# Critical psychology without critical psychologists?
# Reflections on the critical potential of social representations theory in a post-communist society

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The paper examines the shifts in the interest basis of Romanian social psychology that have undermined the critical potential of social representations theory. The examination proceeds in three steps. First, and working from the standpoint provided by Jürgen Habermas' account of knowledge constituting interests, the paper presents an outline of the conditions a social theory must meet in order for it to count as a critical social theory. Second, the paper briefly reviews the reasons why the study of social representations as conceived of by Serge Moscovici and others would qualify as a critical social theory. Third, the paper focuses on the gradual transformation of social representations research in Romania from a potentially emancipatory cognitive practice into a normal social science and considers several causes for this change.

*Key words*: social representations theory, critical social theory, identity, knowledge constitutive interests, Habermas, Moscovici, Romania

## Introduction

Is there critical social psychology in Romania? Are there any critical social psychologists there, or at least the intellectual, institutional and attitudinal conditions for the emergence of such psychologists who might take an active and systematic interest in emancipation through epistemic self-reflection and engage in a sustained critique of reified or ideological forms of psychosocial life? Before I can properly address these issues and in order to better justify what will turn out to be a qualified negative answer, I would like to introduce what I take to be the most important features of a critical social science, as presented in Jürgen Habermas's "Appendix" to *Knowledge and Human Interests*. This choice of a theoretical framework for defining critical social science has its own methodological limitations. As Habermas himself acknowledged in his later writings, the book suffers from conceptual imprecision and equivocations. Some of its conclusions are also partially undermined by Habermas' subsequent adoption of a new framework of analysis that has preserved much of his original vision without however either fully translating it into the new conceptual language, or capturing all of its methodological insights. Yet despite these well-documented shortcomings, the notion of critique that emerges from this early work is still useful for the present discussion in several respects. First, it helps us formulate a criterion for what should count as a critical social science that ties knowledge constitutive rules to the normative attitudes that institute such rules in theoretical and practical reflection. Second, it enables us to overcome the objectivist illusion of traditional theory by explaining knowledge production in terms of the more encompassing social practices whereby subjects and agents claim for themselves and grant each other normative statuses in either cognition or action. Third, it shows us how to further relate these practices, and thus scientific inquiry itself, to the complex process of socialization and acculturation that on the one hand reproduces the structures of meaning that

sustain the various systems of the social world while on the other secures for the individual and the group their own identity within it.

If we adopt this conceptual scheme, we immediately see that for a social science to count as critical, it must conceptually grasp and further articulate the connection between norms of identity formation and social integration and norms of cognition and action. In Habermas' view, this involves two things. First, a critical social science must enjoy a certain degree of theoretical autonomy that allows it to engage in reflection upon its logical-methodological rules and thus become aware of the constitutive link between knowledge and interests that is encoded in these rules. Second, this form of autonomy must enable a different kind of reflection upon the "unconsciously produced constraints to which a determinate subject (or a determinate group of subjects or a determinate species subject) succumbs in its process of self-formation" (Habermas, 1978, p. 377). This type of practical reflection and the practical autonomy that is gained through has the potential to emancipate subjects from these constraints and empower them to engage in or initiate the critique of other forms of distortion.

I use this conceptual scheme to examine the critical potential of the theory of social representations and explain why this theory cannot fulfill its critical vocation in Romania. I identify two main causes for this failure. First, many Romanian social psychologists increasingly approach this theory with the kind of normative attitude that is more typical of traditional, that is, objectivist, social science. This wasn't always the case. In the early nineties, when it was first introduced in Romania, social representations theory was seen by many as a theoretical platform for explaining the distortive effects on social identity and knowledge of a savagely repressive regime (and its various ideological avatars). The advent of this objectivist type of normative attitude seems to indicate that a shift had taken place in the underlying interest basis of this theory, which has gradually led to its colonization by non-critical practices that ultimately stifled its critical vocation and turned it into something closer to mainstream science. The shift, I argue below, corresponds to a change in the more general structure of professional and social interests as a result of the modernizing pressures of the process of European integration. These pressures are internalized in the professional identity of the scientists and their cognitive practices in the form of specific normative attitudes and methodological choices.

