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## Chapter five

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### Social representations

[pp. 90-107]

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The schism between psychology and sociology which made social psychology possible is full of paradoxes and contradictions. At first, the split appears simply to reproduce that gulf between the 'social' and the 'individual' which is such a powerful conceptual and experiential component of modern culture; sociology as a discipline uncovers the social facts and psychology reveals the laws of behaviour. If this were the case we would expect to find positivist (and then structuralist) methods reigning in sociology, and phenomenological (and hermeneutic) approaches dominating psychology. In fact the institutional cleavage between the two was not that simple. As with a broken mirror, the individual/social dualism which structured the relation between psychology and sociology can be seen within each fragment.

In the buffer zone between the disciplines where the social psychologies lie, the individual or social focus, ostensibly dominant in each of the two main disciplines, swing around to turn into their opposite. This is manifest in the peculiar way in which psychological social psychology focuses on the power of situations and adopts a behaviourist methodology in laboratory experiments, and sociological social psychology (the microsociology of Garfinkel, Goffman, and Mead) stresses the 'social construction of reality' (Berger and Luckmann 1971). When new social psychology imported ideas from microsociology, it failed to challenge deeply rooted assumptions about individual action and social structure, and ethnogeny even reflected the rift between the two in its own texts (with Harré adopting a position sympathetic to structuralism, and Shotter defending hermeneutics).

The search continued for a properly social account of action [91] which would leave room for meaning, and which would satisfy mainstream old paradigm social psychologists (who were always suspicious of the varieties of ethogenic solutions to the crisis). Now a theory has arrived from continental Europe which seems to fit the bill. 'Social representations' have caught the imagination of social psychologists in Britain - the battleground between European and American traditions and paradigms - and the theory promises to dislodge attribution theory from its grip on the discipline.

The problems and confusions in the social representations literature, however, flow from the same antagonisms which have bedevilled the study of social interaction since its inception. There is a struggle between the two disciplines. However, this has not stopped social-psychological mavericks in each discipline looking to the other in the mistaken hope that they will find what is lacking in their own. Sociologists look to psychology for an account of individual agency, and psychologists see sociology as the science of the societal backdrop against which their subjects behave. Supporters of social representations theory still mistakenly believe that solutions lie in sociology, and have been all the more desperate and uncritical in their plundering of orthodox sociological theory for ideas. This is a hopeless exercise, as you shall see. I will briefly outline the social representations position and what it borrows from sociology, and then show why it is

so attractive to, and recuperable by, traditional social psychology. It will then be clearer why those who have studied social representations so far have been led to all but abandon the study of ideology and power.

### **‘Social representations’**

The ‘theory’ is, we are told, designed to be vague. The notion of social representations operates within a deliberately fuzzy framework, so that social psychologists can trawl for fruitful ideas without being constrained by overly scientific criteria and definitions. The vagueness is also a result of the long incubation period between Moscovici’s study of social representations of psychoanalysis in France in the 1950s, the suggestion that it may provide an alternative to traditional research into ‘attitudes’ in the 1960s, and the eventual ‘first outline’ of the theory to an English-speaking audience in the 1980s. A further contributory factor must be that [92] during this time, Moscovici was, by turns, railing against American social psychology, rehearsing established denunciations of crowd behaviour, and conducting quite orthodox ‘minority influence’ laboratory experiments.

Social representations link images and concepts, and circulate in shared social worlds. In different situations, within different group settings, the social representations operate as ‘the contemporary version of common sense’ (Moscovici 1981a: 181). The study of these representations, Moscovici argues, amounts to ‘the rediscovery of the social mind’ (Moscovici 1982: 116). People employ social representations to explain social, natural, and mental phenomena to each other, and this shared ‘reality’ of images and concepts is nowadays constructed out of the stories told by modern science. As well as being useful communicative devices, social representations also serve to translate difficult formulaic principles into ordinary language. Moscovici also claims that social representations fulfil, in the process of this reformulation of science into ‘common sense’, a fundamental psychological need: *‘The purpose of all representations is to make something familiar, or unfamiliarity itself, familiar’* (Moscovici 1984: 24).

