Introduction

> Social psychology is an ancient discipline . . . Our intellectual ancestors, for all their fumbling, were asking precisely the same questions as we are asking today . . . It is true that our intellectual forefathers lacked tools of precision for empirical research and that they were sometimes naïve in their theories; yet they bequeathed to us an important store of shrewd insights that have stood the test of time.
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> (Allport 1954a, vol. 1, p. 5)

There are many books on the history of psychology, but few among them devote much space to social psychology. As a rule they do not go further back than 1908, the year when two texts with the title 'social psychology' were published. The term 'social psychology' was coined just after the middle of the nineteenth century, and did not come into more general use until its end. How then, it might be asked, can there be a history of social psychology before it had been recognised as a distinct discipline? The answer is that it is not the label that matters, but the kinds of problems addressed. Histories of biology do not confine themselves to the period after the subject received its name in the early nineteenth century. As Gordon Allport rightly stated, many of the topics with which social psychology is concerned have been discussed from classical antiquity onwards. This was acknowledged by a recent author who wrote that 'Many regard Aristotle as the first social psychologist' (Taylor 1998, p. 59). Then he moved smartly on to the twentieth century, but a great deal happened in between!

There are those who might ask 'why history?' and recall Henry Ford's notorious dismissal when he said 'History is more or less bunk.' As against that, a distinguished modern historian has written: 'if you think of the past as a landscape, then history is the way we represent it, and it's that act of representation that lifts us above the familiar to let us experience vicariously what we can't experience directly: a wider view' (Gaddis 2002, p. 5). In the light of such a perspective one can gain a better understanding of how the subject has evolved, and this in turn provides a platform from which to regard our current state of knowledge more critically. The story of the struggles of our predecessors is also in itself a fascinating one, and it will become apparent that some of the ideas presented in textbooks as fresh and original have in fact been *anticipated* long ago. This is not to claim that there is always a direct line of descent from past to present

ideas, but sometimes continuity can be demonstrated. For instance, the notion that our self-image is largely determined by our social milieu can be traced back some two-and-a-half centuries.

What then, it may further be asked, is the subject matter that defines what is now called social psychology? In other words, what were the criteria employed for inclusion and exclusion in this narrative? There is no easy answer, since even today there is a lack of consensus about what social psychology is or ought to be, notwithstanding the slick textbook definitions along the lines of 'the scientific study of social behaviour'. For the present purpose the following broad formula has been adopted to delimit the area: social psychological topics concern the relationships between individuals and between individuals and their society or culture, considered both synchronically and diachronically. Admittedly this is a debatable choice, but that would also be true of possible alternatives. It could further be objected that the above formula might apply equally to sociology. While that is quite correct, it should be pointed out that the separation between sociology and social psychology came late and was a gradual process – there remains a good deal of overlap even today.

Given that discussions of what could be regarded as such social-psychological issues date back millennia, the question as to when one should start is bound to be somewhat arbitrary, but the eighteenth-century Enlightenment marked a new beginning. The weakening of religious authority, coupled with the Newtonian revolution in science, made it possible to view humans as part of the natural as well as the social world. From then onwards numerous attempts were made to provide systematic if not truly scientific accounts of social relations among people. Many brilliant individuals applied themselves to this endeavour, and the aim here is to present an – inevitably superficial – survey of their ideas. These were bound to be influenced by contemporary socio-cultural and political atmospheres and events, which will sometimes be sketched in. For instance, German thought during the nineteenth century has to be seen in the context of the quest for national unity; or again, the terror during the French Revolution and the trauma of the Paris Commune after the Franco-Prussian war gave rise to 'crowd psychology'.

Many of the early theoretical schemes were 'armchair speculations' of a kind dismissed by tough-minded empiricists. But the armchair is not to be despised, since a great deal of our knowledge originally stems from it – even empiricists need some time in the armchair before starting their investigations! In any case, the mind of the person in the armchair is not a *tabula rasa*, being furnished with a great deal of information conveyed directly or indirectly from the outer world. An example would be a field manual for the study of 'savages' produced by Degérando, who had never himself visited distant shores. Yet the principles laid down in his work (described in chapter 1), based purely on his extensive reading, were still

found to be largely valid in the twentieth century. Or again, the armchair pronouncements of Scottish philosophers must have been the product of shrewd observations; they led at times to remarkable *anticipations* of modern ideas, as for example of some of the hypotheses of experimental social psychology. I have stressed that they were usually *anticipations* so as not to imply continuities of development, though these could also be found. It should be added that from the mid-eighteenth century onwards one also encounters applications of probability theory and the use of statistics. The historical development of ideas that will be traced is varied and intricate, so that only some very broad trends can be discerned, and a brief preliminary overview may be helpful.

