambiguous. This is because the study of individual representations arouses the ghost of cognitivism and of a wholly individualistic perspective.

Perhaps this is a spectre of Durkheim's own creation (Durkheim, 1898) since almost a century later he is still, of all major sociologists, the one most hostile to psychology (Farr, 1994). The weight of cognitive theories--where a representation is a mere reflection of the outside world in the mind or a mark of the mind which is reproduced in that world--cannot be lightly dismissed. There is, however, another ghost which continues to haunt the study of individual representations: that of Freud and of the whole literature inspired by the psychoanalytic theory of symbols. The theory of social representations undeniably draws on a theory of symbolic activity. Social representations are regarded, according to Moscovici, as forms of social knowledge with two, as inseparable as the two sides of a sheet of paper; the figurative, or image-making side, and the symbolic side (Moscovici, 1981). It is, therefore, the latter ghost which needs to be made "real", if the complexities of the relationship between the unconscious, the representation and symbolic activity are to be acknowledged within the theory of social representations.

The public nature of the processes underlying the genesis of social representations becomes clear if we look carefully at the origins and development of symbolic activity. Winnicott's model of 'self development' and Piaget's research on the cognitive development of the child exemplify the complex inter-connections between the infant and its environment as well as identifying the main elements that make these connections meaningful. In their view symbolic activity is deeply rooted in the development of the self, or rather, it emerges as an outcome of the fully developed self. Piaget and Winnicott considered that it is not until the human being can integrate his thoughts and feelings about himself into a global perspective which extends beyond personal interest to include the whole of humankind, that he will become an individual in the fullest sense of the word. I am aware that there are many possible readings of their work, as well as many criticisms. As with all creative scientists, their work is controversial and is sometimes misunderstood. Here, I shall simply explore a few of their insights, combining them with the theory of social representations.³

According to Winnicott (1965), the journey from absolute dependence on others to a relative independence of them is what characterises the development of the human being. This journey is based upon what Winnicott has called holding and handling, activities permeating the relationship between an infant and its caretaker. The caretaker provides a reliable holding for the immature and weak existence of the infant. Progressively, however, the caretaker must start to handle the baby, which involves an alternation between absence and presence. These are the first intrusions of an outside reality upon the sensory-psycho experience of the infant. The caretaker is not always there; she has an independent existence outside of and beyond her relationship with the infant. From the experience of holding" there arises a sense of trust in the environment that the caretaker represents, and from the experience of handling the first elements of ego-relatedness, or communication in the full sense of the word, develops.

Winnicott's account of the transition from absolute dependence to a state of relative independence coincides in many ways with Freud's description of the transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle (Freud, 1920). But Winnicott developed this transition further than Freud, for he regarded the reality principle as an insult in the literal sense of the word. According to him "the Reality Principle is the fact of the existence of the world whether the baby creates it or not, it is an arch-enemy of spontaneity, creativity and the sense of the real" (Winnicott, 1971 :236). Since growing, however, involves an acceptance of a world that is "not-me" and of a relationship to it, how does the infant cope with the insult of the reality principle? The answer Winnicott offers is the substance of illusions or what he has called the *potential space*. For him, the potential space is an intermediate state between the infant's incapacity and his progressive capacity to acknowledge and to come to terms with reality. The illusion experienced by the infant is that of *omnipotence*, which becomes possible through the holding and handling of his needs in a condition of ego relatedness; omnipotence that is real for the child but an illusion from the point of view of an observer. It is in this space that reality and fantasy meet and become one, through the brief experience of omnipotence guaranteed by a caring environment in which the infant has the illusion of creating that which is already there to be found.

The notion of potential space is, perhaps, Winnicott's most original contribution. He developed the concept from direct observation of the relationships between children, their caretakers and the first objects they adopt as their own special possessions (Winnicott, 1951). This first object--the transitional object--has a particular importance for the child. The transitional object is the first "not-me" possession and it plays a crucial theoretical role in regard to the conception of illusion as developed by Winnicott. It is related to what Laplanche (1987:94) would call the acquisition of a 'first-me' possession. This is the first important step on the road to acquiring a sense of self. A further step in the development of the potential space between the individual self and the environment is the play of young children. Playing is a direct development of the transitional phenomena just described. It involves trust in the environment and a capacity to be "alone" in the presence of others. At the same time, playing consists of "playing with reality"; it retains the experience of omnipotence and thus creates a reality for the child. Winnicott considered playing to be the basis of cultural experience and of creativity in adult life. Communication" in a similar vein, occurs in the overlaps between potential spaces which transcend the fundamental boundary between the "me" and the "not-me". Indeed, if for Winnicott the very essence of growth is the construction of a boundary where the self and the inner reality begin to be *one* in relation to a shared reality of *others*, the potential space transcends this boundary. In the potential space people are neither in the world of fantasy, nor in the world of shared reality, but in a paradoxical third place that belongs to both of these places simultaneously.

