Serge Moscovici, Social Psychology Interdisciplinarity

Jorge Correia Jesuino
ISCTE-IUL
jorge.correia.jesuino@gmail.com
The notion of *interdisciplinarity*, covering a network of hyphenated words prefixed by multi, pluri, inter, cross, trans, whose mutual frontiers are far from clear, acquired recently a new relevance giving rise to a prolific literature and frequent scientific meetings.

The controversies and debates about this issue are mainly focused on the complex relationship amongst scientific disciplines enhanced by the ever growing feeling that scientific production is no longer limited to the traditional image of self-contained disciplines.

Serge Moscovici (henceforth SM), whose thinking we continue to evoke and celebrate, contributed to this debate rather indirectly, mostly through the example provided by his own work, which documents the ease with which he was able to navigate across sciences and humanities.

However scarce, it is possible to find some texts where this subject, mostly in the modality of interdisciplinarity, has been analyzed by SM in more explicit terms. For example, on 18 March 1998, the day when he received one more *Honoris Causa*, this time granted by the University of Bologna, he delivered a lecture with the title *Psicologia Sociale, Interdisciplinarità e Fiducia fra Gli Scienziati*, which was published by the *Giornale Italiano di Psicologia*, (GPI) one year later.

This is a very short paper of only three pages, which is not very common in SM’s production. The argument is nevertheless no less deep and no less full of suggestions, reason by which the same *GPI*, in its subsequent issues, opened the discussion publishing comments by Willem Doise, Piero Amerio, and Domenico Paresi, to which, almost twenty years later, I would like to add some fotnotes. In his acceptance speech, SM offers a brief overview of his project as a social scientist, namely in the field of social psychology, a discipline that he so much contributed to develop both in theoretical as well as in institutional
In this overview he also points to several epistemological problems faced by Social Psychology and how the interdisciplinarity approach could help to overcome them.

In his comment Willem Doise (1999) sees the work of SM articulated in three strands: (1) research on social influence processes; (2) theory of social representations (SRT); (3) studies on the History of Science. For Doise, there would be some interlinks among those topics. Experimental studies on social influence could be understood as aimed at validating the propaganda processes described in SM’s work on Psychoanalysis and the essays on the History of Science could be seen as instantiations of the organizing principles of social representations. Doise still contends, in this rather short but no less enlightened commentary, that SM succeeded, in epistemological terms, in overcoming the polemic that at the time opposed Marxists to structuralists.

Piero Amerio, in his comments, draws our attention to SM’s attempt at constructing a social discipline linking social, biological and psychic processes in the wake of leading figures such as Kurt Lewin (1890 - 1947), Salomon Asch (1907 - 1996), and Muzafer Sherif (1906 - 1988). Amerio regrets, however, as SM also does, the way in which this initial vocation of social psychology came to be replaced by a growing fragmentation of the social, concluding, nevertheless, in an optimistic note (wistful thinking?) that SM’s approach will be able to offer enough resistance, at least in Europe, to the reductionism of Anglo-Saxon mainstream.

Domenico Parisi offers a less favorable acceptance of SM’s theses. Although he welcomes SM’s attempt at linking social sciences with natural sciences, he finds it contradictory that SM might have ignored the biological processes underlying the mind as well as the developments achieved in the domain of neurosciences, giving instead exclusive priority to the social processes. Additionally, as argued by Parisi, even in terms of the relations between mind and society, SM’s project for social psychology does not seem clear in terms of its presumed epistemic autonomy in that social psychology is positioned in parallel with other applied “branches” such as developmental psychology and others. As a last negative remark, Parisi questions, invoking Lev Vygotsky (1896 - 1934), SM’s positing the mind as “intrinsically cultural” suggests he forgets the role of what Parisi calls the “cognitive technologies” – that is, “the instruments transmitted and changed generation after generation for thinking and for communicating”.

