



Henri Tajfel's 'Cognitive aspects of prejudice' and the psychology of bigotry

Michael Billig*

Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, UK

This paper pays tribute to Tajfel's classic article 'Cognitive aspects of prejudice' and re-examines its central arguments. Tajfel's paper is important for outlining a social cognitive approach to the study of prejudice and also for refuting of what Tajfel called the 'blood-and-guts' approach. Taking Tajfel's proposition that social psychology is not value-free, the current paper examines the moral and political view of 'Cognitive aspects' and also the gaps in its approach to the study of prejudice. It is suggested that this cognitive approach has difficulty in accounting for extreme bigotry, at least without recourse to the motivational themes that the approach seeks to exclude. In particular, there would be limitations in applying this approach in order to understand the Holocaust. Indeed, Tajfel did not attempt to do so, for reasons that are discussed. Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (SIT) has similar limitations. The paper also examines Tajfel's use of the term 'depersonalization', which he described as a 'milder' form of dehumanization of out-groups. Later social identity theorists have tended to use 'depersonalization' differently, shifting their attention to in-groups. Their perspective moves away from understanding the topic of prejudice in the way that can be found in Tajfel's 'Cognitive aspects of prejudice'. Finally, the present paper suggests how extreme prejudice might be studied without returning to the motivational 'blood-and-guts' approach that Tajfel so cogently criticized.

It will soon be 20 years since the death of Henri Tajfel. His influence throughout social psychology persists, especially in work on social identity (Robinson, 1996). As Brown and Capozza (2000) have shown, interest in Social Identity Theory (SIT) continues to grow, with an increasing number of studies being published yearly. As with any major figure in the social sciences, Tajfel's writings repay careful study and reinterpretation. This article examines the rhetoric and argument of Henri Tajfel's classic article 'Cognitive aspects of prejudice', which was first published in the *Journal of Biosocial Sciences* in 1969 and which has been reprinted a number of times since. The article featured as a key chapter in Tajfel's book *Human groups and social categories* (Tajfel, 1981).

There are a number of reasons for re-examining 'Cognitive aspects of prejudice'. Most notably, the article remains one of the most brilliant pieces of writing in the history of social psychology. Written before social psychology's cognitive turn in the

*Requests for reprints should be addressed to Michael Billig, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough LE11 3TU, UK (e-mail: m.g.billig@lboro.ac.uk).

1980s, 'Cognitive aspects of prejudice' outlined the principles of cognitive social psychology without specifically using the term 'social cognition'. Eiser (1996) has argued that current assessments of Tajfel's legacy tend to concentrate on Social Identity Theory at the expense of his earlier work in social judgment. Tajfel produced 'Cognitive aspects' at a key point in his intellectual development. It was written as a culmination of his work in social judgment, but before he developed Social Identity Theory. The article was published just as Tajfel was embarking on the minimal intergroup experiments that were to lay the basis for his later intergroup theorizing (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). As such, 'Cognitive aspects' combines the themes of social judgment with those of intergroup conflict, as Tajfel argued that the principles of cognition can illuminate the psychological nature of prejudice.

Over and above paying tribute to Tajfel's enduring intellectual legacy, there is another reason for returning to 'Cognitive aspects of prejudice'. This is to understand the nature of prejudice. It is not suggested that 'Cognitive aspects' holds all the keys, nor even that we should follow rigidly the message that Tajfel was advocating there. Far from it, the strategy is to examine critically the omissions in the article. This is not to downgrade the importance of 'Cognitive aspects'. In the social sciences, works of the highest intellectual quality always repay critical re-examination, for even their limitations and omissions can be revealing. This is what separates the first-rate from the merely competent.

The omissions in 'Cognitive aspects', it will be suggested, enable us to understand the context of Tajfel's theorizing, especially in relation to his background. They are also theoretically revealing, inasmuch as they point towards the limitations of the cognitive approach for understanding extreme prejudice. In this respect, the present tribute to 'Cognitive aspects' is also an argument. To argue, however, is not necessarily to reject, but to develop. As Tajfel (1981) emphasized, no social psychology is value-free, for all social psychology reflects the cultural climate in which it is produced. That was why he argued that it was vital to have multiple perspectives in social psychology (Tajfel, 1981, p. 6). The political climate of today is different from that of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Tajfel was developing his ideas. So must social psychology reflect these changed times. Today's social psychology cannot be a mere repetition of that which was formulated a generation ago. Tajfel may have argued that motivational themes should be put to one side, but, by considering one of the finest pieces of writing, it will be suggested that such themes cannot, and should not, be excluded entirely if one wishes to understand extreme prejudice.

Image of humanity

The opening paragraphs of 'Cognitive aspects' illustrate Tajfel's intellectual style. He does not start with a careful review of previous experimental studies on prejudice and social judgment. That sort of review can be found in his contribution to *The handbook of social psychology*, which was published in the same year (Tajfel, 1969b) but which Tajfel did not include in *Human groups and social categories*. Tajfel not only read widely in other disciplines such as history, anthropology and political science, but also used this reading in his social psychology (see, for instance, his comment in the interview with Cohen (1977, p. 306) about his reading). The Marxist philosopher and cricket writer C. L. R. James adapted a saying from Rudyard Kipling in the preface to

his book *Beyond a boundary*: “What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?” (James, 1964, p. 11). A further adaptation would fit Tajfel’s own academic practice, as well as his intellectual position: “What do they know of social psychology who only social psychology know?”

