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SOLOMON E. ASCH



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PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

THIS WORK WAS FIRST PUBLISHED in the United States in 1952, just about a generation ago. For many years it served as a textbook in advanced and semi-advanced courses in social psychology. Scholars in England knew of it, but it was less familiar to British students than to Americans. I am glad that, appearing now with the Oxford University Press, it will be more accessible to students in the United Kingdom and to the general reading public. The book went into numerous editions but was never revised and it now appears in its original form. It belongs to its time and place; therefore it seemed best not to tamper with it.

A few words about the aims and background of the book. First, its perspective is that of gestalt theory. It was my good fortune to work closely in America in the mid-thirties with Max Wertheimer, a leading founder of the gestalt movement, shortly after he left Hitler's Germany and joined the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York City (also known at the time as the University-in-Exile). Previously, as a graduate student at Columbia University, I had heard of gestalt psychology and admired its theoretical vigor and experimental ingenuity although my knowledge and access to its literature were then sparse. The gestalt orientation was quite alien to most American scholars at the time, and even strange-sounding. The dominant American direction was behaviorism; it rested largely on the findings and conclusions of Pavlovian conditioning and British associationism, as filtered through the American milieu. The overarching concept was habit—it was concerned with how habits are formed and changed. Psychoanalysis served as a secondary but important adjunct. As applied to social psychology, it was about how persons deceive themselves (and others); in particular, how persons and groups are misled by instinctual forces.

Historical circumstances made for odd alignments, and this is what happened with the peculiar affiliation during the 1930s in America between the alien and mostly incompatible currents of behaviorism and psychoanalysis. Mainly they shared one affinity: both worked (although in distinctive ways) from the premise of human irrationality; both strove for a general psychology on that foundation. This notion was not altogether

clear, but neither was it easy in the climate of the time to counter the premise of irrationality. People do go mad, and even when apparently sane they are capable of killing one another by the millions. Thus, despite many obscurities, these unlikely partners were made to mesh—conditioning and association on one hand and psychoanalytic processes on the other—and the combination appeared acceptable to many. Clearly it was only a schematic and crude psychology that was available at the time.

One may not omit mention of the wider historical background, the social currents that lent apparent plausibility and vitality to the foregoing academic orientations between the two World Wars. The larger urban centers in the United States, where students in the social disciplines concentrated, sensitized some to more than local concerns. The impact upon them of contemporary conditions was complex and often contradictory; there was no lack of confusion. One of the legacies of the First World War was a pervasive distrust of propaganda, extending at times to an obsessive psychology of debunking. This outlook often affected the most concerned and most idealistic of the younger generation, to the point where it apparently verged on cynicism. It was not unusual to observe the feverish adoption of political positions, not rarely self-sacrificing, but not well-examined. At times one could observe diverse effects in the same individual. These were in part delayed reactions to the First World War, but also related to the Great Depression of the 1930s, and to the growing threat of the Second World War.

Not surprisingly, the more the distorting effects of propaganda were decried, the larger they came to loom in public and academic thinking. In fact, the operations of propaganda became a staple ingredient of the then current social psychology. Here psychoanalysis played a far lesser role, except for a few minor efforts. However, the apparent objectivism of conditioning and association appeared to fit neatly into the subjectivistic conception that the current psychology supplied. It almost seemed that the best one could hope for under the circumstances was not to be taken in, not to be fooled.

These ways of thinking were surely no protection against the growing dangers of war in the mid-thirties. The popular psychological views just alluded to formed a ludicrously powerless, indeed senseless, opposition to the dangers confronting the world, even disregarding their portrayal of human beings in a miserable light. Of what value could such views be to those who were soon to face the perils of deadly combat? Nevertheless this was the situation. In fact, no psychology, however refined, even if it existed, could offer usable answers to the impending crisis.

