MENTAL IMAGES OF TEACHERS AND PUPILS

SOCIO-SPATIAL

REPRESENTATIONS

OF THE WORLD AMONG

LEBANESE AND SALVADORIANS

Abdelkrim Mouzoune and Nadia Mouzoune

Introduction

A representation is a pertinent schematization of reality either by individuals or by the community (Guérin & Gumuchian, 1985). In this way, spatial reality may give rise to the elaboration of numerous mental images that are immersed in the social world, and some of them are likely to be contradictory. The pertinence of such schematizations is not immutable, but is to be seen rather from a dynamic angle. Representations of reality are elaborated through a process involving one’s own perceptions, memory, experience, conscious and unconscious choices, and membership in a social and cultural group. Memory here is to be understood in the sense attributed to it by Tiberghien (1991); in other words, it embraces not only the past, but also the cognitive present and future. These filtering mechanisms thus engender a mental map of space as the individual believes it to be. This map refers to the whole range of cognitive activities that enable each individual to select and manip-

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Abdelkrim Mouzoune (Morocco)
Biographical details concerning the author can be found on page 209.

Nadia Mouzoune (Switzerland)
Holds a degree in philosophy from the University of Geneva. Author of a number of short stories and currently researching political philosophy.

ulate information relating to the spatial environment. The distorted maps thus produced help us to visualize the under- and over-estimations of distances and positions both of familiar and frequented spaces, and of unfamiliar and hence unfrequented spaces.

Mental representations evoke an individual's specific experiences, experiences that are precisely locatable and datable. They are constructed, at a given moment in the individual's history, on the basis of information derived by the individual either directly from his or her perceived environment or from his or her imaginary world, in which dreams, desires and fantasies intermingle to form a spatial reality that is nonetheless not real. This demonstrates that there is no objective reality in the absolute sense of the term, just as there is no objectivity that is independent of our faculties of perception. In redefining the world around us we redefine ourselves and vice versa (Skilomowski, quoted by Gumuchian, 1989, p. 30).

Accepting an approach to space that adopts mental representations is to take account of spatial practices and knowledge. In this study, we look at the mental approach to the world taken by history and geography teachers and their pupils in Lebanon and El Salvador. We have tried to pinpoint the way in which both categories of elaborators represent this space, which is as vast as it is varied. Do they represent it as a space for living together or, on the contrary, as a conglomerate of contiguous spaces for living together that are clearly delimited and hermetically closed?

Representations of the world in Lebanon among teachers and pupils

After sixteen years of inter- and intra-sectarian warfare, Lebanese society is endeavouring to rebuild itself and to reconstitute an image of its immediate and more distant environment thanks to knowledge transmitted by school or acquired through social interaction. We asked both teachers and pupils to draw a mental map of the world, in order to see whether their mental images reflect acquired knowledge or a metamorphosis of that knowledge into constructions in which the aspirations and dreams of those who conceive them are intermingled.

The sketches produced are all legible. We have classified them according to the type of mental construction produced in order to identify those traits that are common to all the conceptualizers, those that relate to only some of them, and those that are specific to individuals. The maps reflect the knowledge of the world of each teacher, and analysis shows that they fall into three types of representation: Arab-centric maps, maps showing commercial exchanges and maps of the world subdivided into subsystems.