

Social Representations, Individual and Collective Mind: A Study of Wundt, Cattaneo and Moscovici

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Abstract The paper presents a discussion on the role of Social Representations in the articulation between individual and collective dimensions of mental activity. An analysis of some concepts in the works of Wundt and Cattaneo is the starting point for a discussion of the relationship between individual processes, practices, artifacts, symbolic systems and functions of Social Representations in the development of culture and individuals. In this perspective, Social Representations could be considered a space of negotiation of the meaning. The relationship between Social Representations, symbolic systems, practices and sense making involves the elaboration of the tension between continuity and innovation, which is developed through communication and practice along time in the interaction between individual and collective minds.

Keywords Space of negotiation · Individual and collective mind · Social representations

Introduction

This paper aims at addressing the following question: is it possible to consider the Theory of Social Representations a theory of the development of the relationship between individual mind and culture? Many scholars, such as Duveen (2007),

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Valsiner (2003) and Jodelet (2002), have for instance provided nuanced interpretations of the Theory of Social Representations as frameworks or symbolic systems mediating between individuals and culture. Moscovici suggests this orientation when he states that: “*The main aim of the theory of social representations is clear. By focusing on everyday communication and thinking, it hopes to determine the link between human psychology and modern social and cultural trends*” (1988, 225). Following a discussion of this topic from a theoretical and historical perspective, we will present the idea that the role of Social Representations in the articulation between individual thinking and culture consists in creating a framework for sense-making, a space for the negotiation of meaning, in which the individual and collective mental activity, mediated intersubjective processes and the social practices take place along the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of culture. The synchronic dimension can be defined as the dynamic totality of endogenous social interactions, of material and symbolic artefacts at a given moment of the history of a human society. The diachronic dimension instead represents both the development of these interaction and artefacts over history.

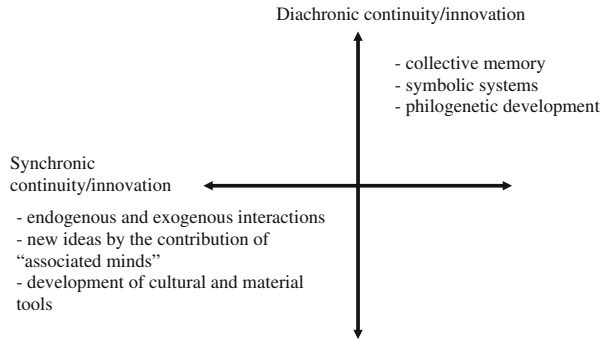
The starting point of the discussion is the identification of certain common theoretical antecedents shared with *sociocultural psychology* (Valsiner and Rosa 2007), by arguing that some concepts presented in the works of Wundt and Cattaneo can account for the role played by Social Representations in the articulation between the individual and collective dimensions of mental activity. These concepts represent the framework for analysing the relationships between individual and intersubjective psychological processes, practices, artefacts, symbolic systems and the fundamental functions of Social Representations: describing, classifying, explaining and building up conducts and directing social communication (Moscovici [1976] 2004; Moscovici and Hewstone 1984). In this perspective, Social Representations can be understood as a framework for sense-making, a space for the negotiation of meaning linking the individual and the social. We will attempt to show that the relationship between Social Representations, symbolic systems, practices and *sense making* is a circular process of co-construction and elaboration developing along a time axis, in the constant tension between individual and collective, through the communication processes.

Mind and Culture

Philosophy (Cattaneo [1859–1866] 2000), sociology (Durkheim [1897] 1952) and psychology (McDougall 1927) somehow share the idea of a collective mind, that differs qualitatively from the mere sum of the individual minds composing a society (Jahoda 2007, 117). The theory of Social Representations has tried to establish a link between these two levels, these two universes of thought (Moscovici [1976] 2004), in order to answer one of the fundamental—and somehow unsolved—problems of social psychology: the relationship between mind and society.

According to Cattaneo (1801–1869), this link between the individual mind and society is established through the collective process of culture elaboration, which develops within recurrent social interactions. These interactions are made possible by two forms of continuity and innovation: synchronic and diachronic (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 The articulation between mind and culture in Cattaneo and Wundt



Innovation

The synchronic form, represented by the endogenous social interactions within a culture or the exogenous interaction between different cultures, assures the creation of new ideas through the contribution of *associated minds* (Cattaneo [1859–1866] 2000). Forerunning a discourse about the phylogenetic development of human societies over universal history, similar to that expressed later by Wundt (1832–1920) ([1916] 1952), Cattaneo argues that primitive man can only develop an individual and limited experience of the world around him. In the following, we will use the concept of diachronic dimension, instead of phylogenetic development, to differentiate it from the principle of finality of universal history, underlying the idea of phylogeny of societies.