In eighteenth-century Europe a faith in continuous human progress prevailed, and in France there was a search for empirical method designed for better understanding of human nature and the improvement of society. In Scotland interpersonal relationships and national stereotypes were analysed.

The first part of the nineteenth century saw a move in Germany, France, and Britain towards grand theories seeking to define the relationships between mind and society. In the second half of the century Darwinian theory began to exert an increasing influence on psychology in general and also on discussions of social and societal issues. Another factor during that period was the process of democratisation in Europe, which stimulated an interest in the 'masses' and collective behaviour. Towards the end of the nineteenth century social psychology started to acquire an identity of its own under that name, and its centre of gravity began to shift towards the United States.

By the early twentieth century that change was well under way, and group psychology that had originated in Germany started to take root in America. Explanations of social behaviour in terms of 'instincts' – a Darwinian heritage – came to be abandoned with the rise of behaviourism. Yet in the midst of much activity a consensus about the objectives and scope of social psychology was slow to emerge. The division between sociological and psychological social psychology hardened, and here the focus will mainly be on the latter. During the 1920s and 1930s the major fields of teaching and research consisted of the study of attitudes and an experimental social psychology focused firmly on individuals. Two handbooks published in the mid-thirties provide a picture of the landscape of social psychology at that time. Some classical studies are described, undertaken over two decades to the onset of the Second World War, the terminus of this account.

The general story is framed mainly in terms of biographies of outstanding figures, with brief sketches of their backgrounds and lives. Some of these were humdrum, others adventurous or even tragic. Prior to the twentieth century the professional role of social psychologist did not

exist, and ideas about human sociality were generated by a widely varying set of thinkers, by no means confined to philosophy: they included people from the fields of anthropology, astronomy, biology, economics, history, mathematics, medicine, and philology.

The ordering of the topics is broadly but not rigidly chronological, subdivided by countries. Many of the original sources are in French or German, and when translated versions existed and were accessible I used them. In other cases, where references are to French or German originals, the translations are my own.

Finally, it should be stressed that this modest volume does not pretend to be an authoritative history – such a history is still awaited. Rather it is intended to give those concerned with social psychology a broad picture of how the subject is rooted in the past.

PART I

The eighteenth century: Enlightenment precursors

1 France: a short-lived dawn of empirical social science

> Nature and nature's law lay hid in night;
> God said 'let Newton be', and all was light.
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> (Alexander Pope)

It may seem odd to start a chapter on the French *Lumières* with a quotation from Alexander Pope, but Newton's prestige was high in France, and even there these lines were quite well known. Isaac Newton and his friend the philosopher John Locke strongly influenced French thought during the second half of the eighteenth century. It was a period when age-old dogmas and beliefs about the world and the place of humans within it began to be questioned, and radically new ideas emerged. Among them a key one in the present context was a question suggested by Newton's success in demonstrating the lawfulness of the physical universe: could there not be analogous causal laws governing mind and society? Such a wish to take physics as a model for psychology in general and social psychology in particular recurred during the following two centuries.

Already in the seventeenth century William Petty in England and Ludwig Seckendorf in Germany had elaborated a system of demographic statistics dealing with births and deaths, showing that human life is subject to order and regularity, and can be studied quantitatively. One of the first attempts to formulate general laws of social processes was made by the philosopher Charles de Montesquieu (1689–1755). In an introductory passage to his *De l'esprit des lois* (1748) he stated that: 'every particular law is linked with another law, or depends on another more general one'. Montesquieu had visited England and been introduced to the Royal Society, though Newton himself was then no longer alive; he also met the translator of Locke. It is perhaps worth mentioning that already at that time the works of prominent writers on either side of the Channel were nearly always promptly translated. As will be shown below, Locke inspired a new kind of psychology that long held sway in France. It opposed the rationalist nativism of René Descartes, a dualist who regarded the body as essentially a mechanical device. Descartes acknowledged that information about the physical world is transmitted through the senses, but believed that basic ideas – such as those concerned with God, or logical concepts – are innate. Locke, by contrast, was an

empiricist who stressed the need for observation rather than mere speculation. Knowledge, for him, is based on experience and gradually built up from birth onwards.