It was at about that time that I became somewhat acquainted with gestalt ideas and began to think of a work in social psychology. My own convictions were not notably more prescient than those of my contemporaries, yet I did persist in a few points. First, the work was to be about fundamental issues of human psychology: it was to clarify problems more than to provide solutions. Evidently the topics current at the time could not

be neglected; they were necessary starting points. The aim to clarify basic issues carried major implications for the planned work. Thus a human psychology necessarily had to be a social psychology. In turn it had to be an account of human experience, of beliefs and actions as they appeared to their human agents. This was an important step from the standpoint of method. In short, my intention was to produce, in contrast to the prevalent non-cognitive versions, a phenomenological psychology in which social facts and processes held central place. By the same token facts of culture were inseparable from this aim. The account of human experience would of necessity be cognitive, but the emotional dimensions of human existence were not to be slighted. Not to sound too grandiloquent, I aimed for a treatise on human nature, informed by recent gestalt strivings—a psychology with a human face. The foregoing aims of course presupposed the necessity to portray human beings as a whole, not as a collection of mechanisms or facts. In addition there were also some unstated presuppositions of the traditional social psychology. Thus many of the issues demanding clarification were at least partly philosophical in character.

It is consequently hardly surprising that the opening chapter of the book examined in a critical light what I called ‘doctrines of man’, or entrenched assumptions that were taken for granted and that few stopped to question.

Among these themes one was a systematic underestimation of human intellectual capacities and potentialities. It was not difficult to understand or even to sympathize somewhat with this position, but it was less easy to justify the glib ways it was adopted. Surely it is not the mission of psychologists to mouth the preconceptions of their day? The consequences of this theme, usually lamentable, spurred me to explore several related questions that lent themselves to concrete investigation. Ironically, many investigators were friendly to these efforts and tried to carry them forward, without, however, departing in the slightest from their irrationalistic starting point. As I was to discover, my medicine was evidently not sufficiently powerful. It did earn me though the suspicion in the eyes of some colleagues of being a ‘rationalist.’ My own position was far more modest if not trite: I did hold that under certain conditions people are capable of acting reasonably.

Another problem that engaged my attention concerned the powerful assumption that human motives and actions are self-centered, that the ego is for each the center of the world. So unquestionable did this proposition seem that it virtually amounted to an axiom: social psychology was not only about individuals, but individualistic at the core. This belief found no place for the person as citizen, as the bearer of rights and duties, capable at times of public spirit.

What struck me most during those years was a drift toward the trivialization of human possibilities, indeed of human existence. Adding to my wonderment was that most students were apparently unaware of the import of their formulations. What they were saying would have been

understandable, I thought, if they intended to denounce the evils of humankind, but this aim was furthest from their minds. They sought only a faithful account of everyday behavior. One might have expected them to be despondent as a result, but again nothing of the sort was the case. Further, the thought never occurred to me—and if it had I would at once have repudiated it—that I was more virtuous than my colleagues. It was under such circumstances that part of this work was written. Clearly I was swimming, often without realizing it, against the current. As one kindly and perceptive reviewer put it shortly after the book appeared: 'There is no doubt that Asch is a deviant.'

Today social psychology appears almost unrecognizably different from what existed in the 1950s when this book was written. The field has expanded enormously: it now resembles more an international combine than the corner grocery of the past. New topics have sprung up, old ones have vanished. More to the point, behaviorism as it existed has apparently lost its old force, and the emergence of gestalt views is almost universally acknowledged. There have certainly also been advances in other respects.

Why then am I not ready to beat the drums of victory, to proclaim that my hopes have been vindicated, and that a new day has dawned in the study of mankind? Why the sense of unfulfilled perspectives? Have I grown querulous? Perhaps. Let me mention though a few insistent and troubling questions. Why do I sense, together with the current expansion, a shrinking of vision, an expansion of surface rather than depth, a failure of imagination? Have the changes that transpired in recent decades been more than skin-deep? Why the outcroppings of piecemeal ways of thinking during a supposedly gestalt revolution? Why are stirring contributions so eerily rare as one leafs through volume after thick volume? Has there in fact been anything like a gestalt revolution in American social psychology during the inter-war period? The evidence is, I think, not convincing. And is not the current cognitive psychology, despite the striking change of language it introduced, perhaps too often a guise for a newly attired behaviorism, a species of the increasingly mentioned 'cognitive behaviorism'? More important, why is not social psychology more exciting, more human in the most usual sense of that term? To sum up, is this discipline perhaps on the wrong track?