The emergence of this new cognitive attitude has had profound effects on how social psychologists represent their own normative status. Whereas in the first years following the fall of communism, during a period of institutional reconstruction of the discipline that was also one of profound political upheaval, the dominant self-image was that of the social critic and agent of change, the new objectivist attitude in social representations theory has also instituted a new normative status for its practitioners, that of mappers of psycho-social reality and stewards of the system. To preserve a unified normative basis for their professional identity, psychologists still interested in critique had to separate it from theory in their scientific practice. And to compensate for the loss of a theoretical basis for critique in social representations theory, they had to reconstruct its normative foundation outside theory, in the form of a humanist moral psychology with universalistic aspirations. It remains to be seen if this humanism can generate enough critical mass, or if it will be the first to collapse under the pressure of the identity constraints it tried to overcome. What is certain, however, is that this separation of functions has turned critique itself into a private enterprise with little institutional backing and an uncertain future.

There is, therefore, theory without critique, and critique without theory, and this duality seems to exhaust all the possibilities for doing critical social psychology in Romania at present. In the remainder of this paper I justify this conclusion as follows. After a discussion of Habermas' conception of a critical social science (section II), which will hopefully set the stage for the more historical and sociological part of my reconstruction, I will briefly consider the potential for developing an implicit critical social psychology on the basis of the theory of social representations. In a second step (sections III and IV) I will present, from the perspective provided by the more recent history of the discipline in Romania, some of the shifts in the interest basis of social representations theory that may be responsible for undermining this potential in that country.[1]

## Habermas and Critical social Psychology

Habermas presents a compelling account of the types of interests that motivate the pursuit of knowledge and constitute the various object domains of the scientific inquiries through which these interests are redeemed. In Habermas' theory, these interests play the role of historically constituted yet naturalized transcendentals. The rational elucidation of these transcendentals helps us uncover the dangers posed by a process of objectification that works through the sciences' positivistic appropriation of the philosophical ideal of pure theory. When internalized and culturally reproduced, this ideal engenders pathologies of ideological self-understanding and reified social interaction.

There are three types of knowledge constitutive interests according to Habermas, each corresponding to a different type of science. In what Habermas calls the empirical-analytic sciences, the constitutive interest consists in the accumulation of predictive knowledge that allows one to exert "technical control over objectified processes." (Habermas, 1978, p. 309) As Habermas argues, "The facts that are relevant to the empirical sciences are first constituted through an a priori organization of our experience in the behavioral system of instrumental action." In the historical-hermeneutic sciences, access to the facts is no longer gained through observation. Knowledge in this type of sciences consists in the interpretation of meaning, which is mediated by a pre-understanding that is derived from the interpreter's initial situation and from the disclosed world of meaning of the cultural tradition that she inhabits. Comprehension requires applying the interpretive norms of this tradition to both the interpreter and her initial situation, and the constitutive interest of such sciences is practical. It aims at "the preservation and expansion of the intersubjectivity of possible action-orienting mutual understanding…in the framework of a self-understanding derived from the tradition." (Habermas, 1978, p. 310) The third knowledge-constitutive interest, or the emancipatory interest, is responsible for generating the type of normative attitude that animates critical social science. The aim of this type of science is to uncover the ideological character of "regularities of social action" that express relations of power dependence. Unlike the practical and theoretical interests, the emancipatory interest has both a derivative status and a derivative corresponding object domain. This domain comes into existence as a result of "systematically distorted communication and thinly legitimized repression." (Habermas, 1978, p. 371) Relations of dependence are internalized in false consciousness, which under

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[1] The fact that this story is told by a social philosopher is itself telling. The interpretation offered in the second section of this paper relies on information and comments from sources that preferred to remain anonymous. Some are former university colleagues and acquaintances from my undergraduate days, others are psychologists and sociologists of an older generation who live in Romania or abroad. Few of them were aware of the existence of something called critical psychology when I first contacted them, and only a couple of them seemed particularly interested in learning more about critical psychology, especially after becoming aware of its ideological leanings and socio-cultural motivations.

the illusion of epistemic and practical autonomy (itself the necessary by-product of the objectifying attitude of pure theory) hides the constitutive ties between knowledge and interests. Awareness of these ties or self-reflection can therefore set in motion a process of self-transformation "[which] releases the subject from dependence on hypostatized powers." (Habermas, 1978, p. 310).

