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The study of representations in sociology: between multidisciplinary, lines of continuity and differences

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Abstract

The present article aims at analysing the role that sociology has played in the process of formation of the theory of social representations. In an effort to highlight the multidisciplinary nature of the theory, but also to recognize an independent point of view on the subject, the article proceeds to a comparison between sociology and other disciplines, especially with the prolific theoretical approach of Serge Moscovici and his school.

Keywords: collective representations; social representations; sociology.

Introduction

Although connected to the original statute of the discipline, the theme of representations, – whether individual, social or collective – has known a development in sociology characterized by spells of fervent production, with moments where the theoretical reflection, taken for granted, has given way to a indefinite number of empirical studies that did not produce any new thinking. There are several reasons for this apparent lack of interest. In the first instance it can be said that the issue has lost centrality as a result of multiple trends, both internal to the discipline (Bronner, 2006) – and thus directly attributable to sociology as a science – and external to it, as a result of a theoretical production opened – and in some cases left – to other disciplines, such as social psychology which on this topic founded a new paradigm (Palmonari, Emiliani, 2009).

The aim of this article is to analyse the formation process of the theory of representations, starting from the historical definition of Durkheim's collective representations, to discuss then the contribution to the subject by Serge Moscovici and the French psychosocial school. We conclude by looking again at sociology and its way of representing the latest perspectives on the subject.

More specifically, through the reconstruction of this process we will try to understand whether, starting from the definition of Emile Durkheim (1898), sociology has produced some original specificity on the subject, or if it only borrowed from the numerous contributions in other fields of research. In fact, as we will highlight later, somehow anticipating the conclusions, the theme of representations is not solved in sociology and it is still extremely debated within the discipline, but according to patterns and routes sometimes not easily recognizable.

We will highlight that in sociology the use of the term representation has known different meanings from the one attributed by Serge Moscovici – although there are frequent references to his theory – but that the discipline nevertheless continued to analyse it according to the different theoretical perspectives in which it occupied a variably prominent position and often through different denominations.

Although the aim of this paper is to pinpoint the concept in sociology, we need to point out immediately that the topic of representations can not be confined to a specific subject or research area, having been since its inception a multidisciplinary approach; this aspect will emerge clearly in the first part of the essay, where we describe the path that has led to the development of a theory of representations that is born, develops and consolidates within multiple disciplinary paradigms, among

which sociology, anthropology and last but not least social psychology. As mentioned before, the second part focuses on sociology, the theoretical approaches and most recent researches on the topic, outlining what are the issues on which sociology has given a specific contribution to a theory that still has a strong explanatory power. Ultimately, we will try to highlight a path on a subject which still under development, characterized by highways but most likely also by new roads that need to be better explained, on pain for sociology of losing an independent and original point of view on the subject.

1. From collective to social representations

The concept of representation has had extensive coverage among social scientists in recent years to the point that Serge Moscovici, the scholar who has most worked on this issue, has defined the current era as “the era of representations” (Moscovici, 1999).

The noun representation is generally associated with an adjective: collective, cultural, social, mental; said adjective qualifies a different meaning of the concept in the various disciplines, although we can find many contact points between them. In fact, every discipline has brought its specificity, its unique and distinctive outlook, to the study of representations and it is not always easy to distinguish the commingling, the mutual influences between these studies, both on a theoretical level and in terms of methodology. On the theoretical level there are frequent references to other disciplines, as for example sociology and social psychology; the constant references testify to the proximity of perspectives, which is also an epistemological closeness with respect to the way of looking at social reality. However, if this applies to the current meaning of representation, in the commonly assumed meaning of social representations – since both sociology and social psychology recognize the socially constructed character of the representative phenomenon – this epistemological proximity is rather recent.

The concept of representation arises in sociology with Émile Durkheim, who first proposed it together with the adjective “collective”, to detect the deep bond existing between this concept and another key one for the French sociologist, that of “collective consciousness”.