The advent of culture in universal history, as the contemporaries of Wundt and Cattaneo conceived it, activates a process that we now define the social construction of knowledge, leading to a more articulated understanding of the phenomena, even those that are not directly accessible to the individual perception. This construction of new knowledge is driven by the process of “*antithesis*” (Cattaneo [1859–1866] 2000, 77), a concept that is more similar to Bakhtin’s dialogism ([1930] 1981) rather than to Hegel’s antithesis (Kaufmann 1966). In short, social life is the context within which individuals exchange their points of view and opposing ideas. This exchange generates a positive conflict that paves that way for the improvement of knowledge. This process is associated with the development of cultural and material tools—language, technology, means of transport, weapons, memory supports, etc.—making it possible to widen the horizons of the experience itself and triggering a virtuous circle of growth for mankind. The generative process can take place in an endogenous and an exogenous way. The endogenous development of culture takes place through two different mechanisms, which are taken into account in a different form also in Moscovici’s theory. The first driving force of cultural development is the appearance of “genius”, in Vico’s sense: the individual’s ability to turn his experience of the world into discovery. The new ideas are elaborated within the society and become collective legacy. The second driving force is constituted by “*the common people, unaware of academic debates but confident in their capacities and aspirations for better life prospects (...) posing anew, and agitating to resolve, fundamental issues in organized existence*” (Sabetti 2006, 10). Cattaneo defines these everyday actors of cultural

development “*obscure Socrates*” ([1851] 1960, 281). In Moscovici’s theory, Social Representations are the place in which the meeting and the mediation between these two ways of producing knowledge take place. In modern society, the former corresponds to scientific and technological production by experts, the latter corresponds to the consensual world of the media and everyday social interactions. Both Cattaneo and Moscovici seem to share the vision of a cognitive and emotional structure of human beings formed by the relationship between “*being, becoming and acting*” (Sabetti 2006, 15). At the same time, individuals differ because of the forms that ideas, beliefs and learning about themselves and the world assume with respect to the actual ways of acting. Thus, Moscovici would have probably subscribed to Cattaneo’s statement: “*society not only sees things, but also makes things*”(Cattaneo [1859–1866] 2000, 84, original bold).

The development can also be generated in an exogenous way through the contact with different societies, enabled by travels, trades, migrations and wars. This is the different process concerning the entry of external ideas that are elaborated and adapted according to the needs of the receiving culture. According to Duveen (2007) this movement is mediated by the process of representing. The assimilation and elaboration of elements foreign to the culture “*is undertaken in relation to the existing structure of the group, so that elements are drawn into existing projects and reshaped or reworked to make them of service to these projects*” (Duveen 2007, 552), in such a way that the external resources are included in the community’s repertoire in function of an imagined future.

Continuity

Continuity has a diachronic dimension, making it possible to create from generation to generation that tie or feeling of common belonging that constitutes cultural unity. To this end “*society is in possession of all the aids of the artificial memory*” (Cattaneo [1859–1866] 2000, 111)—written texts, monuments, images, national symbols, etc.—making it possible to overcome the limits of the individual memory. It therefore becomes possible to create a continuity between generations and a cumulative knowledge through the “*collective memory, which is the contribution of all the individual memories*” (Cattaneo [1859–1866] 2000, 113). The same concept can be found in Wundt, who considers the collective representations “*mental products which are created by a community of human life and are, therefore, inexplicable in terms merely of individual consciousness, since they presuppose the reciprocal action of many*” (Wundt 1916, 3). These products assume above all the form of the writing, which represents the point of contact between individual mind and culture. During mankind’s development, starting from the requirements of trade and lawmaking, the system of writing developed with the purpose of sharing laws and recording economic exchanges. “*In this wise, the material aspects of the world culture exerted an influence upon the mental aspects, whose direct expressions are speech and writing*” (Wundt 1916, 486).

