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Brazilian Social Psychology in the international context: a commentary

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Abstract

The present paper is a commentary on the talks given by Torres and Álvaro and by Krüger regarding Brazilian Social Psychology in the international context. Starting with a brief contrast with the situation in Portugal, this commentary next approaches, in a synthetic way, questions that cut across social psychology in the international setting, namely, those related with the recurrent dichotomy individual/collective, the great advances in social neuroscience, the study of minorities, the scarcity of psychosocial research about colonialism, and lastly, contemporary issues of science and educational policy.

Keywords: Brazilian Social Psychology; intergroup relations; colonialism; science policy; university pedagogy.

Resumo

A psicologia social brasileira no cenário internacional: um comentário. Faz-se aqui um comentário às intervenções de Torres e Álvaro e de Krüger sobre a Psicologia Social brasileira no cenário internacional. Começando por estabelecer um breve contraste com a situação em Portugal, de seguida este comentário aborda, de forma sintética, questões transversais à psicologia social no cenário internacional, designadamente as que se relacionam com a recorrente dicotomia individual/coletivo, os enormes avanços na neurociência social, o estudo das minorias, a escassez de estudos psicossociais sobre o colonialismo e, por último, questões contemporâneas de política científica e de ensino.

Palavras-chave: Psicologia Social no Brasil; relações entre grupos; colonialismo; política científica; pedagogia universitária.

In her opening statement, Angela Almeida referred to the aim of establishing counterpoints to what has happened and what is currently happening in other countries as one of the purposes of this Symposium. That is precisely where I start, noting the historical distance between social psychology in Portugal and in Brazil, where, in the latter case, “one of the initial milestones” of this history dates back to 1935 and 1936 (Sá, 2007, p. 8). This is very clear in the text that our Brazilian colleagues wrote for this Symposium, in particular, if we think that ABRAPSO was founded in 1980, as Ana Raquel and Jose Luis Álvaro refer, and if we take into consideration the reference that Helmuth Krüger makes to Amancio Fabro’s dissertation about “the history of social psychology in Brazil since the nineteenth century” (p. 7).

If we add to this the great diversity and richness of research in social psychology in Brazil we can easily perceive that, in the case of Portugal, the contrast is great. Firstly, because in comparison with what happened in Brazil, social psychology in Portugal appeared at a much later time. In fact, only after April 25 1974, and already living in a democracy, did we enter what we can consider the “short history” of Portuguese social psychology (on this point see Bairrão, 1969; Lima, Castro, &

Garrido, 2003). However, in terms of its most remote roots, we can point out, even through the internationalization with Brazil, the publication, in 1966, of the book by Álvaro Miranda Santos *The Mythologizing of Color – Perspectives of Social Psychology*, with a foreword and a chapter by Gilberto Freyre (“Brazil in the face of the black and mestizo Africas”).

In addition, this contrast persists regarding research into the particularities of social psychology in Portugal and its forms of internationalization and trends, as Torres & Álvaro showed in relation to Brazil in the study they presented in the Symposium. There are still very few studies on the evolution of social psychology in Portugal (Lima, Castro, & Garrido, 2003). This is understandable if we take into account that we are still in the presence of the first generations of social psychologists in Portugal. It is logical that they have sought to assert their research, instead of doing the history of this research, which is still too recent. Moreover, and for this reason, this may be a good time to do so by using different routes of research and through the various models reported by H. Krüger, including the collection of personal testimonies of the protagonists of such a history (Valentim & Figueiredo, in preparation, 2013).

