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## **Society Against Covid-19: Challenges for the Socio-genetic Point of View of Social Representations**

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Today we are experiencing a radical break in our daily lives in the face of the covid-19 pandemic. Faced with a situation of widespread threat, our societies are caught in an unprecedented spiral of coercive measures and social control. In this context, we are not only witnessing a global health pandemic, but also, and above all, a social pandemic under the prism, in particular, of over-focusing media and the flood of communications. Indeed, the covid-19 is not only a medical and scientific object, but an eminently social one. The social representations approach offers a unique paradigm for studying this exceptional phenomenon. Our reactions to the virus do not only inform us of the risks that the virus poses to us, but also constitute a mirror of ourselves, our systems of thought, our relationships, values, theories on common worlds and the principles that organize our social functioning. It is in this sense that covid-19 is a powerful revealer of individual and social realities. We argue that the socio-genetic approach to social representations is heuristic and allows us to study this unprecedented pandemic phenomenon in its entirety. We rely on various illustrative examples to identify the processes of objectification and anchoring of

this object in and through social thinking in order to show the relevance of some conceptual tools in the field of social representations to analyze the construction of covid-19. We discuss several challenges for socio-representational research for a better understanding of psychosocial processes involved in the current pandemic context.

**Keywords:** social representations, covid-19, socio-genetic approach

## **CONTEXT OF AN UNPRECEDENTED PANDEMIC**

As of July 2020, more than 11.5 million people worldwide have been infected with the covid-19 virus<sup>1</sup> and there have been more than half a million deaths. According to the WHO, the USA is the most affected country, followed by Brazil, the UK, Italy and France. We will focus on two of these countries, Brazil and France, where the pandemic has caused controversies over health measures. We are now experiencing a radical break in our daily lives, both private and public, in the face of the covid-19 pandemic. Faced with a situation of generalized threat, our societies are caught in an unprecedented spiral of coercive measures and social control that generate ruptures, anguish and panic and question the existential dimension of our subjects as well as the springs and functioning of our society. The human and social sciences are called upon to provide explanations and analyses. Indeed, the covid-19 pandemic is not only a medical and scientific object, but also an eminently social one. A polemical, polymorphic and conflictual object, generating tensions at several levels. In social psychology, the theory of social representations (SR) offers a heuristic paradigm for studying this phenomenon. The pandemic, its modes of appropriation and the individual and collective behaviors it engenders constitute, in several respects, an emblematic object of study.

## **THE NEED TO ANALYZE THIS PANDEMIC USING THE CONCEPTUAL TOOLS OF THE SR APPROACH**

Our responses to the pandemic not only inform us of the risks posed by the virus, but also provide a mirror of ourselves, our systems of thought, our relationships, values, theories about common worlds (Jodelet, 2015; Kalampalikis et al., 2019) and the principles that organize our social

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<sup>1</sup> Corona-Virus Disease - the name of the virus according to the WHO is SARS-CoV-2.

functioning. The construction of the object “disease”, as a substratum of norms and social relations, mobilizes modes of thought not only contained in the object itself (in the ontological sense), but also in the subject that represents it (in the epistemic sense) (Apostolidis & Dany, 2012). It is in this sense that covid-19 is a powerful revealer of individual and collective realities, faced with a sudden break in social normality. In the background of behavior in the face of covid-19 are social norms and values, symptomatic of inequalities, positions and social relationships. Because of the contagiousness of the virus and the social distancing mechanisms put in place, these socio-cognitive functions are all the more efficient and performative as the risk of the disease for oneself, others and society lies at the level of inter-individual contacts. The relationship to the other now constitutes a situation of inter-confrontation at the risk of contracting and spreading the virus.

In order to illustrate our point (and in the absence of empirical data), we will rely on various examples to identify the processes of objectification and anchoring of this object in and through social thinking through communications and social practices. We will discuss the relevance of certain conceptual tools in the field of SR (paradoxical social representations, representational horizon) to analyze the construction of covid-19 as an object of social thinking. We will question them as ordinary and "natural" phenomena in a situation that the subject must control, symptomatic of both the socio-cultural structure and the conjuncture of confrontation with an uncontrollable threat and a generalized anxiety-provoking state. We will pose certain research perspectives with a twofold objective: to show the heuristic relevance of SR to analyze this pandemic phenomenon and to feed its developments in the study of representational phenomena.

