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## Henri Tajfel, Peretz Bernstein and 'Der Antisemitismus'

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Henri Tajfel, Peretz Bernstein and the history of Der Antisemitismus.

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In 1923, Fritz Bernstein, a German Jew in his thirties, completed a book about the psychological and sociological roots of anti-Semitism. At the time Bernstein was working as a coffee trader in the Netherlands. He specifically wanted to find a German publisher for his book, but he struggled to find one. As a businessman, he had few connections with the world of academics, and he found that most publishers of that time believed that the topic of anti-Semitism would not attract a wide German readership. The book was eventually published in 1926 by Jüdischer Verlag under the title of Der Antisemitismus als eine Gruppenerscheinung (literally ‘Anti-Semitism as a Group Phenomenon’). Jüdischer Verlag was a Jewish publishing house, established in 1902, and, in the main, it published pro-Zionist books, including those by notable writers such as Theodor Herzl, Chaim Weizmann and the poet Hayim Bialik.

The more mainstream publishers had been commercially correct to treat Bernstein’s manuscript with caution. They had not overlooked a potential best seller, for only about three hundred copies were sold in Germany. Bernstein personally bought up the remaining copies to distribute in the Netherlands (van Praag, 2009). The book seemed to fall between potential markets: the title suggested that the work was an academic, sociological tome and so general

readers were put off. However, academics in Germany and elsewhere were not going to be impressed by a book that had been written by a businessman and that contained no scholarly footnotes or references. Then as now, academic specialists tend to look down on amateurs who create their own theories from scratch. On the other hand, any general readers in Germany, who were interested in anti-Semitism, would have wanted something more dramatic than Bernstein was willing to provide – maybe a tract ‘showing’ how, throughout history, Jews, by their actions, weaknesses of character and plots to take over the world, had brought misfortunes upon themselves and upon everyone else.

That might have been the end of the story of Bernstein’s somewhat obscure book but it was not. The history of his book is worth telling for reasons that will become clearer later.

Bernstein emigrated to Palestine in 1936, and unlike many of his family he escaped the Holocaust. In Palestine, he worked as a journalist, editing the paper Ha-Boker (‘The Morning’), and he became prominent in Zionist politics. Whereas many Zionist activists of that time were politically on the left, Bernstein was on the right, especially regarding economic issues (Sofer, 2009). His wing of the pre-independence General Zionists was to form the basis for the right-wing Liberal Party. Bernstein was one of the thirty-six signatories of Declaration of Independence for the new State of Israel in 1948 and he became Minister of Trade in the first provisional government. He died in 1970.

Bernstein was a friend of the American Zionist leader, Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, who persuaded him after the war that his old book on anti-Semitism still carried an important message and should be translated into English. The New York based Philosophical Library, which specialised in publishing works by European intellectuals such as Sartre, Einstein and de Beauvoir, agreed to publish an English translation. It is hardly surprising that Bernstein,

then deeply preoccupied with the politics and security of the new state, had no time to revise his book for the second edition. He realized, however, that the measured tone, which he had adopted while writing in the early 1920s, was no longer suitable. But rather than re-writing the book and making wholesale changes to bring it up-to-date, he agreed to write a short epilogue. He did this in 1949 although, in the event, Bernstein's epilogue would be published as a prologue when the new edition, appeared in 1951 under the title of Jew Hate as a Sociological Problem. The book was published under the author's Hebrew name - Peretz F. Bernstein.

Bernstein's prologue makes fascinating reading for anyone interested in the relations between social psychological ideas and the passage of history. Not only did Bernstein reflect on the history of his own book and his initial difficulties in finding a publisher but also on the recent history that inevitably made his book belong to earlier, more innocent times. In addition, Bernstein's prologue touched on the more technical aspects of the relations between psychological (or sociological) understanding and historical understanding. In writing on these matters, Bernstein would be laying the groundwork for his book's most significant brush with the history of academic social psychology. This would occur almost thirty years later, when Henri Tajfel, one of the most important European social psychologists of the post-war years and the inspiration for what would become known as Social Identity Theory, would write a short appreciation of Bernstein's book.

### Bernstein's 1951 Prologue

In the prologue for the English edition, Bernstein reflected on his book's "rather awkward" structure, for in essence Der Antisemitismus contained two separate parts (2009, p.7) <sup>1</sup>. In the first part Bernstein presented a general theory of group hatred and in the second part he

discussed the specific issue of anti-Semitism in the light of the general theory outlined in the first part. Bernstein explained in his prologue that he had not wanted to treat anti-Semitism as if it were unique but he wanted to analyse it as an example of more the general phenomenon of group enmity. To do this, he needed to draw upon a suitable sociological or psychological framework that would explain group enmity in general. However, he had been unable to find such a framework, and, as a result, he had invented his own.