‘Cognitive aspects’ begins with social anthropology and an assertion of the commonality of humans. Tajfel writes that the views of early social anthropologists such as Rivers, who believed in the cultural and psychological defectiveness of non-Europeans, are now rejected. Tajfel illustrated this with a long quotation from Lévi-Strauss’s *The savage mind*. In the quotation, Lévi-Strauss was arguing that so-called primitive cultures have developed a sophisticated practical scientific knowledge. All forms of agriculture, the making of pots, the use of poisons in warfare or ritual, and so on, depend upon an empirical attitude and a desire for knowledge. Tajfel then commented that: “an image of Man emerges from these considerations” (1981, p. 128; quotations are taken from the version of ‘Cognitive aspects’ included in *Human groups*; here, and in subsequent quotations, no attempt will be made to alter Tajfel’s use of masculine nouns and pronouns to denote humanity in general). The image depicts humans as being essentially rational beings, who seek, above all, to understand their world. The same image, Tajfel comments, is to be found in the work of Frederick Bartlett, who stressed the human ‘effort after meaning’.

As Tajfel realized, such images of humans cannot be proved by experimentation. Evidence can be brought from experimental psychology, and from history, social anthropology and so on to support the image, but ultimately, the image stems from a wider political and moral perspective. Because social psychology and other social sciences are not value-free, such an image will convey moral and political values. In this way, Tajfel at the start of ‘Cognitive aspects’ was declaring a political and moral position, just as Lévi-Strauss was doing when he applied the rational image, not to modern Europeans, but to the very cultures that Europeans had for centuries dismissed as irrational.

Typically, an academic argument is directed towards a rival position. Therefore, to understand the meaning of an academic position, not only must one determine the specific case that is being advocated, but one must also know what positions are being argued against (Billig, 1987a). Tajfel’s assertion of a common rational humanity was an argument against a counter-position. As he noted, when observers try to explain human social activity, especially warfare, they discard the rational image of humanity, adopting instead “a blood-and-guts model for social phenomena” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 128). During the 1960s, the blood-and-guts model of conflict was prominent in both popular and academic writing; it had been “blessed and speeded on its way by a number of books, some of which have quickly become best-sellers” (p. 129). Tajfel had in mind populist versions of Freudian and ethological theories that postulated an instinct for aggression. Foremost amongst the blood-and-guts writers was the Nobel prize-winning ethologist, Konrad Lorenz, who was to publish his ideas in a number of best-selling books (e.g. Lorenz, 1974, 1976). Lorenz directly extrapolated from his animal studies to human beings, in ways that anticipate some of the cruder versions of today’s evolutionary psychology. Lorenz claimed that humans, in common with a number of animal species, had evolved an aggressive instinct but without the biologically based inhibitory mechanisms to be found in other species. Lorenz proposed that human conflict should be explained in terms of this innate aggressive instinct, and, thus, he was proposing a biological source of irrationality at the core of human nature. In this regard, Lorenz’s blood-and-guts model was the very antithesis of the rational model to be found in Bartlett and Lévi-Strauss.

Against the blood-and-guts model

Tajfel recognized that there were compelling intellectual and political reasons for combating the blood-and-guts model. In ‘Cognitive aspects’, Tajfel produced two sets of argument against the blood-and-guts model. First, there was the waxing-and-waning argument, which powerfully yet simply undermined the theoretical adequacy of an instinctivist explanation of human warfare. Tajfel conceded that “all men can and do display hostility towards groups other than their own” (1981, p. 130). However, they do not do this all the time, for “there is also no doubt, however, that under other conditions this hostility either does not appear or can be modified” (p. 130). In short, the positing of an invariant and unchangeable instinct cannot explain the waxing and waning of social conflict (nor of individual aggressiveness). To explain why wars occur at one time and not another, one must go beyond the hypothesis of an aggressive instinct and look at social and historical conditions. This involves examining the beliefs and ideologies that groups hold about each other. Thus, the study of conflict must embrace the study of group attitudes, and, in consequence, there should be a social psychological dimension.

Tajfel also had a moral/political argument against the blood-and-guts perspective. To offer an account of social conflict in terms of an unchanging instinct is, at best, to suggest that nothing can be done to alleviate prejudice. At worst, it is to justify prejudice and chauvinism as an innate part of the human condition. As Tajfel well knew, this was a central part of Nazi ideology, which postulated that there is an innate desire to favour one’s own race. According to this ideology, liberalism and a belief in the universality of human rationality were ‘alien’ to the nature of humans. At the time of writing ‘Cognitive aspects’, Tajfel was unaware that Lorenz’s early papers, which were published during the Nazi era, were laced with Nazi terminology, even to the extent of praising the racial policy of the Nazi regime (see, for instance, Lorenz, 1940, 1943). The exposure of Lorenz’s early work was to come shortly after the publication of ‘Cognitive aspects’ (see Eisenberg, 1972; see also Billig, 1978; Nisbett, 1976).

Even without the specific evidence linking Lorenz’s instinctivism with Nazi ideology, Tajfel was aware of the deeply reactionary implications of the blood-and-guts approach. In this light, his use of Lévi-Strauss to begin his analysis of prejudice was no accident. It was better to begin with the assumption of a universal, human rationality, as Lévi-Strauss was doing—and, indeed, as Chomsky was doing at that time—than to utter profound-sounding banalities about the irrationality of human nature.