### **Covid-19: paradoxical social representations?**

Moscovici (1996), starting with the examples of HIV and disability, had hypothesized paradoxical social representations where "there is both more individual and more collective ... we increasingly see that it is considered normal to seek both an individual use of the "collective thing" and a collective use of the "individual thing". We want both more and less social protection, we demand both more and exercise less social solidarity ..." (*op. cit.*, p. 24, *our translation*<sup>2</sup>). It is clear that something very similar was and is at stake with the coronavirus crisis. We ask, whether in a period

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<sup>2</sup> Original: “il y a à la fois plus d’individuel et plus de collectif ...nous voyons de plus en plus que l’on considère normal de chercher à la fois à faire un usage individuel de la « chose collective » et un usage collectif de la « chose individuelle». On veut à la fois plus et moins de protection sociale, on exige à la fois plus et on exerce moins de solidarité sociale...” (Moscovici, 1996, p. 24).

of containment or not, the least possible relations between individuals, in order to preserve, out of solidarity, the overall state of health. Basically, people are expected to have as little close contact as possible to avoid any risk of spread and contamination. In other words, the less contact we have with others, the more we protect them and ourselves. The more we respect the rules of avoidance and social distancing, the less we take the risk of contagion towards ourselves and others.

This is an emblematic example of paradoxical social representations. The solidarity of the social is the avoidance of the social. Being in solidarity with others becomes synonymous with becoming distanced from others. We have seen and are seeing imperatives anchored in the daily life of the most common and habitual social practices (going out, meeting others, conversing, interacting, travelling, shopping, etc.) being upset. Their transformation has led to a new state of sociability, more remote and virtual, in order to guarantee their proximity. We can no longer see each other to chat, we call each other or see each other via social networks and online platforms. You want to have dinner with your friends and family, online connections to several people guarantee this strange sociability that comes through the absence of physical contact with others, while still being in communication with them. Strategies to reduce anxiety due to the absence of physical contact have been put in place in order to increase the space for contact while guaranteeing its avoidance.

Namely in France, but also in different countries, neighbors who did not speak to each other beforehand have thus started to ritually applaud each other in the evenings at the same time for the same cause, but also to talk to each other, to share music, songs, games... The resolution of the paradox of declining sociability has thus come about through the introduction, probably momentarily, of new sociability and communication practices. "Social representations are born or transmitted through forms of communication. The media orchestrate these forms but are not one of them. A paradoxical communication can only produce paradoxical social representations" (*op. cit.*, p. 22).

One may therefore wonder what kind of social representations are produced during the covid-19 crisis. A new object, with a strange name, a pandemic nature, invested with daily and sometimes contradictory mass communication, with new social rules, has a devastating and deadly effect. If one of the purposes of social representations is to familiarize us with the strange, there is reason to wonder about the covid-19, especially since we are dealing with the extra-ordinary strange. An imperial need to objectify it, in other words to bring the social into the representation,

to communicate, understand and act. Vital need also to anchor it, to bring its representation into the social, to name it, to classify it, to make it signify. As such, the emergence in social communications of similar recent (influenza, H1N1, SARS, avian flu) and ancient (Spanish flu<sup>3</sup>, plague, plague of Marseille, cholera) historical examples have provided a rich and unprecedented ground for anchoring.

### **Tensions and polemics around a polymorphic phenomenon**

We are faced with a new representational object, crossed by areas of tension due to its pandemic nature, highly communicative, where the legitimacy of scientific and secular knowledge is at stake, but also by the experience of the upheaval of daily life, sometimes cruel, and its impact on health. The socio-genetic approach to social representations (Kalampalikis & Apostolidis, 2016) is heuristic and allows us to study this unprecedented pandemic phenomenon in its entirety.

In France, the covid-19 virus has so far caused about 30,000 deaths out of the 200,000 recorded cases of contamination. The measures taken were totally unprecedented. Never before had France asked its citizens to confine themselves to their homes all day long, as was the case between 17 March and 11 May 2020, in order to curb the spread of the pandemic.

In Brazil, covid-19 has caused, until the end of June, the death of more than 60,000 people out of the (approximately) 1,600,000 confirmed cases of contamination<sup>4</sup>. The governors of some states of the federation have asked the population to confine themselves and to go out only for essential necessities. Several institutions have remained closed in these states, including schools and universities. Governors in the Northeast even formed a consortium to make joint decisions. On the other hand, Jair Bolsonaro, the country's President, has taken a stance against containment, downplaying the seriousness of the problem and accusing the governors of taking "exaggerated" measures that could bring the Brazilian economy crashing down. In this controversy, other governors followed the President's position, so uniform measures to deal with the pandemic were not taken everywhere. During the month of June, there were more than 1,000 deaths a day in this country.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Johnson & Mueller (2002), the so-called "Spanish" flu of 1918-20 eroded people's confidence in society. The effect would be transmitted over several generations. The impact of a pandemic would depend not only on its severity, but also on the context in which it strikes.

