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Abstract

Studying social thinking provides a promising field of investigation for the constitution of common knowledge in communication and action of historically and culturally situated groups. Its genealogy helps the understanding of the symbolic efficacy of social practices and their own operating collective logic. The English translation of a short version of Serge Moscovici's article on the new magical thinking allows a wider audience to gain access, for the first time, to a text that perfectly illustrates the currentness and relevance of the social psychology of knowledge.

Keywords

knowledge, magic, social thought

In good faith the Bororo man imagines being an arara in person.

Durkheim and Mauss (1903/1974)

I. Two particles of knowledge

“Mass has been spoken.” With this evocative title on its front page in July 2012, a major French daily newspaper¹ announced the most outstanding discovery in physics of the past half-century, the Higgs boson.² In one short, simple, dense phrase, this word game communicated more than it meant, spread more than it explained, incorporated at a stroke the importance of this extraordinary discovery into ordinary language, into common sense. Does this mean that the reader is capable of explaining the spontaneous breakup of the standard model and the acquisition of mass through interaction? Nothing is less certain. Of course, accuracy is not the point here. Beyond the intelligibility of the exact nature of the discovery, what each one of us feels, imagines, and shares is more important than what we grasp.

The stakes are high behind this act of communication. One issue is precisely the encounter of two particles of knowledge, here, abstract scientific thought and concrete social thought, through an operator of communication. Their connection cannot be reduced to a simple outreach effect. Let

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us remember that, well before this recent discovery, the Higgs boson had a famous nickname and an appropriate iconography among physicians, “the God particle.” As the news breaks, we witness an effort of familiarization with the novelty of this, in many ways, strange finding. The metaphor serves the attempt to materialize the newness, its own already existing meanings color the novelty in order to shape it for communication; representation, in one word, makes it real.

How much is rational in this process of translation of the scientific discovery? Little, no doubt. This is why it has become relevant to evaluate it via one of the less Cartesian theories in social sciences, the theory of social representations. Is this process a simple telescoping of mental operations whose distinction, classification, hierarchy, or, in other words, whose combination could result in physical science at the top of the scale of values, or in religion at the bottom? We can certainly break down in an operational manner the elementary chains of the reasoning, to seize one or the other sequence according to an index of proof administration, capture their truth index. However, this logical processing will not yield explanations about the nature of physics or religion and most certainly not about the logic inherent in their association. Nor will it tell us about the effect, magical after all, of instantaneous comprehension that their association has on the profane mind. The connection of these two particles of knowledge rather concerns two bodies of knowledge which in the past sometimes were one, incorporating historical, cultural, and practical matter.

2. What is so magical?

The article we are looking at, a short version, translated into English for the first time, comes from a lecture its author gave at Grenoble (France) in 1991 during a round table entitled “Cognition and Human Behavior.” The meeting resulted in an article (Moscovici, 1992) which was published rather quickly afterward, 1 year later, in the revue *Bulletin de Psychologie* within an excellent thematic issue dedicated to “New Roads in Social Psychology” (among other participants: Robert Farr, Jean-Claude Abric, Denise Jodelet, Willem Doise, Gabriel Mugny, Nicholas Emler, Dario Paez, etc.).

The reflections suggested by Moscovici are still relevant to date, 22 years after their first publication. A twofold relevance: on the one hand, they recommitted the guiding principles of a psychosociology of knowledge established in 1961. On the other hand, the author’s critique of a model of cognition, which too often—and still today—considers social issues as temporary epiphenomena instead of the essence of man’s societal life: “The epithet ‘social’ is at stake here, as it defines for some a *way of seeing* cognitive life, while for others it is the very way cognitive life *is*.”

A curious mind would wonder, first of all, “Why magical thought?” and then “What’s new about it?”

The answer to the first question is to be found partly in the history of ideas that have shaped the “collective psychology” branch, examining the relation between science, religion and magic in society. This movement of ideas, strongly dominated by Durkheim’s contributions, has had major influence on Moscovici’s social psychology of knowledge. Hence, we are not surprised to find references to Mauss, Lévy-Bruhl, or even Malinowski in this article.

