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Henri Tajfel

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Studies in social psychology

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HENRI TAJFEL

*Professor of social psychology University of Bristol*

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For Anne, Michael and Paul

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## Foreword

These essays are more than an expression of the creative talents of Henri Tajfel. They are also a sensitive testament to the times in which he has lived and in which the social sciences have grown. Tajfel has contributed to the growth of the social sciences in a notable way, but he has also had the courage and the sensibility to suffer the doubts and the metamorphoses that have been a feature of that growth. The doubts have not all grown in the protected soil of academic research either. He has, like many of his contemporaries, witnessed and survived man's inhumanity to man in our times. He has worked in a practical way to rehabilitate other survivors, looking after the orphaned young of the victims of concentration camps. And he has wondered how or whether the work of the social sciences might have prevented such catastrophes from happening. The essays, substantive contents aside, recount a moving story of change and response – intellectually and politically.

I think that the shape and the energy in Tajfel's rich work derive from two deep conflicts that have beset the social sciences from their start, and he has been honest enough to live with them and give them expression. One grows from the issue of objectivity: whether it is ever possible to describe and understand man's world from a position entirely free of and outside the values that each society cherishes. He doubts profoundly whether, in fact, we can ever be neutral in the sense that the physical sciences can claim neutrality. He offers as a partial answer to this problem the expedient of pluralism, the need for 'a social psychology which grows simultaneously in many places' nurtured by many points of view. Yet, pluralism aside, there is, in his view, no way of escaping the taking of a value position. Eventually, one must relate one's conclusions about particular social behaviour to 'the wider social setting' in which individuals operate. The wider social setting strongly influences and is influenced by individual behaviour, though it has a being of its own as well.

This leads immediately into the second energizing conflict in Tajfel's thinking. It has to do with the locus of explanation. There is a profoundly puzzling relation that exists between individual, human psychological functioning on the one hand and 'the large-scale social

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processes and events which shape this functioning and are shaped by it' on the other. Tajfel cannot, for example, accept the view that prejudice is an expression only of individual malaise or maladjustment or even of straightforward inter-individual conflict. Its existence also expresses certain structural properties of the broader society as well, these serving to create the categories in terms of which people sort out and evaluate the society immediately around them. Given these 'large-scale processes' and social structures, individual behaviour is channelled along certain lines that are only indirectly determined by the psychology of the individual. There is a constant interaction between the more structural 'super-organic' forces that animate the wider society and the individual reactions that appear superficially to be impelling human behaviour. For Tajfel, there can be no proper microscopic individual social psychology without specification of the social and cultural setting in which it occurs.

Whether viewed as intellectual autobiography or simply as essays in contemporary social psychology, this book is about the resolution of these two sets of conflicts. Substantively, I suppose, one could characterize the main topic of the volume as 'group prejudice', and there are searching essays on this topic, studies that have won the author world-wide renown. But it would, I think, be an error to interpret the main topic in this way. When Tajfel talks about the psychological significance of being a member of a disadvantaged minority, of the social comparisons that such members make between their own group and more privileged ones, he is dealing as well with the much more general question of the sensitivity of people to the social climate of group differentials as they exist in the broader social setting. The study of prejudice may be the manifest content of the research, but the deeper programmatic significance is equally applicable to any social psychological phenomenon – whether political power, aspirations for social mobility, or even migration. Indeed, speaking from my own personal perspective, I find Tajfel's essays speaking directly to issues in human development, particularly to the question of how children enter the society and so quickly take up its standard positions though they have too few exposures ever to have achieved an individual sense of what those positions entail. In this sense, the book provides a propaedeutic to what one might call 'realistic' social learning.

I cannot resist a few personal comments in writing this preface, for I have known the author well for a quarter of a century and value him as a friend. He is a man of huge hospitality in the broadest sense. He listens, reacts, brings you another drink, argues you down and sets you back up. He sets his guests at each other when he fears pseudo-agreement, thunders at them when he thinks their differences finical. Add one

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further element to that. Tajfel is the canonical European, not only linguistically equipped with several languages deployed with breathtaking speed and fluency, but with a deep sense of European culture. I have already commented on his faith in pluralism as an antidote to parochialism in social psychology. A happy confluence: Henri Tajfel chose to throw his hospitable, European, pluralistic energies into stimulating a 'European' social psychology. I think he was particularly eager to set up a base that would be distinctive to the reigning American social psychology of the time – the post-war decade. It is inconceivable how anybody could have done more to promote the cause – helping found a Society, editing a monograph series, a regular lecturer in Leiden, Paris and Bologna and a peripatetic one in a dozen other centres. I think I speak the complete truth when I say that I have never visited the Tajfels in Bristol without there being an attending Dutch social statistician or a passing-through Italian social developmentalist or a German student of prejudice. It is hard to ascribe causes in history. Tajfel's intellectual enthusiasm, his buoyant hospitality, his European convictions, his faith in pluralism – any of these could have done it alone, could have created a lively and interesting 'European' social psychology. But I must also look to the 'large scale social processes'. I think Tajfel sensed something deeper about the European scene, a point of view waiting to be expressed. And he more than any other helped bring it into being.

This book is a striking example of the genre. If it cannot be said that they are 'European' essays, it can certainly be said with emphasis that their spirit is 'European'. And that is to be welcomed on whatever side of whatever ocean the reader finds himself.

Jerome Bruner  
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