Cognition and prejudice

The next step in Tajfel’s argument was a bold one: to show that the seeming irrationalities in human social conduct owed their origin to this essential rationality. Again, the argument is simple and all the more powerful for its simplicity. Tajfel started from the assumption that prejudice constituted a serious social problem. Indeed, as he recounted in *Human group and social categories*, the essay that won him a scholarship to enter university as a mature student after the war was entitled ‘Prejudice’ (Tajfel, 1981, p. 2). In ‘Cognitive aspects’, Tajfel wrote that prejudice literally means ‘prejudgment’, and most commonly, the term is used to refer to the prejudgment of other groups. Technically, it is possible to prejudge in favour of other groups. However, Tajfel’s concern, which is reflected in the common use of ‘prejudice’ to denote a serious social problem, was the prejudice against other groups. As he wrote, the

purpose of 'Cognitive aspects' was "to present an outline of the cognitive etiology of prejudice, mainly with regard to its *unfavourable* aspects" (Tajfel, 1981, p. 131, emphasis in original).

In prejudiced thinking, judgments are made about the members of other groups regardless of their individual characteristics: members of the out-group are judged negatively, or unfavourably stereotyped, simply because they belong to the out-group. Tajfel related this type of stereotyping to ordinary sense-making. In order to understand the world—both the physical and the social world—humans need to make cognitive short cuts. There is too much sensory information available at any one point to deal with every detail. Unless this information is cognitively organized—unless it is categorized—there can be no meaning. Therefore, humans need to organize the social world into categories. However, when we do this, we are liable to distort the world, even as we make it meaningful. As Tajfel had shown in his line-estimation studies, imposing a categorization on a continuum of stimuli creates a tendency towards two sorts of exaggeration: there is the tendency to overestimate the extent to which instances of the same category resemble each other and a tendency to overestimate the differences between instances of different categories (Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963). Tajfel argued that the effects of categorization on the judgment of physical stimuli resembled the exaggerations of social stereotypes. Thus, the tendency to prejudice members of out-groups was, at root, similar to the more general tendency to exaggerate the differences between categories and to minimize differences within categories.

The notion of 'categorization' was one of three key concepts that Tajfel used in 'Cognitive aspects' to outline the cognitive dynamics of prejudice. The other two concepts were 'assimilation' and 'coherence'. In line with Tajfel's attempt to construct a genuinely social approach to prejudice, he stressed the importance of 'assimilation'. Individuals do not create their own categories but assimilate the categories that are culturally available, thereby accepting culturally determined patterns of prejudgment and stereotyping.

Individuals use these social categories to make sense of, and thereby bring coherence to, their understanding of the world. The search for coherence provides a clue about how individuals cope with understanding the constantly changing social world. Individuals will attempt to use categories in ways that preserve their self-image or integrity. According to Tajfel, "this need to preserve the integrity or the self-image is the only motivational assumption that we need to make in order to understand the direction that the search for coherence will take" (1981, p. 137). A similar motivational assumption was to appear in Social Identity Theory, which assumed a need for a positive social identity (i.e. Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

'Cognitive aspects' provides a brilliant rebuttal of an instinctual theory of prejudice. Tajfel takes an aspect of human behaviour that appears to be inherently irrational but argues that this irrationality should be understood in terms of a psychological perspective that is based on the assumption of human rationality. There is, in consequence, no need to posit an underlying motivational force. Yet, as can be seen, motivational premises are not entirely excluded. The cognitive approach includes the motivation to understand, as well as the motive for preserving the self-image. As such, the cognitive approach is not entirely cognitive.

There are a number of criticisms that can be made of the cognitive approach to prejudice. Recently, critics have suggested that cognitive social psychology is mistaken in taking a perceptual, rather than discursive, view of categorization (Billig, 1985, 1987a; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1996). According to this argument, the

categories of prejudice are essentially language categories. Speakers can use language flexibly and, thus, are not restricted merely to minimizing within-category differences or between-category similarities (Edwards, 1991). Indeed, with language, we can both categorize in our judgments as well as particularize, not to mention talk critically about our categories (Billig, 1987a). All this makes the use of categories in language very different from the use of perceptual categorization. Moreover, this duality of particularization and categorization can be found in the language of those who are prejudiced and, more generally, in the talk of those who hold strong views (Billig, 1985, 1991).

The present purpose is not to pursue this discursive critique of the cognitive approach. Instead, the tactic is to apply Tajfel's theoretical critique against the blood-and-guts approach to his own approach. In the waxing-and-waning argument, Tajfel was exposing what the blood-and-guts approach cannot explain. The fact that the argument could expose the limitations of the blood-and-guts approach does not mean that the cognitive approach has no analogous limitations. In fact, it is safe to assume that any theory in social psychology must be incomplete, just as any image of the person that underlies a theoretical perspective must also be an oversimplification. The intention is to probe the absences, in order to clarify which aspects of prejudice the cognitive approach best addresses and which aspects it tends to ignore.

Holocaust and explanation

There is a paradox in the limitation of Tajfel's approach to prejudice. He did not apply either his cognitive approach, or his Social Identity Theory, to explain the one historical event that brought him to social psychology—the Holocaust. In the opening pages of *Human groups and social categories*, Tajfel describes in all too brief terms his passage towards social psychology. Unlike the majority of the people whom he had grown up with, Tajfel survived the massacre of European Jews. For the rest of his life, he was to reflect on what had happened. As has been mentioned, Tajfel's essay 'Prejudice' enabled him to enter university as a mature student, and he was to become a professional academic "almost in a fit of absent-mindedness" (Tajfel, 1981, p. 1; see also his account in the interview in Cohen, 1977). Although Tajfel may have begun his research career by addressing technical questions of perceptual judgment, he was soon using this research as a basis for understanding the nature of prejudice. Academic research for its own sake was insufficient for Tajfel. He would tell his students that behind his work lay one question: how is genocide possible?

Yet, apart from occasional comments, Tajfel rarely in his written work applied his powerful theories of prejudice to the one event that preoccupied him (for a more detailed discussion of this omission, see Billig, 1996). In part, this reflects a more general phenomenon. There was little written or spoken about the Holocaust for a generation after the Second World War. Survivors at that time would rarely risk telling their stories to a world that seemingly had more important things to do than listen. In addition there are specific reasons against offering academic explanations, especially psychological explanations, of the Holocaust.

