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978-0-521-83014-0 - The Disappearance of the Social in American Social Psychology

John D. Greenwood

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## The Disappearance of the Social in American Social Psychology

*The Disappearance of the Social in American Social Psychology* is a critical conceptual history of American social psychology. In this challenging work, John Greenwood demarcates the original conception of the social dimensions of cognition, emotion, and behavior, and of the discipline of social psychology itself, that was embraced by early twentieth-century American social psychologists. He documents how this fertile conception of social psychological phenomena came to be progressively neglected as the century developed, to the point that scarcely any trace of the original conception of the social remains in contemporary American social psychology. In a penetrating analysis, Greenwood suggests a number of subtle historical reasons why the original conception of the social came to be abandoned, stressing that none of these were particularly good reasons for the neglect of the original conception of the social. By demonstrating the historical contingency of this neglect, Greenwood indicates that what has been lost may once again be regained. This engaging work will appeal to social psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists, and historians and philosophers of social and psychological science.

John D. Greenwood is Professor of Philosophy and Psychology at the City College and Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is the author of *Explanation and Experiment in Social Psychological Science* (1989), *Relations and Representations* (1991), and *Realism, Identity and Emotion* (1994).

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*City University of New York*



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*For my good friends at Kent Ridge*

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To understand the intimacy and separateness between individual and group we must grasp the unusual process that gives rise to groups at the human level. It is a process in which individuals play an extraordinary role, confronting us with a type of part-whole relation unprecedented in nature. It is the only part-whole relation that depends on the recapitulation of the structure of the whole in the part. Only because individuals are capable of encompassing group relations and possibilities can they create a society that eventually faces them as an independent, or even hostile, set of conditions.

Solomon E. Asch, *Social Psychology*

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## Preface

This work is about a peculiar historical anomaly – the neglect and eventual abandonment of the rich and theoretically fertile conception of the social embraced by early American social psychologists – that I stumbled upon almost by accident.

Rom Harré and Paul Secord originally stimulated my interest in the social dimensions of human psychology and behavior and the special problems they generate for a scientific and experimental social psychology. Since my graduate days in Oxford, much of my professional career has been devoted to the exploration of these issues, developed in a number of books and journal articles. My more recent interest in the history of psychology came about as a result of having to substitute for a teaching colleague overtaken by motherhood. Although I immediately fell in love with the subject, which I have taught for the past fifteen years, for a long time the overlap with my metatheoretical work in social psychology was minimal.

However, some years ago I was asked to review Margaret Gilbert's book *On Social Facts* (Princeton University Press, 1991). In consequence, I was forced to recognize that I had been cheerfully talking about the social dimensions of behavior, emotion, groups, identity, and the like for many years without reflecting critically on my own conception of the social. As I explored this issue, I was pleased to discover that something very close to my own conception had been embraced by early American social psychologists. At the same time I realized that that this conception had been almost completely abandoned by contemporary social psychologists. Why had this rich and promising conception of the social been

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abandoned? The present work is the outcome of my attempt to answer this puzzling question.

I first tried out some of the historical ideas that form the basis of this work in a paper that I gave at the 30th Meeting of *Cheiron* at the University of San Diego in June 1998. My thanks to David Leary for encouraging me to develop these ideas and to Kurt Danziger, Ian Lubek, Franz Samelson, Paul Secord, and Andrew Winston for critical feedback on earlier drafts of the work. My thanks also to audiences at the National University of Singapore and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro for their critical responses to early versions of my historical thesis. Thanks also to Mitchell C. Ash and Bill Woodward, General Editors of the Cambridge Series in the History of Psychology, and to Mary Childs and Frank Smith, at Cambridge University Press, New York, for their encouragement and support.

My research was greatly aided by a Rifkind Fellowship from the City College of New York, City University of New York, and a Senior Visiting Fellowship from the National University of Singapore. I am deeply indebted to both institutions.

Thanks to Taylor and Francis Publishing Company for permission to employ material from my paper “From *Völkerpsychologie* to cultural psychology: The once and future discipline?” *Philosophical Psychology*, 12 (1999), pp. 503–514; to John Wiley & Co. for permission to employ material from my paper “Individualism and the social in early American social psychology,” *Journal for the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 36 (2000), pp. 443–456; and to the American Psychological Association to employ material from my paper “Wundt, *Völkerpsychologie*, and experimental social psychology,” *History of Psychology*, 6 (2003), pp. 70–88.

The production of this work turned out to be a voyage of discovery and rediscovery. From a new historical perspective, I found myself returning to many of the themes of the “crisis” in social psychology that had engaged me as a graduate student at Oxford in the 1970s. I also had the pleasure of drafting the first version of this work at the National University of Singapore, where I had drafted my first book (*Explanation and Experiment in Social Psychological Science*, Springer-Verlag, 1989) some fifteen years earlier. I hope the reader finds the work as rewarding as my own experience in writing it.