In his book *De la division du travail social* Durkheim (1996 [1893]: 46) defined the collective consciousness as: “the set of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of the same society forms a specific system with his own life. We can call it collective or common consciousness”. These feelings and beliefs are the value orientations, the principles that individuals endorse both rationally and emotionally; they are the basis of social action, that is propensities, behaviours, the actions of individuals in society. Collective consciousness is a reality in itself, which asserts itself over individual consciousnesses, exists through these, but in the end transcends them and distinguishes itself (Cipriani, 2005). It is only in a later stage, in the Durkheim's essay (1898) *Représentations individuelles et représentations collectives*, when we clearly overcome the conception linked to collective consciousness to make room for that of collective representations, designed as real socialized mental forms which acquire different contents (science, religion, ideology, myths and beliefs, common knowledge, opinions) and are based on the association of individuals, on their being together, in relation to daily practices and behaviours.

Durkheim's definition of collective representation is still today a valid inspiration for many scholars in the social sciences today to reflect on the representations and their characteristics (Palmonari, Emiliani 2009; Farr, Moscovici, 1989 [1984]; Markova, 2003); it had wide acceptance especially in those disciplines, particularly cultural anthropology, which emphasized – in relation to another key concept in Durkheim's sociology, that of social fact – a strong cultural determinism that causally connected collective representations and social order (Roussiau, Bonardi, 2001).

As for sociology, collective representations in anthropology are basically stable structures, and they participate in the regulation and maintenance of social systems by perpetuating themselves from generation to generation. They die as the fundamental values are lost due to evolution, because of the division of labor. We could say that the more a society progresses and diversifies, the less we find collective values shared by everyone and less collective representations as Durkheim interpretes them (cf. Durkheim and Mauss, 1968) will be effective. This reasoning leads us to search for these collective representations in pre-industrial societies or traditional cultures still governed by stability, where the social reproduction is welded through customs, beliefs and collective rituals. We are clearly referring here to the anthropology of the beginnings (Mauss, 1947 Levi-Strauss, 1955) and its vocation toward the study of so-called “primitive” societies, and therefore to the shared set of symbols, representations

and beliefs. Under the impulse of these anthropologists, representations take the form of autonomous entities, independent from the spirit that gives them life and produces them. They describe and specify the natural order of society, and are constitutive of reality and social organization (Augé, 1974; Godelier, 1984).

If the concept of collective representation, therefore, allowed the early sociologists and cultural anthropologists to explain the mechanism that welded together individuals and society, it turned out, however, inadequate to take account of changes that have occurred as a result of the transition to a society – the modern and post-industrial society – which has very different characteristics from the previous ones, that is characterized by constant changes, pluralism of ideas and doctrines (philosophical, religious, political and moral), by the diversity and mobility of social and individual groups (Moscovici, 1992 [1989]). It seems clear that Durkheim's definition of collective representation, more suitable to describe traditional societies, could not survive in the face of such a changed framework of social relations. A significant rethinking was necessary, also because of the overcoming of a prevailing positivism that had characterized, with its strong social and cultural determinism, much of the social sciences at the beginning of the twentieth century, but which was then surpassed by competing paradigms, more skilled and effective in capturing the trends (Jodelet, 2009).

This change of perspective has deeply invested all disciplines, including sociology, but in particular social psychology, the discipline that had to redefine Durkheim's concept of collective representation overcoming its static and coercive character, thanks to the monumental theoretical work by Serge Moscovici (Moscovici, 1992[1989])¹.

Moscovici acknowledges the derivation of the concept of representation from that of Durkheim's collective representation, but starting with its important research on the diffusion of psychoanalysis in France, published in the now classic *La Psychanalyse. Son image et son public* (2011 [1961/1976]) he proposes to replace the adjective “collective” with “social”, underlining the reductive character with which Durkheim's sociology had framed the issue: “their theoretical function was similar to that of atoms in the traditional mechanics, or genes in traditional genetics, that is, it was known that atoms and genes exist, but no one was worried about what they did or what they were like. Similarly, it was known that the social representations existed in society, but no one worried about their structure or their internal dynamics” (Moscovici, 1989 [1984]: 37). The next step, and the new element introduced by Moscovici, was, on the contrary, to conceive of the representations from the structure, understanding them as a phenomenon, and not as a concept: “for Durkheim the concept of collective representation helps mainly to explain social behaviour, while for Moscovici it is precisely the representation that must be explained and analysed” (Galli, 2006: 15).

