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What is the role of "Culture" for conceptualization in Political Psychology?
Presentation of a dialogical model of lay thinking in two cultural contexts

Thalia Magioglou

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Abstract

This paper is discussing the role of conceptualization in political psychology and the limits that the notion of culture imposes: is it possible to construct "useful" theoretical models that offer new perspectives? What is their scope and possibility for generalization? I suggest a dialogical model of lay thinking that is grounded on a longitudinal study (from 2000 to 2010) regarding the social representation of Greek Youth for democracy (Magioglou 2008; 2013). This model, and the research method adopted, have been constructed for the Greek context, as a result of the interaction between field work, data analysis and the conceptual tools available at the time. It is then tried for a different study and context: that of the commentaries left on line after the articles of three major French newspapers (*Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération*), from 2009 to 2010 considering the case of the arrest, trial and liberation of a French citizen in Iran, with the accusation of being a spy, after the elections of 2009.

Keywords

culture, political psychology, theoretical model, democracy, Greek youth, social representations, lay thinking, Iran

Quel est le rôle de la culture pour la conceptualisation en psychologie politique ?

Présentation d'un modèle dialogique de sens commun dans deux contextes culturels

Résumé

L'article envisage le rôle de la conceptualisation en psychologie politique et les limites que la notion de culture impose: est-ce possible de construire des modèles théoriques "utiles" qui offrent des nouvelles perspectives ? Quelle est leur ampleur et la possibilité de généralisation ? En m'appuyant sur une recherche longitudinale (entre 2000 et 2010) sur la représentation sociale des jeunes Grecs à propos de la démocratie (Magioglou 2008 ; 2013), je propose un modèle dialogique du sens commun. Ce modèle, et la méthode adoptée, sont le résultat de l'interaction entre le terrain, l'analyse des données et les outils conceptuels qui étaient disponibles. Dans un deuxième temps, ce modèle est essayé en tant que grille de lecture dans un contexte différent : pour l'analyse des commentaires laissés en ligne après les articles des trois grands quotidiens Français (*Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération*), de 2009 à 2010, concernant le cas d'arrestation, jugement et libération d'une citoyenne Française en Iran avec l'accusation d'espionnage, juste après les élections de 2009 dans ce pays.

Mots-clés

culture, psychologie politique, démocratie, jeunes Grecs, modèle théorique, représentations sociales, Iran

Culture as something that differentiates: grounded concepts that fit the population studied?

Culture is an elusive and dynamic concept. Its definitions vary not only between anthropology, sociology and psychology, but also between approaches and their historic trajectory inside the "frontiers" of the same discipline. Working with questions of democracy and justice in political psychology, I have chosen to rely on Valsiner's definition coming from cultural and developmental psychology, where culture is conceptualized as a semiotic mediation device (i.e. Valsiner, 2000).

My personal adventure in political psychology started with the study of the social representation of democracy that leads to the question of common good (for young adults in Athens, Greece), spending several years in political science and (social) psychology departments. This topic led me to a societal approach of political psychology. The beginning has been a series of non directive interviews, in Athens, with young adults that also come originally from other parts of Greece. My first study on this issue was at the end of the 1990's and the last ones in 2009 and 2010. The subject was democracy and the length of the interviews varied from 40 minutes to 3 hours. However, once the material was there, I couldn't "find" the necessary conceptual tools in order to frame my findings: I had to adopt a "grounded theory" logic, getting inspiration from different theoretical traditions in order propose a reading of the research (what De Oliveira and Amancio in their chapter call the way of the "bandita"[1])

All of the participants, in the first (Magioglou, 2005; 2008) and in the following studies on the issue (Magioglou, 2012), were knowledgeable about the way the representative system worked, even if they couldn't express it themselves in abstract terms. However, they shared a feeling of inefficacy in the public sphere, combined with a representation of democracy that transcended this public sphere. The minority, those who at the beginning ofg 2000 seemed to feel more confident about their personal future, (because they came from a social background that was well off or they worked and studied a field that seemed to guarantee a job), were citizens "to be": while waiting

to become 50 years old like their parents, they concentrated on their "microcosmos", a combination of their private and working life, where they seemed to matter more. The majority, two thirds of the population investigated, shared a feeling of anger they didn't know how to canalize. They were very pessimistic concerning the prospects of democracy, that they valued, but democracy was not to be found in reality, and especially not in the public sphere not only in Greece, but anywhere in the world. Democracy was taking the form of an ideal related to metaphysical questions, such as the meaning of life, beauty, love and nature. The interesting thing about the findings was that the social representations of democracy for these young adults were apolitical, in the sense that they were not to be found in the traditional realm of politics; it seemed that democracy was an idea that found refuge in the sphere of power of these young people: their imagination, and their private life. The characteristic that differentiated the "pessimistic" from the "optimistic" group was not their social origin or revenues, but the feeling of being on the right direction when it comes to the "air du temps". Those studying or working in technology, medicine or business, regardless of the level, were more optimistic compared to those studying or practicing arts, sports or theoretical topics (such as psychology or sociology).

When I was using the resources of political science, more precisely political theory on the content of political ideology in Europe (i.e. Moschonas, 1995 Held, 2006) I still felt that it was not fitting my data. Most of the time young adults defined politics as a relationship to their "significant others" to use Mead's term, and to their "microcosm" to use their own term. Their discourse could be thought of as a social representation, in the sense that Moscovici (1976) and Doise (i.e. 1998) give to it. However, it was a discourse defined by different styles and ambiguous, both crossed by political ideologies and at the same time "apolitical", if I had to use the definitions of political science for politics and democracy.