You should start to get suspicious about the theory when we learn that the world of social representations emerges out of an individual psychological motivation common to all cultures, a ‘genuinely universal principle’ (Moscovici 1982:124). It operates as a point of resistance to the panoply of strange and alienating bureaucratic ideas which threaten contemporary creative thought. There are, Moscovici says, two worlds of meaning, or universes, in our society.

### *Consensuality*

Social representations comprise the ‘community of meanings’ which form the consensual universe. It is here that we feel ‘at home, sheltered’ (Moscovici 1981a: 189). A social psychology which explored the social representations of this consensual universe would have to be one which respected and valued this ‘common sense’. Attempts to discover the social representations of a culture or subculture would also require some sympathetic understanding of the forms of thought found in the system of signs which holds the world together as a meaningful place. Here the [93] programme of research Moscovici suggests links with the proposals made by new social psychologists during the paradigm crisis. Past ethogenic studies could even, at a pinch, be reinterpreted as examples of ‘social representation’ research (Harré 1985).

The elicitation of social representations, then, is more than just a methodological perspective.

The project also rests on a moral critique of modern society, and a decision to support, reinforce and reproduce the consensual universe. Social psychologists who chose this option are recreating a sort of psychic breathing space which permits the full flowering of personality and conversation. Moscovici goes so far as to offer Paris cafe's as examples of sites of this 'conversation'. In such genuine conversation', we are told, 'Thinking is done out loud. It becomes a noisy, public activity which satisfies the need for communication' (Moscovici 1984: 21). Although Moscovici gloomily notes that 'the art of conversation 'is vanishing, we are consoled with the thought that the ('universal') processes of 'familiarization' and 'communication' which produced social representations will repeatedly revivify it.

### *Reification*

There is the second universe of meanings, however, which continually intrudes into the consensual system. In the reified world things appear as isolated objects. People existing in such a world are cogs in a bureaucratic machine, and have to conform to already given roles and categories. The reified universe contains the system of decontextualized 'facts' which make up 'Science (Modern scientific ideas must be translated into the consensual universe because they are not expressed in the terminology of the 'ordinary language' which lay people understand.) According to Moscovici (1982), we are moving into an 'era of representations', but, at the same time, the bureaucratization of the 'social mind' continues apace as reification grows with the power of scientific ideas. In the reified world, 'The social body depends on a sort of global environment and not on reciprocal agreements ... science is the mode of knowledge corresponding to the reified universes' (Moscovici 1981a: 187). If we look to mechanistic science as a solution, therefore, we break knowledge down into self-contained, task-specific routines, and so threaten [94] genuine communication'. One consequence of this position for social psychology is that Moscovici pre-empts discussions of fact and value. He signals the immediate moral correlates of choices of research strategies and topics. Either we collect 'facts' and 'data' and stand guilty of reinforcing reification, or we pursue 'values' and 'meanings' and sustain consensus.

### *Structure and meaning*

Time and again in Moscovici's papers on social representations, concepts occur which reproduce the Saussurean semiological (and later structuralist) proposals for a science which would study the 'life of signs' in societies. A 'social representation', for example, comprises an 'image' and a 'concept'. Moscovici (1984) attempts to bridge the gap between the internal, subjective world, where concepts lie, and the external outer 'reality', where images can be found. The connection between the 'image' and the 'concept' is, he says, the same as the relationship between two sides of the same piece of paper. Saussure (1974) made just such an analogy when he talked of the link between 'signifiers' (the 'sound images') and 'signifieds' (the 'concepts'). The 'signs' then become the medium for what we understand to be 'communication'.