Habermas' account of knowledge constitutive interests is vulnerable to several objections. It is difficult to accept his thesis that all the particular sciences fall into such neat categories and that the emancipatory interest is only captured by one or two disciplines (such as psychoanalysis and the critique of ideology). Habermas also operates with a conception of self-reflection that cannot properly distinguish between knowledge of the rules of competence (or internalized logical-methodological rules) and awareness of the external constraints that have become determinants of false consciousness. When the latter is collapsed into the former, constraints are also reduced to the status of errors and critique becomes a form of error-reduction or error-correction. Finally, it is not entirely clear from Habermas' initial account how these three types of interests relate to the underlying structure of non-cognitive interests of an individual or social group.

To address the first objection, Habermas introduces another distinction between two more general types of science, the reconstructive and the critical, that no longer fully overlaps with the initial classificatory scheme. The distinction is based on the types of functions these two types of sciences perform in support of critical knowledge. The first type of science has the essential task of reconstructing general rules of cognitive, linguistic or communicative competence while the second deals with instances of identity constraints, the products of the "self-formative process of an ego, or group identity" whose "pseudo-objectivity is to be revealed" (Habermas, 1978, p. 378). With respect to the second objection, Habermas explicitly distinguishes between two forms of reflection, theoretical and practical, that cannot be reduced to one another even though the former is the necessary (although not sufficient) condition of the latter. In response to the third objection, Habermas argues that knowledge-constitutive interests are normatively produced within the media of language, work or power and therefore that they are related to the more general interest basis of our practices of communicative understanding, action coordination, and social control. Now, if we combine these two distinctions and apply the resultant explicative matrix to the social dynamic that produces both identity constraints and emancipatory interests, we discover that critique for Habermas will consist of using reconstructed standards of competence to become aware of identity constraints in theoretical self-reflection and then extracting the motivational power of the emancipatory interest from the existing interest basis of the individual and the group in order to gain freedom from such constraints in practical self-reflection. In this way, critical reflection turns knowledge of constraints into practical motivations and practical motivations into forces of emancipation.

These methodological considerations are important for showing that social psychology can only become a critical social science by either adopting from the reconstructive sciences the standards for the "implicit knowledge that we acquire when we possess communicative rule-competence," or else producing these on its own in order to engage in a type of practical self-reflection that could dissolve the objectivity of solidified power relations and thus achieve emancipation from the "determinants of false consciousness" (or identity constraints). The social representations theory strikes me as an excellent vehicle for this type of critical-reconstructive inquiry and a legitimate candidate for the status of a critical social science. I cannot present in detail the reasons that support such a claim. It suffices to notice here that

this theory, at least in the methodologically more radical (and conceptually perhaps more fluid) formulations of Serge Moscovici (1961, 1973, 1984, 1988, 1992, 2002; also see Jodelet, 1984, 1988 for a more systematic approach to Moscovici's theory), proposes one account of communicatively mediated knowledge of social reality that avoids objectivist types of data collection (or feedback gained from experimental set-ups that rely on such data) while at the same time explaining reifying social science itself. The theory of social representations also incorporates in its explanations a distinction between object domains that partly mirrors the distinction between the object domains of the reconstructive and the critical sciences. Because of its awareness of the normative dimension of all knowledge, and because of the distinctly social model used for explaining how representational content is ultimately derived from representational purport (which it inherits from a tradition in social theory that goes back to the young Hegel), this theory recognizes the situated, context dependent character of all social cognition and of the types of interests and values that motivate it. The theory also acknowledges the essential epistemic role of social conflict in the production of normatively robust representations of social reality, which then puts it in an excellent position to both account for the historically developed power formations that accompany and distort the evolution of the media of interaction and communication as well as explain the emergence of individual and group ego identities through dialectical processes of social recognition and symbolic violence. Lastly, and not unlike social identity theories, social representations theory makes possible connecting critical reflectivity to the constitution of social identities that are not subject to ideologically distorted representations of the self or the social world.

