

POLITICAL DISCOURSE, SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, COLLECTIVE MEMORY: POSSIBLE CONNECTIONS

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Abstract: The considerable importance of social psychology and collective memory in understanding the political discourse from the point of view of the social paradigm is generally recognized today. According to Serge Moscovici, social psychology becomes "a machine which manufactures gods" since "politics is the rational form of exploiting the irrational fundamentals of the masses." (Serge Moscovici, Psihologia socială sau mașina de fabricat zei, traducere de Oana Popârda, Iași, Editura Universității "Al. I. Cuza", 1995, p. 99) Within this context, the appeal to collective memory within the political discourse becomes a manner to influence the masses and equally to relate to the psychological mechanisms of the subconscious, which can significantly increase the effects of manipulation. Thus, considering that "memory is a fundamentally important political and cultural element" (Jean-Jacques Courtine, Le tissu de la mémoire: quelques perspectives de travail historique dans les sciences du langage, în Langages, no. 114, Mémoire, histoire, langage, Paris, Didier-Larousse, 1994, p. 11), its importance for investigating the function of the political discourse is essential. By resorting to collective memory, along a set of discursive operations that organize recollection, repetition, also obliteration and oblivion of what can be called the domain of the discursive memory, persuasion and manipulation can be enhanced. That is why broadcast political discourse makes use of the mechanisms of reviving the collective memory depending on the strategies of persuasion and/or manipulation used.

Keywords: political discourse, social psychology, collective memory, persuasion, manipulation.

The considerable importance of social psychology and collective memory in understanding the political discourse from the point of view of the social paradigm is generally recognized today. Social psychology has had a great impact in our contemporary world since it has taken over theories and practical aspects from psychiatry (as well as hypnosis), introduced them to the social sphere and eventually placed them within the area of political activities. In fact, this science "has systematized the use of collective suggestion (or propaganda, to use its true name) as a substitute of rhetoric in influencing public opinion. This indicates why today, when power no longer depends on talks among the people at the top, but on ascendancy over the masses, government by suggestion has replaced government by discussion."¹

Social psychology is defined as a subdomain of general psychology; it studies human behaviour within a social context with the aim of identifying the causes of various behaviours and types of behaviours in various social circumstances. Its area of investigation is on one hand the analysis of the society's impact on the individual's behaviour and, on the other, the investigation of one's personal contribution to the initiation and achievement of social activities.

Social psychology articulates two interlinked processes: at an individual level, it reveals the subject's mechanisms (cognition, learning, perception, memorization, attention,

¹ Serge Moscovici, *Descoperirea maselor*, in Adrian Neculau (coord.), *Psihologie socială. Aspecte contemporane*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1996, pp. 401-402.

motivation); at a collective level, it reveals the relations between the various social structures in a given situation or environment (family, school, political parties, army, the church). In present day social psychology there are two dominant basic trends: the former describes social behaviour via proximal factors (motivation, cognition, perception etc.), while the latter resorts to distal elements (peer pressure, social interaction, social influence etc.). In terms of methodology, two approaches have emerged: the former is experimental, while the latter relies on case studies, field work etc. The multifarious topic currently undertaken by psycho-sociology considers “both the study of motivation and affection as factors determining behaviour, and the study of memory, perception and thought – in one word, of cognition.”² The “cognitive revolution” of the 80’s resulted in heightened possibilities of research and an expansion of the techniques used; for this reason, “psycho-sociology currently studies not only what and how people think, but also what they feel, wish etc.”³

Social psychology is “the science of conflict between the individual and the society”⁴ and, at the same time, “the science of ideological phenomena (cognition and social representations), and of communication phenomena.”⁵ In effect, the aims of social psychology can be simultaneously social and psychological: communication, social representations. Starting from these points, the interaction between this discipline and politics becomes self-evident, given that “any collection of humans that gather in order to live together protected in the same area is political in nature. Politics is the management of collective life, the regulation of the city and its defense, in one word, it is governing the citizens.”⁶ Any form of political life involves aspects of political activity; hence, political discourse as a result of the various ideologies expressing various social representations contributes to the building up of the relation between the individual and society: “Social psychology teaches us that behind power, behind authority, intimidation and manipulation, is in fact society itself which, by taking part in the creation of our personality, constitutes the most powerful and important influencing factor.”⁷

