

FROM UTOPIA TO DYSTOPIA: LEVELS OF EXPLANATION AND THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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This paper considers the political underpinnings of the debate surrounding levels of explanation in social psychology. The development of this discipline since the late 1920s has been informed by an individualistic view of human nature inspired by political liberalism. The article first considers how social psychological research on attribution and forced compliance has questioned the validity of this view. With the latest development in social cognition and social neuroscience, this liberal view has been replaced by another variant of individualism which leaves little room to individual freedom. George Herbert Mead's view of the self and mind as outcomes of social organisation is presented as an alternative to these two forms of individualism. In conclusion, I suggest that, informed by a Meadian perspective, social psychology should address the challenge posed by the advent of neurosciences by considering how social factors may impact upon brain functioning.

"Every man, for his individual good and for the good of his society, is responsible for his own development. The choices that govern his life are choices that he must make; they cannot be made by any other human being" (Goldwater, cited by Brooks, 2008).

Introduction

This statement made by the former US presidential candidate Barry Goldwater reflects a liberal view of human nature, liberalism being understood as a political philosophy emphasising the enhancement and protection of individuals as the central problem of politics (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2009). Alluding to recent research in psychology and neuroscience, the conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks objected to Goldwater's views, which (in his opinion) reflects the predominant view of human nature within the Republican Party: "What emerges [from these findings] is not a picture of self-creating individuals gloriously free from one another, but of autonomous creatures deeply interconnected with one another. Recent Republican Party doctrine underestimates the importance of connections,

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relationships, institutions and social filaments that organise personal choices and make individuals what they are” (Brooks, 2008).

In Brooks’ view, a political program cannot be grounded on an erroneous view of human nature: Our utopias need to be psychologically founded.

David Brooks’ distinction echoes the enduring debate surrounding “levels of explanations” in psychology. This is precisely the issue José Morais addressed in the fall of 1991 on our first encounter. He was then giving his first lecture to the “introduction experimental psychology” class of which I was a first-year student. José Morais addressed the peril of “biological reductionism” which then, as now, seemed to threaten psychology. Rejecting Cartesian dualism, he advocated that psychological explanation take into account the constraints posed by lower levels of explanation. However, in his view, a truly psychological level “emerges” over and above the neural level as it depends on complex interactions between biological units (a position known as “emergentism”: Nagel, 1961).

In the present article, I will consider the political implications of the choice of levels of explanation in social psychology. In a field addressing the relationship between the individual and society, it is difficult to escape politics. This does not mean that research agendas are explicitly guided by political views. More benignly however, even when research findings are not influenced by researchers’ political views, they can be used or interpreted to predict how society should or will become.

In the first part of this article, I will argue that, since the 1930s, modern experimental social psychology has been shaped by a liberal view of human nature. I will then show how this perspective has been challenged from within the discipline itself. Subsequently, I will consider how the growing influence of cognitive neuroscience in social psychology could lead to a view of human nature that combines individualism and determinism. I will suggest that, while beneficial in several respects, such a shift may prevent the discipline from addressing important social phenomena. To respond to this challenge, I will draw on the philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead’s work to illustrate how his perspective could inform a socially inspired neuroscience.

Liberalism as the matrix of experimental social psychology

In social psychology, the “levels of explanation” issue revolves around the transition from the individual to the group rather than around the transition from the neural system to individual psychology (Doise, 1986). Shall we preferably explain a violent conflict between two ethnic groups by aggressive tendencies inherent to members of these groups? Or shall we focus on

the social relations between these groups and interpret these aggressive tendencies as the outcome of shared beliefs or emotions? Shall we explain stereotyping of Africans among Western Europeans by biased cognitive processes or by the relative positions of these two groups in European societies? Although debates surrounding levels of explanation in social psychology have always been abundant, the individual level has gained the upper hand especially in the experimental variant of the discipline (Farr, 1996; Greenwood, 2004; Moscovici & Marková, 2006).