The fundamental feature bringing the concept of Cattaneo close to that of Wundt is that the dialectic between continuity and innovation in a given culture is basically an historical process. It is related to the specific material conditions of a nation at a particular time in its development. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to define

universal comparative laws of social development. This also represents the specificity of the object of social psychology respect to individual psychology. The only very general law that Cattaneo and Wundt seem to share is that the human being is essentially a social and “symbolic” creature, inclined to create his own social environment. This environment created along the phylogenetic development determines in return the features of the individual psychological processes. In Cattaneo’s own words: “*The most social act of men is thinking*” ([1859–1866] 2000, 89).

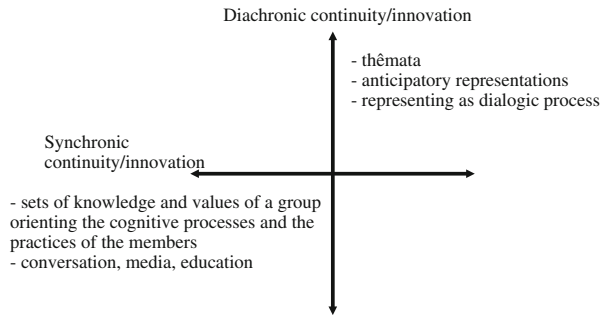
Social Representations, Continuity and Innovation

The twofold process—synchronic and diachronic—of construction and maintenance of the culture is also considered by Durkheim, who argues that it is made possible by the existence of collective representations (Durkheim [1897] 1952; Jahoda 2007). We will not get into a debate about the differences and similarities between the concept of representation in Durkheim and Moscovici, which has been already discussed in literature (Farr 1998; Moscovici 1998). We merely require a short digression, from our topic of the relationship between individual and collective mind in the theory of Social Representations to focus on the fact that according to Durkheim, unlike Cattaneo, the relationship between individual and collective mind is asymmetrical rather than circular. In other words, the “hegemonic” collective representations (Moscovici 1988) are expression of a *social consciousness* that dominates the individual and “*almost exclusively determines social ideas, beliefs, and actions*”, leaving “*little room for psychology*” (Jahoda 2007, 117). The problem of placing the construct of Social Representation Durkheim’s “collective” pole opposed to “individual” one was the subject of debate during the 1980s between Jahoda (1988), Harré (1984) and Moscovici (1988). According to Jahoda (1988), Moscovici simply replaced the term “collective” with the term “social”, keeping the irreducibility between collective and individual representations, thus failing to grasp the articulation between the two levels. Harré, on the other hand, claimed that there would be nothing collective in Social Representations, if by this term we mean a form of collective knowledge shared by the members of a group. Unless this group is highly structured, the fact that some individuals can develop and reach similar points of view is simply explained by the “*influence of social situations on social actors*” (Harré 1984, 930). Some individuals under the same environmental conditions and the same social influences end up autonomously developing similar representations. It is not necessary to invoke collective processes of construction, elaboration and representation of the reality. It was necessary to recall this debate here because it led Moscovici (1988) to deepen some key concepts of the theory of Social Representations—such as hegemonic, emancipated and polemic representations and “*thêmata*”—that played a fundamental role in the understanding of how Social Representations articulate the relationship between individual and collective dimensions.

In the theory of Social Representations, the two dimensions (Moscovici [1976] 2004)—synchronic and diachronic—are also present (Fig. 2).

Nevertheless, in the development of the theory and its empirical applications, the synchronic dimensions—with the study of the structural elements—prevailed

Fig. 2 The articulation between mind and culture in Moscovici



(Moliner 2001) to the detriment of the dynamic and diachronic dimensions (Markova 2003; Moliner 2001). This probably led to overestimate the similarities with Durkheim’s construct of representation. Thus, Social Representations have been understood as structured sets of knowledge and values of a group orienting the cognitive processes and the practices of its members. A sort of social *vademecum* that group members can consult every time they have to make a decision on a social object under the social “*pressure to inference*” (Moscovici [1976] 2004). However, this is merely the first part of the story.