Quoting Moscovici, Alexandre Dorna emphasizes the idea that speaking about social psychology and political psychology is in fact redundant, therefore “in order to establish landmarks as far as this is possible, it is necessary that the most broadly studied topics should be approached: the political subject, leadership, and social influence.”⁸ Recent research in psychology regarding social influence and persuasion emphasizes the mechanisms and implications of psychology in politics. In Dorna’s opinion, political psychology has been characterized by a double vocation since its early days: “as both a form of knowledge and a technique” and it is “a type of science placed at the crossroads of various disciplines.”⁹

² Septimiu Chelcea, *Un secol de cercetări psihosociologice*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2002, p. 19.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Serge Moscovici, *Psihologia socială sau mașina de fabricat zei*, traducere de Oana Popârda, Iași, Editura Universității „Al.I. Cuza”, 1995, p. 7.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 8.

⁶ Maurice Tournier, Simone Bonnfours, *Analyse du discours, lexicométrie, communication et politique*, in *Langages*, no. 17, *Les analyses du discours en France*, Larousse, 1995, p. 67.

⁷ Lionel Bellenger, *La force de persuasion. Du bon usage des moyens d’influencer et de convaincre*, 4e édition, ESF éditeur, 2005, p. 14.

⁸ Alexandre Dorna, *La psychologie politique: un carrefour pluridisciplinaire*, in *Hermès* no. 5-6, *Individus et politique*, CNRS Editions, 1989, p. 181.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 183.

Since the individual, one among the crowd, imagines that he is free to act and does not realize that he is just an instrument in the decisions made by others, suggestion, also known as influence, is the fundamental method used in mass psychology. Thus, suggestion can be defined as the fundamental link created among people, in which case Max Weber¹⁰ names it “mass conditioned action.” By means of this type of suggestion, the above quoted author considers that the state institutes a relation of domination of people by the people relying on the instrument of exercising legitimate coercion. On the other hand, suggestion “implies a set of personal actions, such as possession, coercion, magic or rhetoric”¹¹, as suggestion accomplishes “a transfer from a pathological state into another pathological state of the individuals in the crowd.”¹²

In his book, *Mass Psychology*¹³, Gustave le Bon introduces the idea that the individual in a crowd loses his identity and spontaneously adopts common aims, attitudes and beliefs; this can go from total adhesion to beliefs contrary to his own interests. The individual’s conscious awareness dissipates, while his thoughts and emotions tend to converge and a “collective soul” is created, a mental common unit of what Le Bon calls “the psychological crowd”. Hitler and Mussolini took over Le Bon’s ideas and applied them in order to support their totalitarian rightist political regimes.

Social psychology has considerable importance in understanding politics from the point of view of the social influence paradigm. Dorna identifies six social influence mechanisms¹⁴: social facilitation (with two effects: the audience effect and the co-action effect), imitation of the vicarious effect, conformism, normalization, cognitive dissonance, and minority influence. The French researcher creates a remarkable synthesis regarding experimental contributions of social influence and attitudinal change; this synthesis is particularly helpful for our research as it contributes to the clarification of the links between political discourse and persuasion and manipulation. The experimental contributions of social influence and attitudinal change¹⁵ as systematized by Dorna are:

1. source-related variables: “the persuading agent anticipated by ancient rhetoric is mainly interested in appearing as an expert than being efficient, since real competence is less important than that which is attributed to him. The emitter’s credibility is determined by the competence as perceived by the receiver”¹⁶;
2. message-related variables: experimental studies of the manner of presenting a message have not yet managed to exhaust this topic, although “results generally indicate that effects greatly depend on the type of audience”¹⁷;
3. receiver-related variables: “the receiver is the target in the classical design persuasion, he is voiceless and malleable.”¹⁸ Researchers have listed a considerable number of receiver-related variables: personality, initial belief, self esteem, sex, social status etc.;

¹⁰ Max Weber, *Politica, o vocație și o profesie*, traducere de Ida Alexandrescu, București, Editura Anima, 1992.