This trend can be traced back to Floyd Allport, the author of the first social psychology textbook (Allport, 1924). In the introduction to this opus, Allport writes: “There is no psychology of groups which is not essentially and entirely a psychology of individuals (...) Social psychology (...) is a part of the psychology of the individual” (Allport, 1924, p. 4).

In Allport’s approach, social psychologists should apprehend collective behaviour as the sum of individuals’ behaviours. Allport’s fondness for opinion polls illustrates this perspective fittingly. As noted by Greenwood (2004), this approach represents a radical shift from the more sociological perspectives that were then popular. For example, Faris (1925, p. 405, cited by Greenwood, 2004) argued that “social” or “group” attitudes refer to “collective phenomena that are not mere summations”. The Allportian view leaves no place to “systemic” or “dynamic” conceptions of collective behaviour that transcend the individual level. It forms the matrix of experimental social psychology and is still pervasive today, particularly in social cognition (Greenwood, 2004) although few social psychologists are aware of the role played by Floyd Allport in this evolution.

My preoccupation lays less in criticising this state of affairs than in trying to address its roots. How did such a predilection for the individual level of explanation come to dominate social psychology? Although it is tempting to designate cultural evolutions like the growth of individualism in Western psychological society (Jansz & van Drunen, 2004), there may be a more trivial explanation (pointed by Farr, 1996 and Moscovici & Markova, 2006) if we consider the tremendous influence exerted by Floyd Allport and his brother Gordon on the field.

In the interwar years, Floyd Allport witnessed with horror the emergence of totalitarian ideologies as they threaten to jeopardise individual freedom. His brother, a pioneer of social cognition who shared this concern, reported that he was then guided by the following question: “How is it possible to preserve the values of freedom and individual rights under conditions of mounting social strain and regimentation?” (Allport, 1954, p. 2).

More explicitly, Floyd writes: “A better world can only be a world of better and freer individuals” (Allport, 1933, p. 520).

In this perspective, the individual is the only guarantee of freedom.

Groups and social institutions were stigmatised as limitations on freedom: “Our most vexing dilemma arises not from the fact that we lack the right institutions but from the fact that we have institutions at all” (Allport, 1933, p. 411).

In sum, social psychology *à la* Allport is informed by an extremely liberal view of human nature, the very perspective David Brooks depicts as obsolete in his column. Whereas Brooks considers that politics need to be guided by an accurate view of human nature, we witness the reverse relation here: in its very epistemology, the discipline appears to be largely influenced by the political orientations of its forefathers.

Is this an overstatement? Hasn't social psychology changed radically after World War II? If anything, the Allportian perspective has grown in influence (Farr, 1996; Greenwood, 2004). In 1952, for example, Solomon Asch maintains the Allports' credo in the introduction to his influential overview of the discipline: “(...) social facts have their locus largely in individuals; the psychological study of social facts is the study of individuals in society” (Asch, 1952, p. IX).

Consider also the experimental studies conducted in the decades directly following World War II, some of which are the most prominent in social psychology. The “messages” conveyed by these studies actually tend to confirm the Allports' worldview. Think of Asch's experiments on conformity (Asch, 1956), of Milgram's studies on obedience to authority (Milgram, 1974), or of Zimbardo's “prison experiment” (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). These famed studies address how social factors, in constraining individual freedom, lead to misjudgment (Asch), perversion (Zimbardo) and aggression (Milgram). The moral lesson to be drawn from these studies seems to be that one cannot trust individual consciousness when it is confronted to social pressure: a message that the Allport brothers would not have repudiated. Yet, the focus on the individual level of explanation became even stronger with the emergence of social cognition in the 1970s (Dovidio, Pearson, & Orr, 2008; Steiner, 1974): “Over the past 50 years, there has been a systematic shift within social psychology from studying behaviour at more molar levels of analysis to more molecular levels” (Dovidio et al., 2008, p. 248).