The German professors of the time might not have appreciated Bernstein's theorising, but today his talent for creating innovative social psychological ideas is clear. In the first part, he dismissed the idea that the Jews might be responsible for the strong enmity that they seemed to evoke throughout their history. If hatred of Jews was not the product of Jewish actions, then its source must be sought in other factors, which Bernstein termed 'sociological'. In modern academic terms, we would call these factors 'social psychological', for Bernstein was combining psychological and social aspects. Whether one calls his approach 'sociological' or 'social psychological', one thing was clear: it was not historical. Bernstein was not looking for the causes of anti-Semitism in specific historical circumstances. He was not, for example, explaining mediaeval anti-Semitism in terms of old religious beliefs or twentieth century anti-Semitism in terms of the insecurities of modern life. Instead, he linked anti-Semitism generally to a very basic, universal condition of human life – the need for humans to live in social groups.

Bernstein's argument was very similar to the frustration-aggression theory which was originally proposed by group of psychologists from Yale University just before the Second World War (Dollard et al, 1939) and which was to be revised by Leonard Berkowitz in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Berkowitz, 1969 and 1974). In Der Antisemitismus, Bernstein noted

that we often feel anger which cannot freely express against those who have provoked that anger. Bernstein offered the hypothetical example of a merchant who loses a contract to a business rival but who needs to remain on good terms with that rival. It was a situation that Bernstein would know well as a coffee-dealer in Rotterdam, for one of his close business rivals was his own father-in-law. Bernstein postulated that if the merchant, who has lost out to the rival, could not be directly hostile to that rival, nevertheless his anger “must be vented in some way and in some direction”. This is because “the outbreak of a hostile feeling cannot be totally suppressed” but instead it “seeks an outlet” (2009, p. 84). In consequence the merchant will find other ways to express his feelings of anger – for instance he might find fault with his employees, even provoking them to make mistakes “in order to find a pretext for ventilating his anger” (p. 84).

There, in Bernstein’s account, written in the early nineteen twenties, is the essence of the frustration-aggression theory, which many years later would be used to provide a scapegoat theory of prejudice. The assumption is that frustration produces anger and that, if this anger cannot be directly expressed against the frustrator, it will not dissipate but will seek another target. The idea can be used as a model of prejudice, whereby a group directs its anger at a scapegoat, who is not the real cause of its frustrations. There were, however, three main differences between Bernstein’s account and that which the frustration-aggression theorists would formulate. First, the frustration-aggression theorists would express their ideas in technical, psychological terms; by contrast Bernstein, apart from using some semi-psychoanalytic terms such as ‘projection’, stuck with non-technical language. Second, the frustration-aggression theorists, as experimental psychologists, tended to cite experimental studies in support of their hypotheses. Bernstein was not bothered with the results of experimental studies and did not feel that his theory was in need of experimental validation.

The third major difference between Bernstein's work and that of the frustration-aggression theorists is probably the most important, at least with regard to current debates within social psychology. Bernstein did not reduce the problems of group enmity to personal feelings of hostility, as some of the later frustration-aggression theorists would do. Bernstein's own hypothetical example of the merchant suggested that this was the path he might take: the frustrated merchant complained about his ungrateful workers, and this process had been set in motion by the personal accident of his failing to obtain a contract. However, Bernstein argued that prejudices against groups did not originate in the personal vagaries of the hater, for there was something systematic about the phenomenon of group enmity, as compared with interpersonal enmity. Group enmity was, in Bernstein's view, the consequence of the very existence of groups. Living within a group inevitably produces tensions but, in order to preserve the group, there must be restrictions on expressing feelings of anger against fellow members of the group. In consequence, enmity, which could not be expressed internally, would build up within a group; and eventually this reservoir of enmity would be projected onto those outside the group. It was because Bernstein was linking group enmity to the very formation of groups, rather than to the psychology of its individual members, that he considered his approach to be 'sociological'.

In effect, Bernstein was proposing an explanation of group enmity that was universal, in that it applied to all historical ages and to all types of society. He was suggesting that so long as humans lived in groups, then hatred of other groups was inevitable. According to Bernstein, it was important to understand this universal point if one wanted to understand any specific, historically particular, form of group hatred. The structure of Der Antisemitismus, as Bernstein wrote in the prologue, reflected the assumption that anti-Semitism was "a very

small, though specific, aspect of a general phenomenon” (p. 7). He had made this clear in the conclusion of his book, when he had argued that it was “erroneous” to consider anti-Semitism to be unique, for all the characteristics of anti-Semitism “can be observed in other group enmities” (p. 288). Because Jews had lived for centuries as outsiders, it was inevitable that their more powerful neighbours would direct their enmity against them. Jews, therefore, had been convenient targets for all the built-up enmity, but any other group of outsiders would have sufficed.