In addition, the emphasis placed by Moscovici on cognitive, communicative and linguistic aspects, meaning representations as a specific way of understanding and communicating what we already know, allows him to distinguish his social representations from the vague meaning of the term expressed in Durkheim's definition, which has the disadvantage that it comprises a set of indistinct phenomena (myths, ideas, beliefs). The adjective “social”, instead, emphasizes the mobile and circular character of representations, according to a perspective that emphasizes the situated and conventional nature of reality, of the images and opinions that individuals share and exchange through language in the course of social interaction. This element brings the theories developed by this current nearer to the sociology of everyday life, that consider common sense knowledge as central to the explanation of reality (Amaturo 1995; Crespi, Mucchi Faina, 2005).

1.1 Social representations in “sociological” social psychology

Dealing more directly with the theory by Moscovici and his students is a necessary step if we really want to grasp the place that sociology has as a science within the recent debate in the theory of social representations. In fact, this step is something more than mere pedantry: it allows to take into account the extensive theoretical literature on a topic of social psychology whose interdisciplinary nature is now understood and assimilated²; sociology therefore could not, as some have already pointed out

¹ We are well aware of all the literature that overcame this opinion. For a critic reading of Durkheim on the topic of collective representations, see: Pickering, (2000) and Rosati, Santambrogio, (2002).

² As Jodelet points out: “this multiplicity of relations with neighbouring disciplines, giving the psycho-sociological treatment of the representation a transversal statute which challenges and articulates different research fields, not claiming a right position, but a real coordination of their points of view” (Jodelet, 1992: 53).

(Moscovici, 1991 [1988]; Santambrogio, 2006) become trapped within disciplinary boundaries that avoid confrontation with a theory whose solidity and importance is an accepted fact in the scientific community, under penalty of prosecution of falling into an old misunderstanding – similar to Durkheim's – that wanted to differentiate, often by stretching and forcing, sociology from kin disciplines³. In addition, this comparison is deemed necessary because it allows us to frame, from the established literature of Moscovici and his students on representations, the distance – as well as the similarities – between this approach and those that are currently adopted in sociology regarding the topic.

Moscovici's fame is mainly related to theories of social representations, but this theory has also inaugurated a new movement in social psychology. From his earliest writings Moscovici arises in open criticism of an individualistic drift undertaken by social psychology in the United States, closer to the model of the so-called cognitive reductionists, based on the model of *Human Information Process*, the origins of which refer to the studies on artificial intelligence⁴, which according to the author has the weakness of overlooking “the fact that mental processes are defined in a social context and cognitive activities are influenced by social, affective and motivational factors” (Grande, 2005: 39). Through this argument Moscovici proposes the study of representations as a tool allowing to investigate the conflict between individual and society, that is to connect the individual dimension (the favourite field of study of psychology) and social processes (the favourite field of study, for example, of sociology). This step will result in the birth of a research and reflection current which Moscovici and Markova will define “sociological” social psychology in *The Making of Modern Social Psychology* (2006), a school that in the last fifty years has produced extensive theorizing on the topic of social representations (Galli, 2012). While we can not here, for reasons of space, deal with the internal diversities of this school, it can be useful to summarise the features that allow social psychologists to define precisely what is meant by social representation; as you will see, it means analyzing the role that social representations play in the production process of common sense knowledge, that Moscovici and his students minutely described through their theory, for example, through the mechanisms of objectification and anchoring.

Common sense, a kind of knowledge that is the background of the very notion of representation, is largely underestimated of the understanding the actions and social relations (Galli, 2006), whose importance is lost during the institutionalization process of psychology – something that happens also for sociology – in an attempt to provide it with a scientific credibility. The book *La psicanalyse, son image et son public* by Moscovici (2011 [1961/1976]) pointed out, through an elaboration of Durkheim's concept of collective representation, the role of symbolic processes in relation to human action, highlighting the importance of social factors compared to individual ones, for the determination of daily courses of action. Psychoanalysis and its dissemination in France will be a good example for Moscovici to demonstrate how scientific knowledge is acquired, and of course transformed, by the social fabric in the form of representation, in other words how a content moved from reified universes to consensual ones (Galli, 2006).