I come to a last and different but related question. What justification is there for reissuing a work after more than thirty years in a discipline that considers its knowledge outdated every few years? The reader may perhaps anticipate my reply. The reexamination of basic assumptions that was needed in the 1950s is, I believe, equally necessary today. Busyness is no substitute for serious analysis. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that this *Social Psychology* may invite readers on both sides of the Atlantic—students and teachers alike—to the kind of critique I attempted of investigators who preceded me.

It is not my intention to end on a negative note. Indeed I have never sided

with those who held that social psychology is a marginal, in-between discipline; to me it was and remains as ultimate as physics. Therefore I am hopeful of its future, even though that may require insights not yet on the horizon but struggling to come to the surface.*

Princeton, New Jersey
1986

S. E. A

* For readers who wish a closer acquaintance with the American scene I restrict myself to two titles: Fritz Heider's *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (1958), although it hardly needs introduction; and Roger Brown's *Social Psychology* (1986), the second edition of which is the best introduction I know to the current concerns of investigators in the United States.

PREFACE

THERE ARE MANY REASONS for our interest in the nature of man. How men relate themselves to the physical world, to one another, and to themselves—the roots of their achievements and their destructiveness—these are questions that rival in intellectual interest any that one can ask. The story of man is as absorbing as the movements of stars and the structure of atoms. It is not, however, only as curious spectators that we are concerned; in inquiring about the properties of mankind we are raising questions about our innermost nature, about forces that work in and through us. Our interest and concern are further heightened by the problems that confront individuals and societies today. Living in a time of crisis and perplexed by conditions that we do not know how to control, it is understandable that many hope for enlightenment from a field of inquiry that claims to describe the principles governing our aims, convictions, and passions.

There is reason to believe that advances in psychological knowledge can make fundamental contributions to human welfare. Such knowledge, if widely diffused, should give us increased mastery over ourselves; it might mitigate the blindness of social processes and make us less destructive. But these contributions will take time and will require a psychology appreciably different from the one we now possess. For in spite of a long and rich history of thought we stand today only on the threshold of strict investigation of man as a social being. Great poets and writers have looked deeply into the human character, but their art does not constitute a psychology. If it did, human psychology would be the most advanced of sciences. Nor do the ideas of philosophers and social theorists, despite their importance, form part of psychological knowledge. There are, of course, the many solid achievements of scientific psychology, now nearly a century old. Its problems, concepts, and methods are indispensable to the study of social life. But the most signal successes of this psychology concern the relations of individuals to the physical world—a world from which other men and the products of their labor are excluded. This psychology must serve as our foundation, but it does not provide the knowledge that the direct study of social facts alone can supply. Before pro-

ceeding, the reader would therefore be well advised to realize that psychology has not today attained, on the basis of independent investigation, a comprehensive conception of man's nature and that it does not have ready answers to our most urgent questions. He needs to make his peace with the fact that he is approaching a pioneer field in its early stage and that the account he is invited to follow will not contain a recital of decisive achievements as much as an exploration of problems and first groping efforts at clarification.

The aim to establish a psychology of social life by means of systematic observation and, where possible, of experiment is of quite recent origin. This fact is responsible for a number of special difficulties that the new discipline faces. Social psychology emerged after the history of thought had long been concerned with its problems, and in societies that held definite convictions about the human character. It was therefore inevitable that this field of inquiry should be deeply influenced in its most basic assumptions by the prevailing scientific thought of the day and by the social currents in the midst of which it arose. It has to be admitted that social psychology lives today in the shadow of great doctrines of man that were formulated long before it appeared and that it has borrowed its leading ideas from neighboring regions of scientific thought and from the social philosophies of the modern period. It is paradoxical but true that social psychology has thus far made the least contribution to the questions that are its special concern and that it has as yet not significantly affected the conceptions it has borrowed.