Of course, in political theory and even political psychology, there are theories that explain how citizens are ignorant about ideology and politics because of lack of interest and the necessary expertise in order to make decisions (the minimalist paradigm is an example: Sniderman, 1998). When political psychologists such as Sniderman

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1. Borrowed from Linda Singer (1993).

Brody and Tetlock in the 1990's use the psychological concept of heuristics, they apply it with a positive connotation: it is about shortcuts people use to make fast decisions, without having to process all the information available. Nevertheless, the concept of heuristics initially, is close to that of cognitive biases that social psychologists consider to be opposed to reasonable thinking (i.e. Tversky and Kanneman, 1973).

The "lay people" have been criticized by certain approaches as incapable of applying reason and logic, the cognitive tools necessary to make appropriate political decisions, (Sniderman, opcit). Youth have been particularly criticized for their apathy and lack of necessary knowledge at the end of the 20th but also the beginning of the 21rst century. On the other hand, rational choice theories insisted on the people making decisions concerning politics in a completely rational way according to their "interests".

However, these theories concern voting behavior and the young people I have been interviewing at the end of the 1990's were not particularly involved in this process. Those who voted did it without conviction, following their family, or a personal "interest". Others decided to vote only on local elections, and many questioned whether they would vote or not.

The input of the political philosopher Castoriadis (1987), on the imaginary institution of society and the creative power of everyday thinking helped me at this point to frame the way new meanings are created in everyday lay thinking and language.

Could the local "*culture*" be a reason why different approaches didn't seem to apply to my data? The majority of the young adults interviewed were knowledgeable about the rules of the political system but most of them were critical of the way it functioned. Most of them, (2/3 of the sample) were feeling frustrated, not knowing how to act, and the minority (1/3 of the sample) was dissatisfied, but trying to apply the concept of democracy the way they understood it in their private life, feeling alienated from the public sphere.

Most of them, presented very sophisticated conceptions of what democracy and politics are, and even those who didn't finish school and had more difficulty with theoretical notions, used practical examples to illustrate something that seemed at the beginning an abstract idea.

Why would they retreat from the public sphere whereas in previous decades, the organized student movement was very dynamic? In the 90s and the first decade of the 21st century the presence of young people is sporadic, related to specific events, such as protesting against an educational reform. However, this changed after the revolt of December 2008 when an upsurge of violence, of young, and some older citizens, dominated not only Athens, but most of the big cities of Greece. The incident that triggered this upheaval was the death of an adolescent by a police officer. This revolt is very important because it differentiates the Greek experience from the revolts that followed the economic crisis, both in Greece and in other parts of the world.

My interpretation is that their conception of politics is different, that not only had they a sense of inefficacy in their everyday life since they felt that they didn't matter for important decisions but also, they didn't have the possibility to make their voice heard in the public sphere and where not integrated in the social and economic sphere (Magioglou, 2012). They found a way to be heard, through the riots that started in December 2008. Regardless of the outcome and of the degree to which they had clear demands, they were heard and they attracted everyone's attention. But then, maybe Greece is special, and we don't need a different approach on political psychology to explain something local –Greece is but a small country, what happens there doesn't have to concern other Europeans or the rest of the world even though different mobilizations in European countries as well as in other parts of the world could have a common thread. I would agree that Greece, not just as a country, but as a cultural environment is "special" and this fact had something to do with my difficulty to explain my results using conceptual tools that have been thought and used in the western world. The question is would we always need a "local" concept to understand specific cases? And what is happening in that case with the scientific ideas of comparison and generalization? Is the postmodern position of "situated knowledges" the only possible way (Haraway, 1988)?

Another series of interviews was conducted in January 2009 after the revolt of December 2008 and in January 2010 and 2011, under the pressure of the economic crisis, in order to see how thinking on democracy evolved in the last years.

The main difference with the findings of the interviews conducted 10 and 6 years ago, was that before, young people seemed to find action meaningless because it couldn't bring any change; now, some of them, would prefer to act, in order to express their anger, even if they didn't expect any change. For those who participated actively at the revolt of December 2008 it is also a way to show to other people that revolution is still possible; on the other hand, there were still those young people who seem close to a conservative way of life, against any form of collective action, and adopting a discourse that would be that of older generations when they judge the "youth". They refer to the "youth" as if they were not part of it, with a condescending look, but equally anxious about the future.

What is different in the most recent interviews? At the beginning of 2010 the economic crisis was not felt with the same violence than it was felt at the summer of 2011. However, since 2008 young adults seem in their majority more determined than those 10 years ago. Even if they are as pessimistic, or even more, they still use equality and the rule of the people to define democracy and those who are feeling angry are ready to share their feeling in the public space without caring if their action will bring any positive change. It makes them feel empowered. But there is no hope because for those who are disillusioned democracy is used to manipulate the people in the same form as religion, communism and the fear of terrorism. The question of violence is discussed by the majority as a possible and –for some- acceptable form of action.

Religion can be on the other hand combined with a feeling of revolt both from the left and from the right of the political sphere (i.e. Moschonas, 1995). The interviewees are Greek citizens with parents of Greek origin and Greek Orthodox denomination even though some, consider themselves atheists, or don't practice. Among the young adults who revolt there are believers and non believers. Also among those who criticize violence we can find people who are religious and practice (for example someone who is singing for the religious service) but are very critical also of the situation (political, economic) in Greece. The extreme right group "Chrisi Avgi" and the "anarchists" are present as the two groups who are using violence and who are fighting with each other from those who are "moderate". Nevertheless, all the participants

have personally acquaintances that belong to one of the two groups, which shows the importance they have for this age group. The police are viewed in an ambivalent way by the same interviewees, at times supporting the extreme right and at times trying to stop the vandalism of those who have no respect for other people, their property and their work.

