

DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP: AN ANALYSIS INVOLVING SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND SOCIAL SUBJECTIVITY

Fernando González Rey
Universidade de Brasília (Brésil)
gonzalez_rey49@hotmail.com

The heuristic value of Social Representations for the social sciences has been amply demonstrated by the number of works that this theory has inspired from its inception, not to mention the critiques the theory has engendered. However, as with any foundational position, the concept has been expanded upon according to many different trends and interpretations, which has resulted in this category being adapted by individuals and schools with different theoretical, epistemological and methodological perspectives and goals. In this regard at the moment there appear to be at least two well delineated trends: the processual (Jodelet, Markova, Duveen and others) and the structural (Abric, Doise and others). Both inspire different lines of research and define different epistemological approaches to this topic.

The existence of such trends is common in the process of development of any theory, as has been clear throughout the history of psychology, but concerning Social Representation this phenomenon, in my view, has a special importance, because Social Representations are rather a category than a theory, a category the identification of which has created an important theoretical core as a result of its application to research on different concrete topics of social life. Social Representation has allowed psychologists to define an important “zone of meaning” of social life, that is to say, to explain the symbolic organization of different social domains in terms of common sense. Social representations make up the social tissue or fabric within which social experience becomes relevant.

However, as has been recognized by different authors (Markova, Wagner, Duveen among others), the current theoretical moment in the development of Social Representations presents some gaps. In my opinion, some of these gaps result from the absence of a macrotheoretical level that allows Social Representations to be seen as moments of a more complex framework oriented towards the theoretical construction of new zones of complex social configurations, in which the role of Social Representations is to mediate the

complex relationship between social and individual agencies. These new zones never would appear as a result of the application of any isolating or self-limited category, because by their very nature, those zones are moments of a very complex landscape, irreducible to any single or one-sided phenomenon. In order to face this challenge of developing a macrotheoretical level within which the concept of Social Representation can extend and reinforce its heuristic value in the attempt to understand the constitution of social phenomena, I am proposing the category of subjectivity, in which are very closely interrelated the topic of individual and social subjectivity with the topic of the subject.

Subjectivity represents a theoretical construction which only makes sense when we start from a different epistemological perspective, taking knowledge as a theoretical production that does not have a direct relationship to an empirical basis. In this sense, subjectivity is not simply one more concrete category oriented toward the description of empirical phenomena. The heuristic value of the concept of subjectivity is rather defined by its capacity to generate new meanings and theoretical hypothesis about studied phenomena than by its capacity to provide pre-given responses in any domain of social and human phenomena. Subjectivity defines a complex processual network of meanings and subjective senses that simultaneously organizes itself in individuals and in the different forms and levels of social organization. The concept of subjectivity used in this way overrides the old dichotomy between social and individual phenomena.

The concept has very interesting antecedents in psychology, for example, Castoriadis' category of the social imaginary, which exists in a subjective sense without any immediate objective support in the current social situation in which the individual is immersed. These phenomena represent a constellation of elements that, coming from different sources, integrate themselves as something new on the qualitative level into a subjective dimension, which could not be understood from its correspondence with any immediate social context. In Castoriadis' view, every form of social organization has a subjective core that allow it to maintain its organization and development.

The heuristic value of the concept of social subjectivity is that it integrates the different objective contexts of social existence into a subjective system within which social existence appears in terms of meaning and subjective sense. The configuration of social subjectivity

results from the confrontation and contradiction of different constituent processes of social organization, so, for example, the contradiction between historically constituted social senses and dominant current representations in social scenarios, between the constituted personal subject and the pressures, contradictions and challenges that face him/her throughout social life, the contradiction between an as-constituted social organization and the elements that oppose it in the current social moment,. and many others contradictions and processes that characterize social development. These complex networks of processes and phenomena constitute themselves as subjective cores of subjective sense, integrating different social domains within which individual subjects and social instances and institutions have existed and exist at the current moment. These subjective senses are organized in complex units that simultaneously function as organized systems and as processes.

All social agencies and institutions each carry their own subjectivity, subjectivities which in turn form parts of the whole dictionary of social subjectivity in each concrete society. The concept of subjectivity taken in this way is not the opposite of objectivity, on the contrary, it is a different level in the expression of objectivity; it represents a level in which external objective conditions acquire meaning and sense through the historical constitution of social agencies and of concrete individual subjects.