In conclusion, social representations theory allows us to understand the genesis and dynamics of the processes of social construction of reality, a reality created by means of symbolic exchanges and shared meanings that individuals communicate through language, from generation to generation, and these meanings are always placed in relation to practical situations in which the subjects are from time to time involved (Santambrogio, 2006; Jodelet, 1992). Representations therefore answer to an important function, namely, as a system of values, ideas, and practices, they allow individuals to orient themselves in their social and physical environment and to master it, and thus turn something unusual, or the unknown itself, into something familiar. In fact, as Moscovici said (1989, [1984]: 45): “If the scientist tends to falsify his hypothesis, common people tend to confirm what is familiar, to verify what is known”, an aspect highlighted also by phenomenological and interactionist sociology. Moscovici,

³ As is well known, in the book *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (1895, trad.it. 1996).

Durkheim, in an attempt to define the object of study of sociology and to permit a distinction between sociology and the other social sciences, affirms the autonomy of sociology, particularly with respect to psychology and philosophy. Durkheim's anti-psychologist orientation is called into question by some recent sociological trends; see in particular Bernard Lahire (2002; 2005).

⁴ “The human mind is conceived as a receptor of information which, through a number of processing stages, results in an unambiguous final product which can be totally decoded; within this vision researchers tend to show that, whether automatic or controlled, thought and its forms are merely an expression of individual operations governed by the motives of the subject: motivation to belong to a group, to understand, to appraise oneself and so on” (Palmonari, Emiliani, 2009: 18).

however, introduces additional elements which are, specific objects of attention for sociological social psychology. In order to understand social representations, Moscovici considers of paramount importance to bear in mind that they can be understood both as a product (the composed aspect), or as a process (the composing aspect) (Galli, 2006). He introduces news in both aspects. Compared to Durkheim's notion, with the first aspect (the product) he specifies and clarifies the content of representations, which can be: ideal, imaginary or symbolic (values, beliefs, habits). They recall – and are connected to – the social membership of a person and are expressed through the media in which the representations are objectified: speeches, documents, images, practices. With the second aspect, we talk about processes, or the psychological and social mechanisms involved in the processing of a representation (Grande, 2005). This aspect – well explained in Moscovici's research on psychoanalysis (2011, [1961/1976]) – operates through two mechanisms: anchoring and objectification; with the former new and unusual ideas are anchored to prior, pre-existing and familiar categories, on which the subjects do not harbour any doubt; the latter, instead, is the mechanism by which an object that first appeared as part of a distant universe is equipped with almost physical reality (ibid.: 162).

The focus on one aspect rather than another, has undoubtedly contributed to amplify the polysemy of the concept of social representation or representative phenomena. Over time, the theory has been expanded and enriched by the contribution of different authors with their specific theoretical and research interests, mainly focused on structure, dynamics, and evolution of social representations⁵. Roussiau and Bonardi (2001) identify, in fact, three different paths: that of the “core” followed by the Universities of Aix-en-Provence and Montpellier, that of the “organizing principles” stemming from the Doise's research in Geneva, or the more anthropological and cultural one that has developed around the figure of Denise Jodelet at the EHESS in Paris. Some of these paths are closer to the interests and research fields of sociology, while others turn away and prefer a more individual dimension with the emphasis on analysis and experiments in the laboratory. Among those listed, the theoretical contribution by Denise Jodelet and the studies conducted by William Doise deserve to be mentioned because of their proximity to sociological orientations. From these authors, in fact, it is possible to outline what may be the continuity (and difference) lines between the two disciplines on the topic of social representations.