<sup>4</sup> Brazil is a federation formed by 27 units, including 26 states and 1 federal district (Brasília). The units enjoy administrative autonomy to make certain decisions of general interest, including public health.

The covid-19 pandemic has created a strong political divide in Brazil. There are, for example, those who think of the pandemic as the result of "international communism" and containment as an "attack" on individual freedom and citizens' rights. As an example, the weekly *Isto É* last March with an article<sup>5</sup> entitled "The communist virus" where an excerpt from a public conversation was presented: "You have to understand that the communists are one, you know? They're all connected .... They want to conquer the world, so they talk to each other and combine these things. Have you seen if you have a coronavirus in Cuba? There isn't. They're all connected, and Lula is their man in Brazil. Don't see who doesn't. "

Denying the lethality of the virus is a frequent argument for a position contrary to containment. Another Brazilian press article (*Época*<sup>6</sup>) gives the example of the message (WhatsApp) of a group that positions itself against containment: "Existe o vírus? existe. O vírus mata? Mata. Mas o povo brasileiro tem o sol, abençoado... (Does the virus exist? Yes, it does. Does the virus kill? Yes, it kills. But the Brazilian people have the sun, it is blessed...)". On the one hand, scientists and some governors defend containment, the use of masks, physical distance as preventive measures against covid-19. On the other hand, the President of the Republic claims that the pandemic is a "small flu" and that if the country's economy were to collapse more people would die from it than from the disease. Within this framework, political positions divide the population. Those in favor of containment argue on the basis of scientific data, values of defending human life and a strong critique of economic interests. Those opposed are based on the belief in a communist conspiracy to dominate the world, disbelief in science and defense of the economy, growth and autonomy of the country. The popular demonstrations of 31 May 2020 were exemplary of the divide that was produced. The political positioning acts as a cognitive filter for appropriating information on the pandemic at the same time as the constructed content defines social identities and justifies the separation "us" versus "them". These cleavages have led to the emergence of polemical representations "by definition generated during social conflicts and their anchoring takes place in antagonistic groups. The polemical SR are thus situated downstream of the symbolic organization of the social structure by individuals. They are rooted in identities and conflicting social relations between groups" (Vala, 1997, p. 9).

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<sup>5</sup> <https://istoe.com.br/o-virus-comunista/>

<sup>6</sup> « 'Isolamento é coisa de comunista': os zaps bolsonaristas durante a pandemia », *Época*, 03/04/2020.

In France, the example of Professor Raoult constitutes a relevant case for illustrating the social controversy in the covid-19 context. In January 2020, Didier Raoult, an infectiologist and professor of microbiology, from Marseille, relativized the impact of the Wuhan virus by describing it as "delirium". This position was strongly criticized and allowed his detractors to question his competence at the height of the epidemic. At the end of February 2020, he announced that hydroxychloroquine, a molecule traditionally used to combat malaria, could effectively treat patients suffering from coronavirus. This molecule, unknown to the general public until then, became the subject of a debate that went far beyond the medical and scientific world to enter the political sphere. As proof, on the other side of the Atlantic, Donald Trump is in favor of chloroquine, and Emmanuel Macron, the President of the French Republic, travelled to Marseille during the health crisis to meet France's most controversial infectiologist.

The media focus, in a context of pandemic uncertainty, has contributed to the fabrication of a "folk hero". This provoked a real social phenomenon of "Raoulmania" with support groups into the social networks, with more than 500,000 registered members. According to a national poll (IFOP 29/06/2020) he was considered the 3rd person the French trust the most to think about the post-covid period. His media "heroism" has given rise to popular imaginary comparisons linked to his physical appearance and its statements (Panoramix, Asterix, magic potion<sup>7</sup>). This character has become a surface for collective projection and identification, but also a polemical issue of position-taking in the French context (Marseille vs Paris, people vs elites), highlighting doubt and controversy in the production of scientific knowledge.