Subjectivity has been rejected (Ibañez, Gergen, and others) as a remainder of modernity, but in psychology, the basis for the development of the concept of subjectivity was strongly associated with the emergence of the Marxist dialectic in the beginnings in the formative period of Soviet Psychology, particularly in the works of Vygotsky and Rubinstein. Subjectivity is a well defined ontological phenomenon, taking ontology not in its essential, static and internal connotation, but as a dialectically generated process of dialogue, as the ontology of a Social Representation has been defined by Markova. It is precisely the same kind of ontology that could define subjectivity. As a complex, nonregular and open system, subjectivity simultaneously is configured at social and individual levels, which are mutually interrelated in its development.

The capacity of certain levels of the human psyche to become subjective constitutes a qualitative difference between the human and animal psyches, as was emphasized by

Vygotsky. Today there are different approaches to the term subjectivity, which predominantly focus on a semiotic or discursive nature to subjectivity. In these approaches, the subjectivization of emotions is viewed as being mediated by meanings; this, in my opinion, simply leads to the category of meaning being reified and becoming a new universal category. The overemphasis of one category may lead to a new kind of reductionism, in which categories like discourse, meaning, language and others ultimately define emotions. In my opinion such reductionism leads to a new kind of rationalism: a kind of “postmodern” rationalism. In critiquing rationalism some postmodern authors come to see reality as a kind of discursive order, thus adopting yet another rationalistic position

I understand subjectivity as a living, developing system containing and tolerating contradictions within itself. This system is simultaneously a constituent of individual and social subjects, and at the same time it is constituted and continuously reconfigured by the subject’s actions. This means that subjectivity is permanently involved in the dialogical organization of the subject’s daily life. Communication is therefore a very important source in the process of subjectivization that characterizes the experience of the subject. But simultaneously we consider a personal subject as a generative agency, which has the capacity to reflect and to take positions in relation to him/herself, positions that will strongly influence the processes of communication in which the subject is involved.

The concept of subjectivity used in the way proposed overcomes a number of those dichotomies that have been so common in the history and development of psychology and which have strongly influenced the proliferation of partial and one-sided microtheories in it. Among those dichotomies could be mentioned affective versus cognitive, conscious versus unconscious, individual–social versus external-internal. The integration of these oppositions at a different macrotheoretical level has implication for all the branches of psychology.

Individuals, as personal subjects, are vital constituent moments of a social network, and it is hence impossible to ignore their subjective constitution, which is a differentiated path in the development of social subjectivity in its entirety. Social subjectivity is configured in many different ways in individuals and changes through a subject’s actions and generated by his/her activities, thoughts and motives. The study of social subjectivity thus cannot use

individuals as a source of standard responses, because the subjective senses of social processes do not always explicitly appear in the meanings of individual responses. Social production does not appear identically in each individual, all of whom actively mediate the subjective constitution of social experience through their own and singular histories.

All spheres of society directly or indirectly are configured in complex subjective social networks, but individuals as subjects do not disappear as part of these networks; on the contrary subjects may become important cores of subjectivization. The subjective sense of social experiences appears in very indirect, interrelated and hidden ways, which impedes identifying them in the direct and immediate expressions of individuals. So, Social Representations have a hidden emotional core (subjective sense), which has to be defined through the interpretation of explicit expressions of studied subjects. The objective social world appears in a different order in the subjective constitution of individual and social instances. Social subjectivity, as a category, precisely has been oriented towards the theoretical construction of these processes, in an attempt to go beyond the evidences of consciously organizing individual responses or social appearances. In this attempt, Social Representations becomes a very useful tool, because they represent an important constituent of individual and social subjectivity.

Each social event has an important subjective expression, which become an important moment of its social existence. But the subjective basis of any social phenomenon does not have a simple or one-sided explanation, because it is always a multidetermined phenomenon. Any social event represents a configuration of different sources of meanings and subjective senses, which integrate themselves as a whole into a qualitative uniqueness during the process of subjectivization, through which it would simultaneously be configured in social and individual subjectivity. In our opinion, Social Representations do not only exist as representations that characterize the way in which different phenomena circulate within common sense: they are embedded in different levels of social subjectivity and carry emotional charge and meanings generated in the history of the social context in which they appear and develop.

So, for example, the Social Representation of the Cuban Revolution was not only developed on the basis of some explicit, rational principle, whether ideological, social or

what have you. It also resulted from complex, historically enriched subjective senses, which existed in different aspects of social subjectivity such as memories, beliefs, symbols, histories and others, and in individual subjectivity. These senses appear as the emotional fund of representation and very frequently sustain the meaning of representations beyond the evidences of daily life. The World Revolution is the central core of a Representation that expresses a synthesis of a very complex organization of meanings and subjective senses that appear in the subjective configuration of that participate in upholding the subjective configuration of that representation in its explicit senses or attributes.

