

## **What Differences Make A Difference? A Discussion of Hegemony, Resistance and Representation**

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This article discusses the relationship between hegemony and resistance using the framework of the social representations theory (SRT). It starts by describing hegemony and resistance as dyadic processes that emerge from the work of representation and shows how SRT encompasses both the hegemonic nature of representations and their potential to transform by presenting empirical studies of gender and race. In the second part of the article an explanation of hegemony and resistance from a social representations perspective is developed, one centred around notions of similarity, consensus, “possibility of difference” and alternative representations. In the end, an analogy between systems of representation and geographical environments is made in order to emphasise the dynamic nature of the forces that shape our social life.

How does society influence our way of thinking, feeling and acting? How far can social factors shape the psychology of the individual? Can persons resist these social influences and if so how? All these have been for decades central questions for mainstream social psychologists, addressing the most ubiquitous and problematic relationship of all: that between *individuals and society* (Marková, 2003). It is then no surprise that *Self-Other relations* stand also at the core of Social Representations Theory (SRT) (Moscovici, 2000), where they are conceived as fundamental for the genesis, dynamics and function of representations (Jovchelovitch, 1996).

This article aims to explore hegemony and resistance using the concept of social representation (SR). Consequently, it starts with a general description of the main terms and shows how misunderstandings of SRT end up disconnecting hegemony from resistance and

considering representations as serving either one or the other. This old debate has been repeatedly addressed within SR literature (see Howarth, 2004, 2006; Voelklein & Howarth, 2005) and the present article, in the first part, makes a *review of the discussion and illustrates it* with studies of gender and race. In the second part, an *explanation of hegemony and resistance* is elaborated based on the notions of similarity and “possibility of difference”. It is argued that resistance emerges when social actors are aware of the “possibility of difference” or alternative representations and appreciate their chances of overcoming hegemonic views. In the end an *analogy between symbolic and physical environments is made* in order to emphasise the dynamic and interconnected nature of collective and social, hegemonic and resistant representations.

### **HEGEMONY AND RESISTANCE: THE WORK OF REPRESENTATION**

Representations are a product of social interaction and, in their turn, make social life possible. They stand at the basis of all knowledge, reuniting symbolic meanings with persons, communities and lifeworlds (Jovchelovitch, 2007). The connections between representations, hegemony and resistance within SRT are described in terms of knowledge and identity, of collective practices and innovation, of social power and individual agency.

*Hegemony* traditionally signifies the domination exerted by a group over individuals or other groups and it is important not be confused with coercion and domination by force. In fact, as Antonio Gramsci notes, hegemony must be seen as a process of mutual exchange between culture, politics and economy, a dynamic network of influence, a form of ideological rather than military domination (see Jones, 2006). Hegemonic relations are always a mixture of force and consent (Smith, 1998) and describe a situation in which the ruling class has no viable competition in imposing its own view of reality (Spears, 1999). This state of affairs, characterising to different degrees all forms of society, is supported by deep psycho-social mechanisms playing out in inter-personal and inter-group relations. To begin with, as argued by *social identity and social categorisation theories* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), experiencing our social reality means segmenting it into groups we belong to (in-groups) and groups we don't belong to (out-groups). Moreover, a form of *inter-group bias* makes us systematically evaluate our own group members more favourably than non-group members (Hewstone et al., 2002). This easily leads to a vision of human society as a set of conflictual and oppressive groups organized in a hierarchical structure. Drawing from social identity theory, Marxism

and evolutionary accounts, the *social dominance theory* proposed by Sidanius and Pratto (1999) conceives of group based social hierarchies as “ubiquitous”. Further evidence has shown that even groups of young children are hierarchically organised (Hawley, 1999).