The second change concerns the magnitude of the lack of trust for politicians in general that was already present in my first interviews. It concerns the Greek society as a whole that sees that welfare is no longer reassured by those representatives and blames them. Corruption and incompetence, submission to foreign interests are some of the accusations pronounced. The kind of democracy politicians from different parties seemed to propose was not what most of the participants wanted. But there is also disillusionment of the possibility of democracy to exist in any time and place, combined with the idea that the people have always been exploited regardless of the name of the political system.

Finally, the development of the Internet and the possibility to have access to it, amplified the importance of social networks for the exchange of information, feelings, coordination of action. Although my last interviews do not include the movement of the Greek "aganaktismeni" or those who feel indignation that involves different group ages and social categories than young adults. It has also played an important role in political changes in other parts of the world, from the first election of Obama in the States to the Arab revolutions in 2011 (Harb, 2011).

I consider that a conflict between generations could have been the most important in the Greek context, with the generations born in the 70s 80s and 90s being held "hostage" of the previous ones that were holding material assets and were using them as means to a kind of upward social mobility. However, the possibilities for this upward mobility, were less and the new ambitions could not be met in a sociopolitical and cultural environment that was closed and stagnating. In a way, the financial crisis gave a solution by impairing the previous generations of their hold on the youth since they can no longer assure their future (Magioglou, 2012). A generational conflict that could be compared to the Greek one is described by Chauvel (2006) in the French context. The protest movement in 2011 after the crisis

becomes more violent in its manifestation, has a different character because it corresponds to a new reality that doesn't oppose generations in the same way.

Culture, as an element that brings together: grounding a theoretical model in a different cultural framework, possibilities for generalization

The realization of the importance of culture as a mediation device and meaning-system, presented itself in two dimensions:

Firstly, concerning the content and the form of the data: certain results were compatible with studies in different European countries, for example those concerning the lack of active and continuous participation in the public sphere or the lack of interest for national politics. Culture was related to the "creative" content of the interviews, the a-political forms of democracy that seemed to predominate, the attitude of defiance towards the state and the functioning of representative democracy for most of them, or the tolerance of others.

Secondly, *culture* was present at the level of the social scientist, when it comes to her conceptualization of the discursive style people use to express their thinking. By observing the use of linguistic connectors, I realized that an "all or nothing", *dualistic* and oppositional form of thinking was demarcated from a "*gradual*", or consensual form of thinking (Magioglou, 2005).

Would an analysis based on the "cultural specificities" of Greece be enough to explain a certain form of apathy, and then this expression of rage? Certain kinds of analysis (Mouzelis, 1986; Tsoukalas, 1975) of Marxist inspiration have situated Greece among the countries of the capitalist "periphery", and have associated the political life to different countries of South America that have experienced dictatorships in their recent history. Other analyses compare Greece with the other countries of Southern Europe that not only have emerged after the experience of dictatorships in the 1970s but also have been part of the western world and the European Union some times (i.e. Diamandouros and Günter, 2001). Others (i.e. Contogeorgis, 1999) insist on the specificity of the cultural area that includes the Balkans and

Turkey, that have experienced empires such as the Byzantine and the Ottoman, that included developed cities, contrary to Western Europe.

From the socio-psychological perspective, I found resources such as the Social Representations theory useful, since I have been working on the way young adults represent democracy. However, at the beginning, the importance of the notion of *political ideology* was giving me some trouble in regards to this literature. In my findings, there was an organized and an ambivalent dimension in lay thinking that allowed new representations to emerge. For the organized dimension, *political ideology* and style that I called "*ways of thinking*", were the two constant principles found in every interview. However, when it comes to the organization of lay thinking, political ideology was not integrated as part of the theory in a way that would help the analysis. When I turned to political psychology theorists, especially those inspired by cognitivism in the United States (i.e. Sniderman *et alii*, 1991), I couldn't use their conceptualization as such neither despite their important insights concerning ideology. They suggested a structural model of lay thinking, where ideology seemed to be an organized belief system on top, defining individual attitudes. Political ideology is seen on the one hand, as a kind of superstructure produced by the elites, and is summarized as the belief system of conservatism and liberalism. On the other hand, at the level of the individual, ideology is understood as an element that holds together different attitudes and opinions. Certain authors have qualified ideology at the individual level as a form of "heuristic" a rule of the thumb that allows people to make political decisions without having an extended knowledge on the issue they decide upon (Sniderman *et alii*, 1991).

And, most interestingly, ideology is not "conceptually present" at the level of "lay thinking" -or "sens commun"- in the debate of North American political psychology. Either there is the "elite level" on top or that of the "individual" at the "bottom". On the contrary, in the theory of Social Representations for example, grounded on the notion of lay thinking, there is a sort of fusion between the notion of the "individual" and the "collective", without erasing the notion of individual subjectivity. Consequently, I could understand that, the lack of this "level", or "floor", is a reason why a theory based on the level of lay thinking has not known the same diffusion in the

United States as in Europe. Certain North American thinkers, inspired by cognitivist approaches, seem to present theories in two levels, the individual, and that of the public opinion that is closer to an addition of individual opinions (or the elites when it comes to status differences). The attitudes correspond to the individual level and the public opinion refers to the public. Although North American social sciences have been influenced by many important European scholars of the 20th century; there is a different way to conceptualize "society" the "self", the "group" or "collectivity" (Fraser, 2004).

But if there are cultural differences in the way conceptualization is possible in the United States and in France in political psychology, why would a French constructivist tradition be closer to the explanation of the Greek experience? It would probably be more accurate to assume that the difference exists more between *constructivist* approaches, and *naturalist* approaches, that can be found both in North American and European debates (de Fornel & Lemieux, 2008). However, the idea of locally grounded "scientific cultures" is not to be completely abandoned (Magioglou forthcoming), and Crawitz (2000), presenting the methodology of the social sciences, is using this argument as an explanation to the reason why political psychology has not been developed in France, where the social sciences are dominated by sociology.