Unlike structuralists and post-structuralists, however, Moscovici does not follow through the implications of what this new notion of 'communication' must be like. The study of signs should involve a radical transformation of notions of meaning, seeing meaning as located *between* persons in language and interaction rather than within each of them. An 'idea' of 'concept' or 'meaning' is not folded into a word and then sent to another person to be unwrapped and so

‘understood’. A word and other collections of signs have a meaning by virtue of social context and the other signs which are present (or significantly absent). This is why the decoding of items from a text or discourse can proceed without the presence of the ‘subject’ acting as an authority for the ‘true’ meaning.

Moscovici’s problem is that he holds to a received (traditionally hermeneutic) modern view of meaning to safeguard the distinction between consensuality and reification. The person engaged in a genuine ‘conversation’ is busy creating thoughts and communicating them to another mind through the channel of social representations. [95]

Along with judgements as to what constitutes ‘genuine’ communication go traditional distinctions between ‘true’ individual thoughts and ‘distorted’ social processes. Not far behind follows the distinction between a proper spoken conversation and mediated, written documents. Here is a manifestation of ‘the dominance of an entire metaphysics of proximity, of simple and immediate presence’ (Derrida 1978:130). Moscovici implies that the closer ideas seem to the individual mind (for example, in conversational speech), the ‘truer’ they are. Post-structuralism responds to this line of argument by connecting the sentimental view of meaning, and trust in ‘communication’ that attends it, with the forms of philosophy and human science which dominate western thought.

Structuralism as such does not, of course, hold all the answers, and the contradictions and problems in that approach, as with the solutions offered by post-structuralists (such as Derrida), have to be worked through to be made useful. However, were Moscovici to have placed the study of social representations in *that* theoretical frame, he could have avoided some crucial problems. As it is, the debt that Moscovici does acknowledge is to the traditional schools of sociology (Durkheim explicitly, and then, hidden inside, as a necessary complement, the work of Weber). This is a debt traditional social psychology is only too anxious to honour, for the interest still remains with the sovereign individual.

### **Sociological representations**

The term ‘social representation’ adapts Durkheim’s (1953) distinction between ‘collective representations’ and ‘individual representations’ to the needs of social psychology. The aim is to occupy a ‘strategic middle ground’ between the two levels of analysis (Farr 1981: 251). The problem is that the definitions Durkheim gave for the two varieties of representation were intended to ensure that a conceptual space be left open for psychologists to fill. He insisted that the laws which organized societal systems were theoretically separate from the laws governing the activities of the individual mind. The conceptual space Durkheim left open - a place for the *individual* to act - is present in almost every sociological theory.

In this sense, Durkheim’s work reflects the internal structure of the discipline of sociology. Within sociology other traditions, less [96] happy with positivist psychology and surer of the value of methodological individualism, seize that space. Weber is one of the mainstream sociologists who does this. Consequently, the importation of sociological theory into social psychology, through the theory of social representations, also brings with it the social/individual dualism which informs the debates between the Durkheimian and Weberian schools.

### *Structure*

Durkheim insisted that although the individual mind was a microcosm of the societal *conscience*

*collective* and reflected it, the mentality of groups was not the same as that of individuals. Within the 'collective representations' comprising them are 'social facts' which operate externally to the individual. These work, Durkheim asserted, 'independent of his [sic] individual will ... endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him' (Durkheim 1938: 2-3). They weigh down on the mind of the person as objective things, and for this reason are amenable to 'scientific', positivist study. Organic imagery is often used to describe the relationship between the two levels of analysis: 'individual minds in relation to the cerebral cell and social facts in relation to individuals' (Durkheim 1953).

As well as being a positivist Durkheim was a determined functionalist. In practice, his sociology was consonant with a conservative position. His ideas exemplified traditional sociology's function in the investigation and protection of social structures. Not only are 'individual representations' separate constructs, but the picture of the ideal-typical scientific observer that Durkheim constructs is of a rational individual. Individuals, then, must be able to separate from the social world. In the practice as well as in the theory of Durkheim's work, one level of the research enterprise (the study of 'collective representations') mirrors the other (the study and experience of 'individual representations').