If we claim to have explained an event, we are claiming to have understood it. Moreover, the explanation by providing understanding—by giving a set of adequate causes—seems to 'wrap up' that event. Further detailed thought becomes unnecessary; after all, we know and understand what happened. Any explanation of the Holocaust would be claiming too much. More than any other event in history, the Holocaust should not be explained away; it demands further thought. A psychological

explanation runs a further risk: *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*. If an account explains the motives and thought processes of the perpetrators in psychological terms, such an account may present the perpetrators in an understandable light that wittingly or unwittingly invites empathy (see Billig, 1996; Mandel, 1998). Primo Levi expressed this better than anyone in *If this is a man* (Levi, 1987). He argued that one should not understand what happened in the Holocaust because to understand is almost to justify. Understanding would mean putting oneself in the place of, and thus identifying with, the perpetrators. Better not to understand, argued Levi, than risk such identification.

In addition to such general considerations, there are specific features of Tajfel's cognitive approach that would make it unsuitable, at least on its own, as an explanation of the Holocaust. In 'Cognitive aspects', Tajfel was describing universal processes. 'Categorization', 'assimilation' and 'coherence' were not assumed to be culturally specific, as if they only occur in certain socio-historic contexts and not others. They were intended to represent features of all human thinking. Similarly, Tajfel was proposing that it was human nature to wish to understand the human world and that the simplifications of categorization were necessary to do so. These concepts can be applied to all forms of intergroup prejudice. However, if they are applied to the Holocaust as if offering an explanation, the extreme specificity of that event would be lost.

It would be neither appropriate, nor informative, to say that the Germans systematically murdered the Jews in the Second World War, because they were seeking to understand the world and to protect their self-integrity. Of course, such processes may have played their part, but constitute only a small part in a wider picture (Mandel, 1998, 2001). We can say—indeed we must say—that the German murder of the Jews should be understood in terms of what the Nazis thought about Jews. But this is very different from offering an 'explanation' in terms of cognitive processes such as the search for understanding and the protection of self-integrity. There is nothing intrinsic about these processes, nor about the universal processes of categorization, assimilation and coherence, that would account for the historical specificity of Nazi ideology.

It is significant that Tajfel presented his cognitive approach as offering an understanding (not an explanation) of prejudice. One implication of the approach is that prejudice, at least in its literal sense of prejudgment, is inevitable: we must use categories in our thinking, and categorization predisposes us to prejudgment. Thus the inevitability of prejudice, and indeed of stereotyping, is implied (see Billig, 1985, 1987a, for criticisms of this assumption).

Even if it is conceded that prejudice is inevitable and that human thinking about social groups involves some or other form of stereotyping, this does not mean that all prejudices and all stereotyping are equivalent. Indeed, the term 'prejudice' may be too anodyne to cover all forms of intergroup stereotyping. Stereotypes, even if they are broadly 'negative', can be distinguished in terms of their intensity and ideological importance. For instance, the current British stereotype of German tourists, who rush to the beach to secure the best sunbathing spots, can be distinguished from the Nazi stereotype of Jews as vermin, responsible for all German misfortunes. As Tajfel noted in 'Cognitive aspects', particular categorizations are embedded (or assimilated) into wider ideological patterns of belief.

The term 'prejudice' is not a neutral term, but it conveys a critique of the beliefs labelled as 'prejudiced' (see Billig, 1991). Despite this moral and political evaluation, not all prejudices, just like all stereotypes, need to be considered as equivalent. Within the general category of illegitimate beliefs, 'prejudice' is not the strongest term in the

lexicon. There is, for instance, ‘bigotry’. In extreme ideological contexts, ‘prejudice’ can be considered a comparatively mild term and, indeed, inappropriate because of this comparative mildness. To say that Hitler and other leading Nazis were ‘prejudiced’ against Jews would seem to be an understatement. Their anti-semitism cries out for a stronger term. Thus, one needs to intensify the lexicon in order to begin to capture the sort of beliefs that lay at the core of the sort of Nazi ideology. A term that describes a phenomenon, that is supposedly universal to all belief systems, will not do for a belief system that is specifically genocidal, or ‘eliminationist’, to quote Goldhagen (1998). Tajfel, with his fine sense of understanding and appropriateness, would not have needed to be told this. In this light it is not surprising that he did not turn his theoretical constructs to the very issue that led him to the study of ‘prejudice’.

Prejudice and bigotry

Tajfel’s argument against the blood-and-guts approach can be turned around and applied against his own approach. Just as the blood-and-guts position could not account for the waxing and waning of warfare, so we can say that there can be a waxing and waning of prejudice. Sometimes there is socially shared bigotry; sometimes there is not; sometimes an ideology of tolerance might be widespread. A cognitive approach that links prejudice to categorization (and also to assimilation and coherence) cannot of itself account for this waxing and waning: some additional element is called for.

This, of course, does not necessarily imply a return to the blood-and-guts model that Tajfel criticized so powerfully. Just to say that the cognitive model needs an added element is not to say that the additional factor must be an assumed innate instinct for aggression. It might be suggested that the additional elements are not psychological factors but are historical and cultural elements, which, according to Tajfel’s account, would need to be assimilated by the individual. If this were the case, the distinguishing features between different intensities of prejudice would not be psychological. It would be implausible, however, to assert that the difference between prejudice, as a cognitive interpretation of the social world, and bigotry, as an intense group hatred, must only be cultural and historical. There surely could be some socio-psychological distinctions between the two types of phenomena.