The way the interviewees talked during the non-directive interviews presented a form of dialogue, with questions that they were asking themselves, since the interviewer didn't, and their answer took the form of different forms of argumentation that were, at times, opposing and contradicting each other. Billig (1996) has elaborated an interesting theory on "arguing and thinking" that became the basis for one of the methods of analysis of the data, and his conception of lay thinking as "dilemmatic" and ambivalent, inspired my conceptualization (1996). Bruner's approach on meaning-making and the importance of narrative for lay thinking has also been a source of inspiration (i.e. 1986).

However, different theoretical elements had to be combined together in order to come up with a conceptualization that would suit the object of study.

A dialogical model of lay thinking: the importance of the "aporia" and societal creativity

Hegemonic social representations concern the way a society ought to be run and organized (Moscovici, 1988), in other words, the idea of "*good*". Democracy is an example of an hegemonic representation, or according to Castoriadis, a central imaginary notion (1987). This brings, as a consequence a need for creating identifying/othering positions of individual or social actors. There is a link to action and a moral judgment that is expected. Who is a victim? Who is to blame? Who should restore or maintain what is "justice"?

Asking youth in Greece to talk about Democracy, brings about this questions, and each time, many different answers are proposed. It was just the next step, to arrive at a conceptualization of lay thinking, at least in Greece, as a form of thought that operates in a dialogical form: there are questions, that I named "argumentative poles", "aporias", borrowing this term from philosophy, that attract different forms of argumentation that never seem to arrive at a final dialectical synthesis: participants are thinking in a 'question-answer" style that opposes different kind of argumentations. The same questions, that I characterize as "***argumentative poles***" because they attract different argumentations, are set by all the participants:

Question of "*Good*"

1. What is the common good? Or what is democracy, as a form of common good?

2. Does democracy exist in the world?

Identifying/Othering questions:

passive

1. Who should benefit from democracy?

active

1. Who is acting against it? (othering-blame)

2. Who should and could rescue it? (identifying)

These questions invite different forms of answer. The first two concern democracy, identified to a form of something "good" is more a question, inviting different meanings and practices to relate to it. However, apart from a feeling of well-being, or happiness that could be linked

to the notion of "good", specific meanings and arguments are fighting in order to acquire a form of rhetoric legitimacy that could be related to a form of power. The second question concerns the existence of "good" (or "democracy") in reality: is it possible? Two logics, two styles confront each other in this question: the first one, is pessimistic and negative, if democracy is not present in every moment and every sphere of human experience, it doesn't really exist, there is no possibility for a compromise.

The second logic is more positive, but is proceeding in a way that seems to be a compromise to the first group; human experience is divided into different spheres, which do not identify with the division private/public; if democracy, or good is composed of three important elements (freedom, justice, equality), and if one or two of them are present in some of the spheres of experience, the outcome is positive: democracy exists, in a certain way. Its quality might not be the best possible, but it can still be considered as such.

In the interviews that took place after 2009, this second logic is no longer present in the form of a compromise between different tendencies. Nevertheless, another dimension of this second logic is the importance of private life or what they call their "microcosmos" for democracy, that is still present in a lesser degree.

Some answers to these questions can be associated to a recognizable content of political ideology (in the Greek context, i.e. Moschonas, 1995). Other answers on the other hand, are foreign to any form of political ideology as a way of organization of the public sphere or distribution of resources; they also differ from theoretical constructions of political and social sciences on the meaning of democracy: they are related to the private sphere and they are connected to metaphysical values such as the meaning of life, love and beauty, just to give a few examples.

I distinguish the concept of ideology -that is influenced by Billig's and consequently on Gramsci's idea- from that of political ideolog(ies) that I consider as a sub-category of general ideology. When I refer to political ideolog*ies* I relate them to a particular political party system (in Greece at the end of the '90s and beginning of 21st century) and they invest a particular "agonistic" content opposing one another. *Ideology in general is a way of thinking different from that of lay thinking that allows only one possible answer to the questions of lay thinking and delegitimizes all the others.* I differentiate the concept of *ideology* from that of *lay thinking*. There is however a "resonance" of ideology as an organizing principle, as a constant tempo of everyday thinking (Magioglou, 2005).

The last three questions try to identify/create individual or social actors. Who is opposing, helping or needing democracy? Who is the enemy, the victim, the hero? The answers, ambivalent and contradictory, concern the interviewees as persons, but also the different social groups they feel being a part of: the Greeks, the people, the human race, the Youth.

It is also interesting to note the way that identity construction takes place, concerning both personal and social identities. The young people interviewed question themselves on their role as victims, heroes, or offenders of democracy as a common good. Most times they play multiple roles. The same observation is made concerning social identities: the youth, the Greeks, the people, are groups they identify with at times, or they criticize, even using different pronouns (i.e. "they"), in order to mark the differentiation.

The difference of my conception of lay thinking with "narrative" is that it is flexible, full of questions that don't receive a final answer even if the discursive style is advancing with affirmations and oppositions. Looking closely, we observe that the same person could oppose different entities as "good" or "bad" in different moments of their discourse.

Social "identifying" and social "othering" as a process: application of the model of lay thinking in the French social context

The effort to create identifications, personal and collective, around a central imaginary notion – for this research *justice*- was also present in another study that concerns a different material: the comments of the French public to the articles published after the arrest of a French citizen in Iran, with the accusation of spying, after the elections held on June 2009. For that reason I decided to analyze these comments using the model created in the study of democracy in Greece.

