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On the Knowledge of Politics and the Politics of Knowledge: How a Social Representations Approach Helps Us Rethink the Subject of Political Psychology

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Fifty years ago, Serge Moscovici first outlined a theory of social representations. In this article, we attempt to discuss and to contextualize research that has been inspired by this original impetus from the particular angle of its relevance to political psychology. We argue that four defining components of social representations need to be taken into account, and that these elements need to be articulated with insights from the social identity tradition about the centrality of self and group constructions in order to develop original insights into political psychological phenomena. First, social representations are shared knowledge, and the way interpretations of the world are collectively elaborated is critical to the way people are able to act within the world. Second, social representations are meta-knowledge, which implies that what people assume relevant others know, think, or value is part of their own interpretative grid, and that collective behavior can often be influenced more powerfully at the level of meta-representations than of intimate beliefs. Third, social representations are enacted communication, which means that social influence is exerted by the factors that constrain social practices as much as by the discourse that interprets these practices. Fourth, social representations are world-making assumptions: collective understandings do not only reflect existing realities but often bring social reality into being. Put together, these four components provide a distinctive theoretical perspective on power, resistance and conflict. The added conceptual value of this perspective is illustrated by showing how it allows revisiting ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia. We conclude with implications for research practices and discuss how the proposed model of social representations invites us to define new priorities and challenges for the methods used to study political psychological phenomena.

KEY WORDS: social representations, social reality, power, resistance, conflict

Introduction

In this article we aim to demonstrate how a social representations approach is of use for understanding some of the core issues that are of concern to political psychologists—the nature of power, and how it relates to political reasoning, to communication and social influence, to conformity and resistance, to collective harmony and group conflict.

We will argue that the key contribution of this approach lies in exploring the processes by which people come to a shared understanding of the social world and how this relates to their possibilities for action within the world. From such a perspective political action depends upon the sociopsychological processes by which our understanding of the world is produced, while, conversely, psychological understandings always involve a political dimension in the sense of being embedded in a wider understanding of how social relations are organized in the world. In short, a social representations approach overcomes the duality between psychology and politics.

To illustrate these points, let us start by considering how psychology is treated in the political field before then considering the place of the political in the psychological field.

Psychology in the Understanding of Politics

During the turmoil of the Clinton-Lewinsky crisis, Zaller (1998) surprised his fellow political scientists by claiming that the ripples would be felt even with the academic world. He wrote: “the Lewinsky affair buttresses some work in political science and undermines the importance of other work” (p. 186). Zaller’s point was based on evidence that Clinton’s popularity remained intact despite the wave of embarrassing revelations, allegations, and negative media reports. Indeed, shortly after the affair broke out, Clinton’s popularity actually increased amongst the general public. From this, Zaller argued that, when the fundamentals are good, they shield leaders against negative mass communications. In Clinton’s case, the Lewinsky fallout could not puncture the realization that his presidency had brought prosperity, peace, and ideological moderation to the American people. As Zaller puts it: “the tradition of studies on economic and retrospective voting, which maintains that the public responds to the substance of party performance, seems strengthened by the Lewinsky matter. On the other hand, the tradition of studies that focuses on the mass media, political psychology, and elite influence, including such diverse studies as Edelman’s *Symbolic Uses of Politics* (1964) and my own *Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992), seems somewhat weaker” (p. 186).

From a conceptual standpoint, what is striking about Zaller’s claim (apart, that is, from its disarming and refreshing *mea culpa*) lies in the way that he posits a series of dichotomies: between experience and communication, between reality and representation, between acting and talking, between the rational individual

and the irrational mass. All four of these are underpinned by a more fundamental disciplinary distinction between politics (associated with individuals who experience reality, reason, act, and thereby reshape it) and psychology (confined to what people say about reality and how their views are distorted under the pressure of mass communication and influence). Hence, Zaller's argument is that, when push comes to shove, the rational individual of politics trumps the irrational subject of psychology. To cite Zaller one last time: "However poorly informed, psychologically driven, and 'mass mediated' public opinion may be, it is capable of recognizing and focusing on its own conception of what matters" (p. 186).

Not surprisingly, it didn't take long for communication theorists to strike back. If there is one domain where the standing of the presidency seems best to reflect social reality, it lies in the way that support increases in response to international crises: the so-called "rally around the flag" effect. This common wisdom was been substantially challenged by Baker and Oneal (2001), who argued that, when appropriately sampled and operationalized, effects of international crisis per se are far less invariable than has commonly been supposed. According to their findings, whenever "rally around the flag" effects occur in American history, they can be seen as a function of how the crisis is communicated rather than as deriving from the crisis itself. Ironically, they enlist Zaller himself in support of this position which, as we have just documented, he himself disavowed: "the opinion leadership model of the rally effect (Brody, 1991; Zaller, 1992) seems to more accurately account for the rally phenomenon. . . . The public does not rally in response to crises in and of themselves, but rather to the president's handling and presentation of events, suggesting that public relations skills are increasingly indispensable resources for a successful American president in managing public perceptions of international conflicts involving the United States" (Baker & Oneal, 2001, p. 682). In effect, then, Baker and Oneal reverse the polarity of Zaller's argument—communication and psychology trump reality and politics.

Now, clearly, we have drawn this debate in somewhat stark terms and emphasized (perhaps even caricatured) the contrast between positions. Rare indeed are the voices who would claim either that political success depends *only* on good story telling or else that material realities insinuate themselves *directly* into the hearts and minds of citizens. Most likely, people will take some intermediate position on the continuum from "realism" to "psychologism." They will acknowledge that there are both reality *and* communication constraints on what people think and act. But our point—and our aim in presenting the opposition between positions—is less to demonstrate how they differ than to demonstrate how they sit on a shared continuum. That is, what they have in common is, in many ways, more important than what divides them—and it is this common ground which is the object of our concern.

Even allowing that the controversy is not about whether people respond to political reality or to distorted versions of social reality (which come about through processes of communication that prey upon the frailties of our psychological

apparatus), but rather about the balance between these factors, the very possibility of debate depends on three shared assumptions: *first*, the nature of social reality is taken as given and people are measured against this yardstick, being applauded as “realistic” when they match up and condemned as irrational when they do not; *second*, the psychological is equated with the irrational case, and the role of psychology is to explain distortions of social reality; *third*, people are treated as solitary cognizers who stand alone (and often helpless) in the face of the world, and communications about the world, rather than as social subjects, who make sense of the world and about sources of communication together, who are concerned about what others think and who make decisions in the context of acting in and on the world.

Politics in the Understanding of Psychology

Let us now turn from the political to something inherently psychological, even parochial: what do people think about psychological theory itself? More specifically, what do they think about the one body of psychological theory which has overspilled the boundaries of academia and now inhabits our culture and even our own self-understanding—we refer to psychoanalytic theory? Fifty years ago, Serge Moscovici addressed this question in what has come to be regarded as the foundational text of social representations theory (Moscovici, 1961, 2008). His particular concern was about the role of media communication in the dissemination of ideas and in the construction of lay understanding of the theory. Moscovici distinguished between three different ways in which the French press communicated about the theory. The first was *diffusion*, in which the communicator seeks to engage and adapt to the views of the audience. This was the case with mass circulation newspapers. The second was *propagation*, in which communicators seek to disseminate their worldview and assimilate (or re-represent) alternative knowledge to their own belief system. This was true of the Catholic Church, for which psychoanalysis was originally re-presented in terms of religious beliefs. The third was *propaganda*, which rests on an antagonistic view of the world and an attempt to obliterate rival belief systems (or at least characterize them as illegitimate). This was the case with the Communist Party, for which psychoanalysis was an alien, American, and bourgeois intrusion.