Given the diversity and the richness of contemporary social psychology, it would be overly exaggerated to consider it as a liberal manifesto and, as we shall see, individualism does not necessarily entail a liberal view of human nature. Nevertheless, I would like to draw attention to two strands of research that shed a particularly interesting light on the liberal assumptions that constituted the roots of modern social psychology.

Challenging liberalism experimentally

The first strand concerns research on causal attribution. Social psychological research has amply documented people's tendency to conform to social pressure. More interestingly however, it appears that people tend to underestimate the influence of these pressures on others' behaviours. This is manifest in a classic experiment (Jones & Harris, 1967): participants read an essay which was either favourable or unfavourable to Fidel Castro and were then asked to estimate the author's attitude towards the Cuban leader. As could be expected, participants tended to assume that these political attitudes were consistent with the topic of the essay when this author was said to be free to choose the political orientation of the essay (pro vs. anti-Castro). However, such a tendency persisted *even when* participants were told before reading the essay that the author was forced to adopt a specific orientation. Thus, they failed to take into account the situational constraints bearing upon the author. This effect, later dubbed the "fundamental attribution error" (Ross, 1977), has since been widely replicated (Gilbert & Malone, 1995).

Thus, people often tend to interpret behaviour as the outcome of personal choices, even when it is guided by social pressure. Where there are chains, we see freedom. This tendency, suggests that the "Free Man" hailed by the Allports, Goldwater and liberalism is not only an ideal but often a myth (see Dubois, 1987 for an extensive discussion).

The second category of work I would like to consider here bears on the "forced compliance" paradigm (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). In this paradigm, participants are asked to perform an unsavoury task, like consuming earthworms, copying a telephone directory, or writing a letter asserting that the vacation period is too short. After doing so, they surprisingly tend to find some interest in these tasks: earthworms become quite savoury and holidays seem too long. However such effects only emerge if participants feel that they perform the task freely (Joule & Beauvois, 1998; Kiesler, 1971; Linder, Cooper, & Jones, 1967). In line with cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), these findings can be interpreted as stemming from participants' motivation to reduce "dissonance" between their attitudes and their behaviour by modifying the former.

Interestingly, informing participants that they are free to refuse to perform the task does not influence the likelihood of accepting to engage in the task (Beauvois, 1994). All participants accept to copy the telephone book if an authority (such as an experimenter) requests it. However, this sense of freedom induces a more positive attitude towards the task. In other words, the illusion of freedom is not necessary to achieve behavioural compliance but it is required to yield *ideological conversion*.

Taken together, these two lines of work demonstrate that people tend to

be overly influenced by contextual pressure without realising it: the fundamental attribution error is indeed an error. But, more crucially, it seems that our choices are *less* free to the extent that we believe that we are free. The myth of freedom reinforces submission. Beauvois (1994) calls this condition “liberal servitude”¹.

This illusion of freedom is not universal. Beauvois sees in it the footprint of Western political systems inspired by liberal and democratic ideals: “The conducts (*conduites*) and systems of conducts imposed upon us by social relationships (*rappports sociaux*) determine our cognitive apprehension of things, of people and of ourselves” (Beauvois, 1994, p. 14).

Accordingly, the attitude shift following forced compliance has been difficult to replicate in other cultural settings (for an overview, see Heine & Dehman, 1997). The same holds for the fundamental attribution error (Morris & Peng, 1994).

Considering these two strands of research (attribution and forced compliance) sheds a new light on the political undercurrents of social psychology. If we accept Beauvois’ perspective, social psychology can be viewed as a tool for debunking the liberal ideology that was at its source. The philosopher and sociologist Karl Mannheim (1936) argues that ideologies can only be unmasked with a “utopia” understood here as an alternative view of the community’s future. Accordingly, studies inspired by the forced compliance paradigm play an utopian function with respect to the liberal ideology that has informed the development of experimental social psychology since the 1920s.