The object covid-19 is a phenomenon of the confrontations in our societies. Its emblematic character is therefore not only due to its properties and the lack of medical solutions, but also to the processes of social focus and communication that construct it as an object of our reality. Thus, the disease takes on a social dimension because of the axiological and relational facts that embody and symbolize it through operations of objectification and anchoring, thus becoming its socio-cognitive substrates in social thinking and communications. In this respect, its current status is the result of a process of amplification, a form of "social mental contagion" reinforced by fake news<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> "Under his eccentric air, long hair, badly maintained goatee and moustache, Didier Raoult looks more like an old Gallic druid in the Panoramix style than a renowned scientist. Yet the man who runs the Mediterranean Infection University Hospital Institute in Marseille may hold the key to eliminating the virus that kills hundreds of people every day" (23-03-2020). (<https://www.entreprendre.fr/didier-raoult-professeur-rebelle-envers-et-contre-tous/>)

<sup>8</sup> Covid-19 has amplified the fake news to the point that several countries (but also governments, institutions and associations) have set up verification and control systems against their propagation (e.g. the creation of the *Désinfox*)



The example of a false message in March 2020 coming from the monks of Mount Athos in Greece inviting orthodox believers to make a cross on their door to protect themselves from the virus by using olive oil is quite illustrative<sup>9</sup>. The anchoring of this magical prescription in the imagination of the Bible and the protection of the chosen people from the wounds of Egypt by the crosses on the doors illustrates its symptomatic character in Judeo-Christian culture and the relevance of taking into account the religious horizon in the appropriation of risk in our research. Beyond this, fake news as a mode of social thinking and communication must be analyzed as a form of symbolic coping (Wagner, Kronberger, & Seifert, 2002), anchored in the cultural context and having practical and expressive functions. These ways of thinking are reinforced in situations of doubt and brutal change, in situations of tension between self and others, between individual and collective interest, between routine habits and new behaviors, between biological health and psychological and/or social health. Their propagation via the media and social networks illustrates the value of considering virtual space as a real space for participation and social action where cyber-representations (Moscovici, 2006) participate in the creation of a common reality and the formation of the identity of social groups.

This unfamiliar and threatening object in social, ordinary and institutional communications is considered as invisible and mysterious<sup>10</sup>, which can anchor covid-19 not only in the category of the unknown and incomprehensible, but also in the field of secrecy and conspiracy. This process of apprehending the phenomenon through the prism of the mysterious is favored by uncertainties and scientific misunderstanding, the changing nature of the situation, and socio-scientific conflicts. The question of transmission of covid-19 by air, like that of HIV transmission by saliva thirty years ago, reinforces the feeling of uncontrollability and encourages a socio-symbolic reappropriation of this mysterious virus whose origin and functioning are unknown. The emergence and spread of conspiracy theories on the manufacture of covid-19 in a Chinese or American laboratory is reminiscent of the similar etiologies that are still prevalent on the origin of HIV<sup>11</sup>. Confrontation

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coronavirus section on the official website of the French government; the initiative supported by UNESCO in Latin America:

<https://serrapilheira.org/serrapilheira-agencia-lupa-e-unesco-lancam-iniciativa-de-combate-a-desinformacao-em-covid-19/>). These practices constitute a world first case against one disease.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.events.orthodoxengland.org.uk/an-important-message-from-athos/>

<sup>10</sup> For example, in his official speech of 13 April 2020, the President of the French Republic, E. Macron, spoke of "a fearsome, invisible, unpredictable virus ... which still carries many mysteries".

<sup>11</sup> In France, 32% of people questioned in a national pool believe in 2018 that HIV was created in a laboratory. ([https://www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/3942-1-study\\_file.pdf](https://www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/3942-1-study_file.pdf)). A similar recent poll (March 2020)

with the virus covid-19 is experienced, feared and imagined not only through its biological and social reality, but also through the prism of a familiar fiction, a science fiction<sup>12</sup>, that leads us to project ourselves into it, to fear it, in short to objectify it, that is to say, to think and live it, as far as possible. It conjures up the notion of the horizon "of the objects and events that furnish our daily world, using trans-subjective systems of representation that model and nuance our perceptions" (Jodelet, 2015, p. 142).

The pandemic has required the world's population to adopt new practices in daily life: physical distance, wearing masks, concern for hygiene, virtual classes, home office. The adoption of these new practices reveals social and cultural issues. At the time when schools were closed and, in several countries, distance learning via internet, social and educational inequalities have been aggravated: a certain number of schoolchildren did not have a home computer or had to share it among several, while others had a personal computer; internet access was not the same for everyone, and there was no home space available for school tasks. Physical containment and social distancing measures have disrupted even fundamental anthropological practices such as funeral rites and the accompaniment of the body of the deceased<sup>13</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