Although my purpose is neither to enter in detail nor to discuss the arguments which I only tried to summarize, hopefully without too much distortion, let me suggest that the
points raised by these three authors offer new perspectives hitherto less explored, inviting not exactly a rejoinder but to pursue and broaden the conversation.

Let me start with the issue of “trust among the scientists” addressed by SM in his lecture and included in the title, which was not remarked in the above comments. The word “trust” (fiducia) already stresses how the relationships between scientists of different disciplines are important for the cooperation required by the notion of interdisciplinarity. Such a cooperation does not seem, however, easy to achieve, sufficing to recall Jean Piaget (1896-1980), who very much contributed to examine the conditions of possibility in the sciences in general and more specifically in the social sciences.

For Piaget, there would be an asymmetry between nomothetic disciplines, with the downward ones in the traditional ranking coming from Auguste Compte (1798-1857) being more dependent on the upward ones than the other way around – for example, chemistry depends more on physics than physics depends on chemistry.

On the special field of the social and human sciences, as claimed by Piaget (1967), there would be no such asymmetry. Social sciences are not constrained, so to speak, to exchanges with the proximal disciplines, which would mean that they are also less interdependent from one another. Boundaries here are much fuzzier, which, paradoxically, instead of promoting, makes their interdisciplinary cooperation more difficult. Each discipline has virtually the ambition of hegemonizing the sub-field, as it is the case of sociology, a sort of metonymy for social science, as physics is or was for the natural sciences, but the same could be said about psychology, about economics or anthropology, all of them claiming, in turn, to have a potential steering role within the field.

Perhaps Piaget is not entirely right in stating that interdisciplinarity, at least in the strict sense in which he understood this concept, is not practiced in the social sciences. Besides, having concluded that the object of the human sciences is ultimately related to coordinating rules, values and signs, Piaget came to acknowledge that many new hybrid disciplines had already emerged, escaping the closed order of his circular model of classification of the sciences.

Social psychology is a clear example of a new interdisciplinary sub-field for which SM has always claimed epistemological autonomy and to which, again, he insists in his Bologna address. He starts by rhetorically (?) asking whether the distinction granted to him by the prestigious University of Bologna could not be rather a tribute to the contribution he gave to the Galilean Studies, the history of science being one of the fields where SM had extensively
worked and published. Notwithstanding the importance of his discoveries on the Italian physicists of the seventeenth century, probably known only by a restricted number of scholars, it was, however, his central role in promoting and strengthening the new discipline of Social Psychology, the main reason for the colleagues of Bologna to award him that high distinction.

SM focused his efforts on claiming the epistemological autonomy of social psychology, opposed to the tendency of its reduction either to a branch of the general psychology, or to a sort of micro Sociology. What is at stake is therefore the place reserved to social psychology in the “pecking order” of social sciences, whether it could be seen as a sub-discipline or rather as an inter-discipline or even a trans-discipline. It is well known that SM attributed to social psychology a major epistemic role. Let me recall an article published in 1989 in a special issue of the European Journal of Social Psychology dedicated to the explanation in social psychology, where SM states:

If I had to formulate succinctly the ideal guiding (for European Social Psychology) it would be: creating a science capable of linking and stitching together its components hitherto scattered among the social sciences. I have in mind the psychology of economics, the psychology of language and child psychology, both of which are closely related to social psychology” (1989, p.409).

This could be a reply to Parisi’s comments on how social psychology was never taken as a branch of the so-called general psychology but rather a new interdisciplinary vocationed to federate the hitherto scattered subdisciplines. Of course, this is an ideal still grounded in the Mertonian ethos of science, which does not fit what can be observed in the scientific communities at large. (Merton, 1973). But perhaps more important than this extensional view, to which other items could be added, is the accent put in the social dimension instead the biological orientation of the other more American positivistic style of social psychology.

Of course, I am simplifying but what seems to me crucial in the “new look” claimed by SM for social psychology is that the social dimension constitutive of the discipline, instead of mere external factor, turned out to become internal to the psychological processes. One could say that such a move amounts to reverting the epistemology of social psychology into a social psychology of epistemology.