### *Phenomena*

Individual experience and action are the focal points of Weber's sociology. The latent, and necessary, individualism in Durkheim's work is given expression and attention in Weber, and the two [97] writers enjoy a more or less peaceful coexistence in the discipline. For Weber, the individual actor plans action in accordance with her interpretations of the possible actions of others. Action is social 'by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual' (Weber 1968: 258).

The social action Weber champions, however, is under threat. He was concerned that changes in the organization of society affected the degree to which it could be realized. Against human agency stood the growth of the bureaucratization of experience, reification' as the impoverishment of spiritual life: 'The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the "disenchantment of the world"' (Weber 1967: 34). Here, Weber is concerned to resist the very processes that Durkheim considers to be necessary and valuable. Durkheim saw the lawfully organized social world as a legitimate object of study, and thought that awareness of society's 'collective representations' amounted to a progressive 'hyperspirituality' (Durkheim 1953:130). Weber, on the other hand, resisted the encroachments of this bureaucratic system of 'social facts' upon individual agency. It is this 'agency' that Moscovici optimistically champions (Parker 1987b).

### *Psychology's sociologies*

A further twist occurs when sociological theory is represented in social-psychological texts. Within sociology, the Durkheim and Weberian traditions are both complementary and mutually exclusive (though there were attempts to botch the two together in American sociology). The research carried out on either side, and the debates as to the merits of each, spread into thousands of journal papers and books. When social psychologists draw the ideas across the disciplinary boundaries, simple characterizations are given of each position and there is a pretence that one coherent position can be distilled from the two. On top of that, this imaginary position is laced

into the prevailing cultural constructs outside the academic world. At the moment, those constructs are still thoroughly individualistic.

The licence for individualism is already present in Moscovici's recent suggestions as to how the crisis in social psychology could be remedied. We should, he says, engage in '*the anthropology of [98] the modern world*' (Moscovici 1981b: viii), and give it 'a phenomenology rather than an epistemology' (ibid.: x). For social psychologists this advice is only too easily read as an invitation to continue the incorporation of sociology into their work and take Weber on board alongside Durkheim. In the edited volume in which the 'first outline' of the theory of social representations appears, for example, the editorial gloss sets up a distinction between 'simple behaviour' and meaningful action'. A number of 'classic theorists' are cited - Wundt, James, Mead, Durkheim, Weber - as all purportedly demonstrating that 'internal representations and information strategies' have a 'social nature' (Forgas 1981: vii). This is not simply a squashing together of incompatible ideas. This 'representation' of the theories also has the function of legitimating an existing laboratory-experimental paradigm of research in social psychology (buttressed by attribution theory) which now goes about its business under the name of 'social cognition

Mainstream sociological theory is being read in such a way as to sanction the absorption of social representations into the burgeoning literature of 'social cognition'. This reading and re-writing of the theory is accomplished in two interrelated steps. The first flows from the assumption that a more humanistic understanding of the individual than that implied in Durkheim's writings can be produced by turning to Weber. The second step involves the attempt to study this human agent as if it contained the 'representations' Durkheim claimed existed at the level of society. A consequence is that whether social representations are supposed to be equivalent to 'collective representations', whether they are seen as a mediating variable between 'collective representations' and 'individual representations', or whether they are supposed to dissolve the distinction between the two, becomes irrelevant. Because the 'representations' are imagined to operate inside the individual's head they are, effectively, '*individual*'. So, for all the talk about finding a more 'social' inter-disciplinary social psychology, Durkheim's original prescriptions for a division of labour between sociology and psychology are followed, and social/individual dualism is reinforced.