The difference between prejudice and bigotry, or hatred, can be considered further. Whereas the notion of prejudice seems to invite a cognitive interpretation, since its literal sense refers to prejudgment, bigotry seems to include the very psychological components that the cognitive approach sought to exclude, or at least to put to one side. These are emotional or motivational factors, adding an intensity and wilfulness to mere categorical exaggerations. To talk of Nazi anti-semitism without such factors—to presume it to be merely a category mistake—would seem odd.

Kenneth Burke (1963), in his book *A grammar of motives*, discusses the limitations of giving simple (‘nothing but’) explanations of human behaviour. The excluded elements have a habit of worming their way back. Burke specifically mentioned instinctivist explanations of warfare. When applied to actual cases, such explanations start recognizing situational factors, in order to account for why the war occurred at one point and not another (Burke, 1962, p. 34). Similarly, the cognitive explanation cannot account for why prejudice might become bigotry without discussing motivational issues. One might predict that the more it avoids doing so, the more these issues will sneak into the account by, as it were, the back door.

This can be seen in ‘Cognitive aspects of prejudice’. At one point, Tajfel writes “if a man is prejudiced, he has an emotional investment in preserving differentiations between his own group and ‘others’ ” (p. 134). Here Tajfel is using the description ‘prejudiced’ in a different way than he used ‘prejudice’ when describing the cognitive implications of categorization. To be ‘prejudiced’ in this statement is to do more than use a social category in a way that overestimates the differences between in-group and out-group members. The sentence significantly suggests that prejudice can be a condition of a person’s being (“to *be* prejudiced”, he writes), not something that is a by-product of inevitable cognitive processing. In this case, the condition of being includes an extra dimension, namely an ‘emotional investment’.

Tajfel has little to say about what this ‘emotional investment’ might be and how it might operate. There was a good theoretical reason why Tajfel would have avoided drawing out this theme. To talk of emotional motivations might seem to be leading back to individual dynamics. Significantly, in the statement just quoted, Tajfel refers to an individual being prejudiced, and not a group. Reducing social events to individual motives was something he consistently sought to avoid. The problem of bigotry was not to be resolved by the psychological analysis—or psychoanalysis—of individual bigots.

However, the reductionism, that Tajfel opposed, is not a necessary consequence of considering motivational factors. Recently, within social constructionist psychology, there is an awareness that emotions must be considered as socially constituted (Edwards, 1997; Harré & Gillett, 1994). This position stresses that emotions do not exist as wordless impulses, lying beneath social life, but are constituted within social, discursive interaction. This is even true of unconscious emotions (Billig, 1999). Thus, hatred need not be seen as an individual condition, located within the body of the individual. There can be ideologies of hatred that produce ‘hate-talk’ (e.g. Whillock & Slayden, 1995). The hatred is not separate from the discourse. To hate is not merely, or principally, to feel something at a bodily or visceral level—but to believe and to utter particular sorts of things about others (Billig, 2001). Without that, there can be no hatred. To put it crudely, we do not need to know the hidden, inner psychological mechanisms of the Nazis, in order to know that they hated Jews. Their actions and their words were not a *sign* of their hatred, as if the hatred really was elsewhere; those actions and words were, in the most literal sense, pure hatred.

Gap in Social Identity Theory

Although ‘Cognitive aspects’ contained features that were to be developed in the later Social Identity Theory, there are also differences. Most notably, social identity theory is not a theory of prejudice. It certainly is not a theory of murderous bigotry. It is, at root, a theory of group freedom. It tells of the way that oppressed groups can find ways to challenge groups that have the power to ascribe identities and stereotypes. The most original parts of the theory describe how groups can re-create stereotypes that are applied to them: they can find new dimensions of comparison, alter the valuation of existing traits, collectively oppose powerful out-groups, etc. Significantly, the examples that Tajfel tended to use, in order to illustrate these processes, were the black power movement in the USA and the women’s movement. Both were directly over-turning ascribed stereotypes and re-creating their social identities.

Tajfel belonged to the generation of East European Jews for whom attachment to the Jewish state, especially after the war, was deeply held. After what that generation had

witnessed, a world without a Jewish state could never be fully trusted. Nevertheless, with the exception of a few passing references (e.g. Tajfel, 1981, p. 186), Tajfel did not use Zionism as an illustration of Social Identity Theory in the way that he used black power and the women's movement. Zionism had been engaged in the very activity described by Social Identity Theory; it was explicitly overturning centuries of stereotyping, which had depicted Jews as passive, unheroic, politically uncreative and so on. In private conversation, especially with Jews, Tajfel would be open in his support for the existence of Israel (while distancing himself from the particular actions of Israeli governments). However, in the 1960s and 1970s, there were still inhibitions, at least in British university circles, against expressing Jewish issues too openly. In ways that Social Identity Theory itself could describe, there were pressures not to be 'too Jewish' too visibly (see Billig (2000) for an account of how such pressures affected the cultural sphere of popular music at that time). In the late 1960s, especially during the student power events, Zionism was not politically acceptable within leftist, liberal circles of the social sciences (significantly, Tajfel discussed anti-semitism of both the left and the right in his interview with David Cohen to a much greater extent than in his writings of the time—see Cohen, 1977, p. 310). On the far left, anti-Zionism was commonly expressed (Billig, 1987b).