What Moscovici’s work demonstrated, then, is how people’s views—even on a matter that might, at first sight, seem apolitical, intellectual, intimate—are actually inherently bound up with political stances. That is because our ability to understand phenomena, and what they signify, depends upon drawing on shared bodies of knowledge which determine where the phenomena sit in the wider social world. The politics thereby exists at two levels; in terms of which bodies of knowledge we draw upon (do we look at psychoanalysis through a Catholic, a Communist, or a citizenship lens?) and also in terms of how specific knowledge (about psychoanalysis) both buttresses and is buttressed by whichever worldview is invoked.

From this perspective, then, psychological knowledge is not a distortion of political reality. Rather, the larger political framework is what makes understanding possible. The political dimension, that is, becomes a *condition of intelligibility* for social phenomena. But, by the same token, the intelligibility of any phenomenon cannot be taken for granted or posited as a given. Indeed the social processes by which we come to make sense of phenomena and have knowledge of them must be the starting point for what we think and do about it. In other words, a social representations approach focuses its enquiry on precisely on what tends to be taken for granted in much of mainstream research—the nature of social reality. We do not search for political psychology by measuring the populace against our own representations of the political field. We become political psychologists by interrogating the processes by which people achieve their own representations (whether of the explicitly “political” or indeed of anything else).

On the Social in Social Representations

What we have argued so far is hardly unique. There are many who argue that the understanding of social reality is an accomplishment rather than a given and that politics depends on how we construe the political field. Equally, there are many who point out that, by presupposing the nature of reality we start our analysis after most of the important work has already been done. However the social representations approach that we advocate here is, we suggest, rare in its insistence that this accomplishment is not achieved by individuals thinking alone but rather by people acting together. It is unique, at least to our knowledge, in its elaboration of these themes and in the range of social factors it introduces to the processes of knowledge construction.

There are four factors in particular which we have already alluded to either directly or indirectly and which will organize our subsequent discussion.

First, and most basic, is the fact that our knowledge of the world is shared by others in communities of belief. It is this communal scaffolding of knowledge which makes it possible to have an understanding of the things that affect us (many of which lie outside our direct experience or capacity for reality testing) and which transform individual opinions into social facts—thus achieving the solidity which is necessary to constitute a basis for people to act, and more particularly, to act *together*.

Second, then, the critical factor in what we do is often less what we think ourselves than what we think others are thinking—both the beliefs of those who stand within our communities and also those who stand against our communities. In this sense, we need to pay as much attention to meta-knowledge (and even meta-meta-knowledge—what we know about others knowledge of us) as to simple knowledge.

Third, social representations are about doing as much as thinking. They are enacted knowledge and hence are shaped by those factors which constrain our

social practices. This includes the nature of the built environment, the nature of the institutions in which we live and act, and—less formally but equally potently, especially in situations of conflict—what others think of us and hence how they act towards us.

Fourth, however, social representations do not just reflect social reality but they constitute that social reality—and sometimes change the nature of our reality. Social representations organize the social practices which make up the social/political field. They determine what forms of action are thinkable and unthinkable. If, as the Conservative British politician Rab Butler famously opined, politics is the art of the possible, then social representations draw the boundaries of the possible.

In the next section we shall elaborate on each of these four characteristics of a social representations approach. We shall then, in the third section, show how these various elements work together to shed light on a particular case that is of obvious interest to political psychologists—violent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Finally, we shall conclude by outlining how our approach might more generally shape research into the phenomena that are of concern to us in political psychology.

Social Representations, Social Reality, and Power

We should start with a caveat and an explanation of our terminology. In the previous section, we referred to “social representations theory,” which derives from the work of Serge Moscovici (1961, 2008). But if we want to give priority to general theoretical orientations over specific affiliations, then we must acknowledge right from the start that key facets of the “social representational approach” that we will outline here are rooted in a broader intellectual movement—to which Moscovici’s work provided a major impetus, but which cannot be reduced to this sole impetus. Suggesting that social representation *theory* holds a completely singular place among psychological theories of politics would therefore be incorrect. Its contribution is better understood as part of a broader aspiration towards a societal and political turn within social psychology, which originated during the 1960s and 1970s. This arose out of a dissatisfaction with the dominance of models that ignored the role of structural and ideological factors in the framing of human behavior. An influential group of European social psychologists questioned research which treated social interaction as if it occurred between separate individuals on an even playing field and which bracketed out the importance of collectivities and inequalities—whether they were based on nation, class, ethnicity, or religion. Such research simply did not speak to a generation that had just lived through the trauma of fascism, total war, and genocide and was about to live through the upheavals of 1968. The idealized world of mainstream social psychology was not their world.

If there is anything like a manifesto for this movement, it is to be found in a collective text entitled *The Context of Social Psychology* (Israel & Tajfel, 1972). The two key contributions to the book are by Henri Tajfel (1972) and Serge Moscovici (1972), mirroring a status that grew over time: Moscovici for social representation theory, Tajfel for the subsequent development of social identity theory during the 1970s—two theories that became the twin pillars of a distinctive European social psychology. Together, their chapters lay out a compelling critique of an individualized social psychology that turns its back on the problems of power, social inequality, and collective struggle. They challenge the reification of human social behavior and reveal how it leads to the neglect of both the social determination of behavior and the processes of social change. They argue for these examples of neglect to be transformed into priorities for future research. They call for methods as well as for theories that are adequate to address these realities.

As a consequence, several points that we will make here about “social representations” could similarly be applied to “social identities.” More importantly, though, we suggest that the success of this critique depends upon taking it as a whole and on integrating insights from the traditions initiated by Moscovici and Tajfel. To be more precise, we consider that a critical aspect of social representations concerns the way we divide people into categories in the social world. This is a critical element in understanding the ways that social knowledge becomes internalized: the way we orient to representations depends on how we categorize ourselves in relations to the groups with which those representations are associated. In this sense social categories are not equivalent to representations of other social objects; they constitute an organizing principle for the process of representation in general.

The representation of social categories is also a critical element in the contribution of a social representations approach to the understanding of political phenomena: before we can ask how two groups inter-relate—do they conflict or do they cooperate, and what side do people take on a dispute?—we have to ask how we represent the groups in the first place. To use more popular terms, you can’t answer “which side are you on” without first knowing what the sides are.

So, social identity research has much to contribute to the understanding of social representation processes and of their relevance to political psychology. But equally, social representations research has much to contribute to the understanding of social identity processes. For, even if the representation of social identities has a special place, it remains true that we need to analyze social identities as social representations and subject to the dynamics of representation.

In sum, we question the intellectual division between social representations research and social identity research which, over time, has gradually led to the institutionalization of two clearly separated paradigms. We add our voices to those who, from time to time, have pleaded for more integration (Breakwell & Lyons, 1996; Chrysochoou, 2004; Deschamps & Moliner, 2008; Howarth, 2006). Our

concern is that any theory of social identities which ignores the process by which representations of social categories are constructed and assimilated is in danger of becoming mechanical and realist (by presupposing the categories which will be interiorized), while any theory of social representations that ignores the role of social identification in organizing our relations in the world is danger of becoming descriptive and idealist (by ignoring how we orient to different types of knowledge and assimilate them to the self).

For these reasons, we will not describe our analysis as social representation *theory*, insofar as what we have to say, while being greatly inspired by Moscovici's specific analysis, is not strictly limited in terms of that analysis. Rather, we refer more loosely to a social representations (SR) approach, by which we mean the broader synthetic position outlined above and which draws upon the joint experience of the authors in both the social identity and the social representations traditions. An added advantage of this stance is that it allows us to sidestep some hermeneutic controversies. We wish to be judged by the usefulness of the constructs we provide, rather than by our faithfulness to a tradition.