When social neuroscience fuels dystopia

So far, this article has delved extensively on the past of social psychology. In light of the trends I have delineated, it is now time to consider its future. The prospects awaiting the field of psychology in general seem more and more shaped by neuroscience, as predicted by some of the discipline’s oracles: “Psychological science in the 21st century can and should become not only the science of overt behaviour, not only the science of the mind, but the science of brain function” (Cacioppo & Decety, 2009, p. 13).

In keeping with the rest of this paper, I would like to consider the implications of this transition for the *homo politicus* as considered by social psychology.

To do so, I will describe a study (Amodio, Jost, Master, & Yee, 2007) on the neural correlates of political attitudes. This study is emblematic of a vast body of research in “social neuropsychology” in that it examines how

¹Paraphrasing the French poet La Boétie’s notion of voluntary servitude.

phenomena traditionally explained in terms of socio-structural factors can manifest themselves at the brain level (Lieberman, Schreiber, & Ochsner, 2003; Todorov, Harris, & Fiske, 2006). Amodio et al. (2007) show that presented with a go/no go task requiring to inhibit a dominant response, “conservatives” and “liberals” (self-categorised as such on the basis of a single 11 point scale) differ in their performance with the former experiencing more difficulties than the latter. These behavioural differences are also correlated with divergent patterns of brain activity (assessed through event-related potentials). Amodio et al. (2007) interpret their findings in purely individual terms: “Taken together, our results are consistent with the view that political orientation, in part, reflects individual differences in the functioning of a general mechanism related to cognitive control and self-regulation” (Amodio et al., 2007, p. 1247).

To explain why liberals and conservatives display such differences, Amodio et al. (2007) cite research in behavioural genetics, which tends to suggest that political orientation is highly “heritable” (Alford, Funk, & Hibbing, 2005). Thus, political attitudes are presented as extremely stable within individuals because the cognitive processes on which they are based are themselves genetically determined.

Amodio et al.’s (2007) perspective is consistent with the preferred use of individual-level explanations that we have been witnessing since the 1930s. In moving towards finer and finer levels of explanation (e.g., genes, neurons), it follows the progressive “molecularization” of social psychology noted above. However, this form of individualism² rests on a very different view of the human being than the earlier perspectives. Remember that for the Allport brothers, rejecting a group level explanation was viewed as guarantee of individual freedom. Here, as we move to the “molecular” or “atomic” level of explanation, we seem to witness a form of individualistic “dispositionalism”: upon reading such reports, the emerging picture of the human being is not that of the “free man” hailed by Goldwater. Neither is it Brooks’ ideal of a “hyperconnected” individual shaped by his social world. Rather we witness an individual endowed with uncontrollable psychological processes that constrain his or her political horizons.

The ideal of a free citizen casting his vote based on a sound analysis of the political situation is replaced by that of an automaton forced to vote for a few selected parties due to the limitations of his habitual cognitive processes. Compared to Allport’s glorification of the “Free Man”, this description portends a very grim view of the future of citizenship and political engagement. Is it an exaggeration to view in this work an implicit dystopia in which

²See Sperber (1997) for the distinction between different types of individualism in the social sciences.

democracy has become an illusion?

It is also interesting to contrast this perspective with Beauvois' described above as both perspectives seem to reject Allport's ideal of a free and autonomous individual responsible for his choices. Beauvois attacked this liberal ideal on the basis of a societal explanation i.e., as an illusion bred by the Western political/economical systems. By contrast, Amodio et al.'s (2007) comes from the lower level of explanation: by arguing that this ideal cannot be reconciled with the intra-individual processes associated with political orientations.

As mentioned above, Amodio et al.'s (2007) perspective is shared by many adepts of neuroscience in the field of social psychology. For example, Lieberman et al.'s (2003) argue that thanks to cognitive neuroscience, we can discover in which ways "political cognition is like riding a bicycle" i.e., both reflect relatively automatic processes that become routinized and are relatively inaccessible to introspection.

This transition can be interpreted in the context of a larger shift in the *modes* of explanations favoured in psychology, rather than in their level only. Sperber (1997) notes for example that cognitive science favours what he calls "mechanistic" and "naturalistic" explanations.