The consequence is that Tajfel's writings show a gap at the core of his political thinking. His cognitive approach did not directly address the extreme of bigotry that constituted Nazism. Nor did he apply Social Identity Theory to Jewish (or Palestinian) identity in the Middle East. Social Identity Theory, however, could not have been easily used as the central element in a social psychological interpretation of Nazism. A social identity theorist, who wished to apply the theory, might say that Nazism arose because the Germans created dimensions of comparisons with the Jews, in order to produce a positive German self-identity. There might be a grain of truth in such an account. Indeed, it would not be difficult to point towards such elements in the development of Nazi ideology and even in the thinking of Hitler (Mandel, 2001). But to leave the matter there would convert the grain of truth into a wider untruth. This untruth would be a gross oversimplification, which failed to probe the essential characteristics of Nazism. After all, Nazism was not merely a search for positive German self-identity. Much more was at stake.

There would also be a political untruth in applying a theory of liberation to the most reactionary political movement imaginable. It would suggest equivalences, which should not be made, such as a psychological equivalence between the development of in-group identity in Nazism and that of the women's movement or the black struggle for equality. Any empirically grounded similarities would be trivial as compared with the differences. The more that the social psychological theory drew attention to such similarities, the more inappropriate would be its application. This very inappropriateness shows the truth of Tajfel's assertion that social psychological theories are not, and should not be, value-free.

Depersonalization and dehumanization

In Social Identity Theory, there is a further absence, paralleling the cognitive approach's failure to distinguish between prejudice and bigotry. In his writings about social identity, Tajfel introduced the notion of 'depersonalization'—a concept that was to feature significantly in Turner's Self-Categorization Theory (see, for instance, Turner,

Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). A parallel can be drawn between Tajfel's comments about depersonalization and his treatment of categorization in 'Cognitive aspects'.

Tajfel suggested that the use of categories was necessary for human thinking, but that this entailed prejudgment and, thus, prejudice. However, an extra emotional investment was required to turn such inevitable cognitive prejudice into the state of 'being prejudiced'. Depersonalization was similar to categorization in being a common aspect of intergroup phenomena. Tajfel wrote that depersonalization occurred in the deliberately artificial situation of the minimal intergroup experiments as well as in actual situations of warfare: "The common denomination of all these examples—from the contrived absurdities of the experiments to the tragic realities of the War—is the depersonalization of the members of the outgroup" (1981, p. 241).

Significantly, Tajfel, in his comments about depersonalization, also used a stronger term, namely 'dehumanization'. Depersonalization might be the 'common denominator' in the minimal intergroup experiments and in actual warfare, but there is a crucial difference between the two situations. In actual warfare, out-group members are often not merely depersonalized but commonly dehumanized. Thus, Tajfel wrote that depersonalization of out-group members may be just a beginning, and "the next stage is often their dehumanization" (1981, p. 241). Depersonalization, thus, is a milder form of the way that in-group members can treat out-groups: "Our social history is full of familiar and horrifying examples of dehumanization of outgroups and even more so of milder forms of their depersonalization" (1981, pp. 52–53). As such, there is a 'continuum' stretching between depersonalization and dehumanization (Tajfel, 1981, p. 241). One might suggest a ratio: depersonalization is to dehumanization as cognitive prejudice is to bigotry.

Just as the cognitive approach does not stipulate the factors that lead from prejudice to bigotry (or from prejudices as 'cognitive prejudgment' to prejudice as an ideology of hatred), so Tajfel in his social identity theory did not elaborate on the possible continuum between depersonalization and dehumanization. For any social psychological theory of social conflict, let alone a theory of genocide, such a continuum would be vital: it would demarcate the 'ordinary' from the 'abnormal', or the mild from the strong. As Tajfel stressed, ideological factors, or social myths, will be crucial on this continuum, for cruelty and massacre are made legitimate if the victims are seen as being in some way 'inhuman' (Tajfel, 1984, p. 698). Merely to be categorized as a member of an out-group is not sufficient to be considered as being non-human, although, conversely, it can be said that an ideology of dehumanization must rest on the distinctions of social categorization.

Later work on social identity

It might be thought that later work on Social Identity Theory would have discussed the continuum between depersonalization and dehumanization. This is especially so since much of this later work has involved giving the concept of depersonalization a more prominent role and has addressed itself to making the original theory more precise. However, there has been a crucial change in the use of depersonalization in much of this later work. This change not only leads away from the problem of distinguishing the mild from the extreme, but also leads away from some of the intergroup considerations that underlay Tajfel's theorizing.

The concept of depersonalization is much more prominent in Turner's Self-Categorization Theory than it is in either Tajfel's 'Cognitive aspects of prejudice' or his social identity theory. Turner has linked depersonalization to the process of self-categorization. He writes that the factors that enhance the salience of in-group-out-group categorizations enhance the perceived identity between the self and fellow in-group members; as such, these factors "*depersonalize individual self-perception*" (Turner *et al.*, 1987, p. 50, emphasis in original). In consequence, "the depersonalization of self-perception is the basic process underlying group phenomena" (p. 50).

Depersonalization, being the basic process of group processes, is linked to a range of group phenomena. In-group cohesion, in-group co-operation, social stereotyping and so on are said to be consequences of depersonalization. Turner writes that "sub-theories of, for example, group cohesion, social co-operation and influences need to be developed consistent with existing empirical generalizations but also productive of distinctive, testable predictions and *clearly derived from the depersonalization process*" (Turner *et al.*, 1987, p. 56, emphasis added). The importance of the notion of depersonalization can also be seen in other recent theories derived from Social Identity Theory, such as Postmes, Spears, and Lea (1999), whose SIDE model (the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation effects) reinterprets deindividuation in terms of depersonalization.

It is not the present intention to offer a critique of these recent approaches to intergroup relations. Clearly that is well beyond the scope of the present analysis. Rather the intention is much more limited. It is to point out how the term 'depersonalization', in moving to the theoretical centre of later developments, has been altered in two crucial respects.