¹¹ Serge Moscovici, *Descoperirea maselor*, în Adrian Neculau (coord.), *Psihologie socială. Aspecte contemporane*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1996, p. 400.

¹² Ibidem, p. 401.

¹³ Gustave Le Bon, *Psihologia mulțimilor*, București, Editura Antet XX Press, 1998.

¹⁴ Alexandre Dorna, *La Psychologie politique: un carrefour pluridisciplinaire*, in *Hermès 5-6, Individus et politique*, CNRS Editions, 1989, pp. 189-191.

¹⁵ Ibidem, pp. 191-193.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 192.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

4. group-related variables: “the group is the natural locus of communication. Attitudes are acquired, maintained and altered within this context. The group effect is defined by interaction”¹⁹;
5. an inventory of results: there is “a troubling ambiguity of such networks. For they can be summarized as follows: “this depends on...”. Therefore, we cannot be sure that the desired effect is obtained or its reverse.”²⁰

We have considered that it is necessary to present these variables which are otherwise a synthesis of the numerous experimental studies on influence in social psychology and therefore on persuasion and manipulation, since Dorna’s conclusion is essential for our scientific undertaking: the effect of political discourses, persuasion and manipulation, are not certain of definitive, as they “depend on..”! Therefore, when we speak of persuasion and manipulation we observe the mechanisms involved in achieving them and the speaker’s intention to persuade or manipulate by means of the political discourse. We cannot possibly confirm whether a political discourse has achieved its intended purpose – that of persuading the audience – as there are countless variables; we can, however, acknowledge the actual results of the elections or of the referenda as expressed by polls.

Research in social psychology clearly confirms that within a society, the individuals are governed by forces of the unconscious. Indeed, in a crowd, people partly lose their critical thinking. Thus, when they are in the position to discern between the real and the imaginary, they lose the ability to choose the viable solution or to choose the discourse relying on reasoning. “The masses are the unconscious,” thus mass psychology is equally a psychology of the unconscious, while “society is nothing but a compendium to which each individual tries to accede and reproduce actions, words, ideas of those surrounding him.”²¹ Politics creates a synthesis of the conscious and unconscious elements of the mass’ thinking. All the methods suggested by mass psychology, all the communication and suggestion methods it codifies derive from this formula: “*Politics is the rational form of exploiting the irrational fundamentals of the masses.*”²² If politics may not be entirely rational, the politician must always be rational and observe the rules of the (institutional) political system in order to adjust his behaviour to agree with that of the others’. The hidden dimension of the political game is strategy and by using it politics uses all the instruments at its disposal to exploit rationally the irrational fundament of the masses.

We have selected only mass psychology and social memory from among the domains that social psychology includes in order to combine them with political discourse, as we consider that political discourse centres round the social and is circumscribed by it, for “any society, be it secular or atheist, is a machine that manufactures gods. If it has no gods, meaning powerful passions and efficient symbols, a society can neither mobilize nor govern its members towards achieving the aims it announces.”²³

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem, 192-193.

²¹ Serge Moscovici, *Descoperirea maselor*, in Adrian Neculau (coord.), *Psihologie socială. Aspecte contemporane*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1996, pp. 408-409.

²² Serge Moscovici, *Psihologia socială sau mașina de fabricat zei*, Iași, Editura Universității „Al. I. Cuza”, 1995, p. 99.

²³ Ibidem, p. 2.

Memory is the process of storing and retrieving information; it is based on three stages in an interdependent relation: coding, storing and retrieving information. Research has confirmed that there is an implicit memory which is different from explicit memory²⁴. Today, this distinction is suggested by the Canadian scientist Endel Tulving between semantic memory, by which we get to know the world, and episodic memory, which is the faculty of recalling specific autobiographic memories.