Another admirer of Locke was François Marie Voltaire (1694–1778), whose life in several ways illustrates the intolerant and arbitrary nature of the French monarchy. An aristocrat treated the great man with contempt, and Voltaire responded with his caustic wit. This resulted in his being beaten up by the servants. When Voltaire challenged his opponent, he was incarcerated in the Bastille and only let out on condition that he would leave for England at once. There he was welcomed and introduced to, among others, Alexander Pope, who had written the lines cited above. Voltaire also studied the work of Newton, and later published a book on *The elements of the philosophy of Newton*. Madame du Chatelet, his mistress for many years, was a mathematician who astonished French society by translating Newton's *Principia*! Voltaire was a complex character, anti-clerical but not anti-religious, who believed in a vague deism of a kind then common. He denounced the shams and political follies of his time, but he was no revolutionary and did not fundamentally question the established order. He was a believer in progress, but not in equality; higher education, he observed, is not for cobblers or kitchen-maids. However, Voltaire had a passion for truth and justice, and a hatred of oppression. At considerable personal risk he intervened repeatedly to save people from miscarriages of justice. For instance, he defended an abbé accused of homosexuality, for which the penalty was being burnt alive, a Huguenot accused of having murdered his son, and a manic depressive who had committed suicide. Voltaire glorified the revolution in science, the product of 'reason', which he regarded as the most important attribute of humanity.

Such rationalism, typical of the Enlightenment, was also embodied in the famous Encyclopaedia published between 1751 and 1765, a massive work of seventeen volumes of text. Under the editorship of Denis Diderot, it was ostensibly a compilation of knowledge in all its branches; but in so far as the censor could be hoodwinked, it was also a tool for propagating views opposed to tradition and existing institutions. This is not to say that the Encyclopaedists were preaching revolution; their aim was reform, but they did contribute to a climate of opinion in which radical change was coming to be seen as inevitable.

Some of the figures whose ideas will be discussed were directly involved in the events leading to the Revolution, or were active during and after it, and one of the most outstanding among them became its victim. While historians are still debating the causes of the Revolution, there is consensus that progressive economic deterioration, coupled with catastrophic failure of harvests leading to widespread protests and disorders, were salient factors. In due course (chapter 6) it will be shown that the excesses

of the revolutionary period had an effect on theories of crowd behaviour elaborated a century later. This account of ideas prevalent during the *Lumières* begins with a psychological theory that held sway for the second half of the eighteenth century.

Condillac: the statue that comes alive

A priest and a firm believer in the Catholic faith, content with the political state others found so objectionable, Etienne Bonnot, Abbé de Condillac (1715–80), was far from typical of Enlightenment luminaries. And yet his account of human psychology, which he regarded as a branch of metaphysics, remained unrivalled for half a century. Born in Grenoble into a family of the minor nobility, he was delicate as a child and by the age of twelve had not yet learned to read. He was so withdrawn that his family thought for a while that he was retarded. The local priest saw to his elementary education, and little is known about the transition to his intellectual flowering. At any rate, one of his brothers took him to Paris, where he enrolled at the Sorbonne to study theology. Subsequently he read widely, including translations of Newton and Locke, whose empiricism greatly appealed to him. He met and became friendly with Rousseau and with Diderot, editor of the Encyclopaedia mentioned above. A few years later he began to publish his own works, which soon spread his fame. He frequented the salons where ideas were being discussed, but owing to his retiring personality made few contributions himself. While being exposed to the turbulence of reformist sentiments, he kept his own counsel. After delays caused by illness, his *Treatise on sensations* appeared in 1754.

The twin pillars of Locke's theory had been sensation and reflection, the latter accounting for the higher mental processes such as comparing, judging, and willing. However, Locke abandoned his genetic approach at that point, treating these as basic 'faculties' without seeking to trace them to their source. Condillac decided to concentrate on pure experience and, by means of a descriptive analysis, reduce everything to 'sensation' as the root of all cognition, feeling, and action. While he recognised the physiological aspects of mental phenomena, Condillac resolutely set them aside; he began not with the senses, but with sensation, the inner life. The resulting system had the virtues of logical simplicity and elegance, and as such was widely acclaimed.

In expounding his system Condillac made use of a thought-experiment, imagining a statue endowed only with a sense of smell, engendering the simplest possible sensations. The statue is of course a model of a person prior to any experience, and as such is not to be viewed as passive. If we present the statue with a rose to smell, its capacity for feeling is entirely

taken up with the scent of the rose, and this Condillac called *attention*. The statue may enjoy or suffer but cannot as yet envisage any other state of being; nor has it any sense of its own identity.