³ It might be argued that this is a selective reading of these authors. Indeed, it is. I would consider it very difficult, if not impossible, to escape from a selective reading in social sciences. I do try, however, to be explicit as to my assumptions and choices.

In an illuminating paper about the concept of sign in the works of Vgotsky, Winnicott and Bakhtin, Leiman (1992) demonstrates how Winnicott's notion of transitional phenomena is crucial to an explanation of the quite complex "interplay between the subjective and objective aspects of the intersubjective space". Western philosophy has so insistently imposed its tradition of focusing *either* on the subjective *or* on the objective, that the space of interplay between the two is often ignored. However, it is exactly in that space that we can better understand the roots of symbolic activity. The main element in Winnicott's "understanding of the 'third area of living', which he approaches by the concepts of transitional phenomena and potential space, is the emergence of a symbol in the meeting point of union and separateness" (1992:215).

The potential space, therefore, is the space of symbols. Symbols presuppose a capacity to evoke presence despite absence since the fundamental aspect of a symbol is that it stands for something else. In that sense; symbols create the object represented, constructing a new reality out of a reality that is already there. Symbols fuse the subject and the object, because they are an expression of the relationship between the two. Through symbols, different things can stand for each other and can coalesce into similarity; they allow for infinite variability and yet, they are referential. Thus, it is of the essence of symbolic activity—the activity of the potential space—to acknowledge a shared reality—the reality of others. Yet, it is a creative acknowledgement and leads to involvement with others and with the object-world. The reference to the world of others is what guarantees the creative nature of symbolic activity, so one's experience can build upon the experience of others continually creating the experience of a shared reality. That is why Winnicott says that it is out of difference, in every sense of the word, that the human self grows, for "when one speaks of a man, one speaks of him along with the summation of his cultural experiences. The whole forms the unit" (Winnicott, 1976:99).

As Davis & Wallbridge (1981) point out, Winnicott's views are very similar to those of Piaget concerning the formation of symbols and the symbolic play of the young child. Although the foci of their concerns were quite distinct, with Winnicott concentrating on emotional development and Piaget on intellectual development, they could both agree that the affective and intellectual dimensions are inextricably fused in the development of the child's sense of reality.

Piaget's work is complex and highly relevant to social psychology. I am aware of the critiques which have been surrounding his oeuvre, specially in the Anglo-Saxon world (Duveen, 1994). Here, I draw on Piaget because I believe his notion of decentring is essential to understand the ontogenesis of cognitive development and symbolic activity. This conception pervades all of his work, and constitutes, in his own account, one of the most important facets of the development of cognitive structures in the child. Piaget compares the process of decentring, which the child undergoes, to a "miniature Copernican Revolution". As he says, "at the starting point of this development the neonate grasps everything to himself-or in more precise terms, to his own body-whereas at the termination of this period, i.e., when language and thought begin, he is for all practical purposes but one element or entity among others in a universe that he has gradually constructed himself, and which hereafter he will experience as external to himself" (Piaget, 1964/1968:9). The emergence of a "self" as such, in opposition to an external world, is closely connected to (or even more, is a pre-condition of) the transformations of the mind that permit the representation of things and, therefore, the development of symbolic thought and language. In the register of knowledge the activity of the subject requires a permanent decentring. It is this decentring that "makes the subject enter upon, not so much an already available and therefore external universality, as an uninterrupted process of coordinating and setting in reciprocal relations" (Piaget, 1968/1971:139).