With this in mind, let us now turn back to our core questions: what do we mean by social representations in our approach? And in what sense are they inherently political? As promised, we answer these questions in terms of four key elements: representations as shared knowledge; representations as meta-knowledge; representations as constrained by existing social practices; representations as world-making constructs. We consider each element separately before drawing them together and showing how, jointly, they constitute a model of power, conflict, and resistance.

Social Representations as Shared Knowledge

The first premise of our SR approach is that what shapes social behavior is shared social knowledge. This is true in two connected senses. On the one hand, what counts is not our idiosyncratic experiences but our knowledge of things that are experienced at a collective level. There is evidence, for instance, that belief and action is less a function of whether "I am unemployed" or else "I have suffered from discrimination," but more whether "we suffer high levels of unemployment" or "we are the subjects of discrimination" (see Elcheroth, 2006; Elcheroth & Spini, 2009; Kinder, 1998; Mutz, 1998). On the other hand, experience impacts on our knowledge through the way we make sense of it in terms of shared bodies of knowledge which exist not only in our own minds but also in material culture: books, films, newspapers, museums and so on. What is more, there is an "inter-textuality" to these representations such that, when new phenomena come along, we achieve knowledge by anchoring them in already existing stocks of knowledge (see Moscovici, 2008). For instance, when first Saddam Hussein came to the world's attention after the invasion of Kuwait, he and his acts were interpreted by rooting them in widely shared understandings of Hitler and Nazism. Indeed in one

famous *Time* Magazine cover, Saddam's moustache was manipulated to look more like Adolf Hitler's (see Herrera & Reicher, 1998).

Critically, the importance of shared knowledge is not just that it is broader, but also that it is deeper. That is, understanding undergoes a *qualitative epistemic transformation* by being shared. An individual viewpoint is always contingent. Perhaps if, say, I am refused a job, it was because I performed badly or the individual interviewer took against me personally. But if *we* are consistently denied jobs, then that constitutes discrimination. In other words, opinion is transformed into social fact through the achievement of common interpretations of shared experiences. And, if opinions are an insecure basis for undertaking potentially costly actions, social facts are a firm foundation from which one can act in the world. Take, for instance, a study conducted by Wright (1997) in which participants faced strong discrimination. When they faced the situation alone, without any clue as to how others interpreted the situation, they reacted with resignation. However as soon as there was a minimal breach in their epistemic isolation—that is, if they heard what they supposed to be a fellow participant express anger at what he named as “discrimination”—then they began to mobilize and enlist others in a collective boycott of the experiment. As the study goes to demonstrate, a sense of meaning, of justice and injustice, of mastery and of agency, along with all the consequences that derive from these, derive from participation in collective meaning-making practices.

This focus on knowledge as shared obviously leads us to ask *how* it comes to be shared. That is, a SR approach lays an emphasis on communication (both direct and mass mediated) in the creation of knowledge. But, more interestingly, perhaps, it also stresses that much of this communication is implicit. Indeed, a SR approach can first of all be thought of as a theory that draws our attention to the consequences of what is implied, rather than clearly articulated, when people express themselves. Thus, Moscovici (1994) stresses the importance of considering what several persons need to take for granted together in order to be able to communicate at all. Often, to state one thing explicitly, dozens of other things need to be implied at the same time.

To take one example, all the more powerful for being relatively banal, a discussion of whether the weather will be good tomorrow presupposes first of all an agreed definition of “good” which privileges particular communities and particular practices (good normally means calm, hot, and sunny which is pleasant for the leisure of those who work mainly indoors but may be less desirable for farmers needing rain for their crops or sailors waiting for the wind) and, second, an agreed geographical reference point—where do we want the weather to be good, in the local town, the region, or the country? As Billig (1995) points out, often terms like “the weather” assume a national frame of reference). What is true of “will the weather be good?” is all the more obviously true were we to discuss more explicitly social and political issues: “Is the economy doing well?” “Will this politician be a good leader?” and so on.

For the most part, we never have an opportunity to discuss or even to think consciously about all of the consequences of these assumptions. For social representations, researchers as for those who study implicit primes (see, for instance, Cassino & Erisen, 2010), all of these never fully spelled-out ideas continuously spin an invisible web of meanings and associations which shape what we do and say. But social representations theorists go further. Implicit communication is also important to the sharing of knowledge. It allows us to interact seamlessly with others who are bound up in the same web of meanings and associations, and, what is more, these function as the discrete context within which all new assertions will be interpreted.

The word “interpretation” is important here. For it points to the fact that people are not automatons who respond passively to stimuli or who automatically process (and distort) the information that comes to them. Rather people are active meaning makers who go out of their way to create knowledge. Moreover, drawing on the points we made earlier concerning the way that shared understanding transforms opinions into social facts and underpins the very possibility of concerted action, from a social representations perspective, we suppose that people are motivated to articulate their own understanding with that of others.

Certainly their ability to do so will be constrained by the ways they are able to relate to others in the world. Equally, the understandings they produce may well be limited by unspoken assumptions. Last but not least, SR researchers commonly assume that there are general psychological motivations to create certain types of representation. Human beings strive to live in meaningful and intelligible social environments in which justice prevails and which allow them to enact a sense of mastery. Where the world appears otherwise to them, a series of highly distressing consequences result, such as chronic estrangement, a sense of arbitrariness, or blatant helplessness. But even with these various practical, discursive and ontological limits on what sorts of representations we produce together, there is still considerable room for manoeuvre. From a SR perspective, then, the primary task is to investigate the complex and slippery process by which people make meaning together. Therefore, to borrow from Blumer (1969), we must develop a methodological stance that is suitable to our object of enquiry. As a matter of fact, the central concern for researching meaning systems explains a rather distinctive feature of research practices inspired by the SR approach: their genuine *methodological pluralism*. Unlike many other researchers, most researchers in this tradition have never embraced the assumption that there is *one* royal avenue to the study of psychological phenomena.

Social Representations as Meta-Knowledge

We argued, in the previous section, that people act on the basis of shared knowledge. But as long as this statement stands alone, it can be a little misleading. Take, for instance, Wright’s study on discrimination that we invoked above. In the “isolation” condition, it may be that every single participant believes that they are

experiencing discrimination. In this sense, they already share the same knowledge. However, as we showed, this is not enough to invoke resistance. What is important, as shown in the “communication” condition, is that they become *aware* of the thoughts that they share. It is only in this condition that people gain the certainty and the confidence to resist. The message, then, is that what counts in social representations is not only what we think, but what we think that other people think. Therefore, meta-knowledge is critical in a social representations approach.

But as we have already suggested, not all such meta-knowledge is equivalent. Indeed we respond very differently to what different others think and do. If, for instance, I am a left-winger and I see people at a political rally laugh and applaud, I am likely to react very differently as a function of whether I have categorized them as left-wing or right-wing. In both cases, what they do is likely to influence how I interpret the message to which they are responding. But in the latter case, it is more likely that their behavior will encourage me to be critical toward the message that they are applauding. It is here that the representation of social categories becomes critical in organizing whether we embrace the beliefs of others or eschew our beliefs of them. As Raudsepp (2005) has put it: “A SR includes knowledge of what other groups believe about a particular object. Existence of many people who share certain representations is necessary but not a sufficient condition for a social representation. People should also be able to relate a social representation with identity systems of certain groups. A social representation should include metacognitive knowledge about the limits of validity of a particular social representation” (p. 459).