During its “second season”, the theory of Social Representations was subject to criticism and suggestions from different approaches of social psychology (Duveen 2007; Markova 2003; Valsiner 2003; Moliner 2001). The new debate pointed out the dynamic, diachronic, interactive and genetic dimension, also included in the first formulation of the theory, whose theoretical elaboration added an interesting value to the topic of the relationships between individual and collectivity, continuity and innovation. Our hypothesis is that what we called the “diachronic dimension of culture” with respect to Cattaneo and Wundt—that is the ability of a social group to build an historical continuity—has also been elaborated in the development of the theory of Social Representations. This type of continuity first emerged through in the concept of *thémata*: profound principles of organization of the knowledge characterizing a culture, providing the “magnets” for directing the representations (Duveen 2007; Moscovici and Vignaux 1994). Initially referring to scientific knowledge, Moscovici and Vignaux (1994) stated that not all the knowledge is expressible and explicit: there are some basic ideas and values, such as symmetry, simplicity, elegance, continuous vs discrete, that lead scientist’s thinking and insight. In everyday thinking, there are implicit principles orientating and grounding the Social Representations, such as good vs evil, natural vs artificial, etc. In a similar way, Wundt (1916) individualised some of these profound and almost ancestral organizational principles directing the development of the culture, such as the opposition between health/disease, dominant/dominated, external/internal, etc.

The second diachronic aspect is the ability of Social Representations to direct the choice of the individual with respect to the project of a group. Gina Philogène, integrating the classification of Moscovici (1988)—hegemonic, emancipated and polemic representations—called this type *anticipatory representations* (Philogène 2001). The third temporal dimension finally emerges when the focus shifts from the concept of representation to the process of representing, implying the concept of

“change”. Like Cattaneo, when talking about the relationship between continuity and innovation in the culture, ascribed to the antithesis the role of motive of knowledge, Ivana Markova (2003) conceptualised the representing as a fundamentally dialogic process. In a similar way, Cattaneo described the antithesis as “*the act through which one or more individuals, striving to deny an idea, become aware of a new idea*” ([1859–1866] 2000, 73).

With respect to the continuity, it can be said that representations are stable, in relation to systems of categorisation, symbolisation and joint activities, because they are rooted in the experience shared by the members of a group (Moliner 2001). Nevertheless, Bauer and Gaskell (1999) claim that this stability is precarious by nature, always open to defiance. Representations are social because they evolve dialectically facing the challenges of sense submitted by others and by events (Vygotski 1978). Social phenomena like migration, technological and scientific discoveries, wars and terrorism, represent as many examples of how human activities generate the need for individuals to construct a meaning in order to meet the other, to conceive the beginning and the end of life, to evaluate the success or failure in the making of their life plan, etc. As in a hall of mirrors, the unexpected and the change lead to the modification of the representation, which in return mediates in the process of sense-making of the change. For instance, the idea of socio-cognitive conflict could be considered an interesting application of this general position in developmental psychology (Doise et al. 1975; Perret-Clermont 1979; Iannaccone 2010).

In the light of these arguments, we can now claim that Social Representations are not an analytic category opposing “culture” and “individual knowledge”, as in Durkheim, who defined culture as the set of mutually consistent representations (Duveen 2007). They are rather a symbolic artifact, a network of meanings, that the members of group or culture use to build the meaning of being individuals within the society. In their twofold role as both product and tool, Social Representations take part to the process of symbolic mediation. As tools, they are a constraint for the mediation by providing existing implicit or explicit meanings. As products, they are subject to the change caused by human activity, that modifies their meaning during the process of active internalisation and during use in the changeable context of the environment (Fávero 2005; Lawrence and Valsiner 1993; Wertsch 1995). This vision overcomes the problem of the individual versus collective opposition, pushing the way towards an idea of Social Representations as a space for negotiation and mediation between individual *and* collective, as well as between continuity *and* innovation.

Social Representations as a Cultural Space for the Negotiation

The role of Social Representations is to account for the relationship between subjects—Ego and Alter as members of a group—and a given social object¹ with respect to a project: *representation of something, of someone, for something*

¹ Social Representations allow a sort of *inter-objectivity*, insofar as they define not only the social object but also relationships between objects, like for example confession which becomes a religious psychoanalysis and psychoanalysis that becomes a secular confession in return (Moscovici [1976] 2004).

(Moscovici [1976] 2004). Thus, for instance, a brand new or unfamiliar social object is elaborated and assimilated by a culture, making it familiar and communicable. However, on an individual level, Social Representations also play another function, similar to that Rommetveit attributes to language in intersubjectivity. That is, they are the means of the progressive introduction of an individual into a community of meaning. At the same time they are the protasis of the individual mind towards the other's mind (Rommetveit 1984, 1998). Besides being the way ideas enter the culture, Social Representations are also the means directing the pathway of the interaction, a sort of map to the other's subjectivity, as long as they establish the space of negotiation, define constraints and rules, what is or is not pertinent in the interaction. In her study on the Afro-American identity, Philogène (2001) shows that representations are not merely an anticipatory tool to construct the meaning of a new social object in relation to a project of emancipation, but also that they become a guide for coming into contact or integrating with the Afro-American community. In this sense, the project dimension of the representations is closely related to *sense making*: it is the process of meaning projected into the future (Valsiner 2003) so that attributes, interpretations, associations and emotions are assigned to a social object or to an individual in function of the desiderated directions.