"An explanation is mechanistic when it analyses a complex process as an articulation of more elementary processes, and it is naturalistic to the extent that there are good reasons to think that these more elementary processes could themselves be analysed in a mechanistic fashion down to the level where their natural character would be wholly evident."³

The development of neuroscience contributes to this evolution as it allows cognitive scientists to map these supposed elementary processes on a biological basis.

By contrast, in the social sciences (including social psychology), although explanations can be mechanistic, they are rarely naturalistic (Sperber, 1997). Besides, explanations often rest on reasons instead of mechanisms. For example, people's motives for choosing a specific party remain one of the main sources of explanation for voting choice. Another example is the interpretations Asch offers to conformity in his classical experiment: "(some subjects) experience one imperious need: not to appear different" (Asch, 1952, p. 471). Again, this is a *reason* for yielding to group pressure rather than a mechanistic cause.

When social scientists investigate people's reasons for engaging in specific behaviours, their subjects are regarded as conscious agents with individual responsibilities. These reasons can then be assessed and one

³Excerpts are reproduced from the translation of Sperber (1997), which is available at the following URL: <http://sperber.club.fr/individ.htm> (extracted July 9, 2009)

can argue about their rationality (consider e.g., Friedrich Engels' concept of "false consciousness", which suggests that people's behaviour does not correspond to their rational interest). For some phenomena, reason-explanations are considered independently of causal explanations. Thus, depending on one's focus, tobacco consumption can be interpreted as stemming from people's psychological needs (e.g., integrating in a group) or from biological causes (e.g., nicotine level in the blood) which would both be acceptable and even complementary. It would be absurd to pit these two interpretations against each other by arguing e.g., that tobacco use is purely due to nicotine levels and has nothing to do with psychological needs. Yet, Sperber notes that "from a naturalistic point of view however, reasons should be of interest to us not *qua* reasons, but *qua* causes among other causes". In this naturalistic perspective, it is perfectly legitimate (if not necessarily warranted) to consider that reasons do not play a role in a specific category of behaviours (e.g., political choices) and to explain these behaviours in terms of (unintentional) causes. In facilitating a shift towards naturalistic explanations, the emergence of neuroscience contributes to the decline of reason-based explanations.

Nevertheless, even if it facilitated this trend, this emergence should not be held *responsible* for it. Since the 1990s, research in social cognition has emphasised the importance of "automatic" processes (Bargh, 1999). It appeared that people could engage in a wide variety of behaviours (including "immoral" or socially inappropriate ones) without being able to monitor these behaviours and without being even capable of detecting the stimuli that triggered them. Much of this work has been conducted using traditional behavioural measures. However, the use of brain imaging devices can now be used to buttress these views as they materialise what had hitherto been suspected: the neural "basis" of these automatic processes. The availability of these techniques is likely to encourage researchers to look for even more fine-grained and precise determinants of these attitudes and behaviours, possibly further contributing to the "molecularization" trend.

Yet, it is important to reiterate that the observation of differential patterns of brain activity as a function of social variables (such as political attitudes) do not necessarily call for an individual-level explanation. These may be compatible with a social-level explanation if one accepts that such patterns reflect correlates of political attitudes (which may be socially determined) rather than their cause. Hence, the reductionist move does not lie in the use of neuroscience per se than in the individual-level interpretation that is selected. As a matter of fact, such an individualistic "bias" has been observed with more traditional methods (such as a paper and pencil tests or reaction times).

Besides these political aspects, the transition from a reason-based expla-

nation of behaviour (e.g., in terms of intentions, motivations, etc.) to a neurobiological explanation also poses ethical problems. This issue is well articulated by Webel and Stigliano (2004): “If electrical charges between brain cells are what we once called the ‘self’, and holding to terms like ‘self’ or ‘agency’ is merely a matter of social convenience, then our actions are simply whatever scientific laws follow from those electrical charges. One should not then attribute action or motive to anyone, or consequently hold a person responsible for their conduct” (Webel & Stigliano, 2004, p. 84).