In my conceptualization of *social identities* as *questions* I draw both from the tradition of Social Representations (i.e. Moscovici, 1984) and of that

of Social Identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) as well as the efforts to combine them in social psychology (i.e. Elcherorth, Doise, Reicher, 2011). I consider that social identities emerge as potential answers to the questions attracted to a central imaginary notion or value: democracy or citizenship when it comes to lay thinking. The main difference with ideology, is the fact that *ideology as a form of social thinking, tries systematically to legitimate one answer for each question and to delegitimize all other options.* Elements of ideology are present in the discourse of the interviewees but they are there among others.

Reicher (2004) insists on the importance of flexibility for the formation of social identities and the fact that they constitute projects for the future and not only a description of the past. I consider that people use "social identifying" and "othering" *as processes that try to assign/create different roles for the different actors in a particular situation.* By setting questions related to central social representations such as the notion of democracy, public good, happiness, … we associate them to the question of the "desirable" and "good". Most of the notions related to "good" are controversial. In the case of my studies the "good" takes the form of:

1. Democracy, for the Greek Youth

2. Justice and citizenship (in the case of a French citizen, a young woman arrested in Iran after the 2009 elections with the accusation of being a spy).

The link between the two cases is the representation of good as "*justice*". Justice is a component of democracy for the Greek interviewees and it is also the *thema* of "good" or moral judgment that is behind the dialogue of the French-speaking public who try to decide if the girl arrested is innocent/(like them-identity) or guilty (other). In cases of conflict, as in the second study, there is an effort to create identifications that are opposed to an "other" that is delegitimized. However, when a situation is new, we can study the process and the effort to anchor oneself to the "positive" collective "I" as opposed to the negative "other".

The study of the Clotilde Reiss case

In the case of the study on the reaction of the French public concerning the arrest of Clotilde Reiss I didn't proceed by conducting interviews, but I used the comments of the public, on the

articles of three major French newspapers on the internet: "Le Figaro", "Le Monde" and "La Libération". These newspapers adopt, at times, different political positions, from what could be considered right, to left political positions (Schweisguth, 2007), and being pro or against government policies. The reason why I became interested in this case was the fact, that the arrest of a French citizen attracted the attention of the public and could have an effect on the representation they hold for Iran, or the Iranian government.

The general framework of the study is that of international relations, and the direction of the French foreign policy. It has been noted that this direction has changed since the presidency of N. Sarkozy, who tried to get closer to the U.S. positions than the former French governments. For the record: De Gaulle quit NATO in 1966, Sarkozy rejoined NATO in 2009; (Vaisse, 2009).

During the time of the arrest, Iran was holding negotiations with Western countries, and especially the U.S. concerning its nuclear power. Elections have been held in a way that is contested by the opposition, and as a result, a series of protests took place as a sign of contestation. The reaction of the police was violent, and there were a lot of arrests. As a result, Western countries such as France criticize and don't congratulate the Iranian president, Ahmadinedzad. The 1st of July, a French citizen is arrested at the aftermath of the elections accused of being *a spy*. The category of a "spy" could be something bad, and in this case an "othering" term that is used to cast blame upon someone and place him/her in the "out-group".

What we learn, concerning this person, from the press, is that Clotilde Reiss is a 24 year old French citizen that is teaching French at the University of Ispahan, and holds a master's degree on the educational system in Iran. She speaks Farsi and she has been accused for having participated in demonstrations, taken pictures and published them on the internet. Also, she is accused of having written a report on nuclear power (information that was released during her trial). Her father is a specialist on nuclear power and she has been an intern working for the same institution in the past.

There are four important moments in her case that are followed by articles in the Press. First her arrest, then her trial, and the moment she is bailed out by the French government, but obliged

to stay at the French embassy until the decision of the court. Finally, almost a year later, in May 2010, her liberation, where we observe a repetition of the debate that has dominated the first three phases.

The press has published articles, especially at the important moments of this case. My objective was to analyze the commentaries of the public to these articles. The newspapers have been chosen according to their political orientation, in order to cover a certain range of political positions (Schweisguth, 1995)[2].

- *Le Figaro* (right wing, pro-government at the time) that is open to whoever might want to place a comment

- *Le Monde* (opposition, pro-socialist) where comments are only possible for the members of the newspaper (who pay 6 euros per month)

- *Libération* (left-libertarian[3]) is open to comments

Each newspaper or magazine publishes certain rules that would make the comments acceptable, so that they would not be censured. A typical rule is that comments should not encourage racial hatred and discrimination. Some commentators complain of the presence of censure after articles by "*Libération*", whereas other articles are not open to comments. The interest of the comments of the articles on the internet, despite the censorship the papers might exercise, concern their spontaneity and the fact that the "identity" of the person who is commenting is protected by a pseudonym. Unlike other forms of research, where the population can be "chosen" by the researcher, little do we know concerning the profile of those who comment on newspaper articles on line: their age, nationality or social origin remain unknown, even when they decide to disclose information because there is no way to verify it. Blogs for example are more polished and would rarely include insults, personal attacks and spelling mistakes. However, anonymity could allow less "politically correct" reactions and this is to me the main interest of this form of material. It also depends of course on the control policy of each web site.

The articles chosen are those that attract the biggest number of comments from the public and correspond to the four important moments of the case as well as two articles commented throughout the case, concerning the "identity" of the young woman.

The comments were analyzed using a thematic content analysis in the first place (i.e. Bardin, 1977) and then the dialogical analysis I have used for the interviews on democracy (Magioglou, 2005), considering the dialogical style of the comments. This dialogical style was manifested in three ways, such as:

1. Asking questions and answering them by themselves during the comment

2. Being in a dialogue with the article, disagreeing or agreeing with the author

3. And especially, engaging in a dialogue (imaginary or real) with other commentators. That was the most interesting part because they are not only commenting on other people's opinions, but they try to guess their identity, hiding behind the pseudonym and to position themselves according to it.