It is because of this potential for emancipatory self-reflection, itself solidly rooted in its proven capacity for theoretical self-reflection, that the theory of social representations can provide the foundation for a critical social psychology as well as play the role of a reconstructive science, either alone or in conjunction with other disciplines. And because this theory has had such a great impact on the development of social psychology in Romania, one would have to assume that many of the conditions were met there for the emergence of a critical social psychology that was modeled on the theory of social representations. Moscovici himself seems to have entertained such beliefs (even though he never explicitly framed his discussion with reference to critical social theory). In a widely publicized essay (see Moscovici, 1996 for the original Romanian version), he encouraged Western European social psychologists to engage in the study of social representations by taking advantage of the promising new experimental field that was opening up as the post-Communist societies of Eastern Europe were making their transition to the socio-economic and political model of Western liberal democracies. This new field promised fresh insights into theoretical problems such as the communicative production and ideological control of social cognition that were empirically difficult to assess in the more institutionally reified Western societies. Eastern Europe promised a look at the mechanics of social cognition that in Moscovici's opinion was less distorted by the various determinants of a specifically Western, capitalist form of objectified consciousness. However, the critical potential of social representations theory never materialized in a society where it was supposed to have its best chance to flourish. The main reason for this seems to have been the absence of an appropriately critical normative attitude in scientific practice that could be used to reconstruct an emancipatory ideal out of the existing basis of frustrated social interests.

# Identity constraints and the recent history of Romanian Psychology

The study of social representations in Romania developed mostly in the northeastern university center of Iasi. It certainly helped that the author of this theory, Serge Moscovici, has Romanian origins. It also didn't hurt that he fostered the development of this theory in Romania through direct support of local academics and by encouraging his colleagues at Western European universities to establish research partnerships with their Romanian counterparts. The theory became popular in Romania immediately after the fall of the communist regime. It is very difficult now, twenty years later, to even imagine the dire state of the discipline at that time, as it was trying to recover from the damage caused by a savagely repressive political regime. A quick review of its history might help because the initial interest in social representations theory is explainable at least in part as a form of theoretical and practical coping with the effects of political oppression that have directly contributed to that dire state.

Psychology in Romania started to develop systematically in the 1930's through the efforts of several brilliant students who pursued doctorates at prestigious university centers in Germany and France and who tried, upon their return, to synchronize local research to what was happening in Europe and in the United States.[2] Immediately after the Second World War, however, and despite the fact that most of them were either politically disengaged or had strong socialist or social-democratic leanings, a majority of these psychologists fell victim to the extreme violence of the newly installed Stalinist regime. Many were sentenced to very long prison terms or to hard labor as Western sympathizers and therefore as "enemies of the people." Some did not survive their ordeals. Others had no choice but to collaborate with their oppressors in exchange for shortened prison terms and for the chance to return to some form of normal professional life. After 1989, a few managed to publish their memoirs: hard and relentless books filled with tales of torture, pain, and humiliation. With very few exceptions of political opportunism, those who were not imprisoned lost their positions in institutes of research and universities and were forced to survive in hiding or by doing menial jobs for most of the '50's and the early '60's.

This changed for the better during the relatively short period of ideological détente and opening to the West of the late '60's and early '70's. At that time, a few of these formerly persecuted psychologists were reintegrated in academia, usually under conditions of systematic but more discrete police surveillance that continued well into their retirement years and often until their death.[3] The discipline started to slowly reemerge from the dark Stalinist years. Psychology departments were once again permitted to register students and organize doctoral programs. Researchers could occasionally travel abroad for conferences and documentation trips.[4] Journals and books were imported in limited quantities and Western academics were allowed to reenter the country for conferences and guest lectures. There were

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[2] This strategy of scientific development through the imitation of Western scientific practice was and continues to be the norm in the modernization strategies of such geographically and socio-culturally peripheral countries like Romania that seek to outgrow their marginal status through radical and thorough Westernization. The attempt to engineer changes of identity through cultural development usually drives a wedge between the educated elites and the larger population; it fuels cultural resentment in the latter and social alienation in the former.

[3] The recently opened files of the former Securitate show that the secret police kept a very close eye, usually for no discernible reason, on many of the more important Romanian psychologists, sometimes even while also using them as informers against their peers.

[4] However, as the files of the Securitate show, the price for an exit visa was almost always agreeing to inform on others; an incredibly high number of Romanian intellectuals accepted the terms of this bargain.

fewer restrictions on the types of research one could pursue. New institutes and labs were opened or reopened that were allowed to operate with relative administrative freedom within set political parameters. There was even a psychological association that organized several national conferences before being banned on political orders.