Now, current research on social representations has taken into consideration many of the processes described above, although in a slightly different form. Jodelet (1984; 1991) fashions the concept of social representations and their development into a theory by taking into account what a representation is. She argues that the act of representing overcomes the rigid divide between the external and internal universes. A representation involves an active element of construction and re-construction; the subject is the author of these mental constructions which he can transform as they develop. From her analysis of the act of representing she identifies five characteristics which are important in the construction of a social representation. These are the referential aspects of a representation, that is, the fact that it is always the reference of someone to something; its imaginative and constructive character, which renders it autonomous and creative, and finally its social nature, the fact that the "categories which structure and express the representation are borrowed from a common culture and these categories are those of language" (Jodelet, 1984:365). It is clear from Jodelet's account just how crucial the act of representing is to the very construction of a social representation. It should also be clear how her account can be combined with Winnicott's notion of symbolic activity and potential space.

Kaës (1984), in an explicit attempt to construe a representation from a psychoanalytic perspective, develops the hypothesis that a representation is a work, a work of recall of that which is absent and a work of liaison. Moreover, Kaës argues, the very processes which are at work in the forming of a representation are those which psychoanalysis has discovered in regard to dreams, mental life and the nature of the unconscious: condensation and displacement. They both relate to a capacity for playing with meaning. Indeed, the unconscious and its processes, Freud remarks, "is not simply more careless, more irrational, more forgetful and more incomplete than waking thought; it is completely different from it qualitatively and for that reason not immediately comparable with it. It does not think, calculate or judge in any way at all; it restricts itself to giving things a new form" (Freud, 1900:507). It is precisely this capacity to give things a new form-through the active playing of the psyche which constitutes a representation. In Freud's view the primary material of the psyche cannot express itself directly. The drives find their way of expression through a representation. The psyche's representational activity thus involves a mediation between the subject and the object-world. The latter re-appears, in the form of representations, re-created by the subject, who in her turn, is also re-created by her very relationship with the object-world. It is possible to ask here, what is the substance of these representations, besides delegating the affective load of the drives into something of a different form? The substance, or content of which

representations are made, are symbols.

Piaget has examined the problem of the unconscious symbol in his studies on the development of the symbol and the mental image. In his view, it is just pointless to consider an unconscious domain for affects and a conscious domain for thought and intellectual life, since "the unconscious is everywhere, and there is an intellectual as well as an affective unconscious" (Piaget, 1962: 172). Further, he argues, the trade-offs between the unconscious and the conscious are present in every psychic process, so even the most elementary symbols are at one and the same time both conscious and unconscious. It is particularly apposite to the purposes of the present discussion, to single out the relationships Piaget establishes between the symbolic play and the dreams of children. In the ludic activity of the child there are striking similarities, in terms of both symbolic structure and content, with the processes at stake in oneiric activity. It is not surprising at all to find out that the processes underlying both are condensation and displacement, for both are characterised by the use of symbolic representation. Even the most basic symbols are the outcome of blending images, of contrasts, of identifications that condense, as it were, a variety of objects, affects and significant others at the disposal of the child. It follows that there must be a displacement of meanings among those various objects ("object" here stands for things and people), giving to one object the reference of the other, evoking in one the presence of the other, mixing in one the image and sound of the other and so forth. It becomes clear that condensation and displacement are inseparable aspects of symbolic activity.

To review. Representational activity is a work of the psyche. This work happens through the unconscious processes which Freud described as condensation and displacement. If we consider symbolic activity in conjunction with Winnicott's notion of potential space, we can conclude that symbols develop on the basis of and are embedded in representational activity. The human subject constructs, in her dealings with the world, a new world of meaning. On the one hand, it is through her activity and relations to others that representations emerge, allowing for the mediation between the subject and the world that she both discovers and constructs. On the other hand, representations permit the existence of symbols-these fragments of social reality mobilised by the activity of the subject to enable her to make sense and to re-shape the environment within which she finds herself. Needless to say, from both a developmental and conceptual perspective, there is no possibility for symbolic formation outside of a network of already constituted signifieds. It is upon and within this web that the subject's work of re-creating what is already there takes place. The psychic subject therefore, is neither abstracted from social reality, nor condemned to be a mere reflexion of that social reality. Her task is to handle creatively the permanent tension between a world that, although preceding her, is open to her efforts to be a subject.