Since the questions asked were close to those asked by the Greek Youth of my former studies I found that it was appropriate to use the dialogical analysis I developed in previous studies on Democracy based on four questions (Magioglou, 2005):

1. Who is Clotilde Reiss? (Ego or Alter?)

This question is associated with the "identity" and status of the person who speaks and with collective identifications such as: a young person, a student, an academic, a woman, a French citizen, someone who believes in human rights. The social identity of the nation was present, the idea that France no longer is a major power in the international scene, combined with a feeling of guilt for the colonial past. On the other hand, the values of human rights, democracy, citizenship, are discussed at certain moments: are they enough to establish a form of "moral" superiority? The social identity of the Citizen is brought about also as a way to feel solidarity with someone who belongs to the same people; and to the Iranians who fight for their rights.

– Am I (as a person or member of a group –social, national, human) concerned?

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2. However, I speak about tendencies and not of coherent political positions.

3. In the way Kitchelt (1992) defines « left libertarian ».

The answer to the first question, "*identifying*" or "*othering*", has implications for the reader's position as concerned or not by the problem. As a French citizen, a woman, a citizen of the world, someone who belongs to the same group, whatever that might be in the eyes of the people who write the comments.

2. Is she guilty/innocent/victim? (positioning the "object" of the representation in relation to what is "good" or to "justice")

For those who consider her a spy or as a stupid irresponsible girl who put herself into trouble, she is to blame and she has to pay for her actions. However, as a spy, she was a functionary of the government, so it is normal to bail her out.

For those who see her as guilty or stupid, she is everything they don't like: a naïve left wing idealist, for those who see themselves as right wing. A privileged spoiled brat close to the president Sarkozy, for those who see themselves as left wing or opposition. Othering, in the form of sexism and racism is also present: she is a stupid "mystique" woman, beautiful, young. She is close to the Muslims of Iran for those who don't like Muslims. A Jew for those who don't like Jews. An arrogant Westerner or a Christian when she is criticized as not knowing anything about the rules and the culture of the Iranians.

When she is presented as a victim of the Iranian regime, or in a more positive light as a human rights' activist (this position is only held by a minority), she is innocent, and then positive action has to be taken to restore justice.

The second question is associated to the third one, which is: how justified is it to bail her out?

3. What should be done to restore justice? Is it justified to pay 213,000 euros to bail her out of prison?

This question is related to the previous one, it requires action, so, all the aspects of the problem are addressed: there is not question of the citizens, but of the "contribuable" meaning the tax payers. The tax payers are a social identity that is much more individualistic than that of the citizen. It is related to a club of "clients" who want to get the best service for their money. Finally how "much" money is 213,000 euros? For people who earn the minimum and are occasionally unemployed, it is too much. What other expenses does the state make and can it be decided what is more important?

The value of justice is related to that of solidarity and human rights. But there is also that of the client who expects a good service and is getting angry when his/her rights are not respected. *Justice* as a social representation is moderated by the notion of social class and "selective *equality*": are there citizens more "valuable" than others? That is what the debate around her position as an "academic" or not seems to imply. Finally who is entitled to the money of the State? Those who are unemployed and in debt, those who can't make the end of the month meet or someone who has the means and luxury to travel the world and the irresponsibility to get herself into trouble?

If she is a victim and 213,00 Euros is the ransom that the French government is paying, then this is a humiliation for the French and a sign that their word is not respected by the Iranian government and they don't have the power to impose it. In that case, it is better not to provoke and keep a low profile, so the accusation of irresponsibility is relevant again.

As in the case of democracy, there are questions concerning individual and collective identity. What is more, the roles that C.R. is called to play -that of the spy, the innocent victim or the stupid student- are similar to the roles that Greek Youth was attributing to groups they identified with: the people, the Greeks, the Youth. The commentators try to decide because they are concerned not only at the symbolic level, (she is also French), but also because the government is paying a lot of money to liberate her, in times of financial crisis. The identification or othering process is taking place concerning groups such as the French, the Iranians, the privileged elite, humanity, or society.

It is noteworthy that the different articles from all the journals –for example concerning the identity of Clotilde Reiss as an academic- were holding a similar position that was opposed to that of their readers who didn't seem convinced of the rightness of their journal's affirmations.

The liberation of Clotilde Reiss constitutes a good example of the debate that took place. She returned to France almost a year after her arrest, in May 2010. The articles of the three newspapers attract many remarks from the Public, for example 630 for the article of the *Libération*.

We observe that the debate following the articles starts as being balanced between negative (irresponsible) and positive allegations (innocent

victim, human rights activist) during the arrest, moving to more negative comments for all the newspapers during the trial and then the reader's positions are divided between positive and negative attitudes at the moment of her being bailed out. At the moment of her return to France the negative characteristics predominate with that of a stupid person or a "fake" academic, being the most important, followed by that of being a spy. And then, the comments concerning her physical appearance emerge, categorizing her as a woman with a guilty/victim role.

In the case of the *Monde*, it is the idea of the "fake academic" that predominates. If certain citizens are more "valuable" than others, like academics, she is not one. There is a big argument concerning who has the right to be called an academic: is a student who finished her masters entitled to this distinction or is it just a way to overvalue this person and to justify the government's actions in her favour? Although most journals use the term "academic" to characterize Clotilde Reiss, the commentators don't follow their journal and are very critical to this position. That reinforces her identity as an immature student who acts as a stupid irresponsible person that has put herself in danger and her country in trouble. This is the second most popular category of the commentators after that of her being guilty.

