

Social representations of climate change: French and German discourses about causes and consequences.

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Climate change is a major current affair. In this study, we are interested in the way people from France and Germany represent themselves the causes and the consequences of climate change. The theoretical background is the social representations approach (Moscovici, 2001) which seeks to pay attention to the logics of common sense, without comparing it to scientific knowledge. Social representations depend on the context within they emerged and are anchored in previous knowledge, so the French/German comparison was used to highlight cultural processes involved. France and Germany were selected for this study because they present a certain number of similarities: both are modern European industrial and capitalist democracies. However, they also present important differences in regards to their interpretation of environmental issues.

Different methods were used in a triangulation perspective (Flick, 1992). 250 articles (from the most important daily newspapers in France and in Germany) reporting about an UNO climate conference are analyzed. Moreover, 41 interviews and 10 focus groups were conducted with German and French (between 28 and 40 years old). We investigated through these methods the way causes and consequences of climate change are explained in different social contexts. A content analysis and a discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) were conducted.

The media analysis shows that causes of climate change are rarely explained and that the consequences are presented as quiet uncertain and dangerous: "*the lottery of climate change*". This strangeness relative to climate change is present too in the interviews and the focus groups. Moreover, some folk ecological theories are used by

interviewees to face this uncertainty (see Kempton, 1997). But their explanations are also based on economical and sociological knowledge outlining a cognitive polyphasia (i.e. different types of logics). The great heterogeneity of consequences evoked in interviews (health problems, different leaving conditions...) is opposed to difficulties to talk about in focus groups. Finally, the consequences of climate change represent a threat for social identity: the *South is coming* with its strange and dangerous *animal species*, its *unusual climate* which will modify our way of lives.

Nevertheless some differences exist between both countries: the perceived proximity of risks related to climate change is more important in Germany (media analysis and interviews) and is linked to perceived changes in the environment. Thus, climate change is represented as more concrete in Germany than in France. This is explained by referring to differences in the history of green movements. In Germany, organizations which defend local interests were grouped together around a common ideological discourse. Moreover Tchernobyl, a major event, was treated in different ways (absence of perceived consequences in France / diet precautions in Germany).

To conclude, through the theoretical lens of social representations, climate change appears as a polyphasic social object, it calls identity threatening stakes into play and it is still represented as something strange because it will transform our environment. Moreover, the perceived risk's proximity depends on the cultural background in which climate change is anchored.

References

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