At the same time, hegemony must be understood in a *dyad* together with its counterpart: *resistance*. Every society is characterized, in any particular context, by a mixture of these two phenomena; i.e., by the presence of hegemonic beliefs and their permanent contestation. Group dynamics, both internal and reflected in inter-group relations, is modelled by the interplay between acceptance and rejection of norms and representations, between pressure and reaction to pressure, between obedience and disobedience. In the end, social change and innovation are possible exactly because there is always room for novel points of view coming to complement or even to contradict the “taken-for-granted”. This has important consequences for individuals and their *identity* as group members. Resistance shapes identities by refusing to accept an attempt at influence (Duveen, 2001). It empowers individuals and groups (Joffe, 1995) in their constant efforts to respond, to negotiate and co-construct society’s given.

SR researchers have always been sensitive to this social dynamics and dedicated to showing how both hegemony and resistance are *the work of representation*. Indeed, social representations vary in their capacity to play hegemonic roles for different communities. Some, like those regarding age, gender and ethnicity, constrain the individual and prescribe specific types of conduct. But not all representations are “imperative”; some appear to be “contractual” and to allow more individual freedom (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992). However, this *potential for resistance* (Joffe, 1995) builds upon the diversity of representations groups and communities construct as a response to hegemony. A closer look at the Theory of Social Representations will clarify how these intricate relationships have been dealt with until now in ways that generated both agreement and controversy between social psychologists.

### **Social Representations: Theory and Controversy**

Critics of the Social Representations Theory consider the mere notion of social representation as highly controversial (Billig, 1993) and point, among other things, to an apparent lack of *definition*. Anticipating this problem, Serge Moscovici suggested more than three decades ago that social representations are systems of values, ideas and practices with the double function of enabling orientation and communication (cited in Duveen & Lloyd, 1990a). They are not to

be confounded with mental or individual representations since they emerge out of symbolic labour in an inter-subjective space, *in between* persons and groups (Jovchelovitch, 1996, 2007). Once created, they become somehow autonomous, evolving beyond the reach of single individuals (Philogène & Deaux, 2001).

In fact, it is from *misinterpreting* certain thoughts of Moscovici that critics ended up considering social representations as too “hegemonic” and insensitive to resistance and agency. Indeed, representations are, in a sense, “all we have”, they are “superimposed” on objects and persons by language and culture and have a strong conventional and prescriptive nature (Moscovici, 2000). The confusion between hegemony and representation can be traced back to Durkheim’s concept of *collective representations* that Moscovici departed from. Undeniably, in the Durkheimian sense, collective representations have the force of a social fact, resist any argumentation and contestation, and fulfil functions of social integration and reproduction (Jovchelovitch, 2001). Individuals have no contribution to their formation but just internalise and perpetuate them in social forms of thinking, feeling and acting (Marková, 2003).

Nonetheless, “the social psychological concept of social representations lost much of the claustrophobic nature collective representations had” (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 52) although maintaining the force of these symbolic environments. It is the *idea of consensus* (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005), of sharedness with “its overtones of psychological harmony” (McKinlay et al., 1993, p. 139) that critical discourse theorists are unsatisfied with (see Potter & Edwards, 1999). In response, social representations theorists argue that representations are not mechanically aggregated (Raudsepp, 2005) and that consensus is complemented by negotiation and interaction.

“A representation is not a mere reflection or reproduction of some external reality. There is symbolic space in the development and negotiation of representations, which is why all human beings hold creative power and agency in their formation and use” (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005, p. 433).

Surprisingly, another line of critique may come from wrongly interpreting the new position given to individuals, this time in the opposite direction. Introducing the idea of a “*thinking society*”, Moscovici (2000) suggested that individuals and groups are far from being simple passive receptors of representations. In fact, the Theory of Social Representations has

been proposed exactly for the study of fluid and dynamic post-modern societies, with their plurality of choices and multiplicity of worldviews. As Moscovici (1988) himself argues, it would be an “aberration” in this post-modern age to think of representations that are homogeneously shared by a whole society as was the case for collective representations.

In concluding, Moscovici’s project was from the beginning that of replacing functional with *genetic models of social knowledge*, in which the social and the individual take reciprocal action (Moscovici, 2000). Understanding the necessity of addressing the relationship between hegemony and resistance, Moscovici (1988) suggested that, depending on group relations, we can find either *hegemonic* representations, implicitly imposing symbolic and material practices, either *emancipated* and *polemic* representations. The last of these actively contest established worldviews and emerge in situations of inter-group opposition and struggle. This classification can also be paralleled with Joffe’s (1995) distinction between “dominant” and “resistant” representations.