Obviously, the construction of social psychology in different

national settings was made in different ways and there are marked differences in its nature and contours, in the magnitude of the problems and the directions that are being built. However, while the stories of its development in different countries are specific, they are, nonetheless, leading to contemporary problems that are largely common to such stories. Let us start with the separation between individual and collective to which A. Torres and J. L. Álvaro have referred. This, still in the early days of the discipline, became a dichotomy in the construction of psychology (remember the work of Wundt in *Völkerpsychologie* vs. Wundt's work in the laboratory of Leipzig). This issue has been very well summarized by Graumann (1986), to show how, in such a path, the individualization of the social follows hand in hand with the desocialization of the individual. And this is a dichotomy that seems to arise, sooner or later, for people who work in an "international setting". It is something transversal to the field of social psychology. But I note here neuropsychology as one of the domains in which these aporias around the individual vs. collective are more clearly manifested. This is a new and powerful wave that seems almost absent in Brazilian social psychology. However, in the international setting of research in psychology but also specifically in social psychology, neuropsychology has been imposing itself and its popularity has continually advanced (Amodio, 2008; Harris & Fiske, 2009; for a summary and critical analysis of the socio-cognitive neurosciences, see Garrido, Azevedo, & Palma, 2011). The level of brain or neuropsychological functioning is indeed one of the two new levels of analysis (along with the inter-societal level) in social psychology, which Doise has recently added to the four levels proposed in 1982 (Doise, 2011; Doise & Valentim, *in press*).

I do not intend to question the usefulness and manifest importance of the extraordinary advances we have seen in the field of neurosciences. But I think we cannot gloss over the risks of theoretical and epistemological reductionism arising from schemes of analysis that are too simplistic, in which the psychological explanation gives way to the location and description of neural mechanisms, which emphasizes the separation between social and psychological causes. It is this potentially impoverishing side of psychosocial explanations that I think should be discussed. In this respect, it may be useful to recall the words of Moscovici (1988, p. 32), who, nearly 25 years ago, said he was convinced "that its separation [psychology/sociology] has the effect of partially emptying the former of its content and feeding the illusion that one day it could become a branch of biology".

This is not only a theoretical and epistemological question. This has obvious implications, both in terms of research funding, and in terms of the organization of curricula in psychology training. As I have said above, it seems clear that this movement has been one of the hallmarks of the recent "international setting". But as far as I know, this has not been, until now, a characteristic of the Brazilian setting. From my point of view, this is not necessarily bad. In the same way that not everything that is internationalization is necessarily good. Obviously, I am not advocating that social psychologists should not study the articulations with the level of brain functioning, much less

alienate themselves from the recent trends in this field. But having been out of that "neuropsychological wave", that tends to submerge other approaches, may prove to be an asset to Brazilian social psychology, especially if this is used to encourage a critical and instrumental framework of neurosciences, particularly in the use of additional techniques that this domain allows for, and not of its adoption as an end in itself. The situation in Brazil can be an advantage, especially if it defends itself against the impoverishment of the explanations in social psychology and promotes the search for links between levels of analyses.

Another contrast in relation to the international setting (and I speak here thinking more particularly about Europe), is the importance given to the study of minorities. Torres and Álvaro explicitly refer this fact when they say that "Here is perhaps one of the aspects most divergent between the European crisis and the Latin American one, because, in addition to the crisis of the importance of the social for social psychology, in Latin America we also had a break with the very definition of 'social', which here was associated with the neediest communities". In fact, I think that in other international settings, the question rarely reaches place in terms of an approximation of this kind. In European social psychology – which is also very diverse – there persists a lack of studies that focus on the viewpoint of minority groups that are discriminated against or dominated, or that at least take into account these views. Although in recent years there have started to appear a few exceptions, this tendency is maintained. Even when it comes to investigations regarding identity, stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, the "regard of the other" has too often been absent. This difference seems to me another asset of Brazilian social psychology because of the advantages that occur due to that, both in terms of descriptive or explanatory analyses and even in terms of the development of theoretical models.

However, in this domain, we should also be immunized against the effects of a "culturalization of the social" (in this regard see Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2003; Touraine, 2005; Valentim, 1997). The approaches that seek to focus on the specificities of groups by replacing the social by the cultural, domination by otherness, inequality by difference, can also become reductionist when they de-socialize the relations between groups, by culturalizing them. By forgetting the differences of status, prestige, material and symbolic resources that exist between and within groups, these approaches run the risk of feeding the readings that essentialize cultures and reify identity as an explanatory and demanding category. Take an example: the use of culturalist arguments by new forms of racism. In particular, the fear of "loss of cultural identity" has been a good argument for the recycling of biological racism into cultural racism. The same "adversity to interbreeding" that once applied to the mixture of races, now applies in its modern version of fears of dilution of "cultural identity" by way of "excesses of cultural mixing" (Valentim, 2005).