2. Representations theory in sociology: between lines of continuity and differences

Looking at the vast scientific production by Denise Jodelet we can not fail to note the interest she puts in identifying and promoting multidisciplinary roots of the theory of social representations. In the last chapter of her book *Paradigmi delle rappresentazioni sociali* (2009), Jodelet emphatically reaffirms the central role that the concept of representation has acquired in humanities and social sciences. For the goals we set in the present paper, we have to keep in mind two aspects of her theory that identify the contribution offered by sociology to the enrichment of this theory. The first aspect is related to definitions, *i.e.* to what is meant by representation; the author takes up the controversy between collective and social representations, considering it as a matter of no little consequence since “social sciences use the concept of representation in a very generic sense, without continually reaffirm their social or collective qualification, much as it is a representation shared by a collectivity (group, class, community, society)” (Jodelet, 2009: 264). Using Boureau's (1989) theoretical proposal, Jodelet rehabilitates the sociological concept of collective representation making it co-exist with that of social and individual representation⁶. Her proposal is to use social and/or collective together, “so as to have the means to specify, according to the situations and phenomena under study, the formation processes and the levels of shared representations” (Jodelet, 2009: 267). The second aspect can be instead found in the scholar's attention to the processes of intersubjective and social communication accounting for

⁵ In addition to the huge production by Moscovici (Bonnes, 1999) and confining ourselves to the classics and the more significant contributions, we suggest: for the structural aspects of the theory, Abric (2003), Doise and Palmonari (1986) and Flament (1994); for the methodological aspects, Moliner, Rateau, and Cohen-Scali (2002); on the theory of *Thématas* and the dialogic approach, Marková (2003). For an exhaustive and recent review of theoretical perspectives of sociological social psychology, see Galli (2012).

⁶ Jodelet describes this step as follows: “A first base would be formed by the layer of social representations that, through rituals, are dependent from social production and social dynamics. They would allow to compose and formulate collective representations, which are a shared language, but at the same time they would diminish the possibilities of action and decision of social agents. Then, “downstream”, we find individual representations, expressed through the diversified and conflictual discourses of individuals and groups” (Jodelet, 2009: 267).

the genesis, transmission, dissemination and reproduction of contents and modes of thought (*ibid.*). Hence the deep bond between Jodelet's perspective and phenomenological sociology⁷. About these perspectives, however, Jodelet acknowledges that the reference to the representations was dimmer and more veiled, “in sociology it is the case of trends inspired by ethnomethodology or conversation analysis, which by appealing to the competence of social actors relate to the representations made in the analysis of practices and of decision making, but without naming them as such” (*ibid.*: 262). In any case Jodelet, through its work, highlights the closeness of the concept of representation to the concepts developed by the sociological perspectives mentioned above, in continuity with what Moscovici says: “part of my theories coincides with those of the various sociology and sociology of knowledge schools of the English-speaking countries” (1989, [1984]: 79).

The link between social representations theory of a psychosocial matrix and phenomenological sociology has been grasped particularly within the Italian sociological panorama. Great examples of this internalization of Moscovici's theory are in particular: Franco Crespi's theory (2002; 2005), a sociologist closely connected with Moscovici's school; Pina Lalli's writings on communicative processes (1995; 2005); the studies conducted by Ambrose Santambrogio (2006).

Crespi highlights the close link between subjective consciousness and symbolic mediation, and thus he recalls something similar to the concept of social representation: “With symbolic we mean here the set of expression forms through which man concretely realizes his understanding of reality and actively contributes to its construction: language, myth, religion, ritual (...). The term “symbolic”, if it is sometimes used as a synonym for culture, has a broader meaning than the term “culture” as it does not indicate only the objectified forms of expression, but includes also the construction process of expression through the continuous processing that it develops in its relationship with the culture” (Crespi, 1985: 26).

In one of the few sociological Italian articles on the topic⁸, Pina Lalli (1995) highlights the proximity of the French psychosocial perspective to the phenomenological one; moreover the scholar (2005) considers representations to be especially useful as forms of mediation in a world characterized by a polyphony of meanings from multiple sources of information, typical of post-modern reality. In other words, they represent the landing from which our interpretations of the world start and become intersubjective, therefore capable of being communicated through language in order to match a practical problem related to contingency and experience.