Individuals are never mere “objects” of representation, powerless in the face of an overwhelming social force. The Theory of Social Representations acknowledges the possibility of re-negotiation, transformation and change that we are all endowed with (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005) as “subjects” in the world of representation.

### **Accommodating both Self and Other: Research Findings**

In explaining how Social Representations research encompasses both the hegemonic and the resistant aspects of representations and social practices, let us focus next on two empirical examples, that of *gender and race*, commonly understood as hegemonic (Howarth, 2006) and imposing “imperative obligations” upon identity (Duveen, 2001). These illustrations will show how, confronted with some of the most pervasive dominant representations in an institutional context (kindergarten and school), apparently “vulnerable” and “passive” agents like *children and adolescents* manage to make sense of current beliefs and gradually begin to engage with, contest and even transform them.

“(…) The child is first of all an object in the representational world of others, who anchor this new and unfamiliar being in a particular classification and give them a particular name, and who objectify their representations through the ways in which they interact with the child” (Duveen, 2001, p. 260).

The sex of the newborn is among the first things adults are aware of and, starting from there, they think of and treat the child as either a “boy” or a “girl”. Socially constructed gender representations tell adults all they need to know about how a child *should be and why* (Breakwell, 1990), an example of a more general mechanism Michael Cole (1996) referred to as “prolepsis”. At least in Western societies, the hegemonic binary sex model positions every individual from birth as male or female (Smith, 1998) leaving it no other choice (Duveen & Lloyd, 1993). Moreover, many communities generally have a more positive evaluation for *masculine* practices and objects (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992).

The series of studies done by Gerard Duveen and Barbara Lloyd in the last decades (1990b, 1992, 1993) are among the most remarkable attempts to unpack *social representations of gender*. The authors used a complex methodology (including ethnography, observation, interview, experimental designs, longitudinal and cross-sectional studies etc.) to investigate the formation, dynamics and practical consequences of these representations for children of different ages. They demonstrated in a set of experiments with six-month-old cross-dressed and cross-named children how gender representations are so widespread and domineering that, although no differences were found in the babies’ behaviour, adults around them *responded* differently to their reactions and offered them different types of toys. At this early age children are certainly “objects” of social representations of gender and the two authors were particularly interested in the development of children towards becoming “subjects” or active actors in the field of gender. Therefore they observed how gender identities are imposed on children and paid attention to the first signs of co-participation in their construction. Systematic observations led to the conclusion that, for the first eighteen months, a child’s gender identity is totally regulated by others (Duveen, 2001). From three to four years of age children start to emerge as *independent actors*:

“increasingly able to co-ordinate both the production and comprehension of signs, to signify their membership in a gender category and to respond to others as gendered members of society” (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990b, p. 36).

What the authors argue and what is central to an understanding of the intricate relationship between the hegemonic aspects of representations and the potential for resistance is that, by the age of four, children are very much *aware* of gender differences and the social

representations attached to them (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992). This is clearly reflected in linguistic and picture-sorting tasks (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990b). Still, as Duveen (2001) suggests, children understand also from an early age *the relations of power* rooted in gendered identities. As observed, girls are usually the ones who actively resist symbolic gender discrimination by trying to minimise the difference between them and the boys: they tend to play with both masculine and feminine marked toys (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990b) and compete with boys for resources (Duveen, 2001). Considering all the above, the authors concluded that a primary task for each school-aged child is to understand and negotiate her sex-group membership (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992) and therefore forge her identity as a “reconstruction of externally constructed patterns of meanings” (Duveen, 2001, p. 262).