After the war, Bernstein still defended his strategy of seeking to explain the particular phenomenon of anti-Semitism in terms of general factors. As he wrote in 1949, both parts of his book had been vital, for the general was “necessary to explain the specific” (p. 7). He maintained that, in taking this perspective, he had been adopting a scientific approach to the study of anti-Semitism, “somewhat along the lines practised in scientific research of physical and chemical processes” (pp. 9-10).

Nowadays, it has become second nature for social psychologists to seek to explain the particular in terms of the general. Experimentalists will declare their scientific credentials and, for them, that means more than using scientific methods (such as experiments): it also means using universal concepts in order to explain specific phenomena. For example, social psychologists tend not to treat anti-Semitism, or Islamophobia or hatred of Romanies as historically specific phenomena, but to treat all as instances of something more general – ‘group prejudice’. Social psychologists will then try to formulate general theories of prejudice which they will apply to the historically specific instances (see, for example, Brown, 1995). No matter whether such theories stress the importance of frustration, the effects of identifying with a group or the tendency to exaggerate the differences between



groups, social psychologists will assume that these sorts of factors will lead to prejudice, regardless of cultural or historical context. In this regard, the strategy, which the young Bernstein intuitively pursued, has become standard practice within social psychology.

Although Bernstein defended his approach, he also felt, in the aftermath of the war, that it was no longer suitable for analysing anti-Semitism. He began his prologue by stating that he had written his book in 1923 and that it had been published in 1926: "I mention those dates to explain the painstaking suppression of the emotional moment observed throughout the book" (p. 1). It was obvious why a researcher might suppress their emotions if they were approaching a topic which touched them personally. If they did not detach themselves, they might become too emotionally bound up in their topic. A Jew, researching anti-Semitism in 1923, needed to step back from their feelings in order to approach their topic in a detached spirit, seeing anti-Semitism, for instance, as an instance of something much more general.

Bernstein, writing in 1949, asserted that during the early 1920s, such an elimination of personal feeling "was still possible". By 1951, it had become impossible. The intervening years had brought "anti-Jewish persecution and mass slaughter to an unprecedented degree of fierceness" and this meant that even the most strenuous attempt at "scientific detachment would have been in vain" (p.1). With the benefit of hindsight his earlier detachment now seemed strange and to persist with it would be, to say the least, inappropriate.

Bernstein's words were precise and significant. They indicated that the balance between the particular and the general – between the sociological and the historical - had fatally shifted. What had changed this balance was not a scientific insight or an empirical finding, but it was the events of history, which had been, to quote his words, "unprecedented". Those events

would be diminished if they were treated merely as instances of ‘group prejudice’ or ‘projected dislike’. What was unprecedented would then appear as if it had common precedents.

Bernstein was saying that after the Holocaust it was no longer possible to contemplate anti-Semitism as one might have done twenty-five years previously, when a young Jew like himself was innocently unaware of what was about to happen. If, after the war, one treated those events dispassionately, classifying them under general categories like a botanist classifying plants, then one would be displaying a failure of understanding - historical understanding, scientific understanding and, above all, moral understanding. No general category could possibly contain the savage particularity of what happened.

#### Henri Tajfel and another German edition of Bernstein

If that was the end of the story, Bernstein’s book would have remained little more than a passing curiosity. The sales of the post-war English language edition were not good. There were a number of reviews, including several from academics, but overall the book had no impact on either sociology or social psychology – or on public opinion generally. American researchers, examining prejudice and anti-Semitism, preferred to cite the work by Adorno et al (1951) into authoritarianism or Kurt Lewin’s topological theorising, which was even more abstract, and certainly much more abstruse, than the first part of Bernstein’s book (Lewin, 1936 and 1948). Post-war social psychologists felt no need to consult the work of an amateur, who a generation earlier had speculated without the methodological benefits of a laboratory and without the disciplinary benefits of a university position.