The anticipatory representations, their role of mediation in entering a group, evoke a further diachronic dimension: the ontogenetic development of representations (Duveen and Lloyd 1990). Like culture, Social Representations are something pre-existing the entry of the individual into the group: we are born into them (Bruner 1993) rather than consciously acquiring them. Unlike knowledge acquired in a more or less institutionalised way (instruction, rules, norms), during his/her development an individual learns and interiorises Social Representations informally (i.e. through conversation, observation, media, etc.) (Moscovici [1976] 2004). It is unthinkable to be part of a group or a community, to communicate or to act in it, without sharing, at least partially, its representations. Even if they do not directly constitute norms of behaviour, they construct the social object to which the norms and values are attached. They contribute to codifying the meaning of the action or practice dictated by the norm (Picard 1995).

Educational Contexts: An Example of Dialectic Between Continuity and Innovation

Educational contexts represent one of the points of junction between the diachronic dimension and the synchronic dimension of the relationship between the individual and the collective. Here lies the macrogenetic tension between continuity and innovation through generations and the microgenetic process through which an individual progressively enters the culture by sharing the system of Social Representations. In this way, the individual learns how to manage social identities and social differences, making sense of the practices and artifacts (Duveen and Lloyd 1990). This concept can be understood by looking at the idea of education shared by Wundt and Cattaneo—typical of the humanism of Humboldt ([1903] 1936)—which plays a role in development similar to that we attach to Social

Representations. In fact, during the XIX century, the idea of education was that of “*Bildung*”, that is a progressive process towards an “ideal” working at two levels: individual education and the development of the community (Diriwächter 2008, 86). Education is thus conceived as a progressive entry into the culture of the group through learning from experience as well as from formal education. Education is the progressive sharing of customs and values of the “*Volk*”, understood as a unity of individuals interacting and the linguistic and historical identity. Nevertheless, for both Wundt and Cattaneo this unity—or group identity—is not just an idealistic reification of a “*Geist*”, a national or ethnic spirit. In so far as individuals are situated in a material, social, political and productive context they share a system of cultural artifacts and practices that become both an instrument and a framework for sense-making.

On an individual level, formal and informal education are also the processes through which a person progressively constructs his/her knowledge of the world. It can be argued that education has always to do with the unknown and the unfamiliar. However, the acquisition of concepts, values and beliefs also means the construction of new psychological structures that will later be functional to further acquisitions²: “*the world which is known is the product of the set of socio-psychological structures through which it has been constructed*” (Duveen 2002, p. 140). The knower, the *amateur scientist* (Moscovici [1976] 2004) or the *obscure Socrates* (Cattaneo [1851] 1960), can achieve knowledge of the world only by means of available concepts, experience and communication. Nevertheless, the individual’s psychological structures constitute the object of knowledge in return, in such a way that the world as observable object of knowledge and the individual mind as observer co-constitute one another (Duveen 2002). As this process results from collective forms of knowledge construction, embedded in social life and culture, it can be argued that the evolution of culture is Lamarckian: a cultural organ developed to play an adaptation function is directly transmitted to the new generations (Barash 1986; Lamarck [1809] 1914). Social Representations fully accomplish this task, being the cultural tool for making the unfamiliar familiar, providing the framework for the sense-making of events and for transmitting the knowledge from generation to generation. At the same time, the system of Social Representations shared by a group is not at all a monolithic block (Moscovici 1988). The presence of different types of representations—hegemonic, emancipated, polemic or anticipatory—makes the space of meaning construction mobile, alive and representative of the diversity. Such multivocality, or polyphasia, of representations will engender a variety of forms in the elaboration of concepts, narratives, rituals and practices in everyday life. Social Representations, as psychological structures, are the frame for the co-constitution of the object and the subject of knowledge, providing *topoi*, constraints and arguments for the mediation of the projects of meaning. At the same time, they are liable to the process of change caused by both the development of individual and collective structures and projects (Moliner 2001).

² This is a classical idea shared with different nuances by many scholars such as for instance Cattaneo, Vygotsky, Piaget.