(a) *From out-group to in-group.* In the quotations given above, it is clear that Tajfel, in discussing depersonalization, was writing about the depersonalization of out-group members—not the depersonalization of the self or fellow in-group members. By contrast, the linkage of depersonalization to the self and to the in-group is central to Self-Categorization Theory. As Hogg (1996) writes, "self-categorization depersonalizes self-perception in terms of the evaluatively positive ingroup prototype" (p. 72).

(b) *From negative to positive.* The shift from out-group to the self (and, thus, to the in-group) involves a shift in value. In the quotations from Tajfel, depersonalization, like prejudice, is clearly seen as a problem. It is the start of a process that can lead to dehumanization and mass slaughter. In self-categorization theory, the emphasis is very different. Writers take care to stress the positive aspects of depersonalization. Turner writes that depersonalization should not be seen as a loss of individual identity, rather than as "a *gain* in identity" (Turner *et al.*, 1987, p. 51, emphasis in original). As Turner (1984) stressed, "depersonalization in this analysis should not be considered a loss (as in the concept of de-individuation) but a change, and perhaps even a gain, in identity, as the individual assumes the characteristics of a culturally constructed identity" (pp. 535–536).

The terminology of 'loss' and 'gain' is significant, in construing 'depersonalization' as something that can positively benefit the individual by providing a social identity. Depersonalization is not assumed to be a social problem. Thus it is to be distinguished from terms such as 'dehumanization' and 'deindividuation' that have typically appeared in social psychological theorizing as social problems (see, most notably, Zimbardo, 1969). Thus, Hogg (1996) writes:

Nothing negative is implied by the term 'depersonalization'. It contains none of the implications of 'dehumanization' or 'deindividuation', but simply refers to a contextual *change* in the level of identity, not to a loss of identity (p. 69, emphasis in original).

In such comments the double shift in the treatment of 'depersonalization' is apparent. The focus has been transformed from 'prejudice' against out-groups to the positive benefit to the in-group member. The possible continuum between depersonalization and dehumanization is not given theoretical space. In fact, the linkage is theoretically denied, for 'depersonalization' is said to carry no implication of 'dehumanization'. Tajfel's idea that depersonalization might on occasions be the first step to dehumanization is omitted in this shift of theoretical attention.

The double shift also appears as Turner (1999) appears to dismiss prejudice and stereotyping as fundamental problems. Turner writes that depersonalization is the basic process that "produces group behaviour" and adds "psychological group formation is an adaptive process" (p. 14). This perspective, he claims, provides a new way of thinking about prejudice and stereotyping. In this new way of thinking, 'prejudice' ceases to be a problem as such, at least in the way that it is traditionally conceived. The negative connotation of 'stereotype' is rejected. Stereotypes are not to be seen as invalid or inaccurate. "Stereotypic accentuation reflects the rational selectivity of perception in which it is more appropriate to see people in some contexts at the level of social category identity than at the level of personal identity" (p. 26). Thus stereotyping does not "impoverish, but enriches social perception" (p. 27). Indeed, part of self-categorization research is devoted to exploring the extent to which stereotyping might be "veridical" (p. 28; see Stangor, 1995, for criticism of research that attempts to see stereotypes as accurate or veridical).

The problematic of 'Cognitive aspects' has shifted. Tajfel in that article started from the assumption that prejudice and stereotyping were social problems. He was concerned to trace their origins to rational factors. In doing this, he was not arguing that prejudice and stereotyping were themselves rational, but that irrational consequences did not need to be explained in terms of irrational motivations. In Turner's Self-Categorization Theory, prejudice does not appear as a problem in its own right. Nor does the continuum between depersonalization and dehumanization feature. If followed rigidly, this perspective would make an analysis of the Holocaust even more inappropriate. One would not wish to imagine extreme bigotry as an 'enriching' social perception, nor to see the Nazi stereotypes of Jews being described as rational, 'appropriate' or 'adaptive' because they are socially rather than individually based. Even the idea of exploring whether or not such stereotyping might be 'veridical' is distasteful. Whatever the merits of the Self-Categorization Theory—and this is not to deny that the approach might not have considerable force in some contexts—it is addressed to a different set of problems.

Towards a study of bigotry

There is not space here to do anything more than make suggestions about recasting the social psychological study of bigotry. Such recasting can take, as its starting point, the theoretical interstices of 'Cognitive aspects'. Several factors would need to be taken into account to develop the continuum between prejudice and bigotry or between depersonalization and dehumanization. Some preliminary points can be made about such a development.

(i) *Bigotry as ideological.* In line with Tajfel's argument in 'Cognitive aspects', it can be reaffirmed that the study of bigotry should not be reduced to the personal dynamics of individual bigots. Bigotry typically is more than an individual emotional investment. It is a feature of group relations. In this regard, the ideological basis of bigotry needs to be recognized, as indeed Tajfel acknowledged with his concept of assimilation.

(ii) *Discursive basis of ideology.* The discursive position in social psychology stresses the key role of language in the social world (i.e. Billig, 1987a; Edwards, 1997; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Ideologies are above all discursive, instantiated within discursive actions (Billig, 1991). Thus, the categories of ideology, together with shared stereotyping and commonplace social explanations, are framed in language. If this is accepted, it is no longer necessary to understand categorization in terms of models that are derived from perceptual processes, as is commonly found in most cognitive social psychology, including Tajfel's 'Cognitive aspects'. Instead, categorization and stereotyping can be investigated within discursive interaction.