This is not a story with a happy ending about a book that, after many years of neglect, was suddenly rediscovered and hailed by experts around the world as a classic work of genius. This has not happened yet and probably never will. If one looks on Google Scholar, one will find that the 1951 edition has only been cited seven times, while the original German edition of 1926 has been cited seventeen times. Even allowing for the incompleteness of Google Scholar, twenty-four citations in eighty-five years hardly indicates that Bernstein's book has made an impact. And yet there is something odd about this tale of neglect. After it had published the English edition, the Philosophical Library received a letter from one of their other authors, congratulating them for recognizing the value of Bernstein's book and praising it as "a classical masterwork" (quoted van Praag, 2009, p. xiv). The letter writer was Albert Einstein. How many other social psychological works did Einstein praise as masterpieces? And how many of those have been ignored by virtually all social psychologists?

But there was to be contact with a major social psychologist. Over fifty years after the first edition, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, an academic German publisher based in Darmstadt, decided that it was time to try for another German edition. The publishers thought that a new edition would benefit from having the backing of a notable academic. So, in May 1977, Rita Orgel wrote to Henri Tajfel on behalf of the publishers, asking him to write a preface for the new edition.<sup>2</sup> Tajfel was Professor of Social Psychology at Bristol University, and one of the major figures in European social psychology, active in establishing the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology (Moscovici and Marková, 2006). He was pioneering a new way for understanding intergroup relations and group prejudice, concentrating on processes of thinking rather than processes of feeling. As the title to one of Tajfel's most famous papers indicated, he was exploring 'the cognitive aspects of prejudice' (Tajfel, 1981). In so doing, he was opposing the frustration-aggression approach, as well as

those Freudian approaches that saw normal social life producing reservoirs of repressed aggression which needed to be projected onto outsiders.

It might seem somewhat strange that the publishers should have chosen to approach someone like Tajfel, whose intellectual position was prima facie at odds with Bernstein's.

Nevertheless, Tajfel immediately accepted Orgel's invitation and he asked her whether she could send him a copy of the 1951 English translation, since it would be easier for him to read that version rather than "rereading" the original German. Tajfel's choice of words implied that he had read Bernstein's book in the original, although he was not to mention this again in his correspondence with the publishers or in the foreword that he eventually wrote.

Problems soon arose between Tajfel and the publishers. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft had expected Tajfel to write his preface in German, but Tajfel insisted that he would write it in English and that the publishers should pay for the costs of translation – something that the publishers were reluctant to do. Their budget was small, Orgel responded, and they were intending to print only around three hundred copies - coincidentally the same number of the first edition that had been sold in Germany. Clearly, the new edition was not expected to fare any better in Germany than the original.

The publishers were also unable to find a copy of the English translation to send Tajfel, who continued to maintain that he could not start writing his preface until he received one. In February 1978, there was a change of publishers: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft passed the project onto Jüdische Verlag, who would publish the book under the auspices of the much larger Athenäum publishing company. Once again, only a Jewish publisher could be found to publish Der Antisemitismus in Germany. The new publishers also failed to locate an English

copy to send Tajfel and, in the end, Athenäum advised him to obtain a copy through his university library. There was to be further wrangling between Tajfel and Athenäum, including arguments about the small fee that Tajfel had been promised for his preface and that the publishers were hoping that he might waive.

In January 1979, Tajfel finally sent the publishers an eight page manuscript in English, entitled simply 'Foreword'. It actually appeared as an epilogue (Nachwort) at the end of the book, when the new edition came out in 1980, the same year in which a Hebrew translation of Der Antisemitismus also appeared. This new German edition did not contain Bernstein's 1951 Prologue, which, contrary Tajfel's foreword, had actually been written as an epilogue but was published as a foreword. The new German edition did not attract a wider readership, certainly not the readership that Einstein thought the book deserved.<sup>3</sup>

Despite Tajfel's commendation, the book was hardly noticed by social psychologists. It seems as if the neglect of Bernstein was contagious. Most of Tajfel's other writings, especially those which he published towards the end of his life, have been richly cited. As far as I am aware, none of Tajfel's students or followers has quoted the preface. Even articles which have examined Tajfel's ideas in relation to anti-Semitism have not done so (Billig, 1996). The lack of interest in the short piece is exemplified by the bibliography of Tajfel's writings which Brown, Schipper and Wandersleben (1996) compiled for the volume published as a tribute to Tajfel (Robinson, 1996). They divided Tajfel's publications into three categories: 'Intergroup relations', 'Social perception and related topics', and 'Other publications'. The preface was put into 'Other publications', as if to separate from his writings on the central themes of his social psychological work.

