

# The persistence of Freud

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**D**URING the 1950s and early 1960s the image of the psychologist in popular culture was that of a psychoanalyst – usually male, bearded and speaking with a heavy accent. When I went off to study psychology, along with many others I expected to hear lectures on the works of Dr Freud and to be taught how to uncover the secret meanings of dreams. It was a shock, then, to discover that psychology was about rats, electric shocks and IQ tests. If the lecturers mentioned Freud, it was with a sneer and a dismissive wave of the hand.

I was fortunate that, during my final year at Bristol University, Henri Tajfel arrived to teach social psychology. Here was someone with a wider vision than rat mazes and nonsense syllables. His lectures may not have been easy to follow, but they were riveting. He would draw upon anthropology, history and his personal experience to explore the psychological roots of prejudice. I was to be doubly fortunate. When I graduated, Tajfel offered me the chance to work as his research assistant and to pursue a doctorate in experimental social psychology.

Henri was a profoundly original thinker. He firmly opposed the Freudian turn in social psychology. To understand human irrationality – and he had witnessed the depths of irrationality in Nazi-occupied



**MICHAEL BILLIG** with his personal reflections.

Europe – one did not need to assume irrational motives. Mass prejudice, he argued, could not be explained away in terms of a personality syndrome, such as the ‘authoritarian personality’. Tajfel’s work stressed that groups do not engage in collective madness because their members had unhappy childhoods, but because they divide the social world into ‘them’ and ‘us’, and then tend to believe the worst about ‘them’ and the best about ‘us’.

At the time, to be frank, I didn’t realise how special it was to be studying at Bristol under Henri Tajfel’s guidance. I naively assumed that all universities had their inspiring figures. I can now see that he was laying down the intellectual roots for the ‘cognitive social psychology’, years before anyone thought of using that label. The premise was that social phenomena, such as stereotyping and group identity, should be explained in terms of their cognitive or thoughtful, dimensions. The rush to find unconscious motives was, in Tajfel’s view, intellectually and politically misguided.

Yet, Henri was not the sort of intellectual to stick to a position simply because he had taken it. I remember a conversation, which had a great impact on me. I was moving away from experimentalism and was studying British fascism. We talked about the persistence of anti-Semitism and the oddity of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. That led us to discuss the brilliant historical detective work of Norman Cohn, whose 1967 book *Warrant for Genocide* had traced the origins of the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. The *Protocols* was a Russian forgery that anti-Semites, then and now, claim as proof of a Jewish (or Zionist) conspiracy to dominate the world.

Henri said how much he admired Cohn’s book, except for the last chapter. In that chapter, Cohn had switched from historian to psychoanalyst, in an attempt to explain why conspiracy theories appealed to hidden motives at times of crisis. Henri said that, of course, he couldn’t agree with any such Freudian explanation. Then he

paused. But maybe, he went on, some beliefs are so incredible, that we do need a psychology of the irrational. Perhaps there was no other way to understand why such a preposterous forgery as the *Protocols* could have been taken so seriously and became a justification for genocide in so-called civilised Europe.

In my early research work, I followed the Bristol line with respect to psychoanalytic theory. The cognitive dimensions could amply explain patterns of widespread social belief: there was no need to assume underlying, unconscious structures. Yet, Henri's remark stuck with me. I found myself reading Freud.

*Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (Freud, 1921/1985) was one of the first books by Freud that I read seriously. I remember being amazed at the way Freud analysed social groups. I had never encountered such a writer. Each chapter seemed to provide an account that would have satisfied most social psychologists. He outlined why group members identify with leaders, and then why they identify with each other. After each such chapter, he would state that he still had not explained the phenomenon properly.

On he went, pushing the argument further and further. He argued that the identification with the leader was primary and that this reflected the relations of the son to the father; and then that the father-son relationship underwrote the dynamics of all social history. By the end of the book, Freud had produced a theory that was utterly magnificent in its imaginative breadth, but at the same time was quite ludicrous. Yet, it was hard to work out at what precise point the theorising had tilted from insight into implausibility.

My fascination with Freud has grown in time. When I was between projects and did not have a pressing programme of reading, I would turn back to Freud. And I would experience similar reactions. Just when I would think that Freud's arguments were spinning off into silliness and I was about to put down the book in exasperation, I would be brought up short with an insight that could not be lightly brushed aside.

I now tell my students that when they read Freud, they should not expect well-founded theories, which are carefully laid out and cautiously elaborated. Instead, there is a mixture of wisdom and folly with just enough of the former to excuse the latter. The whole mix is set out in clear, bold language, illustrated with superb

metaphors and aptly chosen literary references. No other psychologist, not even William James, could write like Freud. In one of his earliest works, Freud commented 'it still strikes me as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science' (*Studies on Hysteria*, 1895/1991, p.231). It is the sheer literariness of Freud that continues to make his writing so attractive.

Over the years, I have come increasingly to appreciate the worth of Henri Tajfel's chance remark. Cognitive approaches to psychology can take us far, in that they demand that we take seriously what people say and think. But there is a limit. The cognitive approach at times seems too reasonable, too bland, to cope with the strangeness of some human behaviour.

This is also true of the discursive approach to social psychology that my colleagues at Loughborough University have been developing so profitably as an alternative to cognitive psychology. Discursive psychologists study how we use language within interaction, especially when we make 'psychological' claims about our own supposed states of mind. This approach analyses in complex detail how language is used to perform social actions.

Discursive psychology often seems to project the image of the social actor as someone who is strategically aware and attuned to the nuances of interaction. There is no doubt that this approach is able to notice details of social behaviour that most psychologists had overlooked and, most importantly, discursive psychology reformulates old problems in a radically different way. However, like cognitive approaches, it tends to smooth down the stubborn peculiarities of people, overlooking their psychological hinterland.

For this reason, I began a few years ago to take Freudian notions seriously. I became convinced that a reworking of Freud was necessary. There was much to jettison, to be sure. The emphasis on sexuality, the crude hydraulic model of the mind, the anthropological mythology of the primal father, the male perspective, and much else besides had little place in modern social science. However, the central idea of repression – or the hiding of shameful secrets from oneself – was crucial.

Freud recognised that his whole theorising about the unconscious rested on

the notion of repression, but, surprisingly, he had little to say about how we actually acquire the skills of repression. In my view language provides the key. To learn to speak appropriately, we must acquire the skills and disciplines of 'polite' speech. But in teaching a child politeness, we inevitably create the temptations of forbidden rudeness. These temptations must be routinely driven from conscious awareness. Luckily, language, which demands the necessity of repression, also provides the means: just as we learn how to change the topics of conversation, so we learn the rhetorical tricks to change the topics of our own internal, silent thoughts. Thus, as I outlined in my 1999 book *Freudian Repression*, language is fundamentally both expressive and repressive.

There are, in my view, advantages in this position. First, it preserves the theoretical ordering that Tajfel insisted upon: we must examine what is open and outward first, and not rush in to claim psychoanalytically hidden processes. That is why a psychoanalytic perspective can complement discursive psychology. Second, and possibly more importantly, this reworking perpetuates the memory of Freud in a changed intellectual context.

A writer of Freud's stature should not to be dismissed with a sneer, nor be repressed from undergraduate courses in psychology. Instead, psychology students should be encouraged to read Freud, and to experience for themselves psychological writing of the finest quality. Then, the old Viennese magician can leap across history to offer his insights to a new generation, whose conditions of life he could scarcely have imagined. In their turn, these new young readers should receive Freud's textual offering with scepticism, amusement and, above all, gratitude.

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