Conclusions

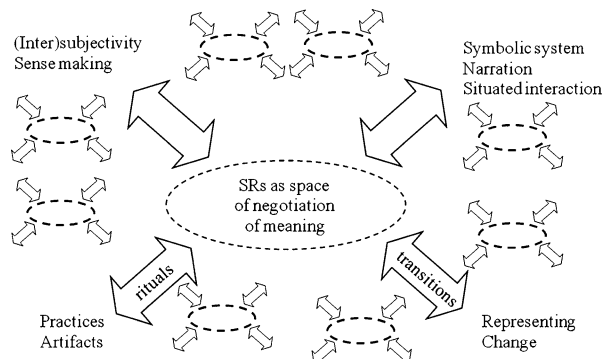
To address the opening question of this paper—is it possible to consider the Theory of Social Representations a theory of the development of the relationship between individual mind and culture?—it is worth asking another question: why should the individual mind be somehow connected to a collective mind or to culture? The scholars mentioned have provided several arguments supporting this idea. According to Cattaneo, the individual mind must be connected to a collective mind to overcome the limits of the direct experience of his own senses. The individual also needs tools such as language, that are elaborated within culture, says Wundt, to achieve his goals and needs. Finally, the individual alone could only achieve and elaborate a limited part of all information, which is by its nature fragmented and partial (Moscovici [1976] 2004). We have argued that Social Representations as psychological structures fulfil these requirements.

Returning to the geographic metaphor, the system of Social Representations as a space of negotiation of meaning can be compared to a map or a network (Fig. 3).

The figure represents our idea of the reticular nature of the system of Social Representations shared by a group. Each social object is represented in connection to other objects, not only through the processes of anchoring and objectivation, but also through the relationships of similitude/differentiation in relation to other representational objects (Moscovici [1976] 2004). For the sake of brevity, we will not describe all the relationships represented by the arrows in Fig. 3. To illustrate the heuristic function of the diagram, let us merely consider the diagonal from the bottom right to the upper left. For instance, we can conceptualize the Social Representations as a space of negotiation during the process of psycho-social transition in which change calls an individual or a group to re-organise its psychological structures and system of goals. In this situation, the Social Representations network provides the *space of negotiation*—that is the concepts, constraints, beliefs, images, etc. to elaborate the identities, the personal paradigms and the practices that characterise each individual—to make sense, to cope with the change and to elaborate the new relationship with the Other.

A map is a conventional representation of a territory, based upon the experience, the exploration and the human activity in relation to a project of use and a pathway. A map also establishes a cultural space, constraints, borders and possible ways. It

Fig. 3 Social Representations as a space of negotiation



changes in relation to the human activity that modifies the territory, according to the rhythm of cultural development. The map marks off the limits of the familiar space, but at the same time suggests new directions for the enlargement of such limits. Since these borders are elaborated by the cognitive work of the “associated minds”, they lose the meaning of limits becoming part of the familiar territory. In return, they construct the sense of a new border or horizon of knowledge. Looking at the history, it seems clear that this is not just a metaphor: how many nations and cities have been created by first drawing a line on a map, as is dramatically demonstrated, even today, by many conflicts?

Having presented some concepts by Cattaneo, Wundt and Moscovici concerning the articulation between individual and collective mind, we can summarize the main common aspects. The first is the relationship between social and cognitive phenomena, between communication and thinking (Moscovici 1988). Another common element is that of considering the relationship between individual and culture in a genetic perspective. On a phylogenetic level, Social Representations are the space for the negotiation of meaning which enables the link between continuity and innovation from generation to generation. On an ontogenetic level, they are the space in which the individuals elaborate specific social identities (Duveen and Lloyd 1990) and specific modalities of interactions (Iannaccone 2010). Educational contexts are an example of this “playground”, where the articulation between the transmission of cultural continuity and the innovation of generations takes place. The system of Social Representations—of schooling, children, subjects, learning, success/failure, etc.—provide the interpretative repertoires, the constraints, the meaning of practices and norms, what can be said and the unspeakable, not in terms of true or false, rather in terms of right and wrong (Moscovici [1976] 2004). In this sense, the processes that take place in educational contexts are illustrative of the progressive entry into a culture through the interiorisation/transformation of the Social Representations and the practices shared by the group. Finally, Social Representations are both the content and the mediator of this process, based on the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of the Representations themselves which, as we have argued, construct the *big game* between continuity and innovation in culture.

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