## **Social paradigms**

Moscovici claims to have produced a theory that has at last broken out of social psychology's hopeless 'archipelago of lonely [99] paradigms' (Moscovici 1985: 91). Unfortunately, the project of social representations cannot but be written within the terms of debate in a discipline still resonating with the crisis and the clash between old and new paradigms. Each side is ready to assess and select new material to shore up its own position. On the one hand, the laboratory-experimental tradition has recovered ground with the success of attribution theory; on the other, the ethogenic opposition is anxious to grasp fresh ammunition to escape from its still marginal position. The old tradition has started to recuperate Moscovici's ideas within the field of 'social cognition' (Parker 1987b).

### *'Social' cognition*

Once the individual 'subject' has been conceptually re-created in the space left open by

Durkheimian positivist sociology, and reinforced by Weberian phenomenological accounts, the way ahead is clear for social psychologists to fill it with cognitions. Writers in the old paradigm rationalize this individualism with claims that the cognitions are 'about' social things. 'Social cognition' in American social psychology deals with processes of encoding, storage, and retrieval of social information. It looks at how the individual employs schemata which make the world intelligible and predictable. Attribution theory is concerned with one aspect of this process. Already social representations are being absorbed into social cognition research. The 'first outline' in English of the theory of social representations appeared in a volume entitled *Social Cognition: Perspectives on Everyday Understanding* (Forgas 1981). This, of course, was a title designed to appeal to attributionists attracted to 'lay explanation'. (Already in British developmental psychology, individualistic stories of cognitive development and linguistic skills are being told to account for supposed sequences in the acquisition of social representations.) The retreat into cognitivism means that we now have all the disadvantages of methodological individualism (positivism and reductionism) without any of the advantages. Again, some of Moscovici's own statements warrant this retreat, and the fault lies not simply in the vagueness of the theory which permits different interpretations, but in the inconsistency, and even occasional mischaracterization, of the research. For example, in practice, the [100] research on social representations in France has, in the vast majority of cases, involved content analysis of interviews, papers, television, and other mass media (Farr and Moscovici 1984). What is described in the literature is the *content* of shared expressive realities. In this there are similarities with the material produced in Britain by ethogenists.

However, at some points Moscovici leads us to believe that a preoccupation with the content of social knowledge is being replaced, in social representations research, with a focus on *form*. This would involve an invitation to 'social' psychologists to discover general rules for the processing of information. Moscovici argues this in a revealing passage: 'the content of thinking and talking matters less than formal aspects of thought and language. This distinguishes the study of social representations from the study of schemas, attributions and the like' (Moscovici 1985: 91). Although he attempts to set some distance between his own position and cognitivism, the contrast he sets up will not cut any ice with cognitivists.

Moscovici's claim also collapses the European opposition to American social psychology (which he was once responsible for firing) into a tame proposal for a different perspective. In the wake of Paris 1968, he depicted American social psychology as infected by individualist ideology. Now he suggests that work on social representations is a European approach to 'social cognition' 'different from, and complementary to, recent North American research' (Moscovici 1982: 182). In line with the logic of this position some of the French researchers have already returned to the laboratory to introduce 'representations' into the minds of 'subjects' and then observe changes in behaviour (Farr 1984).

### *'Social' meanings*

Moscovici's proposals restate some of the tenets of the ethogenic arguments put forward during the paradigm crisis. Moscovici does, at some points, attempt to block a return to positivism and individualism. He argues that thought is public, and explicitly opposing 'the implication of any clear-cut division between the outside world and the inner world of the individual' (Moscovici 1973: xi); here he is in accord with the most radical of Harré's (1983) and Shotter's (1984) attacks on dualism in social psychology. [101] Some of the tensions I have mentioned within the

social representations literature have been noted and accounted for in different ways by other writers sympathetic to the European tradition.