The French sociologist and philosopher Maurice Halbwachs laid the foundations of psychological research regarding memory through his studies regarding the understanding of memory as “an actual knowledge of the past; it is neither “the conservation of images,” nor a “reconstruction of images.” According to Halbwachs, memory has a symbolical “function,” since recollections depend on the ability to have general ideas. Language is essential to the memory processes: “Verbal conventions form the most elementary and at the same time the most stable of collective memory.”²⁵ For Halbwachs, language is an essential access way into the social milieus and is the element that unites family members, social classes, religious groups; these concrete contexts are the social frameworks. Memory re-creates recollections in a manner which is in agreement with contemporary ideas and concerns, to be more precise, recollections adapt to the set of our current perceptions and in this respect the moments, the places and unwritten laws have the function of organizing social memory. Therefore, the past that the masses incorporate, the power pertaining to that past to which the individuals don't resist, must be given a particular role in social psychology: “In all societies, even in the most advanced ones, the past dominates the present in what concerns authority, dead tradition overcomes living modernity. If anyone wants to take action, they must influence people in the archaic layers of their psyche.”²⁶

Considering the connection between memory and history, the event appears as an effect. Jacques Guilhaumou and Denise Maldidier dedicate a study to France's National Day, more precisely to the bicentennial of the Fall of Bastille, July 14th 1789. They consider that there is a (French) national memory which revives the event each year and tries to establish “the ways in which social memory materializes in discourses”²⁷. The two French researchers' conclusion was that what resists in memory is circumscribed to the material support of language, to the deviations, resistance and tension of discourse.

The processes of memory are investigated by psycholinguistics, neurosciences and cognitive sciences, social memory, however, relates to the sciences of language and history. J. J. Courtine²⁸ proves that social memory is in close connection with history and especially with language, which is the “fabric” of memory: “language is the fabric of memory, which means its essential way of existing historically.”²⁹ The French researcher emphasizes that in researching

²⁴ Septimiu Chelcea, *Memoria socială – organizarea și reorganizarea ei*, in Adrian Neculau (coord.), *Psihologie socială. Aspecte contemporane*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1996, p. 109.

²⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris, La Haye: Mouton, 1975, p. 82.

²⁶ Serge Moscovici, *Psihologia socială sau mașina de fabricat zei*, Iași, Editura Universității „A.I. Cuza”, 1995, p. 99.

²⁷ Jacques Guilhaumou, Denise Maldidier, *La mémoire et l'événement: le 14 juillet 1789*, în *Langages*, no. 114, *Mémoire, histoire, langage*, Didier-Larousse, 1994, pp. 121-122.

²⁸ Jean-Jacques Courtine, *Le tissu de la mémoire: quelques perspectives de travail historique dans les sciences du langage*, in *Langages*, no. 114, *Mémoire, histoire, langage*, Didier-Larousse, 1994, pp. 5-12.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 10.

collective memory, an essential role is played by the sciences of language; he also emphasizes that in the analysis of the forms of man's material existence and of the role of language in collective memory and in terms of language of collective memory and in discourses, historians have identified the importance of the political and collective stakes of memory: "from this point of view the memory loci represent a reflexive effect of accelerated contemporary history, of the exhaustion of tradition, of the erosion of certain forms of collective memory, which are felt throughout in Western societies."³⁰ As a historian of philosophy, Courtine also remarks on the fact that the issue of memory carries different degrees of value in Eastern Europe as compared to Western Europe. Ideological prints of the totalitarian communist regimes can be identified in the "political confusion" at the beginning of the 90's, while collective memory has an essential role in this context: "the fall of ideologies – of communist memory, associated with the deconstruction of the discourses that created them, the sudden release of the formidable repression which they exercised on collective memory in the long period of mentalities, all this has turned the old communist block into a memory laboratory: a locus for the fragmentation of collective memory and at the same time a battlefield of antagonistic memories."³¹

