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Rumours and Knowledge

For a great deal of people, the truth of the world, and particularly the truth of the social world, is better expressed by ongoing rumours than by sociological essays. Most of the time, many persons are more inclined to believe than to understand, and to jump at conclusions than to analyze and scrutinize the information they receive.

Is it an effect of ignorance or immaturity ? And, consequently, would it be sufficient to inform extensively people and to educate them ? This interrogation is more or less permanent for social psychology. When studying the famous panic provoked by Orson Welles' broadcast, *The war of the worlds*, Cantril's purpose (well, let's say Cantril's hope) was explicitly didactic : "If citizens can see why some people reacted unintelligently in this instance, they may be able to build up their resistance to similar occurrences" (Cantril, 1940, p. Viii). And he wrote, as a final conclusion : "Our study of the common man of our times has shown us that his ability to orient himself appropriately in critical situations will be increased if he can be taught to adopt an attitude of readiness to question the interpretations he hears. But when he achieves this healthy skepticism he must have sufficient and relevant knowledge to be able to evaluate different interpretations" (*ibid.*, p. 205). Seventy years later, that is after thousands of articles, books, lectures, official recommendations and "educational opportunities", Cantril's confidence sounds a bit pathetic. Our common ability of common men and women to question the interpretations we hear about our social reality has not been increased. As a matter of fact, we are always acquiescing in the pragmatic precept⁽¹⁾ given by Edgar at the end of *King Lear* :

"The weight of this sad time we must obey ;

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say".

Then, why this convenience ? Here lays an epistemological question of an irritant complexity. Without any pretention to solve it thoroughly, it seems that we could bring four elements of response. These four aspects, which

refer to the general theory of knowledge, are, briefly sketched, the following ones : rumours, as for every manifestation of social thinking, belong to the popperian gender of "clouds" ; they afford a solution to an ill-defined problem ; they are short-range applications of a given shared evidence ; finally, their hold on reality is very limited (either incidental or local), implying a limited commitment of tellers and believers.

I. Karl Popper's metaphor about Clocks and Clouds is well known (see Popper, 1972). Clearly, rumours are clouds : they are made in fuzzy settings, they exhibit moving shapes, changing forms, they grow bigger or desintegrate in unpredictable ways, they spread by trial and error, etc. Whatever our theoretical and empirical efforts might be, we cannot hope to be able to transform them into Clocks, that is, to understand them in a purely deterministic way. This does not mean that rumours are exempt from any kind of rationality, either with regard to their apparition and evolution or to the understanding that we can have about them. This means that their specific rationality cannot be analyzed in a linear way by stating plain links from independent variables to dependent ones.

The best demonstration of this point, I guess, is the fact that we can reconstitute such a rationality only afterwards, after its manifestation, and not before. We are able to give a rational interpretation for the rumours which have already occurred, we cannot foresee rationally the rumours which are going to occur. In other words, when rumours are active, they add something to the life of the groups and to their practical knowledge of the world. What they add, we are generally able to understand, but we cannot predict it. This modest expression of history is very meaningful for an epistemological reflection about social psychology. Like creativity for instance, the unforeseeable feature of the rumour phenomenon reminds us that we have to count with the permanent possibility (and at the end the certainty) of emergence and outburst. The future is necessarily bounded (at least by the laws of nature), but it is not designed according to a precise and definitive plan : once more, we meet the classical couple of Clocks and Clouds, like a Janus. Of course, the same remark could be said about communication in general : linguistic and pragmatic rules are strong constraints for speech realization, but they do not impose the contents of discourse.

II. According to Minsky's criterion, a problem is said to be well-defined when any proposed solution can be shown to be true or not (false).

A problem is said to be ill-defined when any proposed solution is only more or less convenient, innovative, attractive, interesting, pleasant, money-saving, and so on.

It follows that a rumour can be considered as a collective solution to a collective ill-defined problem (cf. Rouquette, 1989, 2007). In this case, the fitness of a given solution is defined (and in fact ill-defined) on the basis of four criteria :

- degree of induced social assimilation ("Us")
- social differentiation effect ("Them")
- explicative or justificative capacity ("Why" and "How")
- Pragmatic value (the "lesson" given at the end of the narrative).

The link with SR theory is quite obvious. A social representation presents the same four properties : it enforces social similarity (our common sense), makes explicit social differences (what we think / what they think), offers a naive theory or explanation for a given aspect of reality, and provides a guide for action.

So, a rumour has the same functional properties as a social representation.

III. About knowledge elicitation : an operational criterion in order to distinguish between social everyday thinking and scientific or technical thinking could be the swiftness of something "becoming evident" (the "coming to evidence"). You ask a partner for the explanation of something (phenomenon, process, behaviour, statement, etc). You get an answer. Then you ask for another explanation to justify this first response. You get a new answer. And so on. But at a given moment, your partner invites you only to share an evidence. "Well, that's so..." The train stops. This point is reached much more rapidly in everyday thinking because this type of thinking depends to a great extent on the complicity of the partners. In fact, before leaving, it has already arrived. Moscovici noticed, from the very origin of the works about social representations (1961), this anteriority of the conclusion ("*prééminence de la conclusion*"). In the same way, a rumour is true *beforehand* among people who make it up and propagate it ; it is not the result of a validating process, followed step by step, as for the demonstration of a theorem or the argumentation leading to the conclusion of a barrister's speech. These two "forms" of knowledge that are Rumours and Social Representations ignore both the use of hypotheses and the idea of falsifiability ; they are not made to gain a new perspective or to upset our intellectual habits. On the contrary, rumours are a process of recognition and confirmation of a common constructed reality. The problem is not to

know what is going to be discovered and learned, here and now, but how we are going to find again what, in any case, we take for granted.

IV. What now about the ontological properties ?

A rumour is given as a report of reality ; a social representation as a map for inscribing reality. In other words, we could say that a rumour is something like a case study, while a social representation is something like a theory (this last point has already been underlined by Rom Harré (1989, p. 131) : "A social representation, whatever its exact ontological status, is a version of a theory"). It is an essential difference. You can easily accept a mistake or a fantasy about a particular case. Only limited damage follows and generally the validity of the theory remains untouched. Note that at the same time, social relations also remain untouched : most of the time, you are not ready to finish with those people who told you that unthinkable story or who guaranteed the truth of that false information. You are dealing with family and friends, and only for the sake of conversation on everyday affairs. That is the reason why believing in a rumour (whatever the degree, the deepness or the sincerity of that "belief") is not committing a lot, either cognitively or relationally ; and then we are easily (that is, at a low cost) inclined to believe. After all, in such situations, we are always facing a matter of restricted relevance : the story only holds under the condition of particular circumstances that are met or brought together in a particular environment at a given time. Moreover, the telling itself of the story, in face-to-face contact, is only a moment within wider and longer social interactions.

A rumour is not a serious thing : that's why it may have a lot of success and finally prove to be dangerous. Like a wave, it has no substance of its own, it proceeds or not according to opportunities or obstacles, and may provoke here and there considerable agitation.

(1) Here taken (and even twisted) in a particular sense. I understand of course : "What we **rationally** ought to say".

References

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