Clotilde Reiss is also portrayed as "Mata Harreis", a way to objectify and anchor her as a social representation to the notorious spy of the First World War. This reinforces the sexist attribute of the dangerous *femme fatale*, someone who takes advantage of these attributes in order to escape her responsibility. However good looks could also place her in the position of the victim being objectified (in *Libération* someone comments that Kouchner, foreign affaires minister at the time, is looking voraciously at her bottom in the picture published). Many of the commentators expressed strong feelings, were happy for her liberation, angry, jealous, disgusted by the comments of others, or appalled. The debate also focuses on France as a country, its position in the world, international relations and democracy, of inequalities and power differences in the French society itself. The discourse of the client that needs to be satisfied by the state, but also of the citizen who demands justice, solidarity and other values are all present.

Insulting as a form of « othering »

Apart from identifying who is C.R. and oneself regarding the notion of justice, many commentators who engage in a dialogue with other commentators get into a process of identifying them, and positioning themselves according to their guess.

A particular kind of dialogue that assigns an identity to others is the exchange of insults between commentators. I find this type of interaction particularly interesting since it is not common in other forms of data: it is rare in the case of interviews and questionnaires where the interviewer and the interviewee are face to face (although it is not excluded!). To identify a commentator using only a pseudonym and who doesn't disclose any information about herself, or who gives information impossible to verify, is a difficult task. There are three techniques that the commentators use to categorize their fellow commentators: a. guessing the other's identity through her/his opinions, b. examining their writing style, the vocabulary they use, and c. assigning an identity that is insulting just because they don't share the same opinion.

What form of identity is "insulting"? The insults exchanged in this case, use metaphors related to animals, or social categories that have been suffering from negative stereotypes. It is revealing of the categories that are considered "othering" in the eyes of those who use the insult to distinguish themselves. Homophobic and sexist insults are present, but also insults related to social status, such as someone's hypothesized low education level, lack of experience in the world, old or young age, and also being against a set of common values, related to citizenship and solidarity. At times people are accused as spies of the Iranian regime, or designed as immigrants, so members of the "out-group", because they have a poor knowledge of the French language.

Finally, there is a set of insults addressed to "frustrated people" who are "losers" and become mean, envious and aggressive towards others who pursue their dreams. There are also insults concerning the "animal nature" of a person, not being able to control their body (farting, …) and far from civilization.

> "what you said has nothing to do with a thought, it is farting of the mind, and remains gassy" (*Libération*, August 10, 2009).

The insults used are a sign of passionate involvement with the subject.

Sexist insults related to age and gender are, at times, combined together for example, "*you are a bitter old owl*" (*Figaro*, May 17th, 2010) implying a feeling of jealousy that an older woman is supposed to feel towards a young attractive one.

At the same time there are people who try to prove their superiority by relating personal experiences, such as for how long they have been travelling around the world and why they have a superior education and culture engaging in social comparison; it is even common to lose face in this kind of "blind" dialogue.

It is interesting that when we talk of others, we talk about ourselves. Kristeva has analyzed the presence of the "other" in oneself, and the dialogical self approach (Hermans, 2008), is also taking a similar perspective. When I started analyzing the way part of the French public reacted to the press articles concerning the case of Clotilde Reiss, I assumed that I would observe the way the social representation of Iran was changing throughout this case. Nevertheless, I was impressed to find, after a content analysis, that most comments referred to the people who wrote them, and to the social categories they belonged to. Iran was there as the "other" in a static way.

Contrary to a face to face research context, we don't know the profile of the commentators, but can only assume that they form part of "the public" of the respective newspapers and that their mean age is higher than the population of our studies on democracy that was between 18 and 26 or 18 and 29 year's old. On the other hand, there is no information on their social profile, nationality, social status. There is no information of their location, or for how long they have been living where they are when they place their comment. They form a "public" in Tarde's way (19?) in the sense that they have the necessary symbolic resources to read and react on line to the text proposed by the journals. Anonymity offers them the possibility not to be constrained by what could be "politically correct" and exchange insults as long as the moderator of each journal allows it.

Concerning the representation of Iran

Iran is either seen as a country very different from France that is to be left alone without being judged, or as a dictatorial regime opposed to the people and the Iranian Youth. Some people mention with respect the great culture of Iran. However, there are few concrete mentions to the country and its representation remains static throughout the case. There is no evolution and quite a few differences between the comments that follow the articles of the 3 journals. Iran is represented for the readers either as a unit or divided between the people and the government. But in most cases it is seen as the "Other" that should be left alone; imposing your values on others is not a good idea for the commentators.

Finally, it is obvious that for the readers of these articles, the case of C.R. is not about the social representation of Iran that attracts a very low amount of interest; it is about social categorization and social comparison of the commentators themselves as members of groups and persons; it concerns identity questions. Clotilde Reiss becomes objectified as a controversial representation about the role of France in the international scene; it brings up the notion of social justice that divides the people who comment on the articles.

Culture, generalization and a dialogical model of lay thinking

Culture, as a system of signs and a mediation device, is present in two levels in this chapter: that of the particular field where the studies were conducted, (Greece and a Francophone virtual space delimited by the public of the three journals and the web) and that of the conceptualization (as part of the researcher and as the culture of a scientific field and perspective). Two questions arise: does a particular field or question need a specific, "locally" developed conceptualization? And if this is the case, is generalization out of reach? When it comes to the researcher, she is also the product of a particular culture, and also of the culture of a discipline that shares common meanings. My proposal is that through the interaction between a particular field and the researcher with her own personal history, a "local" conceptualization can be created at the interface between her field and her scientific background. The next step is to try this conceptualization, (in this case my model of lay thinking) in another context and see if this is useful for another or a similar question in a different framework.