This period of relative political liberalization and moderate intellectual renaissance came to an abrupt end when the regime again changed ideological course in the late '70's. At that time, the so-called transcendental meditation affair was used as a pretext to once again shut down everything related to psychology. The affair was a failed experiment in the study of relaxation techniques that the political authorities wanted psychologists to certify for possible application to factory work. The experiment collapsed after a few meetings when it became clear that the technique was a fraud and the whole project a political set-up on the model of the old Stalinist trials. In short time all those involved were fired from their jobs. Most were confined to a life of financial misery and personal humiliations. Soon after that, all the universities in the country again lost the right to matriculate psychology majors and confer doctorate degrees in psychology. After a few more years, psychology departments (and some affiliated research institutes) were officially closed and the few remaining professors had to migrate to other, more politicized departments. Contacts with the Western academic world were completely severed. The teaching and research infrastructure gradually disappeared. Psychological research was no longer permitted under this name. Even the term "psychology" had to be dropped from official communication and print because the regime deemed it too subversive. By 1989 the discipline had almost disappeared. It was kept alive, but barely, by a handful of de-professionalized and profoundly demoralized professors who were completely cut off from scientific developments in the outside world and who had little desire to get involved in anything or take risks of any kind. These injuries to professional identity were internalized in the institutional memory of the discipline and reproduced in the form of theoretical-methodological and practical-institutional decisions that have directly impacted its evolution in the first decade after communism.

The sudden collapse of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe helped Romanian psychology come back to life. At that time, adopting the relatively new and still developing theory of social representations presented an opportunity for Romanian social psychologists to rejoin the intellectual conversation of their Western colleagues without having to spend too much time catching up on new developments in their discipline. It was also a unique chance to re-enter the profession from a relatively level playing field. When the psychology departments reopened in the early nineties, they had to rebuild under very difficult conditions of material and intellectual penury. There were no labs and the departments lacked basic equipment. No new books or journals were available anywhere in the country. There were also very few qualified candidates for jobs in psychology and so, for several years, departments were forced to hire either competent but somewhat de-professionalized psychology graduates who survived the previous decades by doing psychological testing or other forms of inconsequential lab work, or recent philosophy BAs who had minimal exposure to psychology but who were willing and able to convert. These transplanted philosophers were particularly aware of their lack of appropriate training in their newly adopted field and so they initially did what they knew best, that is, they took refuge in methodological or epistemological discussions, or in the kind of meta-theoretical analysis for which their philosophical background gave them a clear advantage. The theory of social representations, with its softer experimental apparatus (in the early years) and a predilection for a distinctly "philosophical," that is, more speculative way of thinking and writing about social reality initially gave these graduates a perfect research substitute. They could do social

epistemology or social philosophy under the guise of a more philosophical, that is, methodologically and epistemologically more reflective type of social psychology, and they could do this relatively well, perhaps even better than their older colleagues who had more experimental training in psychology but little background in theory or appetite for critique. And this also worked well for the more traditionally trained psychologists who needed a theoretically coherent research program within which to apply their technical skills.

**Social representations theory and the prospects of a Critical Social Psychology**

The revival of social psychology in Romania was closely related to the development of social representations theory (initially as a species of self-reflective social epistemology) and so the success of the latter seemed to secure the future of a critical social psychology based on it. However, as contacts and exchanges with Western social psychologists increased in both number and intensity in the mid-nineties, and as psychology departments in Romania successfully emerged from a period of quick and intense reorganization and institutional development, the normative attitude of the researchers who worked in social representations theory—what they took to be doing and the reasons for doing it—also started to change. The incipient knowledge-constitutive interest of emancipation through critical self-reflection was gradually replaced by a knowledge-constitutive ideal of objectivity and scientific neutrality that also encouraged a different methodological approach to social representations theory, one that was more experimental and technically more sophisticated than before. Since Romanian psychologists mostly imported their research methods from their more advanced colleagues in the West, this change in attitude can be attributed at least in part to the process that in Western Europe was slowly turning social representations theory from a slightly marginal type of inquiry into something that Thomas Kuhn would have called "normal science." But there are also other, domestic reasons for this shift, and they are tied to important changes in the interest basis of the profession and society.