If supporting fascist political parties is equivalent to riding a bicycle, who should be blamed for doing so?

Going back in time: G.H. Mead’s social psychology

How can we address the challenges posed by this molecularization of social psychology? To respond to this question, I suggest to move further back in time and consider the precursors of these perspectives. The historian of science John Greenwood (2004) argued in a paper with an evocative title (“What happened to the ‘social’ in social psychology?”) that pre-allportian social psychology was authentically “social”: “Behaviour was held to be socially engaged if it is oriented to the represented behaviour of members of social groups in similar circumstances. On this conception, an aggressive behaviour counts as a social behaviour only if it is engaged because other members of a social group are represented as behaving in this way in similar circumstances: if, for example, it is prescribed by ‘gang law’” (Greenwood, 2004, pp. 20-21).

Following a Durkheimian standpoint, social psychologists claimed the autonomy of “social facts”. But some addressed the relation between different levels of explanation, by considering the social determinants of mental life, an issue that has somewhat disappeared from social psychology until very recently. One of the most attractive figures among these early social psychologists is Georges Herbert Mead (1863-1931), originally a philosopher from the “pragmatist” school of Chicago. In his posthumous magnum opus, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), Mead adopts a developmental perspective and considers how self and mind are co-constructed in the context of social interactions.

Mead considers that the specificity of mental activity resides in the capacity to imagine an audience’s response to our own signs. An example drawn from his book nicely illustrates this position: imagine an animal close to the edge of a flock, smelling the odour of smoke. The animal flees, afraid to end up in a barbecue. The flock follows it. Such a behaviour only requires imitation without any mental activity.

By contrast, when an individual screams “Fire! Fire!”, he can activate in himself the reactions that this behaviour will elicit in others. This is the specificity of mental activity: the capacity to take another’s perspective.

“In so far as the man can take the attitude of the other – his attitude of response to fire, his sense of terror – that response to his own cry is something that makes of his conduct a mental affair” (Mead, 1934/1967, p. 189).

According to Mead, such an internal dialogue requires language. This explains Mead’s intriguing definition of the Mind: “Language as made up of significant symbols is what we mean by mind” (Mead, 1934/1967, p. 190).

From a developmental perspective, this progressive internalisation of the other’s perspective, and the internal dialogue it allows, generates the mind. Mead’s analysis incorporates the social level of explanation: The “other”, whose perspective the infant mind takes is inserted in social networks. Hence, consciousness and mind are modelled by the social anchoring of this person: “Inner consciousness is socially organized by the importation of the social organization of the outer world” (Mead, 1934/1967, p. 189).

Hence, Mead’s work incorporates a “top-down” perspective on the development of the mind. The connected individual described by David Brooks was already present in Mead’s work. With the advent of the individualistic credo of the Allport brothers, this brand of social psychology soon lost its influence on the field and has not been subjected to systematic empirical tests. How can such a view inform contemporary social psychology and address the challenges posed by the emergence of neuroscience in this field? This issue will be considered next.

A “Meadian” look at social neuroscience

The use of neuroscientific methods does not exclude other levels of explanation and it would certainly be legitimate to consider these levels as complementary rather than as opposed. In this vein, Cacioppo and Decety (2009) argue that, given the complexity of brain function, addressing the psychological mechanisms underlying brain functioning is needed. To achieve this purpose, neuroscientists need psychologists. In other words, a top-down approach, from the psychological to the neural level is required. From the vantage point of a social psychologist, Cacciopo and Decety’s argument appear particularly relevant to addressing the issues that have been the focus of the most “individualised” aspects of social psychology in recent years, especially social cognition (Dovidio et al., 2008).

Yet, I would like to take this argument one step further by also considering the influence of the higher, “social”, level of explanation on the lower, “biological” level. Given that the social level of explanation seems even more

distant from brain functioning than the psychological level, it is tempting to address these two levels independently. This may both satisfy neuroscientists who do not want to deal with “messy” social factors and social psychologists who are intimidated by the demands of a training in neuroscience.