This approach suggests that we continuously process information at two levels. On the one hand, we have a range of cognitive operations available to treat any kind of information coming to our mind. On the other, we simultaneously analyze what the information might mean for relevant others (and for our relation to them) and also how they might react depending upon how we interpret the information itself and how we act upon it (Doise, 1993). In other words we are inherently reflexive beings who operate on our knowledge of our own minds, our knowledge of other minds, and even our knowledge of other mind’s knowledge of ourselves.

More generally, such a reflexive approach suggests an alternative explanation of those cognitive regularities in interpretative processes—say in the way that we interpret new information, that we confirm existing information or in the way that we attribute causes to behavior—which are characteristically understood as reflections of universal features of the human cognitive apparatus (see, for instance, Fiske & Taylor, 2008). Instead they can be understood as deriving from shared social expectations as to how we should communicate and interpret social information (see, for instance, Doise, 1993; Flament, 1984; Moscovici, 1982).

This approach also suggests that if we want to change how people interpret the world (that is, if we want to achieve influence) we can best do so by working on their

assumptions about the interpretations that are shared by others. The power of the mass media is particularly pertinent here. To Moscovici (1961, 2008), they are crucial to shaping social representations. This derives, not least, from the fact that, at the moment of consumption, people are aware that many others are listening to the same radio program, reading the same paper as them, or watching the same television program. So, even if every single consumer remains sceptical about what they hear, read, or see (and can readily express such scepticism when asked), they can still be influenced by virtue of their inferences about the impact of the media on others. In turn, this can lead individuals to incorporate media messages into their own personal communication strategies, thus resulting in a multiplicity of interpersonal conversations that seem to validate the impression that the message is relevant (to others) and hence reinforce the original message. Conversely, the impression that certain interpretations of the world are not shared can generate a self-fulfilling prophecy by generating multiple acts of individual self-censorship.

This long-standing intuition recently received new empirical support. In a quasi-experimental and longitudinal field study conducted in Rwanda after the genocide, Paluck (2009) demonstrated how repeated collective exposure (in small local communities) to a relevant radio program enhanced people's inclination to engage in social bonding activities across ethnic frontiers, or to speak out against ingroup authorities. Ironically, counter to the expectations of those who designed the mass media intervention (see Staub & Pearlman, 2009), it did not achieve this transformation of public behavior by changing people's personal beliefs about the roots of genocidal violence or intergroup conflict—which remained unchanged on average. What did actually distinguish participants in the experimental intervention from participants in a control condition was a heightened awareness of the endorsement of critical beliefs by other community members. Mass media exposure as a collective experience changed perceptions of social norms regarding accepted intergroup and intragroup behavior. In line with our general argument here, mass media exposure worked at the level of changing people's beliefs about shared beliefs.

Social Representations as Enacted Communication

While so far most of our examples have focused on the impact of widely diffused *discourse* (through the press, or radio programs) on consciously shared representations, words are not always required to change beliefs about how relevant others experience the world, and position themselves in the world. There are indeed a number of illuminating examples of how we will misunderstand the nature of representations if we look at what people say to the exclusion of what they do. A case in point is Jodelet's (1991) work on representations of madness. As she showed, people may not say that they think mental illness is contagious, but the ways in which they separate their own crockery from that of sufferers suggests otherwise (for other examples, see Flament, 2001, or Howarth, 2006).

Further, a more radical argument about the already mentioned power of *implicit* communication is to state that sometimes acts can be even more influential when they are silent. Discarding speech that could be explicitly challenged, they retain the unspoken and, hence, incontestable. Falasca-Zamponi (1997) provided an analysis of how the fascist salute operated in Mussolini's Italy, which illustrates particularly well this power of ritualized practices. Her point is precisely that the impact of this practice did not primarily occur through the act of changing individual beliefs. Anyone who gave the salute could retain a sense that he or she was doing it reluctantly, pragmatically, without being a "true believer." However, each person, seeing all of the others give the salute, could not take the risk of believing (or acting on the belief) that they were insincere. The salute served to change perceptions of shared beliefs; it created the illusion of a consensus and it thereby discouraged dissent.

Hence, the third premise that we want to propose here is that SR depend on *social practices*. Moscovici's often quoted notions of anchoring and objectification of knowledge (see, e.g., Farr & Moscovici, 1984; Markova, 2003) are a case in point. We mentioned before that they can be understood as issues of intertextuality—prior representations supporting subsequent representations. However, invoking prior understanding is something *active*. It is a matter of practices of remembering, of celebration, and of commemoration—of material cultures—that enact particular understandings of the world. More generally, representations are often supported by creating institutionalized backgrounds for routine practices, which, in turn, render plausible and relevant the assumptions on which these representations rest. This happens, for example, when infrastructures are created that segment people in particular ways in society, or when vital resources are being cut and liberties being restricted for specific social categories (e.g., social benefits for asylum seekers or opportunities to maintain traditional practices for religious minorities), which then may orient members of these categories to behaviors that support a representation of them as antisocial, vindictive, or otherwise threatening.

Let us try to pull the strings together now. Our understanding of reality, the understanding of others and the way they relate to us, is both constructed through communicative practices (at interpersonal and mass levels) and derived from the accumulation of concrete experiences that fill an ordinary life. The latter appears to provide us with a sense of interdependence with other people. All of us have concretely experienced that others can harm or support us—and developed interpretative strategies for distinguishing between those who can affect us, in either positive or negative ways, and those who will not. Obviously, those interpretative activities draw upon shared narratives rendering single experiences meaningful. But, vice versa, those narratives are rendered relevant and plausible through recurrent patterns in concrete forms of social interactions. That is, the social narratives which are offered to people as frames of interpretations need to make sense of mundane experiences and have pragmatic value. They need to help us to act appropriately in various social situations.

What binds the narratives and practices together are *social institutions*. These provide specific opportunities for certain types of social interactions and allow for those regularities in collective experiences that give rise to a common feeling that particular social interdependencies are authentic realities. In other words, institutionalized social structures allow narratives about collective identities and shared values to be concretely enacted and social norms to become relevant in the light of concretely experienced patterns of interdependence. To be somewhat more concrete and to continue with the themes introduced above, the Nazi ideology of Adolf Hitler as the supreme leader who presided over a homogenous ethnic German nation from which Jews (among others) were totally excluded was both the subject of a relentless ideological assault (Kershaw, 1987) and also inscribed in a series of institutionalized practices, including the “Heil Hitler” salute which all “ethnic” Germans were required to give, but which Jewish people were explicitly prohibited from giving.

More specifically, still, intergroup anger or appeasement is frequently provoked by practices that draw on (accurate) assumptions about how they will be interpreted, within and across group boundaries (see Gély & Sanchez-Mazas, 2006). A Hindu who throws a dead pig by a mosque in India is able to provoke a riot not despite but because of shared heritage and accurate presumptions about interpretative activities across religious groups. In this sense, SR are organized as sets of *dialogues* (Markova, 2003; see also Gillespie, Cornish, Aveling, & Zittoun, 2008) enveloped in practices, where opposite positions and antithetical “themes” are enacted all the more effectively when both sides are able to understand the core of *both* lines of arguments.