One response comes from mainstream ethnogenics (Harré 1985). According to this analysis, the key distinction which we must be aware of is that between social knowledge as a 'collective' plurality and social knowledge as a 'distributive' plurality. New social psychology contends that social meaning is collective; it is shared in such a way that the rules in any social world are not all present in one head. Each person contributes to the material in the expressive sphere, and their imperfect knowledge becomes cogent when it is co-ordinated with the knowledge of others through acting and accounting. The collective plurality of social representations, then, could be discovered by gathering material from many informants. Such studies on notions of health and illness, for example, have been translated already (Herzlich 1973). Often, however, the research slides into necessitating a 'distributive' view, with each item assumed to be contained in every person. The experimental studies rest on just such an assumption (Farr 1984). The problem with the distinction between these two types of plurality is that it implies that we could faithfully adhere to a 'collective' sense, share our knowledge with a researcher, and then forget about *how* knowledge is distributed. It is not possible to wish away conflicts of meaning and the way some accounts are continually *repressed*. To pretend that it looks uncomfortably like pluralism (the position that everyone's voice is valid and heard), and would not take us any further towards an understanding of ideology or power.

A second response is advanced by advocates of 'discourse analysis' who recognize the difficulties Moscovici tangles himself in when he assumes that there is 'consensus' of social meaning (Potter and Wetherell 1987). However, for these discourse analysts, notions of power and ideology are not yet built into their approach. They *could* be added later, after an analysis of discourse has been carried out, but there is no reason why different discourses should not be described as if they were just bits of language. For the new discourse analysts, following in the wake of new social psychology, the term 'discourse' covers 'all forms of spoken interaction, formal or informal, and written texts of all [102] kinds' (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 6). There is no necessary sense of organization, structure or system. When themes are identified, the term 'interpretive repertoires' is used, and we are given the impression that these could just as easily be the possession of individuals as of the collective. The definition of discourse Potter and Wetherell offer is more acceptable to social psychologists, and very different from the definition Foucault gave, in which discourses are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972: 49). I have followed this poststructuralist view more closely when I have argued that we should see discourse as collections of texts, as *sets* of statements which construct objects.

### *Social changes*

One important respect in which Moscovici has gone beyond most social psychology has been where he has given- the theory an historical character. His statements about the cultural changes which have accompanied the emergence of social representations as a field of study raise questions about the status of the whole discipline of social psychology. He claims that we are moving into a 'new era of representations' (1982), and that although culture has become increasingly divided into consensual and reified universes, we can take solace in the way that social representations act as a point of resistance and the way in which the study of them is warranted by shifts in other cultural and academic areas. We can take particular comfort from the

progressive movement in psychology, away from positivism, which he links with changes in art; he claims that 'Just as painting has returned from abstract art to representational art, psychology has reverted from behaviour to consciousness' (Moscovici 1982: 117).

However, although Moscovici draws attention to cultural changes, he does not go far enough. He does not escape from the terms of debate which constitute modern social psychology - the dualism which permits both an abstraction of the key items of 'data' from their context and their representation in a mechanistic account, and which rests on the division between behaviour and consciousness. We have, in Moscovici's statement, a clear expression of deep-rooted conceptual structures which tie him to *modern* social psychology (Parker 1989). To step beyond those dualities, I have [103] to return to a theme touched on earlier in the chapter, and place the social representations literature in the context of structuralist and post-structuralist ideas. It will then be possible to move on from the paradigm crisis terms of the debates to take up the repercussions of the conceptual and political crises on social representations social psychology.

### **Representation, structure, and struggle**

The use Moscovici makes of sociology, and the particular reservations, caveats, and additions that are given in the representations of Durkheim in the social representations literature, are paralleled in the other human sciences in the debates over the benefits or otherwise of structuralism. Both Durkheim and Saussure share a conception of society as a social reality, and it is hardly surprising that structuralist anthropology (Lévi-Strauss 1966) and political theory (Althusser 1971) received a sympathetic hearing when their texts entered sociology.