(iii) *Emotional aspects of ideology.* The ideology of bigotry cannot be seen merely as a cognitive appraisal of social reality. The limitations of a purely cognitive approach to intergroup relations have been recognized by mainstream social psychologists. For instance, Stephan and Stephan (1985) emphasize the importance of 'intergroup anxiety', but this primarily refers to individual contact across groups rather than the ideology of hatred (see also Maas & Schaller, 1991). Brewer (1999) argues for examining hatred. However, she offers no characterization of hatred in her argument that in-group preference provides "a platform for outgroup hate" (p. 434). She states that there is a "fine line between the absence of trust and the presence of active distrust" (p. 435) but does not indicate the nature of that dividing line. What is required is not merely the addition of 'emotional variables' to the prevailing cognitive perspective but a theoretical reassessment of the apparent distinction between cognition and emotion. If ideologies are said to encompass emotions, this does not mean that emotions should be seen as free-floating psychological impulses, lying behind ideologies or social categories. They exist within socially shared explanations, blamings, accountings and so on. The emotion within an ideology of hatred is not something extra that is added to a cognitive interpretation; it is part of that interpretation. When Tajfel was writing, it was customary for psychologists to assume a rigid split between cognition and emotion, or between rational and irrational aspects of human functioning. The social constructionist position, which has been developed subsequently, attempts to bridge this gap. Thus, social constructionists have stressed the social and discursive constitution of emotions (Billig, 1999; Edwards, 1997; Harré & Gillett, 1994). In consequence, to say that bigotry involves emotions does not imply that there must be an emotional force behind the bigotry. The emotions will be contained within the hate-talk that comprises the bigotry.

(iv) *Reconceptualizing depersonalization and dehumanization in discursive terms.* Following Tajfel, one can assert that the notions of depersonalization and dehumanization are vital to an understanding of bigotry. Depersonalization should not be restricted to the depersonalization of the self, nor should it be seen as a cognitive process that somehow lies behind language. Instead, the focus should be on the ways that particular ways of speaking might depersonalize the 'other'. To probe this further, one would want to examine the language of stereotyping as used in actual social interaction. Dehumanization will be an extreme form of depersonalization, as the

'other' is depicted as somehow less than human. Dehumanization may, for instance, occur in ethnic jokes, and it will certainly be found in the extremes of hate-talk (Billig, 2001). The ideology of bigotry, in which the discourse of dehumanization will occur, might be presumed to be an emotion-laden discourse.

(v) *Repressed and unrepressed emotions.* Tajfel, in common with most cognitive social psychologists, was resolutely anti-Freudian. He did not wish the study of ideology to be reduced to individual or interpersonal dynamics. However, a discursive approach offers the possibility of reconstituting Freudian theory around the notion of repression in a way that avoids individual reductionism (Billig, 1997, 1999). This perspective assumes that language is both expressive and repressive: in order to speak appropriately, speakers must learn to repress routinely the desire to speak inappropriately. In any social context, there will be norms and routines that permit certain discursive actions and that forbid others. What is socially forbidden can become an object of desire and pleasure. If there are taboos on the expression of bigotry in contemporary society, outward prejudice may take the form of a forbidden pleasure. Bigotry, then, becomes a temptation.

(vi) *Pleasure in bigotry.* This would lead to the disturbing possibility that there is pleasure in bigotry. As Sartre recognized in his *Portrait of the anti-Semite* (1948), the bigot might enjoy the act of hatred, especially if this includes the pleasure of doing something that is forbidden. Dehumanizing the other can be enjoyable as the bigot is freed from the constraints of respect, tolerance and reasonableness. Thus one should not expect extreme racist propaganda to be devoid of humour and mockery (Billig, 2001). The complex relations between language and pleasure in extreme racist humour involve, as Sartre realized, mocking the restraints of logic and reason. This would lead to a further paradox in the study of prejudice. The 'Cognitive aspects' dealt with the paradox of social irrationality stemming from rational motives. There is also the possibility that the extremes of hatred bring pleasure to the hater. Were it not so, bigotry would not remain such a dangerous temptation that constantly needs to be watched.

These notions are sketched out in order to stress a simple point. A turn towards the study of bigotry and the emotions contained with hate-discourse does not mean a return to the sort of blood-and-guts psychology that Tajfel explicitly rejected. When Tajfel was writing, the choice seemed to be between concentrating on either cognitive or instinctual dynamics, as if the two belonged to entirely separated psychological realms. Faced with that choice, Tajfel understandably, and with good reason, chose the cognitive aspects. Today, such a stark choice is unnecessary. The academic, cultural and political climate has changed. In many spheres, there has been a blurring of boundaries that were previously thought to be impermeable. Philosophically, the firm divisions between truth and falsity or between rationality and irrationality no longer seem to fit the current mood: whereas once academics sought absolute truths and complete rationality, the provisionally reasonable seems to suffice nowadays. Such shifts have been both explored by and revealed within the writings of thinkers such as Richard Rorty, Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman. Within social psychology, social constructionism is a product of this changed mood. More generally there might be a theoretical gain if the previously accepted divisions between emotion and cognition, or between rationality and irrationality, no longer have to be accepted at least in the old manner. The challenge is to explore the interconnections, especially in relation to the continuing problems of prejudice and bigotry.

The political context of today should not be forgotten. The current age is not one of confident political ideological truth. Nevertheless, bigotry remains a major social issue in Europe with fascist parties appealing to anti-foreigner sentiments, and the re-emergence of extreme, often violent, nationalist politics. Fascism in Western Europe refuses to wane to the point of disappearance, and there is a marked waxing in the East. These forces are not the products of individual motivations, nor do they represent mere systems of social categorization. They represent powerful and dangerous mixtures. So long as this ideological mixture continues to threaten, the need to attend to the social psychological dynamics of bigotry persists.

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