A final example shows how mass communication and highly symbolic practices—that trigger specific collective reactions—can interact to present a certain version of reality as incontestable. Bar-Tal (2004) has described how the failure of the Camp David talks, which were intended to produce a peace settlement for the Middle East in summer 2000, were consistently portrayed in Israeli elite discourse and media coverage as caused by a lack of genuine will of the Palestinian leadership to find an agreement. This way, Israeli public opinion was prepared for harsher ways of dealing with the conflict. In this climate, the position of ruling Ehud Barak was weakened, and new opportunities opened for his challengers to criticize his government’s policies as too lenient, naïve about Palestinian intentions, and ineffective in bringing about genuine security to Israel. A turning point occurred two months later, when opposition leader Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount, along with a Likud party delegation.

The visit of this highly contested and sacralised place was perceived as insulting and humiliating to many Palestinians—it provoked violent riots, which were countered by violent repression and eventually resulted in the first fatalities of what became then the “second intifada.” To the majority of the Israeli public, seeing a crowd of Palestinians throwing stones in the heart of Jerusalem, provided experiential validation to the key narrative that had dominated political communication during the two preceding months: that most Palestinians strive for dis-

rupting their State rather than settling peace. At that stage, the message became so persuasive that it substantially changed the balance of political support. The following year, Likud won the national elections, and Sharon became Israel's new prime minister. To what extent his visit of the Temple Mount has been part of a conscious strategy to reach this political goal is still an issue of controversy. But the fact that the reactions it provoked have been a central momentum in changing the way Israelis and Palestinians experienced social and political reality over years to come is indisputable. And this leads us directly to a final key component of SR: They create new realities as much as they reflect existing realities.

Social Representations as World-Making Assumptions

The fourth premise of our model is indeed that SR are not only embedded in social practices but also *constitutive* of these practices—and hence of social reality. In effect SR often function as self-fulfilling prophecies insofar as they create the social practices that then sustain them. Effective nationalism creates the national categories that it assumes (see Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Seeing people as an enemy can lead us to treat them in ways that makes them behave as an enemy. This leads us to a more general point that we need to address now in more detail: If we want to appreciate a theory on SR as a theory of power, we first of all need to be more precise about the meaning of “social context.” Any reading of the theoretical model in terms of the sole question “how do people give meaning to what is already out there?” misses the most interesting point. Its scope is greatly extended when one appreciates that, in a SR perspective, social and historical contexts are conceived not only as sets of external background factors that impact on SR but rather as *realities brought into existence through-out these representations*.

This ontological stance is easily misunderstood or else misrepresented. Hence, we must be clear about what is meant by this and what it implies. The starting point is to appreciate that the day-to-day reality in which we live is largely constituted by what Searle (1995) has labelled *institutional facts*. Everything, from the time we get up in order to get to work, the traffic regulations which govern our drive to the office, the rules which govern what we do once there, the value of the money that we earn, are part of a humanly made world. Such institutional facts can be defined by two properties: on the one hand, they exist only as a consequence of human agreement; on the other hand, however, from an individual perspective, they are objective facts: (at least part of) their consequences are independent of subjective cognition.

Things like money, citizenship, degrees, classes, mortgages, and crimes *would* not exist if no one *believed* that they existed. Or, to be more precise, they would not exist if there were no storekeepers, border guards, students, bankers, or police officers *acting on the basis of the belief* that they do exist. But then, it becomes important to make a key distinction. What a SR approach is *not* implying is that,

were an individual to deny these institutions, they would go away. Changes in *individual* representations do *not* alter the existence or essence of specific institutional facts. Were you to drive on the wrong side of the road, try to use conch shells as currency, or else claim to live in your own independent republic with its own laws, you would soon discover that. We are, therefore, not proposing an extreme form of philosophical solipsism which is easily caricatured. What our model does assert, however, is that changes in *social* representations can and frequently do lead to changes in the institutional world.

The relationship between SR and institutional realities is therefore bidirectional. On the one hand, formalized regulations, especially when they are perceived as legitimate by a critical mass of people, are generally powerful tools for clarifying and thus stabilizing mutual expectations. Moreover, fostering the creative nature of normative expectations by formalizing them is not limited to the scope of classical legislators operating within classical nation-states. As Doise (2002) claimed, the international diffusion of human rights has genuinely transformed social relations across manifold spheres of lives and places (see also Elcheroth, 2006; Gély & Sanchez-Mazas, 2006; Spini & Doise, 2005). On the other hand, however, giving institutional support to a particular position by making it a law does not inoculate that position against changes in SR. One pertinent example, in some countries and states, at least, concerns the privileging of heterosexual marriage through various forms of legislation. As alternative forms of relationship have gained greater legitimacy, the law has become out of step. In the end, *the law* has had to change in order to accommodate same-sex partnerships.

Our overall assumption so far, hence, is that social realities are created, maintained, or transformed by collective practices that uphold shared systems of meaning and mutual expectations. There is a corollary to this: Although individual dissent is insufficient to change institutional realities, once an individual's indignation in the face of a perceived injustice is articulated with his or her conviction that others share that indignation, action for social change becomes a viable option. Similarly, once a person's unease with the way in which a valued group identity is expressed is articulated with his or her conviction that others share this unease, a redefinition of the identity becomes possible.

Such *mobilizing beliefs* draw on the organization of SR around common references (Doise, 2005): around knowledge that is shared within a community, such as common sense truisms, widely diffused political slogans, or basic legal prescriptions. The awareness that a significant proportion of community members have access to this background knowledge can create a dynamic of *escalation* whereby individuals presuppose the support of others and, hence, act in ways that elicit support from others—such as when one or two members of an audience start clapping hands after a speech, driven by the confidence that others will follow, and then others infer that clapping is an appropriate response, and, soon, individual acts are transformed into the collective practice of ovation. To take this example a little further, we can see that the effectiveness of an individual actor in shaping the

world lies not so much in his and her own actions per se, but more in the way in which he or she is able, through those actions, to shape the expectations and, hence, the actions of others. Put more generally, this constitutes a distinctive conception of agency that underlies a SR approach. What counts is *the power to shape mutual expectations within a collective* in such a manner as to enable or impede coordinated actions directed toward a given purpose.

A final point needs to be made when we consider the issue from the point of view of political leaders or would-be leaders. How can they shape representational systems to create social realities serving their vision or interests? Representations do not simply arise spontaneously from looking at the world, we have argued. We are constantly presented with representations from leaders and activists through the medium of mass communications. To argue that social knowledge is rooted in practice and, in part at least, used in order to move people to create new social practices (indeed, to argue that the source of social power lies in the creation of forms of social knowledge) is to suggest that the various forms of knowledge are embedded in a process of *mobilization* and that change depends upon *effective mobilization*. That is, people do not come to understand the world through a neutral process of contemplation. Rather, they are enjoined to see the world in particular ways. This then leads us to think in terms of those who mobilize and those who are mobilized. It enjoins us to analyze understanding and action in the context of *relationships between elites and masses*, to ask why particular positions are advocated and why they are accepted, and to admit that the answers to these two questions are not the same.

A Theoretical Perspective on Power, Resistance, and Conflict

Of course there are other theories that incorporate elements of the position that we have outlined in this section—but as far as we know, none has gone so far in building a coherent theory based on the four pillars of the shared, meta-cognitive, enacted, and world-making dimensions of representations. For the sake of comparative clarity, let us consider Noelle-Neumann's (1984/1993) spiral of silence theory, which to our knowledge is the closest an influential theory of political public opinion has come so far to explain political behavior in terms of what people believe *others* to believe (i.e., that it integrates a meta-representational component). This theory has taught us that their reading of political *climates* orients people's willingness to express and behave in accordance with their political ideas, which in turn influences other people's perception of the political climate. Eventually, such dynamics of mutually reinforcing self-censorship can result in political outcomes that ironically reflect initial *beliefs* about these outcomes (e.g., who will win the election) more than initial *intentions* to contribute to these outcomes (e.g., whom do I want to support).

