

Social Representations of Democracy; Ideal versus Reality

A qualitative study with young people in Greece.

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Introduction

Democracy is a major issue in the contemporary world. The collapse of the communist world and the devaluation of communist ideology, the welfare state crisis in Western democracies and the important role of globalization have an effect on the way people think about democracy. In what way do citizens experience these transformations? Abstention from elections and action through humanitarian associations are examples of a new kind of citizen mobilization. More precisely, the present project aims to investigate the following:

- **The social construction of the meaning of democracy:** how do people who live in a system considered to be democratic understand democracy? What does it mean to them?
- **The ideal and the representation of the reality** of democracy. Which is the political system that young people wish for, and is it different from the one they live in? Do they have an ideal of democracy that is opposed to the one that they experience?
- **The limits of what they consider as possible in the real world.** Is democracy, or their ideal political system possible or impossible according to them? If the ideal democracy is seen as impossible, there is no action in order to make it happen.

Democracy has a particular importance for Greek people; it is considered to be an element that somehow belongs to the Greek culture. From early education, the importance of ancient Greece and the fact that democracy was created in Athens is emphasized repeatedly, more so than other historical periods (see Fragoudaki and Dragonas, 1997). Representative democracy as a political system was introduced in Greece very soon after national independence from the Ottoman Empire, by the beginnings of the 20th century. Democratic government of the country has since been interrupted by the civil war that followed the end of World War II, and more recently by the military junta of 1967-1974. These are both significant elements in the construction of social memory, and should weigh heavily on the social representation of democracy.

No previous reports concerning the social representations of democracy of young people have been published. The available literature is related to the social representations of politics in Italy (Colucci and Camussi, 1996), on the social representations of human rights (Doise, 1996) and the social representations of democracy for the Scots and the Slovaks (Moody and Markova, 1995). Finally, the work conducted on the Greek political culture (Diamandouros, 1983, 1984; Nikolakopoulos, 1990), the work of Greek sociologists on the representations of young people (Fragoudaki and Dragonas, 1997) in Greece, and the work of Percheron (1991) related to youth and politics in France, may contribute to the interpretation of the present findings.

Some elements of theory

The theoretical approach is situated within the framework of a field that is currently developing in Europe, that of political psychology. The study of social thinking on democracy may partly be conceived on the concepts of social psychology, that are however not entirely

adapted to the specificity of political questions, as it can be founded on political sociology theories. The purpose of this study is to apply a concept developed in European social psychology, that is, social representations (Moscovici, 1961; Doise, 1986), to the study of politics, by associating social representations to ideology.

Social representations theory initially referred to the transformation of scientific knowledge by common sense. Moscovici renovated the concept of collective representations developed by Emile Durkheim, in order to tap the specific way of understanding reality that is shared by a community of individuals. The theory focuses particularly on the way in which common sense integrates an object that is new. On the one hand, a process called « objectivation » of the novelty is activated, whereby the new idea or theory takes the form of a specific object. For instance, in the germinal study of Moscovici (1961) psychoanalysis is objectivated in the image of a psychoanalyst and his couch. A second process of integration of the new idea is called « anchoring ». During this process, common sense relates the new idea to something that is already familiar. In the case of psychoanalysis, the act of following psychoanalytic sessions was anchored onto the act of confessing to a priest.

According to the definition of Jodelet (1991), social representation is a form of knowledge, socially elaborated and shared, that has a practical objective and contributes in the construction of a shared reality for a social group. We can study the « field » of a social representation, but also its « organizing principles » (Doise, 1988), that is, the elements that organise everything that makes part of a social representation. Abric and Flament (1994) have developed the hypothesis of the « central nucleus » of a social representation, that is, the elements that don't change easily and are indispensable for the existence of the representation, and the « peripheral elements », that are less important and more susceptible to change. The research methods applied to the study of social representations include interviews, questionnaires, as well as experimentation. Content analysis and multivariate statistics are also used for the data analysis.

Although this approach offers a possibility to study democracy from a subjective point of view, that is the viewpoint of the people who participate in the research, it is not sufficient to grasp the representation of democracy. First, there is no theoretical link established between social representations and other forms of social thinking, such as ideology, belief systems and culture. Therefore, one of the objectives of this study is to link ideology with social representations, based on the research findings. A second problem that arises when we study democracy from the perspective of this theory, is that democracy does not constitute a novelty « created » by the scientific world that is absorbed by common sense. On the contrary, it is a very familiar object, and it is also « created », on a day to day basis, and not only by a political elite.