These analogous processes, I want to contend, are necessary in order to understand the full implications of social representations as phenomena mediating between the individual and society. They highlight the psychological foundations of social representations theory and explain some of the intricate trade-offs between psychic investments and social reality. The interplay between the unconscious dimensions of representations and the structuring of social representations as such, allows us to understand the range of phenomena at work in the symbolic construction of reality. The analysis of the conceptual field of a social representation confronts us, at one and the same time with the subjective nature of social reality and the objective nature of subjective reality. There is no dichotomy between the subject and the object except the acknowledgement of boundaries that need to be mediated, and indeed are, through the activity of humans. Such mediations bridge fundamental dimensions of psychic and social activity: presence and absence, self and otherness, symbols, and of course, language.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: THE CREATION OF A SHARED SYMBOLIC REALITY

In the foregoing I have attempted to show that the conditions of possibility for representational and symbolic activity lie in the space of interplay between subject and other. In discussing the genesis of representations and elf symbols I have concentrated upon the individual subject in order to show precisely how social reality-represented by others-institutes the individual subject. Now, one could ask: If any representation is social, what constitutes the specificity of social representations? As tempting as it may be, social representations cannot simply be equated with representational activity.

In fact, this discussion involves a subtle distinction. When talking about social representations there must be a shift in the level of analysis. The analysis is no longer centred on the ontological subject but on the phenomena produced by particular constructions of social reality. Thus, it is not a matter of moving away from the individual because she entails necessarily an individualistic perspective. Rather, the central issue is to acknowledge that in looking at social psychological phenomena-and at social representations in particular-we must be looking at the social as a whole. And just as the social is more than an aggregation of individuals, social representations are more than an aggregation of individual representations.

As I said before, this is not a new question in social psychology. From the Gestalt psychologists to Allport, there has been a lively debate about the relationship between units and the whole. In this regard, our discipline can profit from Piaget's views on structuralism⁴. As he points out, "in psychology, structuralism has long combatted the atomistic tendency to reduce wholes to their prior elements" (Piaget, 1968/1971 :4). Against such an atomistic tendency, Piaget argues that the notion of

⁴ Here I would like to make it clear that, as Piaget himself points out, there are several "structuralisms" , which have acquired various and different meanings: "Nevertheless, upon examining and comparing the various meanings it has acquired in the sciences and, unfortunately, at cocktail parties, a synthesis seems feasible. . ." (1968/1971, p. 3). I draw on this synthesis in order to construct my argument.

structure involves the key ideas of wholeness, transformation and self-regulation. The first two ideas are essential in understanding the contrast between structure and aggregates since the laws comprising the constitution of a structure cannot be reduced to the sum of its separate elements. On the contrary, they grant to the whole properties which are distinct from the properties of its elements. This position, of course, raises the problem of how wholes are formed, or how they are generated. Since we are not talking about a mere aggregation how can the genesis of wholeness be explained? The answer to this question is particularly revealing of Piaget's views, for he offers the notion of transformation to account both for a structure and its genesis as a whole. The problem of formation of wholeness can be "narrowed down once we take the second characteristic of structures, namely, their being systems of transformations rather than static forms, seriously" (Piaget, 1968/1971: 10).

I look at social representations in the light of Piaget's view. Their structure can only be understood in relation to how they are formed and transformed. The processes which form and transform them are embedded in the communicative and social practices of the public sphere: dialogue, talk, rituals, patterns of work and production, art, in short, social mediation. As such, analyses of social representations must concentrate on those processes of communication and vivid experience that not only generate them, but also confer upon them their peculiar structure. These processes are all mediations, since there is no experience of social life that can be considered immediate. To communicate is to mediate between a world of infinitely different perspectives; to work is to mediate between human needs and the raw material of nature; to develop rites, myths and symbols is to mediate between the alterity of an often mysterious world and the world of the human mind; they all reveal to a greater or lesser extent the quest of humans to make sense and to give meaning to their existence in the world.

Thus, it is social mediation in all its many public forms that generates social representations. Bearing in mind the close link between genesis, development and structure, I would suggest that social representations are social in their genesis and in their being; they would be of no use in a world of people who lived apart from each other; rather they would not exist. Social representations are forged by social actors to cope with the diversity and mobility of a world that, although belonging to each of us, transcends all of us. They are a "potential space" of common fabrication, where each person goes beyond the realm of individuality to enter another-yet fundamentally related-realm: the realm of public life. In this sense, social representations not only emerge through social mediation, but themselves constitute that mediation. At the same time, the imaginative and signifying character of social representations express, ultimately, psychic labour towards the world. Therefore, they express *par excellence* the space of the subject in his relationship to otherness, struggling to make sense of, to interpret and to construct the world in which he finds himself.