Tajfel often told his students that he came into social psychology in order to understand how genocide was possible. However, none of his technical papers directly approached the topic of genocide in general or the Holocaust in particular (Billig, 2002). But there, virtually unnoticed amidst ‘Other publications’, was one of the few papers in which Tajfel discussed, albeit briefly, the issue that was central to his whole work. For anyone wishing to understand Tajfel’s thinking, the preface remains an important document. There is an additional reason for discussing it here. Tajfel’s preface shows an understanding of the complex relations between history and social psychological theory – an issue about which Tajfel was thinking deeply in the years before his death in 1982.

### Henri Tajfel, Social Identity and History

In recent years, Tajfel’s name has become synonymous with ‘Social Identity Theory’ (SIT), which is currently one of the most widely used theoretical frameworks in social psychology. Put in over-simplified terms, the theory suggests that people seek to identify with groups that provide them with positive social identities, and that they often achieve such positive identities by distancing themselves from comparable outgroups (for an early, and non-simplified, version of the theory, see Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Anyone, who knows Tajfel only as the formulator of Social Identity Theory, might find his foreword to Bernstein’s book somewhat perplexing. Nowadays, it has become common for social psychologists, along with other social scientists, to package their work into labelled theoretical approaches, typically turning the labels into acronyms in order to promote their approaches (Billig, in press). Gerd Gigerenzer (2010) has claimed that psychologists treat theories rather like toothbrushes: no-one likes to use someone else’s. A modern social psychologist, who commends an old, forgotten book, would be likely to praise it for influencing their own thinking or for being an

early, imperfect variety of their own approach. Tajfel, however, did not claim Bernstein to be a social identity theorist avant la letter and, as we shall see, he was not entirely comfortable with the term ‘social identity theory’. In any case, Tajfel had much deeper reasons to link himself with Bernstein.

Certainly, Tajfel’s approach differed from that proposed by Bernstein, especially since Tajfel believed that it was a serious mistake to explain prejudice against groups in terms of individual feelings of frustration. He criticised the frustration-aggression theory in his important paper ‘Experiments in a vacuum’, which he included in his book Human Groups and Social Categories. In a caustic comment, Tajfel pointed out that the evidence for the frustration-aggression theory came from experiments conducted on frustrated rats or from “creating ingenious laboratory equivalents of a man berating his wife after having been reprimanded by his boss”; none of these studies, Tajfel continued, “can be relevant to a confirmation or invalidation of the hypotheses as they might apply to any social setting of intergroup relations (1981, p. 20, emphasis in original).

In his foreword to Der Antisemitismus, Tajfel noted that Bernstein also seemed to draw inferences from individual frustration to wider social prejudice. However, Tajfel noted that Bernstein went much further by linking frustration with the structural properties of groups and this was “something which was never done by the Yale psychologists” (Tajfel, 1980, p. 6: quotations and page numbers are taken from Tajfel’s English manuscript for the foreword). According to Tajfel, Bernstein stressed that what needs to be explained “is the collective phenomenon of hostility between groups which share a common and structured social and historical reality” (p. 6, emphasis in original). That, in Tajfel’s view, was one of the reasons why Bernstein so long ago had been able to write “a book which...keeps so much of its value

today” (1980, p. 6). Nevertheless, Tajfel was sceptical of Bernstein’s explanation about the origins of group enmity. Bernstein had assumed that love and hate were two basic emotions and that the “quantities” of one emotion could be used in the discharge of the other emotion. Tajfel wrote that he “personally” did not believe that Bernstein’s theory “will stand the test of further advances in the biological and social sciences”, although it was “no better and no worse” than many other theories that biologists and social scientists were proposing (p. 5).

That leaves a problem: how could Tajfel commend a book whose basic theoretical premise he thought would not stand the test of time and which, in many respects, resembled theories that Tajfel rejected? The very question seems to assume that, when it comes to understanding the social world, formulating theories is more important than sharing a common history.

Bernstein and Tajfel were both European Jews, who had managed to survive the war. Tajfel had moved from Poland to France two years before the outbreak of the war and, having joined the French army and been captured by German troops, he fortuitously managed to escape death in prisoner-of-war camps (Jahoda, 2004).