Similar to gender, representations of “race” are highly influential in the broader society and a growing literature on *racism in school* and *school exclusion* on racial basis addresses the ways in which children and youth perceive and react to them (Killen et al., 2002; Lewis, 2003; Blair, 2001; Blau, 2003). Using a social representations framework, Caroline Howarth (2004, 2007) looked at representations of “race” as representations *that* “race”, that are embodied within power relations, communities and practices and “damage identities, lower self-esteem, and limit the possibilities of agency, community, and humanity” (Howarth, 2007, p. 133). The author was not only interested in the hegemony of these representations but particularly in the acts of resistance towards them, in the ways they become “*problematized* in the everyday” by young people witnessing school, media and community racism.

One of her most recent studies (2007) focused on the representations and experiences of race in a sample of school children, aged eight to twelve, with various ethnic backgrounds. The methodology included an array of non-directive methods such as vignettes, story-telling and drawings, all presenting school episodes such as racist bullying. Three central representations of “race” have been revealed in this context: “race” as *real*, “race” as *imposed* and “race” as *contested*. Howarth argued that although young black and Asian children could easily identify marginalisation and stigmatising as a mundane feature of their school, children find different ways to contest racism from rejection and argumentation to the discovery of contradictions.

Unfortunately, representations of “race” scar not only identities but also endanger the future of certain children, especially from stigmatised groups like African-Caribbean, by means of *institutional action* and *school exclusion* (see also Wright et al., 2000). Aiming to

know what representations sustain excluding practices and how exclusion can be resisted, Howarth (2004) employed a study of social representations focused primarily on Black British young people who have been excluded from school and their experiences of injustice and discrimination. Using participant observation and unstructured interviews, she discovered that these pupils were *acutely aware* of dominant representations portraying them as underachievers and violent. Still, resistance and critical engagement were expressed through the efforts of pupils and those around them to *co-participate* in the production of knowledge about themselves. As the author remarks, a clear illustration of participation and resistance is the emergence and development of Black supplementary schools in Britain. Her conclusions reveal once more that:

“The multiplicity and tension within any representation presents possibilities for communication, negotiation, resistance, innovation and transformation” (Howarth, 2006, p. 358).

## **EXPLAINING HEGEMONY AND RESISTANCE: THE ROLE OF SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE**

As demonstrated above, the Theory of Social Representations is not only interested in the connections between representation, hegemony and resistance but also provides the *tools* for understanding their dynamics. In this second part of the article a closer look will be given to how exactly hegemony and resistance can be accounted for from a social representations perspective. The argument will lead to the conclusion that hegemony is supported by *similarity and consensus* in representational fields and resistance by the *possibility of difference* in representational fields. Furthermore, it is not only similarity and difference that mark the trajectory of hegemonic or resistant actions but the act of *acknowledging them* by social actors, recognising what unites groups and what sets them apart in terms of their representations and also appreciating the *power relations* between groups and, consequently, the representations they develop and support.

### **Self Meets Society**

The classic image of hegemony and dominance is that of a person oppressed by the social system, incapable of fighting against societal norms and beliefs that limit her agency and position her as inferior, powerless, exploitable. This is traditionally the “faith” of persons or communities that don’t have access to social advantages and are regulated by a “massive otherness” in the form of dominant groups and ideologies. *Hegemonic representations* in this context are wide-spread representations, representations endorsed by leading groups and accepted by the whole of society, representations that are unquestioned or taken for granted. Equated with Durkheim’s *collective representations*, they describe mainly “pre-modern” societies where “it is the centralized institutions of Church and State, Bishop and King, which stand at the apex of the hierarchy of power and regulate the legitimation of knowledge and beliefs” (Duveen, 2000, p. 8). Myth and religion in traditional societies were not only hegemonic systems of representation but they were also homogenous across different groups. This is understandable in the context of feudal systems marked by deep inequalities and strict social hierarchies, where the towering figures of authority had practically no opposing candidate. Representations here explicitly serve the role of what Sidanius and Pratto (1999, p. 45) call *legitimising myths* or the collection of “attitudes, values, beliefs, stereotypes, and ideologies that provide moral and intellectual justification for the social practices that distribute social value within the social system”.