By extrapolating the political and cultural implications of memory in discourse analysis, the same researcher introduces the concept of "discursive memory"³² in the analysis of political discourse, since the concept he proposes is underlying to that of discursive structure as introduced by Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*³³: "The concept of discursive memory is related to the historic existence of the statement amidst discursive practices regulated by ideological apparatus."³⁴ In what political discourses are concerned, the existence of a collective memory allows the recollection, repetition, rejection and obliteration within a discursive structure. In the framework of this re-conceptualization, Courtine emphasizes the presence of a discursive structure as "discursive memory" and the fact that, in performed discourses "the memory effects" should be understood from the point of view of the plurality of historic times: "the objects we have called «statements», in the production of which the knowledge of a certain *discursive structure* is formed, exist over *the long period of a memory*, while the «phrasings» are extracted from *the short period of a statement's enunciation*. It is therefore the relation between inter-discourse and intra-discourse unfolding in this particular discursive effect on the occasion of which an origin-phrasing returns to the time of a «discursive circumstance» and which we have introduced as memory effect."³⁵

Back to social memory/collective memory, we can see that, in Moscovici's opinion, language is an excellent way to propagate the mnemonic prints from one generation to the next and in this manner the symbols it transmits are readily identified and understood as early as childhood; obviously the French psycho-sociologist postulates that "*the impressions of the past are also retained in the mental life of the masses as mnemonic prints*. In certain favourable

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 11.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Jean Jacques Courtine, *Quelques problèmes théoriques et méthodologiques en analyse du discours, à propos du discours communiste adressé aux chrétiens*, in *Langages*, no. 62, *Analyse du discours politique*, Didier-Larousse, 1981, pp. 9-128.

³³ Michel Foucault, *Arheologia cunoașterii*, București, Editura Univers, 1999.

³⁴ Jean-Jacques Courtine, *Quelques problèmes théoriques et méthodologiques en analyse du discours, à propos du discours communiste adressé aux chrétiens*, in *Langages*, no. 62, *Analyse du discours politique*, Didier-Larousse, 1981, p. 53.

³⁵ Ibidem.

conditions, they can be retrieved and revived. As a matter of fact, the older they are, the better they are preserved.”³⁶

Language has an essential role in organizing and reorganizing memory, it transforms the manner and the content of what we remember; therefore, by means of the social memory, the past persists in order to preserve itself. For this reason the political power in any society is interested in reorganizing memory and sometimes even in re-writing history, considering that the places, time and habits have the function of organizing and reorganizing social memory.

The political leader or political party with the ability to invoke in their political discourses elements that constitute social memory by appealing to linguistic formulae or to various symbols can exercise a considerable influence over the masses. To increase their popularity among the electorate and to bring about their adhesion, a political leader or political party will attempt to alter the electors' attitude in a favourable sense, since a generally shared attitude at the social level is much more stable than the mental models (and opinions) which are specific of a single individual. Thus, the cognitive processes involved in manipulation imply that long term memory stores not only personal experiences which have been subjectively interpreted and are the so-called mental models, but also general beliefs socially accepted; they – the so-called “social representations” – are much more stable. Socio-cultural knowledge represents the nucleus of such beliefs which empowers the individual to act, interact and communicate, decoding the symbols that are specific of the society in which he lives. As for the social representations, they are always organized according to a basic cognitive structure and continually extract their energy from the social field and from the collective image repository as well as from the subject's cultural background. The ideas, beliefs, mentalities have the property of integrating any subsequent information which it organizes in order to produce new behavioural norms. The general aim of the manipulation discourse is that of controlling the social representations shared by various groups of individuals, for these social beliefs, in their turn, can control what people do or say in various situations for relatively long periods of time. As a rule, manipulation will focus on social cognition, on groups of people rather than on individuals and on their unique personal models. To this end, manipulation is a discursive practice involving two dimensions, the cognitive and the social. Dreams and illusions are used by those who have appropriated and integrated the theories of social psychology in their discourses with the aim of convincing and leading the masses. By appealing to social memory, a political discourse can set off unsuspected forces hidden in the collective subconscious.

We consider that the importance of social psychology and collective memory in investigating the function of the political discourse is essential. By resorting to collective memory, along a set of discursive operations that organize recollection, repetition, also deletion and oblivion of what can be called the domain of the discursive memory, persuasion and manipulation can be enhanced. That is why broadcast political discourse makes use of the mechanisms of reviving the collective memory depending on the strategies of persuasion and/or manipulation used.

³⁶ Serge Moscovici, *op. cit.*, p.126.

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