I observe that both throughout the debate concerning Clotilde Reiss's liberation, and the studies on the social representation of democracy, lay thinking takes a dialogical form, that of a debate, even

when we are using non-directive interviews. The dialogical form of questions and answers seems present in both the Greek and the French context that despite their differences share some cultural codes (as part of a "European" cultural framework?). The questions concern forms of what is "good" and "desirable" for the interviewees, when it comes to hegemonic social representations. It also concerns identifying/othering processes and forms of action.

A second underlying dimension in both the cases studied, is the fact that the debate is impregnated by two important "*themata*" a concept introduced by Moscovici and Vignaux (1994) and developed by Markova (2003): two ideas that are based in oppositions and form a type of thematic nucleus that organize a series of representations and arguments. In our case, I refer to the notion of *good/bad* and that of *power/weakness*. The main question for both my studies is: "what is good" or common good? The notion of *good* in this context is considered as a "thema" that is present in the construction of hegemonic social representations such as democracy and justice.

In the study on the case of Clotilde Reiss, the thema of *good* takes the form of "justice", which is also a component of democracy with the notion of freedom and equality. "*Good*" is opposed to "*power*" and the identity of those who can or should use it. The themata of *good* and *power* allow the weaving of the respective social representations of Democracy and Justice in a confrontational style. Is what is "*good*" also "*powerful*" or "*weak*"? Young people feel that they know the meaning of democracy, but they lack the power to act in the public sphere. If Clotilde Reiss as a French citizen is innocent, France doesn't have the power to demand her liberation to Iran and has to pay.

The balance between what is considered *good* and *powerful* can change. The mediation device system or culture, frames the meaning and the weight of each thema: in the context of a national republic or democracy, or in the context of international relations. Conflicting combinations are present in the various "dialogues" of the commentators: power is an important dimension in international relations (especially through a realist approach), between France and Iran, different religions, but also when it comes to individual identities: being a woman in a society that is male-dominated, a poor person in a capitalist system, etc. There is

consciousness of a conflict, and a solution is sought. Conflict opposes different priorities, related to a social representation of what is considered to be valuable, "good" and the ways to act, the means to accomplish it. It engages feelings and asks for identity creativity and positioning. Power should be exercised by those who are legitimated to use it in the western cultural context. Assets should be distributed according to a shared representation of justice. Different arguments arise concerning questions such as: who is able to act and who is entitled to act? Is a form of morality the refuge of those who don't have power?

The "thema" of power is present in the positioning of social identities and social comparison. Power is linked to a hierarchical categorization where one "entity" or "group" is positioned as superior to the other (Tajfel, 1974) and this entails the possibility to act or to define the other's actions and choices. But finally, it is symbolic and could be enacted or not in a particular social context. Power is symbolic because it is also related to social comparison, the notion of the "stronger than", to domination and authority. The notion of power is present in democracy, and is profoundly dialogical: it belongs to the "people" in a very diffuse way. Power in this context is a particular cultural creation that is supposed to find the best way for a collectivity to act, but also for every actor -individual or collective - to reach happiness. In Baugnet and Fouquet's chapter in this book power is studied as a social representation in different cultural contexts.

The dialogical model of lay thinking, composed of a series of open questions on the notion of good and the position of social actors, as well as the forms of action, presents meaning-making as a debate open to conflict and ambiguity, especially when it comes to the central imaginary meanings of a society. In political psychology we deal with meaning and "hegemonic social representations", a concept used in psychology (Moscovici, 1988) or central imaginary meanings, introduced by Castoriadis in political philosophy (1987). When the definition of these central or hegemonic representations between groups is conflicting and polarizing, open confrontation and violence is possible. For example if the representation of democracy for the Greek Youth is opposed to that of the official Greek State, there can be open conflict, as it occurred in December 2008 in Athens.

When the potential answers to the important questions (what is good and who are we what should we do…) are dissociated or don't allow positioning of ego/alter, this could be related to a loss of meaning or a feeling of "ontological insecurity", (Kinnvall, 2004). Ontological insecurity is present when what used to be a "central imaginary concept" (Castoriadis, 1987) is dissociated from the thema of "good", when actors cannot position themselves and others according to it, neither imagine possible forms of action. When there is no common narrative different parties cannot find their place.

Democracy, as a central imaginary meaning, has to do with a representation of self and other, and a way to relate the two using open-ended questions that I defined as "argumentative poles". If we consider the "self" as a question or a social representation (Duveen, 2004) and if the social self needs social "others" to compare and differentiate from (Tajfel, 1974, Reicher, 2004) then the Self doesn't make sense if the "Others" are not defined. The "Self" is a historical and cultural construct in itself, under constant mutation because of the changing life conditions.

Culture as a constellation of signs both frames questions and offers possible answers, in order to act upon them: here is who I am, in that sense I need to marry this kind of person, practice or not this religion and demonstrate or fight for this cause. My group is, for example, the likeminded people, who may be geographically dispersed, and virtually located through the Internet. It could also be composed, however, of my colleagues who ignore part of my self-construction as the tip of the iceberg. A particular culture, as a system of signs and meanings that are shared and co-created, signifies and "does" politics in a way that could be similar and also different from another culture.

In the studies presented, I observed that "locally" constructed conceptualizations such as the one created for my studies in democracy in Greece could also be applied for the analysis of the comments of the French-speaking public in a conflicting case with Iran. However, using a conceptual framework in a new context is a very important but delicate enterprise. So, I could only advance one step at a time, taking into consideration the level of the conceptualization, the type of study and the cultural context, if I want to test my model to another cultural environment.

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