It is this “new look”, this “nouveau regard” (Moscovici, 1984) that permits a line of continuity to be traced between, at one end, his theoretical as well as experimental findings on the social influence processes opposing minorities to majorities, and, on the other end, the theory of social representations which, as it appears to me, posits at its core the same
dynamic of dialogical continuous exchanges between social conformity and innovation processes. Here I am not far from Doise’s remark above mentioned.

Once again, the metaphor of the epistemic triangle introduced by SM in 1984, linking an Ego to an Object mediated by an Alter, seems to be the appropriate conceptual framework to ground this attempt to find a continuity between these two apparently discontinuous facets of his research. Such an attempt to find an internal coherence is required for overcoming the Kuhnian style of critique addressed to the social sciences as unable to go beyond local empirical findings, devoid of architectonic structure. Let me remark that in the metaphor of the epistemic triangle there seems to exist an asymmetry between Ego and Alter, which permits to distinguish this new look of social psychology introduced by SM from Meads’ “symbolic interaction” model (Mead, 1934), which tends to reduce the fabric of society to intersubjective interactions ignoring the role social institutions.

Ivana Markova (2000) gave an important contribution in highlighting what was implicit in SM’s proposal, that is, that Ego and Alter are rather comprehensive abstract instances which, in minimal terms, could be restricted to intra-psychic (cognitive) conflicts, and, at the other extreme, might oppose larger groups espousing different ideologies, including in between a myriad of situations related with the conflicts between humans and their societies.

Between Ego and Alter there is therefore a potential asymmetry that leads to an understanding that this is a complex relationship not to be reduced either to psychological or to sociological exchanges. Pursuing a sort of fractal logic, new triangles would have to be juxtaposed to each one of the sides of the epistemic triangle to allow grasping the underlying mediations between Ego and Alter, as well as those between both Ego and Alter with their (dynamic) Object. Social encounters between Ego and Alter are not, however, necessarily conflictive. One might recall that other sociological perspectives, such is the case with Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) as well as Jurgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998), all of them emphasizing, although not exactly in the same terms, the role of influence as a sort of soft power, herein theorized in terms of a symbolic generalized medium of communication aiming at reproducing societal solidarity. (Parsons, 1975).

It is true that SM has rather insisted on a different metatheoric framework, more focused on social change, wherein social conflict acquires another salience, which, however, is no less mediated by social communication processes. In the context of the lower levels of explanation, in the sense of Willem Doise (1982), SM gave particular attention to the innovation processes he saw grounded on social conflicts between individuals and
society, this being one of the definitions that SM proposed for the new discipline of social psychology.

In his address in Bologna SM suggests that the epistemological context questioning the traditional boundaries between natural sciences and social sciences was favorable to the automatization of new disciplines as well as to the emergence of new transdisciplinary paradigms such as the theory of games, cybernetic, and ethology. Under this new epistemological atmosphere of generalized crossdisciplinarity a number of hybridations took place, and social psychology was an example among others.

SM also rightly insisted that social psychology so understood is not applied psychology to social situations, not a “branch of psychology” but an autonomous discipline by its own right. In institutional terms, as it was the case of the University of Bologna and others across Europe, it led to the creation of a discipline distinct both from psychology and sociology. Twenty years later and in consonance with Piero Amerio, I am not sure that SM could have espoused the same optimism about our discipline. Anyway, and this could be a sort of long term desideratum, he claims for social psychology the autonomy already achieved by developmental psychology as well as psycholinguistics, perhaps having in mind that it is across this triad of hybrids that “anthropological objects embedded in culture” are to be constructed, a claim that could moderate Parisi’s critical remarks. SM probably has in mind authors like Jean Piaget or Noam Chomsky (1922) as paradigms of an epistemological anti-reductionism that he also has clearly endorsed.