Objectification and anchoring are the specific forms of social mediation of social representations, which elevate to a "material" level the symbolic production of a community and account for the thing-like character of social representations. They can be better understood if compared to the processes discussed above, namely condensation and displacement. To objectify is to condense different meanings--often threatening, unnameable meanings--into a more familiar reality. In doing so, social subjects anchor the unknown to an institutionalised reality, and displace the established geography of significance which society, most of the time, struggles to maintain. They are processes which both maintain and challenge, which both repeat and overcome, which are shaped by, and yet also shape, the social life of a community.

In the light of the foregoing sections I would suggest that social representations are in the public' sphere. Public life, with its specific institutions, rituals, and meanings is the very locus in which social representations develop and acquire a concrete existence. It is in such a space that they incubate, crystallise and are transmitted to others. It is when people meet "out there" to talk and to make sense of their everyday lives that social representations are forged. When that happens social representations themselves become part of the fabric of public life. Social representations and public life therefore stand in a dialectic relationship to one another.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE AS AN OBJECT OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

In this section I discuss the relationship between the public sphere as a specific historical phenomenon and the making of social representations. How did "the public", as a distinct space of sociability, historically become an object to be socially represented, and what form does it assume today?

The emergence of a public sphere as an object to be socially represented is linked to the transformations which occurred in the relationship between the public and private domains in western societies and to the birth of individualism. The notions of public available today cannot be taken for granted, for they are the product of profound changes in western societies. The moment at which something like "a public" or "the public" becomes conceivable to social actors is a crucial one, and involves a number of important transformations in the very lives of the social actors who are there to realise such a conception.

The dimensions which I discuss here are interconnected and they all play a part in the process of constituting "the public" as a social object. Besides the rise of individualism, I shall consider changes in the nature of the public space itself and in the mass media of communication. Their close inter-relatedness is fairly obvious and we can cite a number of illustrative studies which demonstrate how these elements are at one and the same time dependent upon each other, and how, collectively, they conjure up a totally different scenario in the social life of modernity (Moscovici, 1985; Aries & Duby, 1991; Farr, 1991).

The rise of individualism cannot be understood outside a network of relations that displace traditional ways of regarding the subject and her subjectivity. As Moscovici states, "if asked to name the most important invention of modern times, I should have no hesitation in saying that it was the individual. From the first appearance of the *homo sapiens* to the

Renaissance, man's horizon was always 'we' or 'us'" (Moscovici, 1985: 13). Nevertheless, we know only too well that the 'we' has become an 'I', the family has become the nest of this new!' and the 'we' after that, was separated and kept outside the realm of subjectivity. Thus, the privacy of the bourgeois family was born, and with this new privacy, there arose the "public" as a separated, even opposed, realm. Aries (1987) in his study of the social history of the family, points out his surprise at the rarity of scenes depicting interiors or family life prior to the XVI century. The central character in these images was the crowd-but not, as he remarks, the anonymous crowd of contemporary cities. The crowd of those images was rather an assembly of neighbours, children, and *matronas*, who were not strangers to one another at all. For a long time, until the XVII century-the period in which the iconography of the family became extremely rich-the essential images were representations of external space and of public life. The upsurge of interest in family life expanded to such an extent that, by the end of the XVIII century, it had already destroyed that old type of external sociability in all social strata.

Thus, it is the progressive growth of an intimate space indoors, with its boundaries set by the patriarchal family, that engenders in the first place the public as a dimension of otherness. The public was outside; it was a different space, with its own rules and meanings. The crossing of thresholds from the domestic home to the public space meant also commuting between different ways of being. Habermas emphasises the importance of the family in shaping the new psychological experiences and a concern with the purely subjective; "no doubt existed about the patriarchal character of the conjugal family that constituted both the core of bourgeois society's private sphere and the source of the novel psychological experiences of a subjectivity concerned with itself" (Habermas, 1992:427).