However, the most important contribution towards a discussion of the sociological concept of social representations is forwarded by Santambrogio in his book *Il senso comune. Appartenenze e rappresentazioni sociali*. Through a critical reading of Schutz (1974 [1932]), with particular reference to his theory on subjective and objective sense, the scholar analyses the link between social representations and common sense, with the aim of developing a theory of social representations able to give an account of their dual nature of product and process. For Santambrogio, the basic idea of phenomenological analysis is that all social phenomena can be traced back to the behaviour of individuals and the meaning they give to their actions: “the meaning which is initially produced by individuals, but then becomes an independent reality” (Santambrogio, 2006: 66). Social representation can thus be analysed as a subjective “meaning” that becomes objectified, through processes somewhat similar to those of “anchoring” and “objectification” identified by Moscovici. In Santambrogio's words: “If we can think about common sense as a set of common representations of reality, we will be able to make the two concepts compatible and thus see social representations as relatively consistent patterns of subjective sense that has become – after a long process – common and shared (*ibid.*: 67).

The approaches presented above favour the intersubjective aspects of the social construction of reality through a conceptual framework similar to Moscovici's one, showing their distance, on the epistemological level, from the original concept of collective representation of which sociology holds

⁷ This similarity between the perspectives is clearer in his last writings; see in particular Jodelet (2006).

⁸ The sociologists that within the recent debate have directly tackled the topic of social representations are just a few. Within Italia sociological literature, in addition to the above mentioned essays, we mention also Battisti (1990) and Cipriani (2005). With regard to the French literature, see Danic (2006) and Corcuff's (1995) researches, as well as Boltanski and Thévenot (1991). For what concerns the English-speaking world, see Deaux, Philogène (2001); Pickering (2000), Voelklein, Howarth (2005).

authorship⁹. Together with the constructivist perspective, William Doise (1986) identifies contact points between social representations theory and some of the theories expressed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Doise (2012) conceives social representations as generating principles of stances related to specific insertions in a set of social relations and as organizers of the symbolic processes involved in these relationships. He clearly puts this construct at the intersection of sociology and psychology. In fact, in this definition of social representations, he emphasizes the close connection between the social relations stemming from the positions that individuals occupy within the metasystem, the production relations and socio-cognitive processes involved in the appearance, the structure and dynamics of representational fields.

In a way, we can consider Bourdieu as the one who inherits, if not the problem, at least the spirit of Durkheim's tradition, the one aiming to establish sociology as a science by differentiating it from delusions and opinions. True to structuralism, he stresses the urgent need not to consider anymore opinions, expressions, and explanations of individuals as explaining issues. Truly explicative issues are the structures underlying determinants that are beyond the consciousness of the actors (Bourdieu, Passeron, Chamboredon, 1968). Through this way of thinking Bourdieu comes to the concept of *habitus*. The *habitus* is the built-in social or, more precisely, the social becomes a cognitive framework, a way to perceive the world and categorize information (Bourdieu, 1983); it thus designates the set of acquired dispositions, or the frameworks, perceptions, thoughts, actions that are inculcated in the individual at the hands of a specific social context and thus allows him to adjust his current actions and decisions without being aware of it.

Despite the clear similarity between the concept of *habitus* and that of social representation, there is, however, a big difference compared to the theories of social representation developed in social psychology. Bourdieu is not interested in the structure of the representations, nor in their transformations; in addition, as Roussiau and Bonardi (2001: 32) point out: “In the *habitus* model, individuals' representations are supposed to be under strict dependence of the underlying pattern system. (...) the model is then strongly static. In fact, there is always a last resort for Bourdieu: social relations, and they are what allows him to explain the genesis of one or the other representation and the relationships between the different representations”.

Another way through which sociology is confronted with the issue of representations can be found in Raymond Boudon's theoretical perspective (2000, [1999]), particularly in his theory of collective beliefs.

According to Boudon, beliefs – be they collective, common, ideological, religious, moral, etc. – are a classic research topic of sociology, because of the relationship linking these to social action. The French scholar sees in the study of beliefs a fine example of the arguments arising from the interpretive framework of methodological individualism (Boudon and Fillieule 2005 [1963]). In order to explain why individuals adhere also to beliefs that turn out to be unfounded and/or false, he refers to the perspective of *cognitive rationality*, according to which “explaining a belief means to 'understand' it, that is, to find the *good reasons*, whether explicit or implicit, for which the individual adheres to it” (ibid.: 87).