Nevertheless, the theory of social representations is a theory meant to study the *age of modernity*, where “collective life has adapted to decentred conditions of legitimation” (Duveen, 2000, p. 9). This doesn’t imply that hegemonic representations or legitimising myths are nowadays only historical oddities but that their mechanisms and function have changed *to adapt* to more pluralistic and fragmented societies (Gillespie, 2008). “The Other” is no longer a unitary, a monolithical point of reference and representational fields are no longer unitary and homogenous. The “wars of representation” Moscovici set out to study are expressive of the competition for legitimacy and dominance that groups and knowledge systems engage in on everyday basis.

### **The Plurality of Others**

Considering the above it is probably more suitable to talk about *Self-Others* rather than Self-Other relations. This is not a minor terminological observation but a reflection on the fragmented nature of contemporary societies where both forms of human association and

representations are undergoing a process of geometric increase. In the words of Gillespie (2008, pp. 375-376):

“we are witnessing the breakdown of collective, homogenous and 'total' knowledge structures and the emergence of a pluralistic field of representations. Accordingly people are now navigating between knowledges and discourses, choosing which is relevant for the given context, and able to defend that choice in relation to possible alternatives”.

At the same time, the “social” is not a mechanical aggregate of independent “atoms” but an intricate and integrated system of individuals, groups and relationships. As Duveen and Lloyd (1992) argue, there is no pure “individuality” that can be apprehended apart from the complex fabric of social relations and representations. This *communicative existence* and *dialogical tension* constitute in fact the perfect environment for the genesis of social representations. Since dialogicality is *multifaceted*, *multivoiced* and *polyphasic* in nature (Marková, 2003), the hegemonic influence of the “social” can and will always be confronted by opposite and resistant representations. The permanent fluctuation between hegemony and resistance is embodied in the nature of our societies where “dialogical antinomies both unite and divide, both estrange and appropriate, both orientate the self towards ideas and meanings of others as well as towards the self's own ideas” (Marková, 2003, p. 97).

This is the basis for advocating that the notion of the “Other” within the theory of social representations is recognised as *a dynamic network of dialogical relationships*. This implies that the “social” is never a monolithic structure, crushing the person's agency by imposing a singular and hegemonic conception. In fact, the diversity of worldviews defines a social and representational system (Jovchelovitch, 2001) where the Self is “in the position of accepting or rejecting various social suggestions, combining different SRs in a unique way” (Raudsepp, 2005, p. 463). The hegemony of representations relying on the “force” of social connections always allows for the expression of resistance due to the *multiplicity of “others”*. Furthermore, both self and others take part in what Moscovici (2000, p. 30) referred to as the thinking society where “individuals and groups, far from being passive receptors, think for themselves, produce and ceaselessly communicate their own specific representations and solutions to the questions they set themselves”. All these assertions point to the fact that *struggle and change* are in effect at the heart of re-presentation (Howarth, 2006), that social

representations act as both structured and structuring structures (Jovchelovitch, 1996) and that the same underlying mechanisms that build representations can be used to transform them (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). *Social actors* are not merely reproducing a well-learned role, but always act as *co-authors* of social scripts.

### **Differences that Make a Difference: Alternative Representations**

Until now we have seen how hegemonic representations, perfectly illustrated for example by religious beliefs in pre-modern societies, are sustained by *similarity of thought and high consensus* between different persons and different groups, allowing them to exercise their power over other persons and groups in a “legitimate” way. What modernity brought with it is a more active and real “*possibility of difference*”. Being different, holding a different view, sharing a different norm is the actual basis of resistance that, I will argue, depends on the development and endorsement of *alternative representations*. In discussing this notion I will make reference to Gillespie’s use of the term and how it can be instrumental to our understanding of resistance.

For Gillespie (2008), alternative representations are representations of other people’s representations or, in a more precise definition, “*the representation of a potentially competing representation from within a social representation*” (p. 38). In other words, when holding whatever representation about a certain “object” we are always aware of the fact that there are other possible representations different people or groups might have of the same object and we even anticipate and respond to these other, alternative representations. There is always a potential for the emergence and recognition of alternative representations, very often opposite representations, since thinking in polarities, oppositions and antinomies is an “omnipresent human potency” (Marková, 2003, p. 26). Alternative representations are, in Gillespie’s view, “important dialogical sub-parts to certain social representations, enabling those representations to adapt to the plurality of representations” (p. 376). They are often “betrayed” in discourse whenever the speaker expresses what “they say”, “they claim” or “they think”.