Under these conditions it is not surprising to find schematic and contradictory views thronging this no-man's land of science. Human nature is unchangeable; there is no human nature; it is an X that changes with historical conditions. Society enslaves men; in it alone can they find freedom. Groups are fictions and only individuals are real; groups have a reality higher than that of individuals. Society is created by sympathy and cooperation; at the root of society are destructive impulses. Men are conformists, infiltrated by the Trojan horse of social influences; they are rebels against society. The plausibility of these assertions taken singly fosters in some the optimistic conviction that we have an adequate understanding of psychological processes in society, that the main issues are settled, that most questions have been asked and most answers have been found, and that we are in a position to apply known principles to most human problems. Far from reflecting solid progress, this attitude is rather the symptom of a certain backwardness. The most advanced sciences do not lack unsolved problems and retain considerable capacities for surprise. Why should we suppose that the difficult region of human facts has yielded its mysteries when investigation has hardly begun?

The growth of the natural sciences is an indispensable condition for a sound psychology, but their unquestioned eminence has also exerted a disturbing effect on the newly emerging discipline. In their anxiety to be scientific, students of psychology have often imitated the latest forms of

sciences with a long history while ignoring the steps these sciences took when they were young. They have, for example, striven to emulate the quantitative exactness of natural sciences without asking whether their own subject-matter is always ripe for such treatment, failing to realize that one does not advance time by moving the hands of the clock. Because physicists cannot speak with stars or electric currents, psychologists have often been hesitant to speak to their human subjects. Or they have taken some selected facts of biology as their model, hoping to derive a scientific account of man from the studies of lower organisms. There are psychologists who would readily acknowledge the reality of conscience or of a sense of honor if they could certify to their presence in oxen and chicks. They are prone to speak in the same breath of rats and men, without clearly acknowledging that the topic of conversation has changed. Under such pressures it is easy to ignore great issues and to become blunted to what is most striking about the subject matter. The temptation arises to allow techniques called scientific to govern thinking and to dictate the range of interest. There result oblique views of man as an animal gone wrong or as an assemblage of mechanical devices. Observing these distortions there are those who are only too ready to conclude that science applied to man has about it an incurable superficiality and that it is insufferably dull in the bargain. Fortunately there is no necessity to equate the attitude of science with narrowness or lack of sensitivity; there is no need to dissolve the psychological baby in the scientific bath. If there must be principles of scientific method, then surely the first to claim our attention is that one should describe phenomena faithfully and allow them to guide the choice of problems and procedures.

If social psychology is to make a contribution to human knowledge, if it is to do more than add footnotes to ideas developed in other fields, it must look freely at its phenomena and examine its foundations. To contribute to this task is the aim of this work. I have attempted to re-examine some basic ideas about man and to clarify the assumptions behind current investigations and propositions about his social nature. Such an inquiry immediately touches on great and persistent issues concerning the needs and capacities of individuals. For social facts have their locus largely in individuals; the psychological study of social facts is the study of individuals in society. It was therefore necessary to start from the existing situation in general psychology. Today the guiding ideas of social psychology stem principally from two movements—behaviorism and psychoanalysis. In tracing the effects of these doctrines I have come to the conclusion that despite the importance of their contributions they have not supplied an adequate foundation for a social psychology, and that their accounts of human motives and intelligence must be re-evaluated.

The point of view of this work is that of gestalt theory; with what success I have established the fruitfulness of gestalt concepts for the problems of social psychology the reader must judge. I hope that he will find them of help in widening his horizon and in deepening his perspective of

the human situation. This starting point accounts for a number of emphases of this work. Social relations at the human level, even the simplest, require emotional and intellectual capacities of a high order. I have tried to call attention to their productive character, which is to my mind also necessary for the understanding of destructive social processes. In this respect I have departed from a widespread trend that comes near to equating social ideas and convictions with illusions and misconceptions. Psychological processes have the extraordinary property of providing us under certain conditions with a knowledge of things and persons. One should not assume that they are generally subjective phantoms, that the world might be seen properly but for people. Also, I have found it necessary to keep in the forefront the human modes of experiencing the world of nature and men, since the social actions of which we will speak are those of conscious beings who act largely in terms of what they understand and feel. More particularly it is my conviction that sound progress requires a clarification of what is unique about social-psychological facts and their investigation on the level at which they reveal their special properties.

A word should be said about what I have not attempted to do. It has not been my intention to write a system of social psychology. The time does not seem ripe for such an undertaking; in any case it is beyond my capacities. My aim has been to bring some problems into sharper view, to seek theoretical and empirical clarification at some points, and where possible to sweep aside misconceptions. Nor does this work deal with all questions of interest in the limitless field of social phenomena; did it not go contrary to usage it would have been appropriate to call it "Chapters in Social Psychology." In referring to the literature I have followed the practice of examining representative investigations extensively rather than referring in passing to all that might be relevant. Within the confines of this volume it unfortunately has not been possible to treat many questions of motivation and learning with the detail they deserve. The reader will find that the discussion concentrates on those aspects of behaviorism and psychoanalysis that have had a direct impact on social psychology, without referring to many other important ideas and divergent trends within these movements. I therefore do not claim to have represented these doctrines in full, although I have striven to do justice to their basic ideas. Finally, the discussion to follow refers to historical matters only cursorily, my main concern being with problems and concepts. For example, Professor Floyd Allport's *Social Psychology* deserves, it seems to me, serious consideration as a statement of a behavioristic orientation that has significantly affected thinking, although I am aware that he does not concur fully with his earlier views.

In the course of this work many have helped me to whom I can only inadequately express my gratitude. My foremost intellectual and personal obligation is to Max Wertheimer. In him a passionate striving for truth was joined to an abiding respect for the human person. Wertheimer en-

couraged me to undertake this work, but no less encouraging were his contributions which in the sphere of psychology struck a blow for human freedom. The reader will find my indebtedness to him on many pages, and the psychologist will see evidence of it in numerous places where he is not specifically mentioned. To Dr. Dorothy Dinnerstein, a student and colleague of mine, I owe a special debt of gratitude. She has commented upon every idea of the first and final versions of the manuscript. I have profited much from her insights, which forced me to reconsider many questions and to alter my thoughts where her understanding was superior to mine. Her incisive ideas have appreciably altered and improved the work at innumerable points. I am greatly indebted to Professor Mary Henle of the New School for Social Research for her lucid and invariably pertinent criticisms of the first version of the manuscript. Professor Daniel Katz of the University of Michigan read the final manuscript. His judicious observations and fair but firm criticisms were of distinct help even where we were not in complete agreement. Professor Carol Creedon of Swarthmore College read a portion of the final manuscript and made numerous suggestions helpful to both content and style. To all these friends, as well as to the host of others whom I cannot name because their writings and words have become merged with mine, I wish to express my deep thankfulness. The reader should understand that I have not been able always to live up to the suggestions and insights of those who have seen this work before publication, and that my errors are not theirs. I must also mention my students, who have been a constant challenge and whose views have become, unknown to them, part of the warp and woof of the succeeding pages.

It is also a pleasure to acknowledge my gratitude to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for granting me two years of freedom from academic duties in the course of which I was able to begin the experimental studies reported in Chapters 7, 15, and 16.

Finally, I am sincerely grateful to the publishers and authors who have so generously permitted me to quote from their publications. Specific acknowledgment is made to each in the list of references at the end of each chapter.

S. E. A.

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