As examples of some sense elements that configure the subjective sense of the Social Representation of Revolution in Cuba we may mention the equality of races and social classes and the development of social opportunities and social rights, which in the first ten years of the Cuban Revolution played an important role in the cultural and social development of the Cuban population. Besides this, anti-American feelings and sentiments relating to independence or self-determination configured by our history, together with the charismatic and very Cuban personality of Fidel Castro, were also elements of sense subjectively embodied in the Revolution. Most of these elements do not appear either in conscious or in organized meanings as part of the given Social Representation or Representations, but they play an important emotional role in the subjective senses of Social Representations of the Cuban Revolution. So, the importance of Social Representation in the study of the current social organization of Cuba does not rest only on the explicit contents and organization of the representations in themselves, but in the configurations of complex meanings and senses that only appear in hidden and indirect ways in those representations.

In the above approach, Social Representations are subjectively constituted phenomena of social subjectivity, whose importance cannot be reduced to the content of representations, which carry important information that should be constructed through an interpretative–constructive approach to their study. This approach presumes to overcome the purely descriptive and structural approach that has prevailed in some of the current dominant methodological approaches to the study of Social Representations. It is time to take

research in the meaning of Social Representations to another level by looking anew at the complex organization of social phenomena.

Representations have as their basis complex subjective configurations of social subjectivity, which are manifested in individuals as a configuration of individual subjectivity as well, which means every individual will vary in this regard. This singular expression should become a subject of social psychology, within which the exclusion of the personal subject unfortunately had a long tradition contributing to keep up the mechanical split between social and individual. These configurations have remained up to now outside of our theoretical capacity.

A finer analysis of the subjective constitution of social phenomena could lead researchers to consider other phenomena, such as religion, gender, social movements, etc, in their interrelation with other fields of social life. The individual as subject might play an important role in the constitution of a new generative core of social subjectivity and in the development of new social subjects. Individuals are an active part of social subjectivity. They are constituted in their social actions, but simultaneously they are constituents of those social instances in which they act. This has been the case with all exceptional leaders in history. That is to say, persons who become leaders not by an exceptional capacity but as a result of a combination of circumstances at the moment they become leaders generate a new focus of subjectivization. History does not follow a regular course governed by historical laws, rather it is a very complex and confusing mixture of processes and elements which do not follow any prescribed rational criteria. All the elements and processes that take part in the course of history acquire their forms of organization in the course of their development, in the scenario of human actions and practices that characterize any historical event. In this context individual actions are not subordinate to any suprasocial order, they are part of the social order, sometimes as a moment of expression of that order, other times as a moment of rupture of it, leading to a new processes of subjectivization.

Using Social Representation in the context of social subjectivity reinforces the concept's heuristic value, allowing it to enter into new "zones of meaning" of social phenomena that up to now have remained out of the equation. In my view, one of the criteria for judging the value of a particular category or theoretical framework is what opportunities these

constructions create to open up new zones of meaning to knowledge production. A viable theory, in my view, must have the capacity to develop new zones of senses on the studied phenomenon.

In spite of the theoretical character of this work, it is indirectly enriched by empirical information that has resulted from many differently psychological inquiries (1994, 1997, 1999) which has been oriented on the basis of what I have called Qualitative Epistemology. This epistemology reconsiders the place of theoretical construction in research, emphasizing the need to center on the constructive processes of the participants rather than in their responses in front of our methodological tools. In this qualitative approach the tools are considered as a way for motivating participants to speak involving the subjective sense of their experiences. Conversations and discussions in groups represents a continuum of research process that become an active and living social scenario.

The analysis of democracy and citizenship in Latin America: subjective configurations of these representations

The term democracy has been used as an important ideological tool from ancient times and in the modern period was particularly deployed as part of an emphasis on an image of equality and social rights, which were closely tied to and regarded as necessary to economical growth. That image underwent transitions at different moments in modernity, being closely related to the development of concepts like nation, state, morality and religion. The modern era has been a time in which universal principles were considered as necessary conditions for a progressive development of humanity. Democracy was part of that representation and has had a moral and political connotation. During the cold war, democracy was intensively used in order to reinforce the image of capitalism. The term was used in order to mark the difference between capitalism and socialism, becoming a symbol of the advantages of capitalism, while in reality, in the case of Latin America, it became a euphemism that lead to another euphemism: worker's democracy, which in socialism was administered by the possessor of power, thus leading to the constitution of a bureaucratic state whose functionaries reproduce the values of capitalism.