The underlying point of Tajfel’s foreword was not to promote his theoretical position at the expense of Bernstein’s but to reflect on the history and the understanding of that history, which they shared. An abstract, universal theory of the sort that Bernstein had proposed in the first part of his book was inappropriate for understanding that history. Tajfel began his foreword with Bernstein’s 1951 prologue, which Tajfel describes, as an apology, phrased as “a question as deeply felt as it is desperate: how could anyone have foreseen in 1923 the horror that was to come so soon?” (1980, p. 1). The unimaginable had happened and “no human endeavour, in art or in science, could ever hope to reflect, understand or explain the enormity of the suffering and of the crimes” (p. 1). Tajfel recalled watching Charlie Chaplin’s



film 'The Great Dictator' in France around the time that Bernstein must have been writing his preface. He had to leave the cinema, unable to watch Chaplin's "restrained account" of Nazism. It was no good telling himself that Chaplin, when he made the film before the war, could not have possibly imagined what was to come. Similarly, Bernstein's dispassionate theorising in 1923 was unbearably inappropriate "when set against the enormity of what had really happened" (Tajfel, 1980, p. 1).

Tajfel's point was that one cannot blame the young Bernstein or the young Chaplin for failing to predict an unimaginable future, but those with hindsight must treat the past with respect. This means not treating the exceptional moments of history as equivalent to the more mundane, as if all historical events can be fitted into the same general categories. Although Tajfel took up psychology in order to understand how genocide occurred, he never presented his ideas about social identity and the nature of intergroup prejudice as a theory to explain the Holocaust (Billig, 2002). Indeed, Tajfel developed his theory principally to explain strategies open to groups who have been excluded from power and who, like Black Power activists or feminists, strive to develop a collective, positive identity as a means of changing social reality (Reicher, Spears and Haslam, 2010). This was no oversight. It would be inappropriate to 'explain' the Holocaust, using the same set of terms that 'explain' more ordinary types of group identification, especially those that lead to positive social actions.

Imagine Tajfel, or anyone else, applying the main concepts of social identity theory to explain the Holocaust. For instance, an identity theorist might speculate: the rise of Nazism occurred because the Germans wished to develop their sense of positive identity and to differentiate themselves from Jews and other non-Aryans, in ways that resemble the ways that participants in a number of laboratory experiments have made their self-identity more

positive. The statement in a literal sense might be true, but it would be the sort of truth that is so empty of content that it tells us nothing. Actually, it is a truth that is so beside the point in its triviality that it constitutes an untruth.

Indeed, the Holocaust is one of several historical events that resist explanation, for to 'explain' the Holocaust would be to risk explaining it away. That, in essence, was what Bernstein was saying in 1949 when he reflected how wrong it would have been to adopt once more his earlier dispassionate tone and to treat the Holocaust as just another effect of group formation. Even when writing in 1923, Bernstein was aware of the dangers of explaining the unforgiveable. He wrote that if one tries to enumerate the causative factors behind a crime, one risks diminishing the sense of the guilt that should be attached to the criminal for "tout comprendre est tout pardonner" (Bernstein, 2009, p. 98). After the war, that would be unthinkable.

### Universal Psychology and Historical Particularity

As a social psychologist Tajfel was never concerned to formulate technically proficient experiments or theories for their own sake and in the years before his death he was becoming deeply uneasy about the direction that social psychologists were taking. In his important paper 'Experiments in a vacuum', Tajfel argued that social psychology was becoming increasingly trivial. Many social psychologists were conducting trivial experiments, often on the assumption that experiments provide 'pure' environments in which theory can be tested. Tajfel argued there can be no 'pure' experiments, for participants will always bring their culture and its history with them into the laboratory. Indeed, far from trying to control that

culture and history by vainly trying to create 'pure' environments, social psychologists, according to Tajfel, should be seeking to understand cultural history.

Tajfel stressed that if social psychologists are to produce meaningful theories, then they should try to situate social psychological factors within particular cultural and historical contexts. He gave the example of the art historian E.H. Gombrich, who adapted psychological concepts from the Gestaltists and particularly from Frederic Bartlett. In his book Art and Illusion, Gombrich (1960) argued that artists used 'stereotypes', with representatives from different artistic schools constructing and employing different visual stereotypes. Tajfel noted that Gombrich could hardly stop there, as if he had solved the problems of art simply by saying that artists used different stereotypes. Historians of art, when studying particular groups of artists, must be familiar with what the artists "intended to communicate, how they wished to communicate it, and why they chose their particular idioms" (Tajfel, 1981, p. 26).

In short, the historian, whether of art or society, must get down to the particularities of the world; otherwise they will end up with bland generalities. General categories, such as 'stereotypes' or 'attributions' or 'group identity' are only valuable if they enable us to see the particular features in new ways. The problem is that social psychologists typically favour the general over particular. They treat their universal concepts as primary, using the particularities of the world to serve the categories of their theories, rather than vice versa. In their hands, general concepts become greedy concepts, devouring the individual, unique features of the social world. The result is less, not greater, theoretical understanding.