Over time, this theory has proved powerful in explaining, and sometimes even in predicting, dramatic shifts in electoral support. But, as critics have pointed out

(see Scheufele & Moy, 2000), it is also limited by a series of conceptual flaws, mainly at the level of the underlying psychological assumptions: It fails to provide a compelling account of why people would always necessarily take the entire national community of voters as a relevant standard of reference (for comparing their own stance), it surely exaggerates people's desire to be part of the national majority, and it confuses minority membership with social isolation. In more general terms, it lacks a clear conceptual model regarding the way in which all elements of social understanding are constituted in and constitutive of social relations.

In a SR perspective, we share the spiral of silence theory's concern for developing a systemic and holistic approach to public opinion formation. Feedback loops between individual agents and social contexts, and the way they can lead either to relatively stable states of equilibrium or to (partially) self-sustaining spirals of change, are central to both approaches. Both adopt a resolutely nonadditive, nonatomistic and nonreductionist perspective on the way individual motives articulate to produce collective outcomes. But there is something more about a SR approach. It builds upon a more comprehensive and subtle version of cognitive activity and motivation, which is solidly founded in psychological theory and findings. It convincingly shows how models of collective political behavior can draw upon a proper understanding of fundamental human desire to take part in the construction of shared meaning. While it rests on the assumption that much of human effort does indeed strive to overcome (epistemic, existential, and social) isolation, it does not presuppose a generic motive to be part of "the majority." As a consequence, it better accounts for the negotiation of plurality, diversity, and innovation, which are all central to our contemporary "thinking societies" (Moscovici, 1984). While spiral of silence theory is build upon a theory of social conformity, any theory about SR is fundamentally a theory of social *conflict*.

To be more precise, a SR perspective is necessarily a constructivist perspective on the way cognitive conflict is embedded in social conflict. This means, first of all, that it offers a theory of political public opinion and collective behavior, taking into account that people are frequently exposed to and often aware of conflicting versions of reality and that particular contexts frame and anchor particular interpretations. Such a perspective is clearly at odds with traditional models of public opinion studies, which assume that individuals hold univocal and relatively stable "true attitudes" and which treat "social desirability" as a source of bias—a simple technical obstacle in measuring the assumed underlying attitudes without error. It is much closer to models of survey response that give a formal role to the inherent ambivalence of respondents holding conflicting points of views and to the importance of contexts in orienting (temporary) choices among opposed alternatives, such as Zaller and Feldman's (1992) "simple theory" of survey response. But then, we have argued, a SR approach makes an ambitious step further, when it assumes that such fortuitous products as expressed opinions and beliefs can at the same time function as world-making things. How simultaneous

expressions of beliefs (within a relevant collective) will eventually integrate to form an organized whole is not always predictable, but it is always consequential. In that sense, theories on SR are also fundamentally theories of social *power*.

But they are not only theories about how power works. They are also theories about the boundaries of power (when the powerful cannot reach their aims) and changes in power (how the powerless can become influential). This emphasis is clearly related to the normative stance of the theory. According to some readings, its ultimate aim is to change social conditions, rather than just describe them (see Raudsepp, 2005). This activist stance has been reinvigorated more recently by a new strand of action-research that mobilized a SR approach to empower stigmatized groups (Howarth, 2004). It contrasts SR from the more static orientation of many other theories of elite influence on political reality—for example, from Edelman's profound pessimism about both the democratic public's capacity to interpret politics and act rationally (Edelman, 1969), and the prospects of genuine social change (i.e., beyond the transformation of one form of dominance into another, such as the transformation of slavery into the exploitation of paid black workers in the United States). It similarly contrasts with theories that have gained prominence more recently in the field of political psychology, and which propose explicit models about the way one social group exerts its power over another, such as social dominance theory (see Sidanius, Pratto, van Laar, & Levin, 2004), and system justification theory (see Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Both approaches have been criticized for the way they essentialize power (and motives towards power), taking it as a fixed background to their psychological analysis (see Reicher, 2004). It is striking how different a SR approach is: It does not take power for granted as an object to which our psychology orients us, but it examines the psychology specifically in the way power is constituted.

More specifically, a SR approach is different because it will not only aim to explain how social reality is reproduced, but also how it can be transformed: It is about collective *resistance* and social change, as much as about collective oppression and social reproduction. It is no coincidence that the "other" research tradition initiated by Moscovici (see Moscovici, Mugny, & van Avermaet, 1985), all too often artificially separated from his work on SR, is about social change brought about by consistent minority groups that managed to be influential despite a lack of access to structural power, such as student protesters in 1968 in France (and elsewhere).

The theory recognizes that sometimes social relations are represented in such a way as to avoid conflict and preserve the status quo. Thus, the asymmetry of social relations is either denied (or indeed inverted), or else naturalized. Classical SR studies described how SR direct and legitimize social practices towards relatively less powerful social groups, such as psychiatric patients (Jodelet, 1991), children, or women (Chombart de Lauwe, 1964, 1984). Further, practices that initially have not been conceived of in terms of intergroup relations are symbolically reframed to accommodate them to current representations of status relation-

ships within society, or antagonisms between societies. As already mentioned, Moscovici (1961) has shown that psychoanalysis was considered in the 1950s in France as more convenient for women, children, or artists than for men, adults, or workers—but also that for some people it even reflected the political antagonism between Americans and Soviets.

But the crucial point about showing how status inequalities are maintained by institutionalized practices or widely diffused depictions of symbolic order is precisely to make transparent that their (re-)production requires *agents*, *efforts*, and particular *contingencies*—and that it does not just grow naturally out of human psychology. Further, these classical studies paved the way for more recent work that has put more emphasis on the heterogeneity that exists within most societies, with regard to perceptions of intergroup relations. Doise, Spini, and Clémence (1999) illustrated how variations in the perceived intensity of conflict between various social categories underlie different conceptions of human rights. In their international survey, personal commitment towards the implementation of human rights was highest among those who perceived high levels of intergroup conflict within their country, whereas those who embraced a nonconflictual conception of their society rather tended to trust in their government's ability to handle human rights issues adequately. Staerklé, Delay, Gianettoni, and Roux (2007) developed a typology of intergroup perceptions that underpin popular support for competing political agendas and showed in particular how claims to social rights are related to perceived intergroup conflict.

Let us close this section with a few words on conflicts that degenerate—where physical violence adds to the means by which social and political realities are transformed. In these blatant conflicts much of the struggle is actually over the representation of the conflict itself—who are “we” and who are “they”—and how these definitions are related to our sense of right and wrong and the perceived legitimacy of different actors. Once the representation is determined, most of the work is done, and many other things follow. Take, for instance, the Arab-Israeli conflict—or is it the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, or even a conflict between Palestinians and Western imperialism? This problem of description tells a story. The Israeli state tells a story in which they are a small, vulnerable, and historically oppressed people threatened with annihilation by the might of the combined Arab countries. In this context, the moral responsibility of outsiders in the international community is to protect them against the shadow of another holocaust (see Gamson & Herzog's 1999 discussion of vulnerability as an unproblematic assumption in Israeli political discourse). The Palestinian leaders tell a story where the small, vulnerable, and historically oppressed Palestinian people are threatened with annihilation by the might of the Israeli Defence Force, which is backed by the even greater might of the United States. So here, the moral responsibility of the rest of the world stands against Israel. Our point here is not to say which representation is right or wrong, but to show that the representations are highly consequential for the nature of the conflict, the

balance of forces, and the way things play out. It is not self-evident here what the categories are (or even how many there are). It is certainly not self-evident who is dominant and who is subordinate.