Without going into the details of the different ways the question of magic is treated in the English and French anthropological traditions (Keck, 2002), we simply remind the reader that M. Mauss and H. Hubert, from 1903, positioned magic as a firm component of scientific thought and basic rationale with its own laws (so-called sympathetic laws: contiguity, similarity, contrast). They supported the idea that magical practices were transformed into causal-logical reasoning through the substrate of the representations on which they lean. For the two authors acts and representations are inseparable, become “practical ideas” (Mauss and Hubert, 1930/1950: 84) with mighty symbolical efficacy within collective thought. They conclude their extensive study writing:

“in the origin of magic we situate the basic form of collective representations which have become since the basis of the understanding of the individual” (Mauss and Hubert, 1930/1950: 137). The rationality of magic as an act and as social practice finds its legitimization in a form of socially governed thought.

The psychology of the social “has to do with explanation of the phenomena of belief, religious or magical, of ordinary and popular knowledge, of the ideological forms of collective thought and action” (Moscovici, 2013: 71). From this point of view, the answer to our first question is in direct line with the central debate on the history of ideas of collective psychology on the illusion of culture versus reason, but also rational versus irrational, knowledge versus belief, science versus common sense, adult views, and views of the child, civilized as opposed to primitive, and ultimately, individual and society (Moscovici, 2012).

The second question is more about our modernism shaped by science. Moscovici anticipates in this article qualifying his observation from the start as disturbing: “the eras when magic prospers seem to coincide with those when science flourishes.” Let us consider for just one moment the worldwide success of contemporary literature and movies for children (and adults) featuring schools of witchcraft. This mass diffusion is not just an ephemeral fashion. Influenced by Piaget, several recent experimentations in psychology have been carried out recently among children to study the effects of magical thought using mainstream movie extracts as support (Subbotsky, 2007), and also among adults (Pronin et al., 2006) with voodoo objects or rituals against superstitions, like bad luck, for example (Zhang et al., 2014). The results show beneficial effects of this form of thought in children, mainly with regard to creativity in solving problems of logic. They also illustrate the importance of the law of participation according to Lévy-Bruhl’s (1926/1984) prediction less than a century ago. As for adults, the observed causal inferences defied by far scientific rationality and proved the efficient cultural anchoring of these practices in our modern societies.

Magic with ritual causes fear, hopeful expectation, and strangeness. Neither objects nor ideas are magical by themselves. They become so when their combination diverts familiar patterns of thought or action, when they become generators of strangeness. Magic is the science of strangeness, a *collective* science of strangeness. Repetition, belief, and group culture give it its power. Mauss already made this point in (1903/1950) (our translation):

Acts that are not repeated are not magical. Acts in whose efficiency a whole group does not believe are not magical. Forms of rituals are highly transmissible and sanctioned by opinion. Consequently, strictly individual acts, like players’ superstitious practices, cannot be called magical. (p. 11)

Numerous experiences in experimental social psychology, particularly those of Tversky and Kahneman, illustrate resistance to the principles of non contradiction of our daily social judgments and acts, to the laws of probability, to statistics, resistance to medical recommendations, and healthy diets; these consolidate the idea of the appeal to other forms of reasoning rather than that of the predominant scientific thought. The strength of Moscovici’s argument is to evidence that way beyond individualistic interpretations defining these forms exclusively as deviation, as bias, illusions of one subject cut off from the others, from the situation and from his culture, what happens is the exact opposite. Due to the growing importance of the individual as the only unit of analysis, in certain situations, we tend to see dispositional causality where situational explanations would be more appropriate, a shift in the system of categories based on subjective anchoring, internal anchoring, the actor’s. According to Moscovici, it is not a unilateral, permanent movement. It does not present itself like a solitary decision to be taken, but as demonstration of one of the logics of social thought.

The translation of the article enabling Anglophone readers to access its contents will allow for more discussion on the cultural and symbolic patterns which characterize social thought (cf. Jodelet, 2014; Jovchelovitch, 2007; Kalampalikis, 2007). After all, social thought is of polyphasic nature, there is nothing magical about it.

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Notes

1. *Libération*, 5 July 2012.
2. The Nobel Prize in Physics 2013 was awarded jointly to François Englert and Peter W. Higgs.

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Author biography

Nikos Kalampalikis is Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Lyon 2, France. His actual work on social representations deals mainly with symbolic practices of kinship and gift in medical procreation. He edited recently two books with Serge Moscovici (*Reason and Cultures*, 2012 ; *The Scandal of Social Thought*, 2013), both in the Editions of the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris.