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The social representation of victims

Serge Moscovici

I- To move ahead with the theory of social representations

Several factors have driven me to increasingly centre my concerns on interest in the present. Here, I will mention some of these factors.

First is the desire to better understand the questions facing us when the usual responses become obsolete. Science has something in common with photography: it can, and indeed must, create an impression of "estrangement".

Next, these phenomena are *in status nascendi* – in a nascent state – and therefore allow active observation, free from constraints, and even from past models. Marc Bloch, who was an example, clearly stated that "mere passive observation, even supposing such a thing were possible, has never contributed anything productive to any science". One is tempted to follow this great historian's opinion for its obvious truth.

Finally, it is difficult to ensure a theory progresses, and my intention is to further the theory of social representations. Admittedly, this theory has never been an easy one to set out, and is no more so today. The theory of social representations has always advanced at the expense of certain tension, in comparison with others that have separated the field of the individual from the context of the society. As Norbert Elias said, "We often have the impression that individual psychology and social psychology are two disciplines that can be entirely separated from one another. And the questions concerning both are generally drawn up in advance as if a gulf truly existed between the individual and the society" (1991, 17). We have always subscribed to this belief that "society without the individual and the individual without society are two things that do not exist" (id.).

Today, I do not wish to return to an old debate. I simply want to recall the specificity of our theory and the obstacles it has encountered. The different research trends progress in a variety of ways, with ours generally moving forwards by addressing new phenomena and determining the questions they raise. And when all is said and done, this is the positive side to the theory. It forces us to be attentive to reality, which is constantly changing and renewing itself. In any science, this provides an opportunity for progress.

As some may recall, I first spoke about victim phenomena and victim minorities at our International Conference in Guadalajara. Since then, with Juan Perez, we have experimentally demonstrated the specific nature of these minorities and their social influence.

Nothing would be more legitimate today than to involve (engage) the theory of social representations in research on this new issue of victims and on the victimisation phenomenon. We would all agree to seeking new relationships between favoured majorities and persecuted minorities within the different cultures, psychological manifestations and social conditions. Today, this is the direction the community's policies and aspirations are taking in order to tackle and resolve a very old issue.

I wonder if we are not faced with the signs and proof of the emergence of a new human figure, the victim, whose original characteristics are as yet unknown to us. Taking a closer look, we clearly see that in order to find new solutions, societies must imagine themselves and represent themselves through specifically new individuals or groups. For all of these reasons, I suggest that we approach the challenge raised by the victim issue from the perspective of our theory.

II – The moral aspect of human experience

This first implies defining the way we view the empirical facts underpinning such research, which could be conducted collectively, or even from a comparative perspective.

Because of its shock effect, the Nazi extermination of a community and a culture at the scale of a continent, in the most brutal and murderous manner, is undoubtedly at the origin of this evolution. Human holocausts have certainly occurred before, but never at the heart of modern Europe, and never in such a reasoned and scientific way, in secret and with no regard for suffering. We witnessed the emergence of the underrated idea of a human abyss, of a crime not against a nation or a State, but against the human race. A crime against humanity is unforgivable as law cannot be distinguished from ethics, and because this crime demonstrates a non-legal aspect of the truth, such that it is impossible to link the *quaestio facti* to the *quaestio juris*. In this crime, both fact and norm, the law comes up against a limit beyond which it is mute. The very concept of collective responsibility following from this crime and the pattern of repentance it implies are at the origin of a moral misconduct that has taken on a variety of meanings in our time. Collective responsibility and ethical misconduct are the two aspects illustrated by the Eichmann line of defence defined by his lawyer: "Eichmann feels guilty before God, not before the law". The criminal immediately declared that he wished to hang himself in public in order to lift the burden of guilt from the shoulders of German youth. But this did not prevent him from proclaiming until the very end that his crime before God, the highest bearer of sense, could not result in criminal prosecution.

Evidently, for reasons that would take too long to explain here, recognising a moral responsibility alongside a criminal responsibility tends to shift the legal categories towards ethical categories in our culture. This

is an upheaval in the sense that ethics, as Spinoza taught us, are the doctrine of a happy life, free from misconduct and responsibility. But this upheaval was made possible as the legal concepts of crimes against humanity and collective responsibility express the sense of radical evil, an ethical concept coined by Kant, upon which the fate of democracy would depend.

And everyone knows that this evolution took shape with the big bang of social movements in the 1970s, starting with that of civil rights. It is clear, for example, that this extraordinary surge was preceded by a number of small changes in customs, law and everyday life. Be that as it may, before this movement, authoritarian and dictatorial regimes were considered as being "natural" political regimes, whereas democratic forms, according to Bergson, served the purpose of protest and criticism: "We find them useful for preventing, rejecting and overthrowing; it is more difficult to draw positive indications of what must be done from them" (4).

More specifically, these movements affirm, as we have seen for civil rights, "the moral nature of human existence", to put an end to the tradition of injustice. It would be a mistake to underestimate the "logical", philosophical and especially historical issues of all of these movements. But it would be an even greater mistake to fail to look at the direction our society has taken under their impetus and to ignore the changes in sensibilities, beliefs and moral relations that they have initiated. In a rapidly changing world, this establishes the shift from a democracy limited to several groups, to the nation or to several institutions, towards an unlimited democracy that tends to include all groups – except the persecuted –, all aspects of life and almost all institutions, including the most archaic, such as the family or the army.

I do not claim that this expectation of an unlimited democracy has been achieved, or is even achievable. It is nevertheless the virtual horizon of this evolution by the legal extension of human rights and of the bodies that are supposed to apply them to almost all minorities, including children, for example. A very long chapter in our contemporary history opened from the mid 1970s, when these rights became the subject of specific treaties. We thus observed the emergence of human rights movements within the Soviet dissident movement that were permeated with ethics and worked to reveal the difficulties of leading a life of truth. They were based on these rights with infinite trust and heroic patience. And all earthly suffering and fear expected success of them, such was the emerging faith. We must credit Doise (6) with having disentangled their social representations and shown with originality and relevance the way in which human rights have penetrated the anonymous depths of our everyday beliefs and knowledge. I feel it necessary to insist upon this, since in proceeding by successive creations, human rights respond to a demand for justice that concerns all of humankind. Or, if we wish, human society beyond any political or ethnic society. And it is the all-

encompassing nature of these rights, always to be fulfilled and always unfulfilled, which increases their appeal, just as any unfinished task inspires the urge to finish it. This is clearly within the scope of our present ethics.

III- Comments on a paradox

What is the aim of the remarks I have just made on this evolution? They clearly underline the fact that against the backdrop of our history of war and peace emerges what we now call ethics. What I would call my penchant and even my profound faith would serve to justify it as it ensues from this history. In the continuation of my account, I have left little room for discussing rules and moral values as would be proper, since this would require competence that I do not possess. But to fail to do so would further endanger my enterprise. Long ago, when reading the last part of Heider's book, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, (1958), I was struck by the fact that he translates the content of the modern pre-World War II morality or ethics into psychosocial concepts. Without claiming to explain obligation, he develops the ethics of "oughts", with their impersonal and imperative character. "The ought", he writes, "is not merely a feeling, some esoteric quality that can be glimpsed by the phenomenologist in a happy moment. It influences real events" (7). Its influence, if we follow Kant, means that the very compulsion that has prompted people to subsume their ideas in symmetrically organised rules and to attempt to unify them, has also forced them to feel an obligation to do the same in their moral life, to treat like cases in a like manner, without fear or favour.

Up to a certain point, this is what Heider describes and analyses, above the individual and the social as a new order of psycho-social reality created by the ought, and which is indeed a moral reality. In many respects, his attempt to grasp this reality recalls Bergson's attempt to reconstruct Durkheim's sociology, or even social psychology, based on the same idea of duty or obligation, as a science of closed society and morality. Once it has been profoundly interiorised, the categorical imperative breaks away from its philosophical root and becomes a social or psychological imperative. "In ordinary times", says Bergson, "we conform to our obligations more than we think about them. If, each time, we had to evoke the idea and set out the formula, it would be far more tiresome to do one's duty. But habit is enough, and we generally have only to let ourselves go in order to give society what it expects of us" (Bergson, 1978, 12).

In fact, it is worthwhile examining this issue of duty, remaining within the familiar field of psychology, where we are more at ease. For good and obvious reasons, it was felt particularly strongly that the Milgram experiments (8a) did not deserve the profession's respect. They brought misfortune upon this undeniably talented researcher with an exceptional

flair for significant phenomena. Almost everyone judged them to be unethical because they confronted us with a terrible revelation. Yes, if Milgram's research showed us anything, it was that by doing his duty, asking himself the question needed to make a decision, one man could nevertheless turn a fellow man into a victim. Or that by asking themselves what they should do, what they are obliged to do, or what they are supposed to do, people in fact act or behave in an inadequate, careless manner contrary to their interest, rather than refuse to do what is being ordered. It is true that this was an ethical experiment, not in terms of its implementation, but in terms of its subject: the obligation was detestable, the act that the person was to carry out contemptible, and the whole a conflict with no way out. Or rather, the only way out was to show courage by refusing to take part, if what was involved entailed suffering. In this case, as we know, the suffering was inflicted by electric shocks given to another person who failed to learn what was being taught.

In other words, by following a moral norm defined by a duty or obligation, we bring about an immoral action. So we try to explain this behaviour in terms of respect for science, obedience to the authority of the experimenter and the physical distance between the "torturer" and the "victim". All of these good and obvious reasons have been given by "torturers" in real life, when they claimed to have been acting on orders when torturing or exterminating the prisoners in the concentration camps. Thus, in a sense, each explanation corresponds at the same time to an excuse. But just as Cavell says, "Our obligation is to avoid doing something at a time and place or in a way which is *likely* to result in some misfortune ... If for *all* excuses there were relevant obligations, then there would be no excuses and action would become intolerable. Any *particular* excuse may be countered with a *specific* obligation; not even the best excuse will always get you off the hook" (2003, 26).

If one is in profound personal distress, it is pointless to behave according to norms and reason. Cold, intellectual analysis of our acts and of circumstances will never lead us to the true source of the turmoil or help us to overcome it. This must have been the thinking of the English sociologist Bauman when he asked how a person that had committed acts that had led to misfortune and death could try to get off the hook. At the end of an in-depth analysis of the Holocaust, for which he turned to the Milgram experiments, the first observation Bauman made was the following: "Graciously, the noble creed of rationality absolved both the victims and the bystanders from the charge of immorality and from guilty conscience. Having reduced human life to the calculus of self-preservation, this rationality robbed human life of humanity" (id., 10).

Thus, even if we try to find excuses for this harmful behaviour that has hurt people, we will never find it innocent or just, as shown by the reactions of the subjects in the Milgram experiments, who stopped "torturing" the "victims" once they had touched them. Thus, according to

Bauman, only the feeling of shame can help someone to get over the terrible experience that haunts their conscience. There is no doubt that a feeling of "shame too human" would have prevented anyone from turning away from the suffering inflicted on another, on an unknown person. If this is so, it is because, as explained by Lévinas (1992), shame is not the objective awareness of an imperfection or an insufficiency in what we are, and from which we wish to distance ourselves; on the contrary, it is based on the impossibility for all people of stepping outside themselves, on their absolute incapability of breaking away from themselves. And this may be because any morality of this kind concerns the preservation of individuals and favours egoistic solutions.

IV – Shame and guilt

When we look in as free a manner as possible at the link between the moral social psychology of Heider, that of oughts and musts, and the Milgram experiments showing the consequences of violating the norms and values that may result from it, we understand that we have here a parable of contemporary ethical dilemmas. If Milgram had continued his work, had furthered the way in which the subjects experienced the tests inflicted by the experiment, he would perhaps have reached the same conclusions as Bauman. Be that as it may, these conclusions invoking the role of shame enable us to address the second question raised by the specific content of our ethical style.

Let us recall that under Freud's influence, the anthropologists Kardiner and Benedict once distinguished a shame culture and a guilt culture discovered in extra-European societies. This suggestion has been examined in only limited detail, or it has been explicitly shown how we can be sure of its general nature. However, some scholars, in particular Dodds, have acknowledged that early Ancient Greece, in Homer's time, could also be considered a shame culture. Admittedly, the concept of guilt was not absent, but its subject was barely sketched out. We may have some difficulty admitting that shame or guilt are the exclusive traits of a culture, because it is difficult to imagine without effort the motives of this exclusivity. Nevertheless, it is likely or interesting to think that, inasmuch as it exists, shame culture expresses a predominant tonality or sensibility towards non-conformity with the group opinion, with external views and judgements, whereas guilt culture, of course, reflects a sharp sense of conformity with these interiorised judgements or values. This may be partly the result of a historic evolution, of a shift in beliefs and groups, affecting the community rather than each individual.

If the ethics from which we started, illustrated by Heider, form a circle with obligation at the centre, here is another, elliptical one, with its focus on the one hand the experience of genocide, and on the other the essential aspect of the rights of minorities today. I would like to make it easier to describe this ethical style by taking the liberty of connecting

these two foci by means of a new emotion, or one that will take on new contours. Naturally, compassion today expresses this emotion that brings us to vanquish the persistent deafness to others' voices, to lend an ear to the fates and troubles of the majority. It encourages us to support the same surge of trust to the very end, in order to harmoniously share both good and bad fortune. It may be – and this occurs more often than one would believe today – that we belittle our qualities, our possessions or our group, by secret signs, not out of self-interest, but in order to satisfy the desire to preserve this harmony. With the hidden motive of the void in which only the memory of a major disaster would subsist. This is perhaps what Balzac refers to as *compatissance*, or compassion.

Both Kardiner and Williams imagine the individual and spontaneously consider the emotions he experiences when others judge him or move away from him. While following their schema, I cannot help recalling that shame is a social fate. It is the lot of minorities, of foreigners, of deviants – even in the Bible it strikes a couple – who have broken a rule or a discipline that governs the community. And I believe, based on experience, that it stems from a lack or a loss of social recognition. There is no doubt, as I said long ago, that the aspiration of minorities is to be recognised in order to fill this gap, a true rejection, especially of their visibility.