Similarly, as Stevenson, Condor, and Abell (2007) showed, the answer to the question of whether Irish Catholics or Irish Protestants are the minority group depends on the framing of relevant context as either “Northern Ireland,” “Ireland,” or the “United Kingdom,” and different political leaders invoke different contexts to make plausible their version of positioning groups within the conflict. Sometimes even the *same* leaders refer to different contexts at different moments, when political opportunities and strategies change. As we have stressed, these are the very stuff of the conflict and therefore they should be the focus of analysis, not only its prehistory.

Social Representational Analysis at Work: Revisiting “Ethnic Conflict” in the Former Yugoslavia

In a recent discussion of scholarly explanations of violent conflict in the former Yugoslavia, Kolsto (2009) pointed out the limitations of both “realist” and “constructivist” models of conflict, security, and threat. A good example of the former is provided by the work of Petersen (2002), who related changes in the objective structure of relations between ethnic groups to consequent collective emotions, and hence collective violence driven against ethnic outgroups. Doing so, he bracketed out the key problem that “information we possess about putative members of other groups is derived to a very small degree from personal encounters only, and often first-hand experience is disregarded if it conflicts with what we hear on the news (. . .) Thus, the weak point of Petersen’s emotion-based theory of ethnic violence is that it does not include any discussion of how information about ‘reality’ is filtered and moulded through discourse before it becomes ‘knowledge’” (Kolsto, 2009, p. 7).

On the other hand, constructivist accounts of the conflict have focused on how political leaders have actively promoted security concerns within the population by propagating a discourse of ethnic threat. But then, they have left out another set of critical questions: When and why did (parts of) the population embrace this discourse? Therefore, this approach “fails to discuss why nationalist propaganda may be such an effective tool in some settings and not in others. Cynical politicians who are willing to manipulate their population to the point of unleashing an ethnic war may be found in most societies, but only in some situations are they able to attain their goals” (Kolsto, 2009, p. 10).

In this section, we aim to illustrate how the SR model that we have just outlined can meet both types of challenges. On the one hand, it explains why people’s experience of “reality” cannot be divorced from how they and others *communicate* about such experience; on the other, it offers concrete proposals

regarding what will, within social systems exposed to conflicting communications, orient people to privilege one version of reality over another.

Ethnic Conflict: When it Started as a Shared Representation

Survey research carried out in the former Yugoslavia shortly before the outbreak of war in 1991 (Hodson, Sekulic, & Massey, 1994) revealed a pattern that appeared as a conundrum to many political psychologists. It showed that hostile attitudes towards members of other ethnic group were the *least* frequent in the most multiethnic parts of Yugoslavia (and particularly rare in Bosnia-Herzegovina)—but these were precisely those parts that during the following years have become the theatre of the most outrageous interethnic violence. In effect, there is a conundrum only as long as we assume that collective *behavior* adequately reflects an underlying (and preexisting) collective *will*. But such an assumption is problematic in many regards: It misconceives the nature of armed conflict and ignores differences in the power to shape collective behavior. More specifically, it neglects a fundamental observation, often made by researchers studying populations that experienced civil war (see Stover & Weinstein, 2004): Survivors of civil war typically report being overwhelmed by a spiral of violence that they were unable to preempt. When studying processes of violent escalation, we should therefore refrain from presupposing anything similar to a natural democratic order: The collective outcome rarely, if ever, reflects the motives of the majority.

So how can we move closer then to understanding how many people eventually became bystanders, accomplices, or even perpetrators of ethnic violence that most did not want (see also Elcheroth & Spini, 2011)? To grasp the nature of shared representations at the eve of war, we went back to historical survey data collected in 1990 across all republics of what was still Yugoslavia then. We found an intriguing discrepancy (Elcheroth, Reicher, & Penic, 2009): When asked about relations between members of different ethnic groups at their own workplace or in their own neighbourhood, respondents in Croatia and Bosnia described these on average as better than satisfactory (as they did everywhere else, with the exception of Kosovo). But once the same people were asked about ethnic relations “in Yugoslavia,” they overwhelmingly described them as worse than bad. This means that most people were convinced that there was a problem about ethnicity “out there,” although most did not concretely experience such tensions in their own local world.

When people did not (yet) ground their beliefs about such tensions in what they could personally witness in their day-to-day life, they must have heard about it somewhere. As Mutz (1998) rightly pointed out in her analyses of a series of similar discrepancies between people’s personal experiences and their beliefs about collective experiences, the latter have both antecedents and consequences on their own: They depend more on “impersonal” (i.e., mass-mediated)

influences, and they are more predictive of subsequent politically relevant behavior. Applied to the context of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, analysis of mass media contents highlight the plausibility of the first thesis—there was much media discourse about ethnic nationalism and antagonism in the late Yugoslavia, before people experienced consequences concretely (see e.g., Mihelj, Bajt, & Pankov, 2009)—and the historical reality of subsequent massive bloodshed sadly underlines the accuracy of the higher predictive value of people's beliefs about collective experiences.

In 1990, this did not yet hinder people from engaging in close personal relations across ethnic boundaries: The same set of secondary analyses pointed out very large majorities in favor of interethnic marriage, for example. This would change dramatically later on. When one of us co-conducted a new survey across the former Yugoslavia in 2006 (see Spini, Elcheroth, & Fasel, 2010), only a tiny minority of our cohort sample could still imagine marrying across ethnic boundaries—less than one-third as compared to equivalent age or birth groups in 1990. Similar results were reported by Sekulic, Massey, and Hodson (2006) for earlier postwar surveys, one of them conducted immediately after the war. How could such a dramatic and long-lasting shift in the meaning of ethnic categories occur in a short period?

Rapid Escalation: Why Meta-Representations Became the Driving Force

In line with the theoretical model outlined in the previous section, we want to argue here that there is no convincing way to answer this question, as long as we stay at the level of individual attitudes, at the expense of meta-representations. To explain this point, let us try to take the perspective of any (randomly sampled) ordinary citizen, who happened to live in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. As just described, this person probably has good relations with neighbours and colleagues carrying markers of a different ethnic identity than his own (e.g., they celebrate other religious ceremonies than himself), while he also probably believes that tensions exist between different ethnic groups elsewhere in Yugoslavia. Further, since he knows this mainly from what he recurrently hears and sees in the mass media, he can be fairly confident that many other citizens, whom he does not personally know, have similar information and might hence draw similar conclusions—something he cannot assume regarding his idiosyncratic experiences at home and work. When the time comes for him to make decisions that might have important consequences for his own security and well-being and that of his nearest and dearest, on what kind of assumptions will he base them?

To be more precise: To what assumptions about the way most ethnic outgroups think, feel, and will ultimately act toward him, should he give more credence: to what he knows about his narrow sample of neighbours and colleagues or on what he was led to believe about the majority of “them”? And, at least as

critical, how should he form accurate assumptions about the thoughts, feelings, and intended actions of other *ingroup* members—whether they will still tolerate interethnic solidarity and when the majority of them will start to stigmatize and punish “ethnic moderates” as “ethnic traitors”? A critical point, in both cases, is that from an individual point of view, the cost of getting it wrong in one way (i.e., expecting outgroups to be *less* hostile and ingroups to be *more* tolerant than they actually are) can be dramatically higher than to getting it wrong the other way around. Uncertainty thus plays against intergroup benevolence, and individuals have better chances to be on the safer side when they behave on the basis of assumptions that thereby, paradoxically, will contribute to create a tenser, and eventually more dangerous, situation for everyone.