Paradoxically, Tajfel, who is noted for his experimental work, was criticising experimentalism in ways similar to noted anti-experimentalists like Kenneth Gergen (1973), who argued that all social psychological findings are historical. In fact, some critical theorists today acknowledge Tajfel as a critical psychologist on the basis of his paper 'Experiments in a vacuum' (e.g., Calucci and Montali, 2012). On the other hand, many experimentalists have tended to overlook the argument of that paper. In fact, the paper is not even listed in the bibliography which Brown et al (1996) compiled.

The philosophy of formulating pure theories of social psychology has been prevalent amongst social identity theorists, who have sought to work out the relations between a widening list of universal variables relating to 'social identity', 'social categorization' and 'social differentiation' (see, for example, Abrams and Hogg, 1990; Brewer and Hewstone, 2004; Capozza and Brown, 2000; Ellemers, Spears and Doosje, 1999). To give just one example of the way that Social Identity Theory is being used to make universal statements, here is a comment from one of the theory's many advocates: "SIT assumes that we show all kinds of 'group' behaviour, such as solidarity within our groups and discrimination against out-groups as part of social identity processes, with the aim to achieve positive social self-esteem and self-enhancement" (Treppe, 2006, p. 256). It is as if the complexities of the world – "all kinds" of complexities - are being reduced to the simple, universal motive of achieving positive social self-esteem.

In some of his final writings Tajfel expressed his concern with this sort of development. In the concluding chapter of his edited book Social Identity and Intergroup Relations, he tactfully pointed out gaps in the work of his former student John Turner, who was to develop the theory of self-categorization (Turner, 1982; Turner et al, 1987; see also Reicher et al,

2010). Turner, in examining how individuals form groups through their sense of self-identity, started with the subjective views of individuals. According to Tajfel, this perspective “leaves out a preliminary stage that might perhaps be referred to as the pre-history of group formation” (1982, pp. 502-3). This stage of ‘pre-history’ was, of course, very much part of wider history - the history of economic and political relations, as well as the history of myths and beliefs. Tajfel’s point was that the decisions, which individuals take about their sense of identity, should not be separated from this history.

In one of his last writings, Tajfel complained that some social psychologists, including those developing his work, were over-simplifying the history and function of social stereotypes by explaining them in terms of individual’s needs for a positive identity. He wrote that “the blame must be firmly assigned to an over-extension of what has come to be known as the ‘social identity’ theory” (Tajfel, 1984, p. 699). The use of quotation marks around ‘social identity’ indicates his discomfort the label and the way it was being used. Here Tajfel was underlining the importance of social myths and their social power. He wrote that questions about social identity are “to some extent represented in the so-called ‘social identity’ perspective, but social identity is not enough”, for issues about identity must be considered in relation to the creation and diffusion of social myths (1984, p. 713). Tajfel discussed how social myths can be used, in times of conflict to sanction extreme actions. The sort of violence, which would be considered criminal if used against individuals, then becomes acceptable, even demanded, when it is pursued for the sake of the group against its ‘enemies’. He added: “examples are unnecessary for anyone who is familiar with even a small part of the history of the present century” (1984, p. 708).

Tajfel was hinting at the history, which he experienced at first hand and which he described briefly but movingly in the opening pages of Human Groups and Social Categories (Tajfel, 1981, pp. 1ff). His remark certainly distances him from those social psychologists who assume that analysts can only trust events, which have been created in laboratories under controlled conditions. Regarding his statements about individual and collective violence, Tajfel was not saying 'we must conduct an experiment to see whether this is true'. He knew it was true: the evidence from history was more than sufficient.

### History and Anti-Semitism

Tajfel's reservations about universal social psychological theories could be applied equally to Bernstein's theory of group enmity. In ascribing the causes of anti-Semitism to group formation Bernstein had been simultaneously explaining too much and too little. In very general terms Bernstein's theory might seem to explain why anti-Semitism existed in Germany during the 1920s, but that theory could not explain why such anti-Semitism should have increased in intensity over the following years and resulted in a scale of violence beyond imagining. The existence of social groups – or of social identities or of residues of frustration – cannot possibly explain Auschwitz, without explaining it away.

So, why was Tajfel so keen to commend Bernstein's work? The answer does not lie in the nature of social identity theory or even in Tajfel's unique contribution to the social psychology of prejudice. It lies in Tajfel's knowledge about anti-Semitism and his deep fear that history in the late 1970s might be about to repeat itself. And if it did repeat itself, the result would not be, as Marx once famously commented, that tragedy would be repeated as comedy.