 The first change was likely caused by the impressive institutional development of the field compared to the earlier period. The department of psychology at the University of Iasi has led the way by first establishing contacts and then engaging in more sustained forms of collaboration with leading theorists of social representations from France, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland and Spain. They operate a well-equipped and adequately funded social psychology lab. Their MA program in psychology, which is geared toward social representations theory, and the participation in the Rome-based European PhD in social representations have secured a solid foundation for the future institutional development of social representations theory in Romania. As a result of this institutional integration in European programs, the department is also becoming an agent of international development. Many Romanian graduates of these programs enjoy flourishing careers in Moldova, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Canada, and the UK. The department has organized one of the biannual international conferences on social representations. It also publishes a well-regarded international journal, *Psihologia sociala*, which devotes considerable space to social representations studies. The department is adept at attracting national and international funding for a variety of research projects in the area of social representations theory. These have led to published reports, edited books, and studies in books and journals which are dedicated to the study of ethnic and racial minorities (Neculau, Ferreol, 1996); the university field (Neculau, 1997, 2001b); social change (Neculau, Ferreol, 1998); poverty (Ferreol, Neculau, 1999, Neculau, 2001a, Curelaru, 2002a, Neculau, Curelaru, 2003); school reform (Cozma, 1995, Vlasceanu, 2002, Cristea, 2007); European identity (Neculau, 2002b, Gherasim, 2007, Curelaru, 2010); religious identity (Curelaru, 2002b); ethnic identity

(Cojocaru, 2005); social violence (Neculau, Ferreol, 2003); the social context and cognition (Curelaru, 2003, 2006); the integration of Roma populations (Giordano, 2008, Boscoboinik, 2009, Neculau, 2009); and social control and manipulation in totalitarian regimes (Neculau 1991, 1998a,b, 2001b, 2002a, 2004a, 2008b, Soponaru, 2010).

These institutional developments of the discipline have put significant pressure on social psychologists to consolidate professional status by securing access to external sources of academic legitimacy such as international grants and research partners. The more successful ones had to diversify their research portfolio and develop new sets of research skills, which persuaded them to avoid pursuing the kind of self-reflective, theoretical work that was encouraged by early social representations theory and instead focus on the acquisition and development of competences that could more easily bring in funds, yield publications, and generate professional prestige. Western researchers on the other hand demanded of their Eastern partners a certain level of technical competence and narrow specialization that could not be secured through philosophical speculation on the conditions of social knowledge, reality, or identity (as was the case with the initial work on social representations). These developments have certainly had an impact on the shape and direction of social representations research in Romania. They have generated a lot more specialized empirical research and this has in turn contributed to an increase in resources and symbolic capital. But they have also prepared the ground domestically for the process of normalization of this theory that in the West was already slowly eroding its critical potential.

However, the change in normative attitude mentioned earlier is not exclusively attributable to the internal dynamic of the discipline or to changes in the interest basis of the professional identity of its practitioners. The other important motivating factor lies outside it, in the identity-constraining potential of a rapidly modernizing society. The process of socio-economic modernization in a country still recovering from its communist past has created identity conflicts both in the general population and in the reflective classes, and the most important species of it appears to be the perceived gap between an (idealized) type of modern social consciousness and the existing cultural mentalities and attitudes. This directly affected the interest basis of social representations theory itself. In the beginning, the knowledge constitutive interest of social representations theory (as practiced in Romania) was to explain and thereby practically overcome the ideological constraints on social identity that made Romanians so unlike the Western Other. After the country was admitted to the EU following decades of communist rule and post-communist transition to a partially liberal type of democracy, the motivating interest seems to have changed from the critique of ideological distortions to becoming this Other. Something was lost in this process, and the change of normative attitude in social representations research in Romania seems to have captured this shift at a theoretical and methodological level.

Initially, the theory of social representations was seen as an opportunity for the social psychologists of Eastern Europe to understand the profound transformations in the social identity and thinking of the individuals and groups that were slowly emerging from the deep ideological freeze of Soviet style communism. Since these psychologists also belonged to such groups, social representations theory presented them with the opportunity to study the phenomenon as both observers and participants. Engaging with this theory was a form of therapy through self-reflective social cognition, and in the early years one could discern a real interest among Romanian social psychologists in practicing a form of implicit critique of reified patterns of social thinking and action through the systematic study of social representations. If one examines the topics of the first Romanian publications and research

projects in this field, one can easily detect a preoccupation with the long-term, distortive effects of ideological forms of thinking, communication, and social action on the development of values and norms, modes of personal interaction and affective self-expression. There was also a relatively strong concern for the pathological development of social institutions and practices that incorporate such distortions at the level of their constitutive and operational rules. However, this initial motivating interest, which was directly tied to the traumatizing experience of life under communism and its disappointing political aftermath, was gradually replaced by the more powerful interest of socio-economic and political integration in the various systems of the European Union. Integration, it was hoped, would effectively cancel out the effects of all ideological distortions on social consciousness by generating a new type of social identity that would no longer be subject to the old constraints but instead match the profound effects of the rapid process of socio-economic modernization.