The triumph of family life was, undoubtedly consolidated by social and historical circumstances. The new tension between the public and the private realms allocates the place of subjectivity *inside* and the place of politics, trade and literacy, *outside*. Although the public sphere in the Habermasian sense belongs to a private sphere of society (private in the sense that it is privatised individuals-private individuals before the state-who assemble to form a public), it is within this private realm that constitutes a public, that a new tension emerges, namely, between a space of intimacy and subjectivity inside and a space of discussion, debate and citizenship, outside.

The new importance granted to intimacy within the family circle consolidates individualism as it is known in modern societies. However, it is not only the sharp divide between the inner and the outer, or the bourgeois dialectic of inwardness and publicity that conspired to make of individualism the expression *par excellence* of the new subjectivity. The very transformations which occurred in the public space itself are to a considerable extent constitutive of individualism and these forces combine to mould the manners in which the public is to be represented.

The enormous distance between the public life that emerged in the XVIII century and the urban reality of cities is the clearest evidence of these transformations. Urbanisation, changes in the means of communication and transport, have profoundly transformed the very constitution of public spaces. In the literature and poetry produced in the XIX century we can detect the impact of such transformations. The slow walk and the figure of the *flaneur* contrast with the speed and anonymity that were to become the most visible signs of the contemporary city. The *flaneur*, that individual who used to walk slowly in the streets, making the cafes his dining room and the newsstand his library, has been overtaken by metropolitan passengers, whose condition is one of permanent movement: they must travel far, and the further they go the quicker it has to be.

It is no accident to find in Baudelaire, a visionary of modernity, and in Edgar Allan Poe, the *maudit* short-story teller of the English language, the same concern with the modern city and the potential for isolation within the crowd. Baudelaire wrote in *The Crowds*, "there is an art to enjoying the crowd. . . Multitude and solitude: equal and interchangeable terms for the poet. . . He who finds it easy to espouse the crowd knows feverish pleasures which will be eternally denied to the selfish man, who is tightly sealed as a strong box, or the lazy man, who is as self-contained as a mollusc" (Baudelaire, 1991:44). And Poe, in *The Man of the Crowd*, writes in a similar vein, "I had never before been in a similar situation, and the tumultuous sea of human heads filled me, therefore, with a delicious novelty of emotion. I gave up, at length, all care of things within the hotel, and became absorbed in contemplation of the scene without" (Poe, 1993:386). Such fragments catch the spirit of an era, where the multitude of passers-by still could provide ground for singularity to emerge, as happens in Poe's short-story, for instance. They portray an outdoor life that conveys with precision the period in which "the public" becomes one of the references of everyday life. And it is Baudelaire again who captures the transition between the crowds that he loved and the anonymous crowd in his poem *A Une Passante*. In that poem, he tells us about his eyes meeting the eyes of a woman passing-by in the opposite direction. The encounter of their eyes happens in a very brief moment and he feels ecstasy; what he sees is himself reflected in her eyes. Astonished with that look he stays there immobilised. When he turns back she is already gone, vanished in the middle of the crowd (Baudelaire, 1964: 114).

What we can see in Baudelaire's poem is nothing less than the description of an epoch that had eclipsed the possibilities of communication and encounter *in public* to allow for the consolidation of the "age of the crowd" (Moscovici, 1985). One of the most influential factors facilitating this process were the mass media of communication. In Moscovici's words, "the media penetrate every home and seek out every individual to change him *into* a member of a mass. . . It is the kind of mass, however, that is seen nowhere because it is everywhere. The millions of people who quietly read their paper and involuntarily talk like their radio are members of the new kind of crowd, which is immaterial, dispersed and domestic. . . They all stay at home, but they are all together, and all seem different, but are similar" (Moscovici, 1985: 193). The development of the mass media almost made irrelevant the coming together of people to engage in conversation and discussion, let alone to exchange information. The mediation of the mass media becomes a substitute for public experience as well as limiting the potential knowledge that this experience will develop of itself. The mass media, by pervading society, inform and form the public sphere. They do this in such a way that information about and representations of the

public space substitute for experience in the public space.