These problems led us to the ideas of Castoriadis (1981), the political philosopher who wrote about « the imaginary institution of society ». Castoriadis takes into account the potential of common sense to innovate and create. He argues that human societies throughout history are characterized by continuous creativity, a way to modify themselves which takes shape in social institutions. Social facts are for Castoriadis an incarnation of imaginary meanings, that society materializes. Among these imaginary meanings, there are several that are central for a society because they create something from nothing, and thus organize every other meaning. Democracy is an example to this: ancient Greeks invented it ex-nihilo, and it organizes a group of imaginary meanings, such as politics, citizenship, the parliament. Society is not conscious of its creative power which is at the basis of all human institutions; there is however a possibility for it to become conscious in the future and to thus arrive at a better quality of democracy.

The work of Jennifer Hochschild (1995) and Paul Sniderman (1995), on political psychology, are valuable sources since they furnish us with empirical evidence and theoretical

insights that orient our interpretation. Hochschild works on the way African Americans “face up to the American Dream” and more generally on the conflicts between Americans’ ideals and practices. Investigating the case of young Greeks, we don’t have the variable of race in stake, but social class or aspirations of social mobility play an important role in the way young Greeks perceive democracy in the sense that they are associated to different ways of thinking about democracy.

Sniderman has made a major contribution on the role political ideology plays in the way people understand politics. We also consider that political ideology has an important part to play when it comes to the representations of democracy for young Greeks. We claim that ideology “organizes” the attitudes and opinions linked to democracy.

Hypotheses

1. Our first hypothesis is that there are two ways in which young Greeks would represent democracy: one opposing the ideal to reality, *binary*, and the other, moderate and consensual, referring to a unique representation of democracy, based on the actual political system, that the individual would like to see improved. In the second case, there is no conflict between a model of democracy and reality; democracy belongs to the real world. In the first case, the ideal democracy is impossible; this way of thinking is in fact incompatible with positive action.
2. We consider that the way of thinking revealed by interviews is related on the one hand to the subject’s social position, and on the other to their positive or negative aspirations related to their social position. Optimism would be related to a moderate way of thinking with absence of great oppositions, whereas pessimism would be related to a dualistic way of thinking.
3. We consider that the representations of democracy for young people in Greece would be examples of the « creativity of the social imagination », in the sense that Castoriadis attributes to this expression. We expect to find combinations of different theories and ideas that may be considered « wrong » according to scientific and ideological discourse, but which prove however the vivacity of the social imaginary.
4. The idea that democracy is a question of the private sphere of life is one of the new elements that we expect to find in the social representation of democracy.
5. Tension between an ideal vision or representation of democracy and the representation of reality would be a sign of innovation. If the ideal representation differs from the official discourse of the media or other dominant discourses of the public sphere, young people are aware of it, and therefore they place their ideal project in the realm of the impossible.
6. Finally, we consider that the content of the representation of democracy will be organized according to ideology, a conception of political left and right on the one hand, and a system of traditional values and a system of modern values on the other.

Sample: studying the social representation of democracy of young people in Greece

A case study was undertaken on a sample composed of men and women aged from 18 to 26 years, in Greece. A series (30) of non- directive interviews were conducted. Greece is a Southern European country with a number of particular characteristics but also characteristics shared with other European countries, concerning its political system. In that way, it is possible to compare our results with findings from other studies in Europe.

The decision to work with a population of young people was influenced by a study carried out by Percheron (1991), who considered that certain tendencies present in other social groups may be found accentuated in youth. What is more, young people have played an important role in the recent political history of Greece: they were actively involved in the restoration of democracy after the dictatorship in 1974, and active in politics since, through

political party youth organizations and an animated student's movement. In the 80s, however, they appear to become more and more disengaged from politics, with the exception of punctual interventions, such as expressing opposition to a specific government measure (Demertzis and Kafetzis 1996).

Individuals between 18 and 26 years old are people who are confronted with the representative system for the first time, in the sense that they are in the process of becoming citizens with full civil rights. As a result, they may be more attentive to the political system than older and more experienced people who are more familiar with it.

Data collection and analysis

Thirty non-directive, in-depth interviews were conducted in Athens. The interview began with the following question: « If I say the word democracy, what comes to mind? What is democracy for you? ». Interviews lasted on average an hour, they were audio-taped and then transcribed verbatim.

The sample consisted of young people between 18 and 26 years old, men and women, students in different fields, or people who work, coming from different social backgrounds, originally from Athens or the countryside, with different political orientations. The social status of the interviewees was defined with the combination of educational level, occupation of the parents and the part of Athens they live in. Concerning the definition of their political orientation, we took into consideration the occupation of the parents and the interests of the interviewee. The following tables summarize the composition of the sample (N=30).

<i>Age</i>		<i>Social Status</i>	
18-21	8 (26%)	Upper	6 (20%)
22-26	22 (74%)	Middle	14 (46%)
<i>Gender</i>		Lower	10 (34%)
F	15 (50%)	<i>Occupation</i>	
M	15 (50%)	Students	18 (60%)
		Employed w/ diploma	7 (23%)
		Employed	5 (17%)

The table indicates that all participants have an occupation. However, not all subjects who have a job make their own living. Students who are more than 22 years old, who have not completed their studies yet and work occasionally or part time, may be considered to be unemployed; this regards 7 out of the 18 students reported in this table.