Gianbattista Vico (1668 - 1744) is a classic Napolitan author that SM often quotes, and again in the Bologna speech recalls his famous dictum – “verum ipsum factum” – that seems to underly his epistemological constructivist approach to social psychology, wherein priority is therefore given to human communication. We know better what we do but what we do is socially constructed with signs, be these words or things. Vico is also considered one of the forefathers of the social sciences. The importance of language could not be here more emphasized. Language is at the core of the common sense in which we are embedded and through which we are socialized.

As shown by John Searle (1995), herein also quoted, many social objects that started by being social conventions, for example, money, acquired an epistemic status of objectivity as if they were natural facts, institutions, out there, offering the same constraints and resistance to change to which Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was so sensitive. For SM, as it is well known, social change is, however, possible, and it takes place on a continuous base
through the innovative processes initiated by consistent active minorities (MOSCOVICI, 1976).

It is in this book that SM opposes the functional to the genetic approach to explain the dynamics of social processes, which once again is coherent with his constructivistic epistemological stance. It is true that SM has not directly discussed traditional issues of the philosophy of mind such as the relations of body and mind, as well as other metaphysical dualisms inherited from Descartes (1596 - 1650). We may, however, presume, by the way he quotes Chomsky’s antireductionist positions, that it is also in this sense that we have to interpret his rejection of a simplistic evolutionary approach to mental processes as claimed by functionalists.

Ever since his essay on human history of nature (Moscovici, 1968), SM has always insisted that nature and society, evolution and history, be seen as a dialectical process instead of positing among them some sort of a hierarchical discontinuity. This seems to make sense in that social representations come to mediate between individuals and societies, or more local groups, to which they belong, and through which they negotiate the meanings of problematic or unfamiliar object and events. The next step of the argument, so I presume, consisted in looking at dialogue or rather the “negotiation” taking place between individual representations and collective representations expressed by concrete embodied minorities as well as majorities, whose outcome would not be a dialectical synthetic collective representation, but rather multiple changing social representations dialogically produced. (MARKOVA, 2003)

An alternative way of expressing the argument is to borrow from the semiotic terms of the Charles Peirce’s (1939 - 1916) logic, which SM also explicitly endorses (Moscovici, 1984). The semiotic approach offers a way, I would say, the only way, to explain the place and the status of the social scientist as an analyst of social phenomena. How can he claim that his explanations are more valid than the ones provided by the actors under his observation? How can he escape the conclusion that what he finds is no more than a description of a description? As a matter of fact, the more acceptable answer would be less in terms of methodology than in terms of reflexivity, understood as that never-ending self-reference process that Charles Peirce named as the “chain of the interpretants” in pursuit of a “dynamic object”, a sort of an elusive, moving target.

Although SM did not directly address this epistemic issue, I dare to believe he would accept to locate the social psychologist within this chain of interpretants, where social
representations become the *signs* of this semiotic process. In concluding his presentation in Bologna, SM reconsiders his thesis of a desirable interdisciplinary relations between the social and natural sciences that require a more open attitude from scientists of both sides. He has already shown the way in his attempt to examine how the reciprocal images of science and common sense generate new social representations eventually organized around a sort of *scientist* ideology.

We may remember that SM, in parallel with his research on social psychology, also conducted studies on the history of science, being particularly knowledgeable in the field of classic physics, where some sort interdisciplinarity could be traced, if we consider the influence of the religious convictions on the work of the scientists.

He was a student of Alexander Koyré (1892-1964), who arranged for SM to spend one year at the University of Princeton, where he had the opportunity to broaden his scientific culture. It was also then that he started to write about the complex relations and representations between science, nature and society, eventually producing the essay “The Human History of Nature”, published years later in 1968. This first essay was followed by two others – *Society Against Nature* in 1972 and *Domestic Men Savage Men* in 1974. This latter book is a collection that includes some previously unpublished texts. As the title suggests, an appeal is made for “wilderling” the world, which somewhat echoes the Weberian regret of a bureaucratic rationalized society in which it would be healthy to introduce the “grano salis” of the dissident minorities. The book would deserve a lengthy comment that would be misplaced here, so I restrict myself to recalling the last chapter, entitled “On Kepler’s revolution”, where SM offers an interpretation of Kepler’s laws as a paradigmatic illustration of his understanding of interdisciplinarity.