Yet, brain function is also an outcome of phenomena taking place at these higher levels. I believe that one of the main challenges facing social psychology involves maintaining a top-down perspective in spite of the attraction exerted by the neural level of explanation. Consulting Mead’s work can be useful in this respect. Consider for example his metaphor of the individual as a cell in a social organism: “It cannot be said that the individuals come first, and the community later, for the individuals arise in the very process itself, just as much as the human body or any multi-cellular form is one in which differentiated cells arise” (Mead, 1934/1967, p. 189).

This metaphor stands in stark contrast to the perspective developed by the social neuropsychologists we have considered previously (e.g., Amodio et al., 2007). Although Mead was then not interested in neuroscience, this metaphor can naturally be extended from the individual to its brain. Recent work by Harris and Fiske (2006, 2007) offers one of the rare examples of social neuropsychology studies consistent with such a top-down approach: in fMRI studies, these authors have presented images of individuals belonging to different groups to their subjects. They found that depending on the social standing of the target individual’s group in relation to the subject’s group (i.e., a macro-level factor), different areas of the brain were activated (at a “micro-level”) and more specifically, that information regarding members of the most stigmatised categories do not activate the area of the brain that are typically associated with “human” stimuli (i.e., thereby suggesting that they are cognitively “dehumanised”).

In spite of the interest of such approaches, trying to address the neuropsychological manifestations of such top-down phenomena should not distract us from considering the “top” level in and by itself as some social psychological realities call for collective explanations. As noted by Dovidio, one such phenomenon is intergroup bias (i.e., the tendency to favour one’s ingroup compared to out-groups): “Social neuroscience may help illuminate intra-individual processes reflecting and contributing to intergroup bias, but such findings cannot supplant investigations at more macro-levels of analysis, such as the role of system-level forces in shaping intergroup relations” (Dovidio et al., 2008, p. 250).

Conclusion

I have considered how social psychology may address the interplay between the “individual” and the “social” level of explanation in social psychology. I tried to show that the development of this discipline since the late 1920s has been informed by an individualistic view of human nature inspired by liberalism. Drawing on Beauvois’ work, I then illustrated how mainstream experimental work on attribution and on forced compliance, although inspired by the same views, questions their validity. I showed that, following recent developments in social cognition and the availability of brain imagery devices, we have been witnessing the popularisation of a new brand of individualism in which individuals appear like automatons deprived of freedom. I argued that George Herbert Mead’s view of the self and mind as outcomes of social organisation may constitute a viable alternative to these two forms of individualism. As social psychology now faces the challenge posed by the advent of neuroscience, it may benefit from adopting a Meadian perspective in addressing the relation between macro- and micro-level factors.

In sum, it appears that, unwillingly, social psychology tends to pass on a political message: by showing that individual freedom is an illusion as it is either limited by influence from others or by automatic and unconscious processes, it conveys an inherently conservative dystopia. This dystopia may be legitimate; yet it may also derive from a one-sided view of reality resulting from some of the partial assumptions that drove the development of the discipline. Hence, I plead for a collective introspection into the ideological roots of experimental social psychology as it is practiced today. Should this introspection induce social psychologists to make their science free of politics? I am not sure this will lead to productive research. Indeed, in sketching the history of social psychology, my purpose has not been to disqualify research informed by this ideology. The bulk of social psychological studies we now admire have been inspired by the Allport brothers’ epistemology. When partial political views fuel innovative hypotheses that can be tested empirically, they can engender work of the greatest methodological quality and rigor.

Rather than banishing politics, social psychologists should be willing to imagine alternative articulations between the individual and his social environment. Viewing groups as constraining individual freedom informed social psychology up until now. It may be time to reconsider this view and apprehend in which way collectives can liberate individuals and bring about social change (see also Turner, 2006). Acknowledging this possibility, and engaging in dialectical thinking, may spawn equally innovative research and help us differentiate grim dystopias from epistemological biases.

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