But how could the demands of European integration, a slow moving, opaque, and bureaucratic process of institutional transformation, have such transformative effects on social consciousness that even the interest basis of a discipline like social psychology was affected? Many Romanian psychologists seem to be aware that this form of systemic integration through money and power is both partial and somewhat artificial. But they also tend to attribute this partiality and artificiality to the existence of a lag in cultural attitudes and civic mentality that separates them from the rest of "civilized Europe," or the Western Other.[5] And in countries like Romania, where the efforts at integration through economic and political modernization are systematically undermined by a deeply rooted culture of corruption that affects every aspect of social life, the need to overcome this lag is experienced with much greater intensity than elsewhere. By all accounts, and unsurprisingly, considering its recent past, Romanian society suffers from an enormous deficit in self-esteem.[6] Many academics and professionals tend to overcompensate for this deficit by engaging in an obsessive quest for self-validation through "becoming European" at all costs. Consequently, for many of them the failures of European integration is the failure to acquire a "truly European" mentality. It would probably take too many pages to even begin to describe exactly what this means and what it entails. The supporting evidence is never fully presented or explored because the existence of this standard is taken to be patently obvious and immediately verified by everyday practice. One convenient way to understand the meaning of this normative term is by reference to the material conditions that make a practice recognizably European, that is, something Western Europeans would have or do.[7] This, of course, extends to all kinds of practices, including the practice of scientific research, and to all types of enabling material conditions, from objects of personal consumption to scientific theories and matching research

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[5] This mental and behavioral lag is probably nothing more than how the new ideology of European integration covers over and rationalizes the presence of those old and familiar identity constraints that were the initial objects of study of the social representations theorists.

[6] There is sufficient empirical evidence to support this claim, including the various studies of the social representations research group in Iasi that were quoted earlier in the paper. But you don't need social science to validate a conclusion that is based in common knowledge. The media is full of Romanian success stories, domestic but especially international, that are supposed to boost the national ego and compensate for the damaging effects on the collective psyche of persistent reports in Western European media of widespread Romanian criminality or corruption. Every applause for a Romanian opera singer, every sports success of a Romanian team is presented as evidence that "we belong in Europe." These stories have become subjects of kitchen table conversation to the point where it becomes impossible to make any reference to some aspect of life in the West without automatically triggering a negative comparison with domestic reality and an effort to rationalize it by means of such forms of psychosocial compensation for deficits in self-esteem.

[7] In politics, this takes the form of voting in office the most "European sounding and looking" of two equally incompetent and morally bankrupt candidates.

topics, and from the manner of presenting oneself in everyday interaction to accumulated research skills and competences.

Given this definition of material conditions, how exactly can a very general social interest in European integration have a knowledge-constitutive impact on the work of social psychologists, and how can it fuel the transformation in normative attitude from self-reflective and critical to objectivist and legitimizing? There seem to be two possible ways: either through the normalization of scientific practice, that is, through imported research practices and methodologies that indirectly contribute to the normalization of social representations theory, as shown above, or through the selection of research subjects. With respect to the latter, there has been a surge in Romania in recent years in a type of mimetic research in the social sciences whose official purpose, as specified by the (mostly European) funding agencies, is to increase the quantity and quality of comparative social knowledge that is necessary for increased European integration, but whose implicit function in Romania is to identify ways of closing the perceived gap in mentalities and attitudes that undermine socio-economic modernization (and in process also show that the scientists who are engaged in this kind of research have closed that gap in themselves).[8] Now, there may be theoretical benefits from expanding the geographic and cultural area of social knowledge through this type of research, and so rejecting it out of hand because it is subservient to the interests of European system integration may not be fully warranted. It would also be unfair to fault Romanian psychologists for doing research that is opportunistic or inconsequential given the lack of funding for other kinds of research. Western researchers are no different in this respect. However, what seems to be more important here is not what is researched but, rather, what this type of research omits or displaces: the systematic study of those identity constraints and distortions that have accumulated and grown during the communist and post-communist years and are the likely cause for the lag in "European mentalities and attitudes."