In accordance with the interpretation herein suggested, very much acclaimed by the Nobel winners Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers (1986) in their famous book “The New Alliance” which is an acknowledgement and a legitimation of his accurate insight, SM compares the wide acceptance of the “Copernican revolution” with other revolutions that only displaced the locus of the observer who, although moving to a more distant point, does not alter his or her solipsistic status. SM distinguishes, as a matter of fact, two kinds of revolutions - the first, whose paradigm is given by the Copernican revolution, consisted in reversing the center of the conceptual system, in this case the Sun and the Earth. For SM, this would be a rather limited sort of decentration in that the system remained thought in terms of a geometric model with its putative perfect circularity. The second kind of scientific revolution is illustrated by the genial insight of Kepler in discovering that the orbits of the
planet Mars, considering the empirical data gathered by Tycho Brahé (1546-1601), could not be circular but elliptical. Such a finding was not only a change of a geometric figure but rather a transformation of a geometric platonic view of the cosmos into a physical theory where the orbits of the planets are produced by physical forces. In the words of SM:

> le soleil y joue un rôle d’un principe moteur qui anime des corps célestes, et non-plus celui d’un astre singulier qui règne sur eux et les éclaire de haut et de loin. L’astronomie est mûre pour poser la question essentielle-Ques-ce qui fait mouvoir les planètes? (Moscovici, 1974:234)

The change operated was actually very important from an epistemological point of view as well, in replacing a formal with a causal explanation. The way was opened for the Newtonian revolution, impossible without Kepler’s discoveries. Still from an interdisciplinary standpoint, it might be noted that the scientific achievements of Kepler were due not in spite but in consonance with his religious convictions, as scholarly shown by the Jesuit sacerdotal Job Kozhamthadam (1994), Kepler’s laws are a result of the interaction of science, philosophy and religion. Gerald Holton (1922) has also reached a similar conclusion when writing that:

> Kepler saw the three basic themes or cosmological models superposed; the universe as physical machine, the universe as mathematical harmony, and the universe as central theological order. And this was the setting in which harmonies were interchangeable with forces, in which a theocentric Conception of the universe led to specific results of crucial importance for the rise of modern physics (Holton, 1975:70).

A revolution in science as in knowledge in general is not limited to a reversal of positions as a sort of “Gestalt switch”, as shown by the Copernican revolution between incommensurable paradigms, but can also occur through the discovery of possible interdependencies between apparently disjointed phenomena. The Keplerian revolution becomes, in this way, a sort of metaphor for other revolutions where a plurality of centers turns into a system of mutual coordination. Interdisciplinarity thus understood is open to a dialogical approach where differences are recognized and mutually inspiring, instead of becoming asymmetrically ranked. (Markova 2003). SM gives the example within the field of anthropology, where ethnocentrism must be superseded not in a Copernican way of reversing the former hierarchy but rather by a mutual acceptance of differences. Of course, in the real world this is still an ideal difficult to achieve, sufficing to recall the problem of finding any “overlapping consensus” around the issue of multiculturality. Let me again give the floor to SM:
Enfin la révolution décentre, laisse entrevoir des relations, substitue à une vision axée sur la disjonction (des centres et des périphéries, de l'intérieur et de l'extérieur) une vision axée sur leur conjonction. Puisque connaître c'est transformer et se transformer, puisque c'est interagir au lieu de détacher, alors toute loi, toute théorie, toute méthode ne concerne plus un terme unique, exclusif: l'objet, le naturel, le primitif, le soleil, mais une relation: la relation de l'observateur et de l'objet observé, de la société et de la nature, de l'homme et de l'animal, du civilisé et du primitif. Les sciences qui s'y rapportent sont les sciences de cette relation (Moscovici, 1974: 233)