The new work on social representations strengthens the influence of structuralism in social psychology. Now Durkheimian theory is representing, again, a structuralist way of investigating forms of social interaction in smaller social worlds. Unfortunately, social psychology has not learnt the lesson that the result is a positivist approach to meaning which conceals within it a phenomenological individualism, and that we are receiving across the massive gulf between psychology and sociology, much in the manner of light-waves from a distant planet, a method that has all but burnt out in its place of origin. Furthermore, the structuralist attempts to build a theory of ideology failed in much the same way as the social representations research has. Just as structuralism came to be seen as a problem rather than a solution in philosophy and literature, so it is with the theory of social representations in social psychology.

#### *Concepts of ideology as a 'thing'*

The problem lies, in large part, with the use of the term 'representation'. For Moscovici, what is represented derives from social 'reality': 'there is nothing in representation that is not in reality, except the representation itself' (Moscovici 1982: 141). One [104] representation', then, is a representation of a complete stock of knowledge contained in a society, and a particular way of picturing and evaluating an individual person's knowledge of their social world is reinforced. We are led to speculate how far, and how imperfectly, an external system of meaning is reflected in internal cognitions.

A political consequence is that even if social representations are not seen as 'deposited in the brain of each individual' (Saussure 1974: 23) as semiology argued, it appears that the key to enlightenment is that they *should* be. This, presumably, would then facilitate perfect 'consensual' transparent 'communication' between people. You should recall that Moscovici's appeal during

the paradigm crisis of the early 1970s was for social psychology to study all that pertains to ideology and 'communication'. In his theory of social representations, the two concepts are still twins but have now become *counterposed* so that the latter ('communication') is thought to be the point of resistance and the solution to the power of the former ('ideology').

In literary theory the development of structuralism rested on just such a counterposition. Through the 'scientific' study of underlying structures, it was proposed that the 'competence' of readers could be increased so that they could appreciate more of the meaning of the text (Eagleton 1983). A version of this is also found in new social psychology, in equations between 'ideal cognitive resources of individuals' and 'coupled with known deficits', 'the actual resources of real individuals' (Harré 1979:185). This latches into crude mechanistic notions of 'false consciousness' in ideology, which suppose that it emanates from distorted cognitions: perhaps certain individuals merely lack access to the main accounting systems' of a society (Harré 1977: 332). This is a reductionist account of ideology with an individualist solution. When Moscovici does talk of ideology, it is as if it were a type of 'thing' which could be identified (and so dispelled). He claims that social representations act as a sort of intermediary stage in the process of the diffusion of scientific knowledge across a culture. After the 'scientific' phase and the 'representative' phase come the 'ideological' phase, when thoughts are 'appropriated by a party, a school of thought or an organ of state' (Moscovici 1984: 58). Again, there are uncanny echoes of structuralism, this time of its expression in political theory. Although Moscovici (1984) alludes [105] to (caricatured Althusserian) structuralist political themes when he complains about theories of ideology which picture people as dupes, he barely acknowledges his own debt to these ideas. It would be as well for readers to be aware, not only of Althusser's (1971) contention that ideology is 'a system of mass representations' embodied in certain powerful institutions (the Family, the Church, and Education), but also of the realization by his erstwhile supporters that his view implies that there were real things outside the representations which can show whether they were 'true' or 'false'. It was a reaction against the notion that there was anything 'outside the text' that led disillusioned structuralists to turn to Foucault's (1977) account of discipline. Foucault usefully showed that traditional notions of ideology as a 'thing' presupposed a 'truth', and that his descriptions of 'regimes of truth' more effectively emphasized the power of meaning, of discourse, to *create* the things we think are real. The problem is that he led many radicals to drop the term 'ideology' altogether, and this has had disastrous political effects outside social psychology.