Another point worth signalling, in my view, refers to the lack of studies about colonialism, despite the psychosocial effects that such historical processes retain even long after decolonization. In fact, these deep rooted issues continue to have effects at various levels in contemporary societies, particularly in social

and cultural identities, collective memory, and the relations between European and non-European groups. In recent years we have witnessed the development of some investigations that are bridging this gap in our discipline. But there is still much to do. To change this current scenario, I think there could be an extremely fruitful collaboration between European and Brazilian social psychologists in this domain.

Consider, for example, what we could gain from exchanges between the two sides of the Atlantic on these issues, from the perspective of studies on collective memory, in the wake of the work conducted by Celso Sá and his team, or in studies of social representations of Luso-Tropicalism. Research programs in this area could transform what has been a disadvantage of national isolation and silence on these issues into an asset of internationalization.

Finally, regarding the international setting, in a very brief note, I would like to mention the issue of science policy and education policy. Among what has come to mark the changes in this area, is the gradual devaluation of the teaching component, of university pedagogy in favour of the research component, both in the evaluation of individuals, and in the evaluation of institutions. As is well known, this has occurred alongside a decline in the use of other languages – including national languages – in favour of English as the language of international scientific communication and also the preference for publishing articles rather than books. This process happened very quickly. The same Professors who, not long ago, were more devoted to preparing lessons than investigating, and who gave their students literature written in French, are struggling today with the pressure and effort to communicate and publish in English. This is a change strongly intertwined in current procedures for assessing scientific productivity, typically based on the value of articles in international journals, preferably with impact factor. I think we should be cautious of taking this path. Doise has drawn attention to the fact that “there are real filters, namely of linguistic nature” which mean that, in Europe, “All the publications originated by authors of a “golden croissant” of European social psychology (which goes from England to North Germany, passing through Belgium and The Netherlands) are supposed to be known by everyone else, to be common references, but the ones originated in the periphery are not” (Doise in Valentim, 2009, pp. 340-341). From my point of view, this does not only refer to power asymmetries and hierarchies of excellence. I think there are real risks that “in the present context the ‘higher’ status of mainstream English language journals often results in homogenisation and not universality or diversity in scientific thinking” (Doise, 2012, p. 9).

Leaving aside the reflection that should arise from the cases of fraud we recently witnessed in the international setting due to the competitive pressure to achieve good outcomes (cf., in particular, EASP, 2012), I want to focus on two points that appear or at least have been raised, differently, in the interventions of Torres and Álvaro and Krüger and that, largely, derive from these issues. The first is the fact that in this scenario there is a real risk that dedication to pedagogical issues and students can become an obstacle to these indicators of academic productivity, whether individual or institutional. We do not need great insight to see

that the times we are experiencing in academic life hardly favour the praise of university pedagogy (on this issue, see also Judt, 2011, chapter 16, in particular, p. 142). But it is also a fact that, apart from its intrinsic value, the requirements flowing from the pedagogical work are often a great factor for clarity and rigour of what is taught (and what is researched), due to the constant challenges of unexpected issues and questions raised by students.

Another problem is that this type of scientific culture can easily lead to – or at least can provide – what Krüger draws attention to when he affirms that “many themes and research problems (...) do not have stability, are transient, and soon disappear from the field of scientific interest”. This can be associated, in terms of “conceptual matrix”, to the fact that “the terminology used in contemporary social psychology (...) needs further attention regarding its meaning and carefulness in its application. Often, concepts are no longer defined or are presented ambiguously”. I agree. As I have said elsewhere, we are confronted with “the risk of a multiplication, fragmentation and overlap of paradigms. A kind of permanent search for novelty, instead of taking advantage of what already exists, and this to the detriment of the search for an integration of what is already there, and injurious to a centration on fundamental problems” (Valentim, 2009, p. 340).

I think we should not overlook the importance of the historical roots of concepts, of focusing on the development of models, no matter how recent the topics and themes we work on may be. From my point of view, we should seek to be immune and we need to immunize new researchers against the risks of a kind of originality searched for at all costs and which, not infrequently, is anything but that, while forgetting the lode of “classic” knowledge that we already have and disregarding the support of pre-existing work in our current projects. This is a common mistake that can even be considered one of the signs of “pseudoscience” (Lilienfeld, 2010/11).

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