Although Boudon utilises the term “collective” beliefs, his setting is inspired to Weber's (1961 [1922]) and is therefore absolutely incompatible with Durkheim's way of considering representations, a frame within which Durkheim, as already mentioned, inscribes also beliefs. In the same way is clear the distance between his theories and the explanations given by causal theories: “The latter have in common the idea that beliefs (whether positive or normative) are not based on good reasons, but are determined by causes acting without knowledge of the people involved” (ibid.: 111). Moreover, the explanation of “cognitive rationality” – and the importance given to the cognitive acts linked to processing information – results incompatible with the meaning of “social representation” as elaborated by Moscovici.

Despite Boudon's theory on beliefs turns out to be hardly compatible with the theories of collective and social representations, some scholars who identify themselves with his perspective decided to analyse their contact points. In his book *Vie et mort des croyances collectives* (2006), Gérald Bronner distinguishes his concept of collective belief from that of social representation – highlighting the

⁹ Some authors are critical towards Moscovici precisely because he traced back the roots of his concept of representation in Durkheim's theory instead that in the phenomenological tradition in sociology. For an in-depth analysis of the roots of the theory see Deutscher (1989, [1984]: 95-127).

intentional nature of adherence to certain beliefs, with respect to the meaning attributed by Moscovici's school that insists, instead, on the unconscious characteristics of representation structures and on centrality elements – and states again the importance of a methodological integration with the school that, within the study on social representations, has developed a more extensive set of methods and techniques aimed at analysing the content and internal structure of social representations, in particular the school of Aix-en-Provence. This last example thus shows a third, we could say “symmetrical”, way for sociology to tackle the study of social and collective representations, which not only analyses them as an explanation for behaviour, but also focuses on their content and internal dynamics, as well as their transformation – aspects which, as is known, are preferential areas of analysis for sociological social psychology. Just like social psychology has borrowed from sociology the concept of collective representation, these studies borrow the set of methods and techniques on the basis of their analysis and the characteristics of their object of analysis, thus contributing again to detect the interdisciplinary character of the theory of social and collective representations.

3. Conclusions

The path we followed in the present article has allowed us to highlight the contribution that sociology has given to the growth and development of the representations theory. After specifying the many minglings and mutual influences, especially for what concerns the psychosocial approach, our overview of the existing literature has identified – although for just a few references – three different ways for sociology to address the issue of social and collective representations. The first method appears to be strongly alike to the psychosocial, but with a strong theoretical dignity. We are talking of the phenomenological approach and its focus on the processes underlying the social construction of common sense, on which shared representations play an important role.

Adjectives like individual, collective, and social, refer to different moments of the processing of representations and, therefore, highlight the different contribution given to the study by the disciplines here analysed. For this reason, the studies that, within sociology, refer to representations as “collective” in their static aspect – like for Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which, despite its intent to overcome the opposition between individual and structure, gives greater prominence to the underlying patterns from which representations emerge as a reflection – still make sense. The last method is made up by those studies and researches that, investigating phenomena closer to the topic of representations, as in the case of collective beliefs, absorb into them some specific theories and methodologies developed in the “sociological” psychosocial school.

In summary, although the use of the term “representation” (whether social or collective) in sociology is in the perspectives here analysed often blurry or non-existent, or handled through related topics, we can see the emergence of an autonomous role of the discipline for the growth and development of the theory of representations. Moreover, the attempts to integrate the various perspectives are of paramount importance. We are not only talking about the integration of sociology in social psychology, as we saw with regard to Bourdieu's theory, but also of the other way around, as happens in the social networks theory (Ferrant, 2011). When complemented by the theory of representations, in fact, it contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics that influence the choices of individuals in contemporary society, characterised by multiple memberships on the relational side and by various reference cultural models on the normative side.

In addition to these approaches, should also be analysed the contributions that emerge in specific fields of analysis in which the theme of representations proved to be particularly useful, as for the study of the dynamics of social representation of health and illness (Galand, Wullemmin, 2009). Not to mention, in conclusion, the unprecedented interest in the representations recently developed by some scholars, such as Jeffrey Alexander (2006), whose potential and whose relationship with the theories here analysed here are totally unexplored.

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