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European Studies in Social Psychology

Perspectives on minority influence

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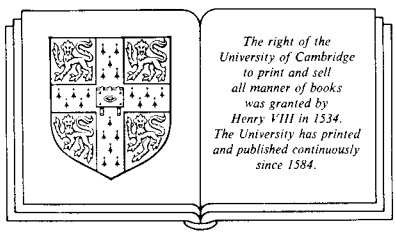

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Preface

SERGE MOSCOVICI

One particular phenomenon represents the touchstone of relationships between groups and individuals, and beyond that between majorities and minorities. This phenomenon is influence. In practice and from time immemorial all psychologies of people in society have been based on some vision of influence. It constitutes the common denominator in medical, religious and political activities. Virtually no peoples exist, however primitive they may be, who do not call upon some magical formula or technique for modifying the consciousness of individuals and incorporating them within the common consciousness. Through various means, which may take any form ranging from spirit possession, to spirit cures or to ceremonies organised around dance or music, individuals are brought closer together and more intimate contact is created. For us analogous functions are served by debates, mass meetings, gatherings and rallies of all kinds. In each case we may observe the presence of a group or individual that tries to convince others and achieve acceptance of a feeling or an action by a greater or lesser number of individuals. What is the goal? All the evidence suggests that the aim is to bring people closer together, to create a community of thought and behaviour. Without such convergence and such community nothing can be achieved, anymore by two people than by a great social movement.

The above mentioned examples manifestly involve influence. The most banal and least spectacular example one could imagine would suffice to illustrate this phenomenon. But whether the example is ordinary or extra-ordinary is of little account. The principal lesson to be drawn is clear; it is possible to exercise a hold over people's beliefs, emotions and even their behaviour. Moreover, these may be modified without their voluntary consent. Thus individuals who have been influenced in this way often consider as their own, as the product of their own minds, an idea which in reality has been inculcated in them by others.

There are several different ways in which one can examine the nature and

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particular characteristics of this phenomenon, but there is one dominant factor: influence represents for everyone the power of ideas, if not the omnipotence of ideas, as Charcot put it. Whatever meaning you give the word 'power' – manipulation, communication, propaganda, etc. – the intuition remains that through influence a mental cause produces a physical effect. It thus has a utility which derives uniquely from its psychological properties. These properties allow intellectual factors, and particularly language, to operate as if they were organic, as if they had bodily form. That this is possible has always astounded people. This is why influence is considered a gift, an extraordinary phenomenon.

When social psychology came into being, relatively recently, it took up this inheritance. This is not to say that it did not also provoke a kind of revolution in our understanding of what happens when people confront one another in a group. The revolution consisted in considering the power of ideas and thus influence as an elementary and normal phenomenon. From this we have come to regard the essential feature of collective action as being influence. And the essence of individual action is itself to be found in the way influence is resisted. But in another respect the tradition is maintained. It is assumed that influence is exercised by a group upon an individual, by the majority upon the minority, or even by an individual who has authority over those who do not. In other words, social psychology continues to regard influence as leading to conformity. Now in a society like ours, characterised by change and innovation, such a point of view seems rather limited. It does not allow us to understand how opinions or behaviours are modified, why people come to accept beliefs or ideas that originally appeared unacceptable, indeed absurd.

To overcome this limitation some researchers have begun to treat the phenomenon of influence from a less traditional point of view, namely in terms of its minority origins. They are concerned not with *any* minority but with that minority which undermines the order and vision of the majority. How can such a minority make its ideas convincing in the eyes of those who would otherwise reject them as nonsensical? Yet this is true of the influence exercised by a dissident minority, a heretic in his break with the church, an ethnic group asserting its rights, and even a new scientific school. These researchers have tried to respond on a general level to the question the German physicist Heisenberg judged to be paramount in understanding scientific revolutions:

> We must now ask how such radical alterations have come about, or – to put it in more sociological terms, though also quite misleadingly – how was a seemingly small group of physicists able to constrain the others to effect these changes in the structure of science and thought. It goes without saying that these others first resisted change, and were bound to do so. (Heisenberg, 1975: 157.)