And yet in Gillespie’s analysis the focus was not on the use of such representations in acts of resistance but, to a certain extent, on the contrary process of how alternative representations are often *disregarded or contested* in the face of “existing” or “shared” views. Considering his purpose, Gillespie noted that “it might be tempting to assume that an

increasing plurality of co-existing representations would lead to an increasing plurality of mind, or at least tolerance for alternative forms of knowledge, but the present article will show that such an assumption is not warranted” (p. 376). His study of Moscovici’s *Psychoanalysis* reveals how alternative representations are often “shallow”, “second-hand”, a stereotypical and simplified version of the alternative, nothing more than “straw men” to be dismissed in current discourse. Being the “Alter” within the social representation, they are commonly used as examples that come to confirm and reinforce the established view, “always bracketed, held in a state of disbelief, open to questioning and critique” (p. 381). However, since alternative representations *portray the knowledge and position of the other* they are useful to enable communication between different groups. They constitute a recognition of the “possibility of difference”, although not always a true appreciation of it, and therefore, for Gillespie (p. 382), “hegemonic representations as completely devoid of alternative representations”, they “are completely egocentric, and they orient to and dialogue with no alternative perspectives”.

This does not imply that there are no alternative representations “responding” to a hegemonic representation but that people holding the hegemonic view are *not open* to any “difference” in relation to that view. If we take any hegemonic representation (including race and/or gender, the focus of much research in social psychology) it becomes clear that, by definition, both members of “dominant” and “disadvantaged” groups are *aware of it and adopt it* to a certain degree (see the system justification theory, Jost et al., 2004). And yet resistance is possible only when, at least members of the “disadvantaged” group, are also *aware* of the “possibility of difference”, the possibility for an alternative, and start to *peruse* it. Just as hegemonic representations are based on the similarity of conception set in place by power relations between persons and groups, resistance emerges when alternatives to a unitary conception start to be supported by more and more persons and groups. This is also referred to by Gillespie (2008, p. 382), when he notes that:

“Alternative representations are peculiar because they can both destabilize and stabilize the given social representation of which they are a part. In so far as the alternative representation represents a real alternative to the main representation, then it can be destabilizing – posing a challenge to the core. Yet alternative representations can also protect the main representation from the challenge of alternatives. (...) In some cases, however, the core of the given representation is actually shaped by the

alternative in the sense of it being first and foremost a position taken vis-à-vis the alternative”.

Turning this around, the core of all *resistant alternative representations* is certainly shaped by the hegemonic view they respond to. Furthermore, they are also shaped by the envisioned relation of power invested in the generation of representational forms.

### **Difference As Possibility: How Likely Is It?**

Paraphrasing Gillespie (2008, p. 379), who said that “communication entails not just difference, but also some representation of that difference”, we can state that “*resistance entails not just difference and the representation of that difference, but also the representation of what this difference means*”. In other words, members of “disadvantaged” groups are not only acutely aware of dominant or hegemonic representations (something that Howarth’s and Duveen’s studies have clearly showed) but also the possibility of alternative representations and what they mean in the context of group relations. Taking position in networks of meanings requires individuals to know the conditions of the debate (Clémence, 2001, p. 87) and, in practical terms, this suggests that people hold not only the content of a certain representation but also, attached to it, a representation of the *context*, of the “*strength*” of the representation itself in relation to “competing” representations. In order to understand both hegemony and resistance it is always necessary to have an “overview of alternative representations within a community and the logic of their social distribution” (Raudsepp, 2005). This kind of *meta-knowledge* suggested by Raudsepp has been also referred to by Moscovici (2000) when he proposed a constant re-working of our representations done by analysing representations of representations. Black teenagers for example resist racist representations from a position where they are well aware of hegemonic views about black persons, the existence of alternative arguments and the “likelihood” of imposing these alternative arguments. What this comes to show is that representations are never singular but come in *complex systems* that include *the representation itself, alternative or counter representations, a representation of the in-group and the out-groups holding these representations and also an appreciation of the power relations between groups and how they are reflected in the distribution and acceptance of representations*.