### *Concepts of ideology as a relation*

The alternative that post-structuralism was led to adopt was to describe the meandering of meaning, not in terms of 'representation', but in terms of *signification* (Henriques *et al.* 1984). This is more useful for three reasons. First, the notion of signification allows for the fluidity of meaning and takes account of the way our understanding of terms changes from context to context depending on our social positions. This feeds into a view of ideology as a *relation* instead of a thing, with different meanings enabling or disempowering different writers, readers, speakers, and listeners. Second, because it allows for the idea that our talk in texts and discourses creates the social-psychological phenomena that appear to be innocently 'discovered'. Discourses and texts give a 'reality' to the objects delineated within them, and so the circulation of such discourses has immediate effects of repositioning people who 'read' them. The discourses position people, and social-psychological discourses always position their 'subjects'

without power.

The third reason for adopting the notion of signification is that it cuts across the dualism which nourishes the space for the [106] ‘individual’ (and for an academic discipline like social psychology which continually reduces social issues to that level of analysis). I want to retain the distinction between the practical order of society and the expressive order, and not fall into an extreme relativist position. Studies of geography, biology, demography, and economics can reveal the *practical* possibilities for, and limits to, human action. This does not mean that the stuff of social psychology does not have a ‘real’ basis outside of the expressive sphere. The notion of signification here follows post-structuralism in refusing to aim the metaphor of ‘depth’ at individuals, resisting the siren calls of ‘social cognition’, so skirting the Scylla of positivism (and structuralism) and the Charybdis of phenomenology (of hermeneutics). We should take care to resist the temptation to think that nothing ‘outside the text’ affects what happens within it, or that there are *only* ‘regimes of truth’. It is crucial that the term ‘ideology’ be retained, not for what it refers to (for it does not, anyway, refer to a ‘thing’), but for what it *does*. To use the term ‘ideology’ to talk of systems of meaning which screen out conflict and repress resistance is to connect with radical politics outside social psychology, and to *empower* people.

### *The politics of power*

Were we to deconstruct the theory of social representations we might take the consensual/reified distinction, and show how the ideal of consensus threatens always to become ‘reified’. The very social representations which give expression to our thoughts are but reconstructions of scientific thought. They come about through processes of ‘anchoring’ and ‘objectification’ to ameliorate our instinctive dread of powers beyond us, and they ‘intervene in our creative activity’ (Moscovici 1984: 7). Moscovici then paradoxically calls for a ‘science’ of social representations to beat back reification. The science of the consensual then starts to seem suspiciously similar to the scientism of the ‘reified’ universe. This move is similar to that outside social psychology when scientific structuralism would end up reproducing ‘a world of calculable and representable subjectivity’ (Derrida 1982: 317). Laboratory-experimental social psychology plays the same game when it attempts to measure and explain away experience and social meaning. [107] The danger is that the other organic images of the social to be found in Durkheim’s writings would also come trooping back. The notion of the social ‘body’, for example, holds within it notions of deviance and pathology which necessitate those modes of policing Foucault (1977) discusses in his writings on the rise of disciplinary power. The programmes to subject the ‘social body’ to certain treatment regimes then fold back on to the individuals contained within it. Individuals are invited to take care of processes of ‘self’-discipline. Foucault’s (1981) account of the emergence of confessing subjects in modern society indicates that calls for a return to an idealized ‘genuine’ communication against reified worlds could *intensify* the powerlessness of people. The acceptance of certain discourses – feeling ‘at home’ in them – makes for the success of a regime of ‘truth’. There have been many previous attempts to dispel ‘ideology’ by producing a ‘calculable subjectivity’, among them those of the original *idéologues* after the French Revolution, which accompanied the birth of modernity (Billig 1982).

To drag across material from mainstream sociology to solve crises in psychology, as with the theory of social representations, does not dissolve the barriers between the two disciplines. Neither does it challenge the experiential chasm between the ‘social’ and the ‘individual’. The ground plan of the academic disciplines is laid out in such a way as to vitiate attempts to solve

the crisis in any one of them by borrowing from the others. This is the case with structuralism and when I turn to attempts to span individual intention and social meaning in the next chapter you will see that it could even be the case with recent appropriations of poststructuralist theories of the text. [end of page 107]