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The initial results of this research have been encouraging. They have allowed us to establish that a solution is possible and that interesting discoveries can be made in this area. An entire view of reality is revealed to those prepared to examine it. Little by little we have seen more social psychologists become interested in the problem, in Europe and in the United States. Some have made empirical or theoretical studies. Others have pondered upon the consequences of this way of viewing influence. It obviously throws a new and different light upon the classical notions of deviance, the group, and so on. The idea began to grow of organising a conference to bring together all these social psychologists so that they might share experiences, debate their various viewpoints and establish closer relations.

The European Laboratory of Social Psychology at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Paris) reacted favourably to this idea. S. Moscovici (Paris). G. Mugny (Geneva) and E. Van Avermaet (Leuven) were given the task of bringing it to fruition. Closely associated with this group was S. Barriga (Barcelona), who played a vital role. Following preparatory meetings the conference was held at L'Escuela de Formacion 'La Caixa' in Barcelona between 10 and 12 September, 1980. It was organised with the financial aid of the Fondation de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, the University of Barcelona, and also la Caixa de Pensiones 'La Caixa'. The generous support of these institutions enabled the conference to proceed under excellent conditions. However, the key figure, perhaps one should say the alchemist who brought together all the necessary but sometimes incompatible elements for such a conference, was Adriana Touraine. By her intelligence, her sensitivity to social relations and her patient tenacity, she untangled the most delicate situations and smoothed the life of all the participants. The following is the list of those attending: V. Allen (University of Wisconsin), E. Van Avermaet (Universiteit Leuven), M. von Cranach (Universität Bern), J. P. Deconchy (Université de Paris VII). M. Doms (Universiteit Leuven). W. Doise (Université de Genève), H. Gerard (University of California, Los Angeles), J. P. Di Giacomo (Université de Louvain), M. Guillon (Université de Lille III), B. Latané (Ohio State University), J. Levine (University of Pittsburgh), G. de Montmollin (Université de Paris V), S. Moscovici (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris), G. Mugny (Université de Genève), C. Nemeth (University of California, Berkeley), A. Palmonari (Universitá di Bologna), S. Papastamou (Université de Genève), B. Personnaz (Université de Paris VII), S. Reicher (University of Bristol), J. Rijsman (Katholieke Hogeschool Tilburg), S. Wolf (Ohio State University), M. Zaleska (Université de Paris VII), and S. Barriga, T. Ibañez, P. Gonzalez, F. Munne, P. Noto, M. D. Riba (Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona), F. J. Burillo (Universidad Conplutense de Madrid), P. Ridruejo (Universidad Autonoma de Madrid), G. Serrano (Universidad de

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Valencia), M. Siguan (Universidad de Barcelona) and J. R. Torregrosa (Universidad de Valencia).

The chapters assembled in this volume can represent only a part of what was presented at the conference in Barcelona. Those we have chosen deal with minority influence from a variety of perspectives, and are organised into two broadly based parts. The first is devoted to analyses of the process of influence as such. It contains both the research paradigm which has emerged and some of the results it has yielded. The second is more concerned with the place given to the processes within the context of groups. The influence of minorities is thus located within the cognitive and social field in which interaction between minorities and majorities occurs. But between the two parts there is only a difference of emphasis, not an absolute separation. Indeed, in Part I there are frequent references to the social and cognitive field, and in Part II there are several analyses of processes of minority influence. And it goes without saying, though it is preferable that we do so, that the different authors express points of view that do not always agree. Consequently, one may be struck by the critical standpoints they adopt and by the vitality of the debates. When one considers the ground which remains to be covered in understanding these phenomena it is the degree of agreement which is surprising. After all, we have studied minority influence and innovation for only 20 years. We have simply not yet examined enough concepts, nor integrated enough information, to choose between the various explanations. In any event, the interest of a book such as this lies in the differences between the authors and in the perspective each one offers. For the moment, it is less important to decide who is right and who is wrong than to lay bare this *terra incognita* of the mind of man and of human groups. In the last analysis it is social psychology that will be the winner.

It would be impossible to end this preface without acknowledging gratitude to Silverio Barriga, friend and colleague. I am pleased to acknowledge that without him this book, like the conference on which it is based, would not have seen the light of day. His personal and intellectual energy has been a stimulus to everyone and I would like to thank him.

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