The existence of two focal points instead of one center makes the difference that Galileo Galilei (1564 - 1642) himself, notwithstanding his genius, was unable to accept, likely due to this atavistic belief in the perfection of the circle. Scientists also are liable to the unconscious influence of representations – call them thêmata if you prefer – that are decisive for the process of innovation as it was the case of Kepler but that also might block the progress of the mind constituting what French epistemologist Gaston Bachelard (1884 - 1962) called “epistemological obstacles”. Thinking in triadic terms introduces a social mediating variable that makes the difference of a social psychology as conceptualized by SM. Still recurring to the very same metaphor one could propose a triangle where social psychology would be placed in the third corner mediating psychology and sociology. But, as already remarked by Georg Simmel (1858 - 1918) and Fritz Heider (1896 - 1988), triadic relations tend to become unbalanced, inviting alliances between two sides against the third one. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that psychologism as well as sociologism became the Scylla and Caribdis between which social psychology had and still has navigate.

SM not only defended the epistemological autonomy of social psychology, but was also very active in promoting the discipline internationally at an institutional level. This saga is described in the book co-authored with Ivana Markova, published in 2006 with the title The making of Modern Social Psychology. This is a fascinating report, showing how science and politics are now so closely intermingled in opening new interfaces to interdisciplinarity. In this specific case, notwithstanding the effects pursued by the Transnational Committee in which SM as well Leon Festinger (1919-1998) and many other international academics participated from 1964 until 1974, the committee, although successful in promoting the discipline via organizing meetings, creating regional associations, recruiting students and publishing prestigious journals and books, was not able to go beyond the regional level and create an international organism such as it is the case in Psychology and Sociology, to which social psychology still figures as sub-discipline. This has inevitable consequences in institutional terms, which, to a large extent, explain how social psychology seems to live in an endemic crisis, as a minority group that, pace SM, I am not sure whether it eventually will be able to convert most of the positivistic main stream.
SM regrets on various occasions and again in his Bologna address that instead of a major discipline we find a fragmented landscape where social psychology is nonetheless practiced as a subfield of other social disciplines, such as economics or sociology, wherever social thinking is no less requested. On the occasion he quotes Chomsky twice: first to denounce the trend of cognitive social psychology as, and I quote, “displacing insightful intuitions in favour of technical manipulations of minor interest”. SM could not be more in agreement, having himself regretted the fascination exerted by the experimentalism of social psychologists transfixed on the information processing conceptual framework.

The second quotation is the one where Chomsky suggests that the problem of science is not reductionism but unification, which is something quite different. I personally remember how SM was impressed by some of Chomsky’s later texts, where this very idea of unification, to distinguish from reduction, must be interpreted just in terms of reciprocal influence, in the sense that the integration of new as well as an unfamiliar idea on a former structure is not possible without its transformation as it might be observed on all the walks of science. Reduction as emphasized by both Chomsky and SM seldom occurs in Science.

Recalling Jean Piaget, as well as SM, assimilation and accommodation, as well as anchoring and objectifying, are mutual processes through which the object of knowledge is constructed. It might, however, surprise, at first sight, or at least it was a surprise for me, that SM and Chomsky could become so close if we consider the naturalism that Chomsky claims for his philosophy of the Linguistic Science. But, in a closer reconsideration, I also have to recall that SM never proposed any ontological distinction between nature and society, between evolution and history, this being the main idea developed in his work eloquently titled as The Human History of Nature. In this light, we move from inter to transdisciplinarily as a call for opening closed walls of laboratories, for a more trusting attitude among scientists toward one another, as the title of Bologna’s lecture also demands.

SM gave himself the example of such an opening, both in the style of his scientific research crossing multiple disciplines, as in the public activism on the “natural question” that he rightly came to consider as the main issue of our present times. Interdisciplinarity becomes here the forum where scientists are forced to enter into dialogue, not only among themselves, not always an easy task, but also with policy makers as well as with the public. The role of social representations in mediating this polyphonic conversation of our times could not be overemphasized.
References


Invited author