The current context of the covid-19 crisis is particularly illustrative of the prelogical mentality (Moscovici, 1993) of civilized societies and reminds us that the question of the ways of thinking of ordinary reasoning is not a matter of evolution, but of condition. In this respect, it reactivates ways of thinking and doing that are familiar and symptomatic, as whenever an exceptional disease emerges as an issue in social communication and the social arena. As it is the case of covid-19, "Antinomies in common sense thinking become themata if, 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" (Marková, 2003, p. 184). Like AIDS, covid-19 brings up to date all that is most archaic in the relationship to the disease (Laplantine, 1989) and mobilizes symbolic and intellectual patterns that refer to a social order already thought out (Augé & Herzlich, 1984), prior

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shows that 26% of French people think the same about the origin of covid-19 ([https://jean-jaures.org/sites/default/files/redac/commun/productions/2020/2803/117275\\_rapport\\_covid\\_19.pdf](https://jean-jaures.org/sites/default/files/redac/commun/productions/2020/2803/117275_rapport_covid_19.pdf)).

<sup>12</sup> In this respect, it would be interesting to explore the role that science fiction (films, novels, ...) as a cultural product and register of the social imagination can have in subjectivizing the reality of this pandemic.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Journal du CNRS* (27/04/2020) (<https://lejournal.cnrs.fr/articles/les-pratiques-funeraires-face-a-la-crise>).

to its arrival. The phenomenological nature of the reality of the disease is to be radically inseparable from the social (Stoetzel, 1960), society and covid-19 must be analyzed as an indissociable and complex whole. The paradox of the illness is to be both the most individual and the most social thing (Augé, 1984), disease and society form a "recursive loop" which leads to a double questioning in the empirical study of diseases: how does the social produce illness? How does illness produce the social?

It makes the perspective proposed by Moscovici (1961) in the study of social thinking more actual than ever: thinking cognition from society, thinking all forms of thought, including the illogical, within the logic of the social. In particular, to analyze the basis and social communications in and through which these forms of thought are constructed and actualized, which must be considered as true socio-cognitive and emotional structures. A pandemic phenomenon of such magnitude in a context saturated by uncertainty and doubt, both in ordinary thought and in scientific knowledge, cannot be read in a simplistic and uniform way. As such, we do not believe that this phenomenon should be studied from the sometimes-trivialized angle of "social representation of covid-19" but rather "social representations and covid-19". It is a question of grasping the systems of representations (Jodelet, 2013) that form the framework from which social representations are constructed, including paradoxical ones. The theory of social representations makes it possible to understand how certain social and cultural dynamics are appropriated by the subjects and manifest themselves in systems of thought, in daily practices, including affective ones. For social psychologists, it is important to grasp the systems of thought mobilized by the object covid-19 and the new social practices imposed by the threat of the new disease. In this sense, the theory of social representations can highlight the social issues that give meaning to the phenomenon and in this way make us "understand why certain problems emerge in a society and clarify certain aspects of their appropriation by society, such as the debates and conflicts that take place between different groups of actors" (Herzlich, 2005, pp. 61-62). Our reactions to the threat tell us not only about the virus and the likely risks it poses to us, but above all about ourselves, our systems of thought, our relationships with each other, our values and principles governing social functioning, our conditions of existence. In this sense, it is a true revelation of our societies and their reality in terms of social inequalities in health, as shown by the epidemiological surveys on covid-19-related mortality. As with HIV, the psychosocial analysis of the construction of covid-19 requires us to consider the intervention of the social on a double register: as a system of interpretation of the

disease and of relations with others (Morin & Apostolidis, 2002). Moreover, a systematic comparison between HIV and covid-19 phenomena could be useful for a better understanding of psychosocial processes involved in the current pandemic context.

SR theory is a powerful tool to go beyond the analysis of the content and to understand the psychosocial processes that generate it, in other words, the dynamics of individual-society interaction through multi-levels analysis (Doise, 2002). The specificity of this object also questions the place of the researcher finding himself in the same context of health crisis and uncertainty that he/she is studying. As such, it is delicate to take distances that guarantee scientific objectivity in a context of generalized social distancing. It is true that the human sciences "are not able to recognize objective facts *per se*, but they do manage to establish solid relationships between everything in human conduct that is representable, or only partially representable" (Busino, 1992, p. 265). This context of social laboratory where the social sciences is called upon to participate in the fight against covid-19, it invites the researcher to adopt a reflective and critical stance in order to grasp the socio-sanitary demands (e.g. psychosocial intervention and social acceptability of containment and distancing devices) and to observe and analyze the consequences of this pandemic on the functioning of our societies (e.g. social control and risk management, self-governmentality and social normalization). One more reason for the psychology of social representations (Kalampalikis, 2019), which is interested in the study of this extraordinary phenomenon, to take this state of affairs into account.

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