V – Let us praise the victims!

Now we can consider the third question, the social question. Helkama and Williams have some good reasons for defining shame and guilt as emotions. Furthermore, their content, which seems so inconclusive, has not been created *ex nihilo* by separate, solitary reflection. It appears as the consequence of an evolution and a thought process whose power reveals the activity of a community. This is what Dante says in *De Monarchia*: "Since the power of human thought cannot be fully and simultaneously translated into action by a single man and a single specific community, there must be within the human race a multitude through which this power in its entirety can be realised. The task facing the human race, taken in its totality, is to constantly realise all the potential power of intellect, first in order to speculate, and as a consequence to act".

Whether we wish or not, but I cannot show it here, our era has launched itself along the crest of a wave of ethics that have penetrated all the spheres of existence. A process to which we have become accustomed and which has transformed our relations with politics, the language we were used to, the representations groups have of themselves, and even the priorities of social movements. We must search – but not too far – in order to find out what is the social problem that results from this. It is sociology itself that points us in the right direction, by reminding us of the concept of deviance or marginality. Durkheim devoted some admirable work to the anomic groups inherent to the industrial society and essential

to maintaining social solidarity. According to Parsons and Merton, those who fail to conform to norms and to the roles of father, citizen and so on, join the army of the dissident minority: **foreigners**, criminals, members of non-integrated communities, the sick, and so on.

If, therefore, at the watershed we have stood at for 20 years, there is a new social problem, it is because from the ethical viewpoint, which has become predominant, social movements have replaced the old figure of the deviant with the new one of the victim. However unpleasant it may be, the truth is always instructive. Social psychologists have allowed themselves to be misled by their conservatism. They believed they were studying racism, gender, deviance and group identity as unchanging phenomena. **Computers** are not the only things to be changing rapidly, group representations are changing just as fast. And those who yesterday represented themselves as dissidents or as suffering discrimination now represent themselves and act as victims. The contrast is flagrant.

Indeed, we observe that groups seek to define themselves by casting off their former shame and the physical or social handicaps that affect them. And by presenting themselves as victims protected by the human rights upon which the values of justice depend, as well as the degree of social guilt and collective reconciliation. Attitudes and judgements that were based on the "blame the victim" principle have made way for the ethos, "praise the victim", according to his suffering, once he has been recognised. We thus sense that the minority that seeks to erase the shame and suffering has the possibility of defining the majority that inflicted this shame upon it, and capitalises the guilt that obliges the majority to expiate or make amends. It is undoubtedly this new status of the victim that Williams has in mind when he maintains, as a self-evidence: "It is to be an inherent virtue of guilt, as opposed to shame, that it turns our attention to the victims of what we have wrongly done, then the victims and their feelings should remain figured in the construction of guilt" (Williams, 1995, 222).

We understand that in this "couple", naming the victim is enough to indicate the culprit: the woman points towards the man, the Indian towards the Spaniard or Portuguese, the black towards the white, and so on. The judgement that distinguishes the culprit from an ethical viewpoint is nothing more than the sedimentation of the experience and beliefs accumulated over history. Responsibility to others and, especially, to a specific victimised group, determines the social relationship with this group. Fear of condemnation by others is the basis of responsibility. Such fear is probably the reason for what we call repentance. In other words, a demand for apologies or repentance that would erase the traces of the past and the reference to a potential conflict. If I had to choose an example of repentance, it would be that of the Church, which is all the more exceptional given that it is unknown in its history. After the first *mea culpa* of its history, which concerned the persecutions during the

Inquisition, John Paul II asked forgiveness for the excesses committed by the missionaries during colonisation, and did the same for the fate of the Indians, the peoples of Africa and the Holocaust. But there are also countries that have created authorities and voted laws establishing a true legal status for victims. There is no need to insist upon the fact that the emphasis placed on the victim nature of a group also aims to render ethnic and racial prejudices illegitimate.

This is how I suggest we redirect research on minorities suffering discrimination, which have been widely studied for the last 50 years. I could have undoubtedly gone further, starting from the analogy between repentance or acknowledgement of responsibility and sacrifice. As Mauss wrote, "sacrifice is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned" (1968).

Two tasks now remain to be completed. First, explaining why the social representations of victim phenomena are reflexive representations, "turned towards the self", both individual and collective. Next, explaining the cause or causes of the influence of victims on the "normal" majority. But this is all part of the work that should follow, if the proposal I am putting to you convinces you and if the prospect of this field of research appeals to you.

Serge Moscovici
Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales
Paris, June 2008.

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