The term democracy in Latin America has been manipulated and presented as the right to vote, which is only one of its expressions, and which in the case of the Latin American

countries has covered up enormous atrocities committed all along by “democratic” governments of the nations of the region. Democracy, in our view, is inseparable from the development of citizenship, understanding by this the right of persons not only to survive, a right which today millions of people in the so-called third world do not enjoy, but also the right to participate in different levels of social life, involving the right of individuals and societies to live with guarantees in spite of their differences. Citizenship should be, in my opinion, a concept that allows different individuals, groups and social agencies to be part of a single social network keeping and tolerating differences that up to now appear as “zones of prejudice” in each society, prejudices related to race, gender, sex, profession, political criteria, social status, religion and so on.

I completely agree with the hypothesis proposed by A. Touraine about the place of the personal subject in the current condition of what he has called demodernization. In the condition in which the subject is separated from the system, breaking down the links between economical growth and identities, it is no longer possible to appeal to universal principles in order to guarantee the growth of moral and social tissue. The notion of the personal subject has been a point of convergence between the instrumental reasoning that has governed the current process of globalization and the authoritarian process that has governed the defense of communitarian alternatives in the face of the expansion of the irrational market system, but which center only on the development of the economy and of technology, without any attention to social development.

It is interesting that throughout the history of humanity, the processes of subjectivization have tended, in a very irrational way, to segregate authentic human phenomena on the basis of purely subjective reasoning, while the fact of the matter is that each process is related to a variety of processes that simultaneously have taken part in other spheres of society, whose consequences appear interrelated in subjective terms in a unique and complex subjective configuration.

Democracy has been the cornerstone of a Social Representation that has facilitated conformism and the proliferation of alienation in most of the Latin American countries. The increase of mass culture, reinforced through a highly sophisticated technology of the media, has led to a obsession with consumption that has contributed in the disintegration of the

institutional, social and familiar “tissue” of personalization in social life, which historically have been a very important source for the production of emotionality as a condition of the subjective constitution of the individual subject and social agencies. The lack of personal relations impoverishes the process of emotional constitution of the subject, leading to his/her finding affirmation in the alienating mechanism of drug and alcohol consumption, which today are part of the subject’s alienation. The subject is alienated of the capacity to define his/her own psychological space and cannot develop a personal identity

The development of democracy and citizenship should lead to respect for differences, for contradictions, for the singular, while at the same time the development of the singular has to contribute to social projects and to the constitution of new social instances, able to develop social programs at the moment in which the state is progressively abandoning its participation in social programs. At this point, once again, I would like to emphasize the need to construct a theoretical scenario that legitimizes individuals and social processes, because to ignore individuals is highly dangerous. This has been one of the facts presented by various forms of totalitarianism, among which unfortunately those of the left have not been an exception. On the contrary, disregarding the individual and the role of subjectivity was, in my opinion, one of the main factors in the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe, a phenomenon which has not received up to now a careful attention in the social scientific literature.

The absence of a culture of democracy in Latin America has led many sectors of the population to accept the label employed by the media related democracy without any critical thinking in relation to it. The development of critical thinking is a condition for democracy and is a condition for the foundation of the social and individual subject. We should not confuse individualism with the need to guarantee a productive, creative and critical individual subject. The condition of the subject is always in relation to social action, the individual subject is part of the necessary differentiation that should characterize the social configuration of democracy.

The deformation in the use of the concept of democracy also characterizes the positions of power in socialism, where a very interesting process of subjective configuration appears. The leaders or the officials wielding power began to be identified with the attributes of the

political “cause,” i.e., the person replaces the richness of the process and become the symbol of the revolution, in a process of personalization of the social process that leads to some kind of fundamentalism. This process has presented itself with different attributes in different cultures. This change gives to those persons so identified an unlimited power, and in a certain way sacralizes them, leading to an individualism and personalism that enter into contradiction with the explicit principles of the ideology that rules the process, whatever it was. The concrete person appears as the “spirit” of the process, gaining unlimited power and generating around him a complex bureaucratic network that gradually does away with all assumptions of official discourse

The official discourse continues to be a source of representation for the generations that were an active part of the process of transformation, meanwhile the new generations enter into a new subjective condition that allows them to confront reality and the discourse, a capacity that seems to be lost by the older generations, which keep themselves subordinate to the subjective sense of the dominant representations.

Suddenly the people become an undifferentiated mass, which has to apply the ideas of the leader, who carries out the attribute of “trust” in each moment of the social process. In this context, the term democracy is completely eliminated of political scenarios and of the daily life of society, but if you ask many people of the population what democracy is, they have a representation of it that may be socially characterized and that does not have anything to do with their individual social practices.

The subjective configurations of this complex processes of course have to be deeply studied in order to help in the construction of new theoretical and practical models, able to confront the increasing processes of desocialization and depersonalization of different alternatives in the capitalism “era”.

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