This conclusion may have a pessimistic ending attached to it since there is mounting evidence that the internalisation of hegemonic representations by members of disadvantaged groups is often associated with supporting the status quo even by those who are harmed by it. The *system justification theory* (Jost et al., 2004, p. 885) substantiates the claim that “hierarchy is maintained not only through mechanisms of ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation exercised by members of dominant groups, but also by the complicity of members of subordinated groups” and by forms of outgroup favouritism. As the authors argue, people don’t have only the need to feel good about themselves and the groups they belong to but they also have the need to feel good about the social system they are a part of, and this means to perceive it as fair, legitimate, good, natural, and even inevitable. This dynamics is directly connected to actual inter-group relations and the status of members from each group. Accepting hegemonic representations and discounting alternative representations that would endanger the social system and, consequently, the self, often leads to a *circular process* where “social representations not only perpetuate themselves, but also endorse the power of the groups that embody the values that underpin them” (Joffe & Staerklé, 2007, p. 413).

And yet there is actually much more scope for resistance and change than the system justification theory would make us believe. This is because members of disadvantaged groups often see a “*real*” *possibility of difference* and trust that their coordinated action could change their position in the eyes of out-groups members they interact with or even the whole society. This commitment to the promotion of alternative representations, alternative as compared to those of the majority, is what characterises the process of *minority influence*. The studies of Moscovici (1985, p. 22) have demonstrated how “a resolute minority that knows what it wants and is ready to accept conflict” can successfully influence the majority. For as long as the minority respects the conditions of consistency, autonomy, investment and fairness, it can change the beliefs and norms of the majority, independent of relative power and social status (Moscovici, 1976). This line of thought brings the hegemony–resistance debate close to other “important dyads” in social sciences, like that between stability and change, continuity and innovation, conformity and insubordination. It is therefore not at all accidental that Moscovici, the father figure of social representations theory, was also a promoter of minority influence. It is maybe an *underlying conception* for both theories and for Moscovici’s work more generally the assertion that:

“It is no less amazing when we realize that, in spite of the enormous pressure towards conformity in thought, taste and behaviour, individuals and groups are not only able to resist, but are even capable of generating new ways of perceiving, dressing, and living, new ideas in politics, philosophy, and art, and of inducing others to accept them. The struggle between the forces of conformity and the forces of innovation is a fascinating one, and one which, in many respects, is critical for the existence of each” (Moscovici, 1976, p. 1).

## TOWARDS A GEOGRAPHY OF THOUGHT

The forces of conservation and the forces of innovation, those of hegemony and those of resistance, the ones maintaining the current status quo and the ones pushing for change, they all play out in the life of a society and shape its symbolic environment. In this sense they could be paralleled with the physical forces shaping our material world. This analogy can be traced back to Moscovici’s (2000) vision of “*thinking as an environment*”. Although the symbolic environment is something we collectively create, what distinguishes it, as any type of environment, “is its autonomy, its independence of us or even, one might say, its indifference to us and to our needs and desires” (p. 19).

I want to introduce the metaphor of “*geography of thought*” in the end of this article because it seems more than suitable for offering us a dynamic image of the interplay between stability and change in representational systems, between taken for granted knowledge and ever-changing repertoires of representation. This notion has little to do with its previous usage by authors like Nisbett (2003), who were more interested in how forms of thought vary across cultures, but rather seeks to explore the symbolic world we all construct and “populate” and points to its organic and continuous transformation. From this perspective one can associate collective and hegemonic representations, “ossified” and taken for granted systems of thought, with *tectonic plates*. The *landscape or crust* on the other hand, an arena of continually (re)shaped and transformed constituents, is evocative of the universe of social representations Moscovici envisions in his theory. Hegemonic representations are often fundamental pillars of our knowledge just as tectonic plates play a foundational role for the Earth. Their origin and nature are rarely noticed or reflected upon and they change very slowly, at a historical scale, just as we can’t observe plates as such and they develop in geological eras. Strikingly, Moscovici’s (2000, p. 27) observes that:

“The more [a representation’s] origin is forgotten, and its conventional nature ignored, the more *fossilized* it becomes. That which is ideal gradually becomes materialized. It ceases to be ephemeral, changing and mortal and becomes lasting, permanent, almost immortal”.