In the foregoing I have attempted to follow a line of argumentation whose logic lies in the dialectics between the emergence of the public as a social object, its relation to the formation of a private sphere of intimacy and the ways in which, the very transformations which the public space itself undergoes, institute individualism as the ultimate expression of personal life. The mass media cut right across this process not only in regard to their genesis but also in regard to the different historical forms they have assumed. The public that arises in the XVIII century, still retains traces of the old street sociability and its dynamic and emancipatory potential has been highlighted elsewhere in this paper. However, it is in the novelties of mass society that the actual foundations of what today is called individualism are to be found. And perhaps more than anything else the social representations of individualism have shaped the social representations of the public space. In the case of social psychology-and let us not forget how powerful science is in disseminating social representations-there can be no doubt, as Moscovici has shown, that "social psychology's contribution to the objectification of a social representation of mass society is made via the concept of the self or the individual" (1990: 77). This is the case he thinks, because the "individualism of social psychology is a fiction. Behind the person and the manner in which he or she is described, one can discern the mass society. Lurking there is the undefined mass, the anonymous crowd, a formless aggregation of little identities, each isolated from the others. To be sure, we are dealing with metaphors here, but metaphors that make large numbers the essence of sociability" (Moscovici, 1990:70). In shrinking the public space, mass society paradoxically places the individual in centre stage and leaves him there alone. Indeed, one need not go further to find the individual at the centre of western societies: be it as the only one responsible for his fate, or as the provider of intimacy in media shows of all kinds, the individual has never before been so exposed.

Some of the consequences of such conditions have been discussed by Sennet (1977) in his analyses of the various imbalances that exist in contemporary societies between public and private life. According to him, that vital part of one's life lying outside the walls of the family home has been lost and one's fellows in the public street have become threatening strangers. Silence has taken over from talk and observation has replaced participation as the only ways to experience public life. As a result, private life becomes out of focus, as increasingly narcissistic forms of intimacy set in. Even more, Sennet argues, the public world is usurped by a private psychic supremacy which leads to a deterioration of both individual and society.

While Sennet has been criticised for overlooking the importance of self-reflection as one of the marks of the reflection of modernity (Giddens, 1991), I would agree with his fundamental point, namely, the risks of an all-encompassing privatised intimacy invading and impoverishing public life. At a time when we are continuously bombarded with post-modernist critiques that prize difference, intimacy and the multiplication of meaning for their own sake, I think it is necessary to reaffirm that the production of meaning and difference is only possible in relation to the boundaries of a world of others. The limits set by such boundaries-unfortunately too often represented socially as a threat-have nothing at all to do with authoritarianism. Quite the opposite: it is because the boundaries are there that humans dare to transcend them, as it happens in the potential space of social representations and-to a great extent-in all forms of community life that stand as contradictory effects to the imperative of mass society.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have attempted to show that social representations are forms of symbolic mediation firmly grounded in the public sphere. The public sphere as a space of intersubjective reality-is the terrain in which they are generated, crystallised and eventually transformed. I also attempted to show how public life plays a constituent role in the processes of constitution and development of representations and symbols, which are the psychological foundations of social representations. The constitution of both individual and social life rests neither upon the individual nor upon society but upon those spaces of mediation that link and separate them at the same time. The understanding of the necessary trade-offs between the subject and social reality allow us to recover to the heart of social psychological knowledge the social world in which we live. In this sense, public life is not a variable, and even less an influence of what we are. It is the very cement which constitutes us as beings capable of speech and action, thought and passion, subjects and yet, subjected, to the conditions of life we produce.

The other side of the problem I discussed in this paper is not less important. The symbolic representations about public life are constitutive of what public life is and to look at their form and content is crucial to assess contemporary experiences of selfhood and the possibilities of preserving a *sensus communis*. Different historical realities produce different symbolic strategies and we all know just too well that today, perhaps more than ever, there is solitude, fear and threat out there. The social knowledge we produce in order to make sense of this reality, appropriate it and give it a meaning bears a constitutive impact on both public and private experience. From the space out there to the space within the problem remains the same. Therefore the need to demarcate and to preserve spaces of sociability and intimacy in order. to maintain differences and nuances, which are also the basis for finding similarities. The necessity of defending the existence of boundaries between the two spheres, the public and the private, and, at the same time, the recognition of their essential interconnection is decisive in modern societies. It is not only decisive to sustain the possibility of democracy and citizenship-where political subjects in their speech and by their action participate in that sphere of life that is common to all, and therefore cannot rely on purely private interests and intimacy. Furthermore, it is decisive to the constitution of a private life that bears in itself the full consequences of the fact that people live together and there is no human life without the presence of other human beings.

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