The attempt to forget the past and ignore the actual source of present constraints is disconcerting in some respects but also understandable in others. Too many people have benefitted from their direct or indirect collaboration with the communist regime in ways that have led to a lot of misery and suffering for many others. And too many of these beneficiaries have also prospered in the post-communist years as successful business people, charismatic politicians, media stars, and celebrated public intellectuals at the price of reproducing the culture of compromise that created them in the first place. The political consensus in post-communist Romania, such as it is, is built on repressing knowledge of this dirty foundational secret. However, ignoring the many ways in which this generalized moral failure has had distortive effects on social consciousness is only possible by turning the page and pretending to embrace the new. In the communist years, social scientists used to escape political pressure by immersing themselves in highly abstract and technical research. If you could not openly criticize the regime, you took up the study of fuzzy logic in the hope that formalism and *theoria* would put a wall between you and the party hacks. Something similar seems to be happening now, as those who try to avoid the systematic analysis of the conditions that explain their collaborative past and opportunistic present are taking refuge in a high-minded theoretical attitude of objective neutrality that refuses to consider anything that cannot be

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[8] The conclusion here seems to be that doing this type of research makes you more European. This appears to reproduce an older form of cultural survival that was practiced by many Romanian intellectuals in the communist years: to read, teach, publish almost exclusively in areas where the only available sources of information were Western. This was a form of intellectual resistance through cultural escapism that also fetishized all things European or North American. But it was also an implicitly ideological strategy for avoiding the responsibility of dealing with the more pressing and base political realities of the time.

quantified—and especially moral guilt and distorted consciousness. The dirtier their past, the more neutral, dispassionate, objective, and "scientific" they have become. And, of course, the more European.

There is some evidence of substitute forms of critique in Romanian social psychology. One of these operates under the guise of a genealogical hermeneutics that retrieves and maintains the memory of suffering that has shaped social identities in the communist and post-communist years (Neculau, 1999). The other takes the form of a direct moral critique of pathological forms of social thinking and action that are attributed to the communist destruction of integrative forms of social consciousness and ethical life (Liiceanu, 2009; Neculau 2004b). Since the common link in both is communism and its socio-psychological heritage, these two substitute forms of critique often lend support to each other. But although the theory of social representations occasionally plays a role in both, this role is marginal and decorative. The first type of substitute critique tends to evolve in the direction of an archival investigation of the communist past that edifies through the vivid evocation of the details of suffering but without providing the necessary grounds for a higher-level form of critical reflection.[9] This has already produced a wealth of empirical material that still awaits the theory to interpret it. The latter type of substitute critique either is diluted in a plethora of polemical writings of no consequence for social critique, or closely reproduces the most vitriolic aspects of the latest political debates. Either way, whatever passes for critique lacks the necessary theoretical grounding that could generate emancipatory forms of self-reflection and support a critical ethos that is rooted in actual scientific practice. There is a strong critical potential in social representations theory, but this potential will not be actualized in Romania as long as the existing interest basis continues to prevent the emergence of the kind of normative attitude through which critique must operate.

## Conclusion

The theory of social representations has the potential to function as a critical social science, but this potential is not actualized in Romania because psychologists there increasingly pursue it with a normative attitude that characterizes what Habermas earlier called empirical-analytic science. Conversely, whatever critical impulses one detects among Romanian social psychologists, they rarely operate at the level of theory. As a result, they often succumb to an ideologically confused game of political rhetoric or to a form of commemorative remembering of the recent past. Given the increase in social tensions and the growth in corresponding forms of ideological constraints on social identity as a result of the rapid process of socio-economic modernization, one can easily see that the conditions are in place for the development of a critical social psychology based in the theory of social representations. But it will take a while before this theory will catch up with the interest in emancipation. At this time, all critical energies are seemingly consumed with learning how to become more European.[10]

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[9] It is even likely that this memory of suffering constitutes a form of commemorative escapism that actually prevents the critique of existing sources of constraints.
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