In his foreword, Tajfel quoted Bernstein who in his own prologue had talked about his early difficulties in finding a publisher. Back in the 1920s, according to Bernstein, there had been an aversion to discussing anti-Semitism. Tajfel then commented: “We have now come back to where Bernstein had started from” (1980, p. 2). After the end of the Second World War, he claimed, there had been a great deal of writing about anti-Semitism, and there had been no way of avoiding the subject. However, now in the late 1970s and early 1980s “the ‘aversion’ is back with us” (p. 2). Some outward forms of anti-Semitism were changing, with old ideas about Jewish conspiracies now appearing as ‘anti-Zionism’ and the extreme right often employing codes to avoid directly mentioning Jews: “Although it would be preposterous to claim that all anti-‘Zionists’ are anti-Semitic, there is very little doubt that the new terminology and the Middle East conflict have caused much old wine to be poured into new bottles” (p. 3). Tajfel feared that there was a parallel between the late 1970s and the 1920s, for people were being faced “with a combination of circumstances very similar to that which Bernstein had to overcome when he tried to publish his book in the early twenties” (1980, p. 3).

If it had proved inappropriate in the 1920s to adopt a dispassionate tone, then, in the light of recent history, it would be just as inappropriate to adopt one fifty years later. Anti-Semitism could never be just another outcome group formation or an expression of the search for a positive social identity; certainly it never could be so for Jews of Tajfel’s and Bernstein’s backgrounds. The Tajfel archives, now housed in the Wellcome Trust Library, reveal the depth of Tajfel’s concern to combat new forms of fascism and anti-Semitism. He was a signatory member of the left-wing Anti-Nazi League, which advocated directed action against the far-right groups of the time.

Tajfel was aware that the writers of history can be important for reproducing old myths in new forms. The archive reveals his concern in 1980 about a booklet, entitled Arab-Israeli Conflict, which the Schools Council History Project had produced to be circulated in British schools.<sup>4</sup> Tajfel wrote to the publishers to complain that the booklet was biased in its representation of the past. Tajfel specifically objected that the booklet contained no statement of the scale of the Holocaust and its impact on Jews; he also objected that the booklet ignored the fact that many of the post-war immigrants to Israel had come from Arab countries. Tajfel copied his letter to a number of prominent academics and politicians. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin wrote back to offer his support, praising Tajfel for his fight against bigotry. Tajfel replied to Berlin saying that both the far left and far right were producing “the kind of rumblings that scare me out of my wits” (letter, 31.3.1980).

The issue is not whether Tajfel was correct in seeing a parallel between the anti-Semitism of the 1920s and that of the late 1970s and early 1980s. There are clear differences as well as similarities. Nevertheless, we can see why Tajfel sought to understand the present in terms of the past and, to do that, he could not simply put his faith in a universal theory. He understood that no social psychological theory, however much laboratory support its supporters could muster in its favour, could replace the need to understand the particularities of the past.

The present essay has sought to support this point, but not by producing general, and therefore essentially non-historical, arguments about relations between psychological and historical knowledge – and how social psychologists need to maintain a historical consciousness. To have expressed the argument in general terms would have meant expressing it non-historically. By contrast, the point has been pursued by telling the singular story of a book. This story has encompassed the history of its author and of Henri Tajfel, who



knew that the enormity of their experiences, and those of their families, communities and that generation of European Jewry, could not be contained within even the best of theories. For those like Bernstein and Tajfel, the particularities of the past would ever haunt their view of the present.

It is often assumed that history belongs to the winners but academic history cannot be left to the winners, who they will all too readily write the history of their disciplines in ways that celebrate current ways of thinking. Self-congratulatory histories will only tell half the story and maybe not even the most important half. As Tajfel's tribute to Bernstein shows, we can learn much from the history of those who have been unjustly neglected. We can recover forgotten ideas, which in Bernstein's case were substantial ideas, and we can confront the unfairness of history. In re-telling the story of someone, whose intellectual achievement has been largely overlooked, and whose background was destroyed, we are able to make, by our act of remembrance, a small protest against that unfairness.

## Endnotes

1. All quotations from Bernstein's book are taken from the 2009 edition, published by Transaction publishers of Rutgers University, and containing an excellent introduction written by the Dutch economist, Bernard van Praag.
2. Details of Tajfel's correspondence with the German publishers are contained in the Tajfel archives, the Wellcome Library, London, in box PSY/TAJ/1/3/4.

3. There was to be a further English language edition in 2009, with yet another title (and curiously one which did not contain the word 'anti-Semitism'): The Social Roots of Discrimination: the case of the Jews.
4. See box PSY/TAJ/6/50

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