Let us now offer a second flower, and the statue's whole *attention* is given over to the second scent. If we now go on to repeated alternating presentations, something new emerges: the statue gains awareness of more than one state of being because of the *memory* of the other state, leading to a *comparison* of the two existences. At this mode of consciousness the stage of ideas is reached, and other operations can be performed, including for instance *imagination* and *abstraction*. A notion of self arises, this being the sum total of sensations experienced and recalled. All cognitive processes, according to Condillac, essentially consist of different modes of *attention*. A similar analysis is devoted to the progression from the simple dichotomy of pleasure and pain to the whole gamut of emotions. The radical conclusion is that since attention and desire can ultimately be reduced to *sensations*, it follows that *sensation* is the fundamental element underlying all mental processes – hence the label of 'sensationism'.

Condillac's attempt to show how, beginning with the simple sensation of smell, the association of what we would call various stimuli and then ideas leads to such functions as imagination and memory was of course a *tour de force*, a kind of analytical model devoid of any empirical basis. But it should be stressed that the condensed presentation offered here does scant justice to the subtlety and complexity of his scheme. In particular, the association of ideas was for him not something free-floating, but a process ultimately governed by human needs or wants:

> The connection of ideas can arise from no other cause than from the attention given to them, when they presented themselves conjunctly to our minds. Hence as things attract our attention only by the relation they bear to our constitution, to our passions, to our state, or, to sum up all in one word, to our wants; it follows that the same attention embraces at once the idea of wants, and of such things as are relative to those wants, and connects them together. (Condillac 1746/1971, p. 46)

The fundamental driving force of *wants* constitutes a constant thread in Condillac's arguments, and is applied by him to the social sphere. Take for instance his discussion of differences between peoples: he believed, in common with many eighteenth-century writers, that climate determines temperament, which in turn influences the type of government, and both jointly create the character of a people in terms of their 'passions' and wants – 'passions' being much the same as what we would call emotions. Furthermore, the language of a people is said to reflect their character by expressing their dominant interests and values. The general thesis may be summarised in modern terminology by saying that ecology determines culture, which in turn shapes mentality.

The spread of 'sensationist' psychology

The general aim of Condillac, whose sphere of activity was much wider than the topics touched upon here, was to construct a philosophy that was as exact as mathematics, though he was no great mathematician himself. Yet his aspiration to create a rational system of human nature was typical of his time. Among those who adopted Condillac's psychology was Claude-Adrien Helvétius (1715–71), whose crass materialism in his book *De l'esprit* (1758) scandalised many others besides Condillac. He held that humans have no divine soul but only senses and a passive, though receptive mind that can be completely shaped through education. It must be said, however, that he used the term 'education' in a very broad sense, meaning:

> Everything that serves for our instruction, and thus I say that no one receives the same education, because everyone has, if I dare say, as teachers the form of government under which he lives, his friends, his mistresses, the people surrounding him, his reading, and lastly chance, i.e. an infinity of events whose causal change our ignorance prevents us from perceiving. (Helvétius 1758/1973, p. 208)

This long list indicates that Helvétius was really referring to what we would call 'the social environment'. He denied the existence not merely of group or race but also of innate *individual* differences, claiming that, given the right circumstances, anybody could achieve anything. In this he was a forerunner of J. B. Watson, founder of twentieth-century behaviourism, who guaranteed that he could make a doctor, lawyer, artist or other specialist out of any healthy infant. Helvétius also followed Condillac in believing that 'passion' is what drives us. Some passions tend to distort reason and thus lead to error, yet without passion reason becomes ineffective. One of the chapters in his work is headed 'One becomes stupid as soon as one ceases to be impassioned.'

Although the lucidity and coherence of Condillac's doctrine ensured its dominance for much of the eighteenth century, its metaphysical and speculative character was at variance with the temper of the latter part of that century. Thus it came to be modified by two of Condillac's disciples, Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836) and Pierre Cabanis (1757–1808). Tracy invented the term 'ideology' to denote the 'science of ideas', which he claimed was part of zoology: 'One has an incomplete knowledge of an animal, if one does not know its intellectual faculties. Ideology is part of zoology, and it is with regard to man that it is particularly important and deserves to be dealt with in depth' (de Tracy, cited in Copans and Jamin 1978, p. 490). This sounds almost as though he had anticipated modern evolutionary psychology; but in fact his claim was rather spurious, since he failed to depart very much from Condillac and viewed the object of study as the analysis of ideas into their constituent sensations. None the less he was deeply involved in contemporary debates; his circle came to be known as *idéologues* – so dubbed disparagingly by Napoleon.