In a climate created this way, how people see themselves—how they intimately feel about themselves as a social being—becomes increasingly irrelevant, as compared to how people expect others to treat them according to their visible markers of affiliation (to categories imposed by the collective situation, rather than chosen by genuine identification). In such a climate, what people guess about their mutual mental states, ironically, becomes much more real *in its consequences* than what each of them “really” thinks and feels. And it might then only take a few incidents to trigger a tragic escalation of violence, which, from the outside, is too easily misinterpreted as a “spontaneous” release of genuine intergroup hatred or other collective emotions, such as those assumed (but never observed) by Petersen (2002) in his famous writings.

Collective Resistance: How It Was Breached by Enacted Representations

These incidents occurred and they did trigger a dreadful escalation. But they did not happen spontaneously. They were part of a political strategy. As we will see now, the events around the outbreak of violence in Croatia in 1991 and in Bosnia in 1992 confer a somber meaning to our theoretical point about the bidirectional relationship between power to push people into specific practices that render specific representations relevant and, vice versa, the way these representations recreate social power. But first, they also tell a story about the limits of power. As Gagnon (2004) described in great detail, in Serbia on its way away from socialism, the position of Slobodan Milosevic’s government was considerably challenged, from both a public clamouring for more drastic economic and political change and reformers within his own party. His defence was to play a nationalist card and to portray those who questioned him as dividing the country, weakening its leadership and therefore either unwittingly or wittingly abetting the enemy. So, we can understand why Milosevic and his allies would have an interest in provoking ethnic tensions. But why would people accept a discourse that was designed to silence them?

Is this an example of credulous people accepting anything that a wily propagandist throws at them—another example of the mindless masses? Well, no. To start with at least, people living in mixed areas of Serbia or in Serb enclaves abroad

did resist the propaganda brought to their homes by state-controlled mass media. While the latter remained positive towards their Croat and Muslim neighbours, among the former, more than half of the young men drafted to “rescue” their “ethnic fellows” in Croatia in 1991 preferred to hide or leave the country rather than to serve, constraining the government to use more selective and forceful drafting procedures during the subsequent Bosnian war (Gagnon, 2004). But then militias were sent in to attack these neighbours and to force Serbs to collude in the attack (at least in the provision of information). After that, Croats and Bosnian Muslims lost trust in “Serbs”—perceived increasingly as a consistent entity—not knowing when they might be attacked again and who might help in the attack. Many became suspicious, when not actively hostile, and this new reality gave traction to “hatred” as a collective belief system, in an ever-escalating cycle.

Hence, people did not automatically accept mass-mediated discourse: Indeed they were initially very sceptical. The first acts of violence did not grow out of public frenzy. On the contrary, they represented an (eventually successful) attempt to break public resistance to a new definition of political space in terms of ethnic categories, which speech alone could not impose upon them. Public support for the ethnicization of politics only emerged once the discourse of enmity was backed by experiential reality. What this means concretely has been impressively documented in Maček’s (2009) ethnographic description of people living in Sarajevo during the siege. In their daily struggle for survival, they were frequently left with no other choice than turn to “their” ethnic community for assistance and protection and thereby to enact identities that were assumed by the conflict, although not of foremost importance to most inhabitants *before* violence broke out.

*Social Power: Which Strings Were Pulled to Shape
World-Making Representations*

This example underpins the more general point that representations that are divorced from the organization of social practices in the world will most likely be rejected. The analysis of conflict in the former Yugoslavia therefore highlights the role of leadership in creating not only discourses but also practices that are consonant with the discourse. When leaders achieve to both craft and embed understandings of reality (see also Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011), then their power becomes effective.

We have further illustrated, in this case description, how armed conflicts tragically stress the creative dynamics of social representation and social categorization. When intergroup violence spreads, people often can no longer afford the luxury to live in accordance with their intimate sense of identity. The most likely possibility is that they will tend to decipher and anticipate other people’s behavior in terms of the ethnic (or other collective) grid rendered salient and hence start to think and act themselves in accordance with the categories imposed upon them by

the violence. At a collective level, the aggregation of the resulting individual behavioral strategies is then likely to create (and postvalidate) precisely those kind of assumed realities.

This does not imply that collective violence was just an “accident,” based on a kind of collective misunderstanding. To say that it cannot be interpreted in terms of the motives of the majority of ordinary citizens is one thing, but to say that it did not respond to the way a powerful elite perceived its own interests is another. By positing demonic Croatian and Bosnian enemies who certainly threatened the lives of Serb people and possibly threatened the very existence of Serbia, Milosevic was able to isolate and repress internal opposition. During one decade, the invocation of enemies was an eminently successful technique of demobilisation and defence of the status quo (Gagnon, 2004). In other words, the transformation of social reality brought by ethnic violence served political ends, whereas the means by which these were accomplished here (and often countered elsewhere) were inherently psychological.

Conclusion

A powerful theory provides answers, as we have shown in the previous section. However it also generates new ways of seeing and new questions to ask. So, to conclude, what are the ways in which a SR perspective provides a new agenda for studying the phenomena of interest? In line with the four components of SR that we have prioritized, we suggest four new ways of looking at political reality. None is entirely new, but a SR outlook invites us, first, to give them a much more central place in political psychological analysis and, second, to integrate them into one consistent way of looking at the phenomena we are studying.

First, it invites us to *look at relations*, rather than isolated individuals. This raises, for example, concrete challenges to overcome atomistic sampling procedures, as they (still) are current standard practice in survey research. If we want to take seriously the notion that social interactions should be studied as a level of analysis on their own, then we need information on social networks, local communities, or collective movements as much as on individual respondents. A variety of methods is needed to study collective experiences in their own right, and they need to focus on channels of communication, places, settings, and contexts in which people meet, discuss, and argue, as well as the media through which they share ideas and information.

Second, it invites us to ask people *what relevant others think*. This has tangible implications for the way questions are (routinely) formulated in opinion polls. In the previous section, we argued that when the aim is to explain the outbreak or evolution of intergroup violence, it is neither necessary, nor sufficient, to study the factors that would intrinsically motivate most individuals to fight, kill, or die, for the sake of their group. It is more enlightening to analyze the structure of collective beliefs that inform people’s understanding of behavioral options on the basis of mutual expect-

tations, within and across group boundaries. If that is true, the vast majority of research on intergroup attitudes still falls short of this objective. A similar argument can be made for any type of research that aims to explain collective political behavior, but measures only personal attitudes. In the future, we should not just study people's own opinions, we should also measure what they think that ingroup and outgroup members believe and intend to do. Meta-representational polls should get as much prominence as straight opinion polls

Third, we need to *observe collective practices* more systematically. In understanding how particular representations win out, we should look at the ways in which they are sedimented into collective practices and institutional facts. Looking at survey responses is not enough, nor is looking at "natural" discourse. In any case, ethnographic descriptions of collective rituals and routine practices allow us to broaden the interpretative context for "speech acts": They help to explain what is communicated by other vehicles than words, and they clarify what words allow people to do together.

Our fourth and final invitation to political psychologists is to dedicate more energy to *compare organized wholes*. If we want to understand how SR (re-)create social realities, that is social order and social change, we need to compare systems of power and conflict across different times and places. In particular, in studying how collective political behavior transforms the world, we should look at the way different processes of communication concur to construct more or less consistent political climates, in which proposed definitions of issues and problems rule in and rule out particular types of solution. We can then examine more closely how actively promoted representations achieve, in some contexts, to constitute particular people as allies or enemies, and particular individuals as legitimate policy makers or dangerous troublemakers, but fail to do so in other contexts.

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