The empirical interest of this study consists in the use of three different methods of data analysis, corresponding to three different phases of the research. The first one, is a thematic content analysis, aimed to explore the hypothesis of the opposition between the ideal representation of democracy and the representation of reality (Berelson, 1952, D'Unrug, 1974).

The results of the first analysis confirmed the first hypothesis and led to the formulation of a second hypothesis: ideology and systems of modern or traditional values organize the representation of democracy. To verify this postulate, a multiple correspondence analysis was carried out on the themes of the thematic analysis. The results confirmed the second hypothesis concerning the role of political ideology but revealed the importance of two "ways of thinking" concerning democracy that do not coincide with traditional or modern values.

In order to clarify the results of the second analysis, specifically the role of the two ways of thinking democracy, we proceed to a third analysis that is different from the two others

in the sense that both of them pool data from different interviews together and thus obscure the specificity of each interview.

The third analysis we applied, a structural discourse analysis, has been inspired by a method used by Michelat (1975). The purpose of this analysis is to define the internal structure of each interview, without eliminating any elements but summarizing similar ideas. Then, we focus on the oppositions and contrasts that each discourse includes, compared to logic, and also ideological and scientific discourse. We follow the way these contrasts are dealt with by the interviewees and finally formulate a typology of contrasts and the “new” ideas that emerge from them, new, compared to what is established knowledge for the scientific and the ideological discourse.

Results

The content analysis initially showed that democracy is a major issue for all the interviewees. The abundance of themes associated to democracy (144 themes), and the different ways of talking about it, are evidence of the importance that the notion holds for subjects. The values of freedom, equality and justice, and the principles and procedures of the representative system, such as deliberation or elections, are the most frequently mentioned themes. However, interviewees don't accept the representative system without any reserve: more than half of the sample consider it as a compromise between the ideal of direct democracy that is impossible, and a political system that is feasible in contemporary societies. The majority thinks that ideal democracy has never really existed and never will, with a possible exception of ancient Athens. Ideal democracy is opposed to real democracy for the majority of the interviewees. Although ideal democracy is placed in the realm of the imaginary, it is symbolically present and judges reality.

The matrix composed of the themes of the thematic analysis and their presence or absence from the discourse of each interview was then treated with multiple correspondence analysis. This analysis yielded two dimensions, corresponding to two different social ways of thinking. The first dimension explains 15% of the variance and corresponds to political ideology. It opposes themes related to the political left to themes related to the right. The second dimension explains 7% of the variance and opposes two ways to think democracy: on the positive pole of the dimension we find an elitistic, moderate and individualistic version of democracy, whereas on the negative pole of this dimension we find a dualistic way of thinking constituted by various oppositions: ideal to reality, good to evil. These two dimensions are the organizing principles of the representation of democracy (Doise, 1996), in the sense that they organize all the themes mentioned.

This empirical evidence allows us to relate the concept of social representations to that of ideology, as it shows that ideology and value systems that are not part of the definition or the representation of democracy, in fact organize the representation. Ideology, that is, a way of social thinking different from social representation, is probably an element that organizes many other political representations.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the central nucleus of the representation is composed of the values of freedom, equality and justice, because they are the most frequently mentioned themes and are indispensable for the definition of democracy. Concerning the difference between the « central nucleus » of a representation (Abric, Flament, 1994), and its organizing principles (Doise, 1986), the findings show that the central nucleus is not the same thing as the organizing principles, which may indeed be found « outside » the definition of democracy. Ideology and traditional or modern values organize the representation of democracy in our case.

The structural discourse analysis enabled us to better understand the role of the “two ways of thinking democracy” that appeared as organizing principles of the representation of democracy in the correspondence analysis. We concluded that the discourse of each interviewee presents a number of contradictions and inconsistencies that are resolved in two ways: either they are taken in charge by the interviewee, and this corresponds to the dualistic way of thinking, or they are concealed and in this case there is no tension or apparent conflict. Each way of thinking resolves these “inconsistencies” in comparison to logic, ideological and scientific discourse, in a different way: the first one “creates” the representation of an ideal democracy with a strong metaphysical aspect, related to absolute beauty, an earthly paradise. The second, turning its back with indifference to the public sphere, “creates” the “private democracy” and the “democratic personality” that one can live and enjoy in his private moments with his family and closest friends. This is a democracy of the “microcosmos” with a lot of its values and practices, transferred to a different setting.

Conclusion

At this stage we have finished our research and the analysis of our data. What is missing for our project to be concluded, is to discuss our findings with experts from the discipline of political psychology, and to anchor our conclusions in this scientific tradition. Political Psychology does not “exist” in most European countries.

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