If for Moscovici (2000) collective representations are “like layers of stagnant air in a society’s atmosphere” (p. 32), social representations are much more fluid. Following our analogy, they never emerge out of nowhere but are “*anchored*” in various established systems of thought (like the landscape develops “out of” tectonic plates) and, at the same time, social representations make deeper structures *accessible* to us, they are our point of contact with various knowledge systems and embody them (just as the landscape reflects the plates we don’t usually have direct access to). Even more interesting, it is believed that the move of tectonic plates *in relation to one another* accounts for most of the world’s familiar surface features (Pinter & Brandon, 1997) as well as earthquakes and eruptions at the points of friction. In a similar vein it is hypothesised in the SRT that *times of crisis and upheaval* stimulate the generation of social representations (Moscovici, 2000, p. 63). The “points of tension, even of fracture” in our cultures stimulate representational work (Duveen’s, 2000, p. 8) and can well be generated by the encounter of conflicting systems of thought (like meeting the “knowledge of the Other” as was the case with the discovery of the non-European).

The “volcanoes” of our symbolic environments are sure to be “located” where there is an active *themata* underlying the production of representations. As Marková (2003) discusses this notion, antinomies in common sense (like we/them, freedom/oppression, human/non-human, etc.) can be dormant for long periods until, “in the course of certain social and historical events (...) they turn into problems and become the focus of social attention and a source of tension and conflict” (p. 184). In light of the analogy we are using here, they can turn into problems when, for example, existing ways of doing things come across contrary positions and need to confront them. Moreover, the meeting between tectonic plates can lead either to *subduction*, when one plate slides down below the other, alimending it, or *collision*. Parallels perhaps can be drawn here with Jovchelovitch’s (2007, p. 143) distinction between two types of knowledge encounters:

“(a) dialogical, involving coexistence and inclusion with the potential for hybridisation; and (b) non-dialogical, involving displacement and exclusion with potential for segregation and even destruction”.

The “geography of thought” sketched above has several interesting implications for our understanding of *hegemony and resistance*. To begin with, it suggests the invisibility and foundational role of hegemonic representations for our knowledge systems. At the same time it argues that the “surface” arena of social representations is, similarly to the landscape, in constant movement. Profound transformations take place when hegemonic representations are confronted with other deep-seated beliefs and norms and these clashes activate a *themata* in the consciousness of the society. In other words, when the alternative representation is of a polemic type and directly challenges the hegemonic view, problematising core conceptions of self, others and society. Nevertheless, even when “submerged” beneath a new representational form, old hegemonic representations can *aliment* in more subtle ways current thoughts and practices (such is the case of racist ideologies that, although “submerged”, generate masked and equally domineering forms of symbolic racism).

On the other hand, there is always at the “landscape” level a continuous activity that, little by little, and even in the absence of “thematized clashes” between systems of representation, may end up changing core beliefs. This “trajectory” certainly reminds of the *central and peripheral elements model* (see Abric, 2001), where change often infiltrates a representation from the periphery to the centre. In our analogy this role is played by constant climatic and erosional processes about which modern geology tends to think they are equally or even more powerful than tectonic forces (Pinter & Brandon, 1997). Citing a research group, the two authors write “savor the irony should mountains owe their [muscles] to the drumbeat of tiny raindrops” (p. 74). This is certainly a hopeful corollary of the geographic analogy: even as tiny raindrops, acts of constant resistance can move the “mountains” of centuries of oppression.

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