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Commentaries

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Review of "Political Psychology: Critical Perspectives"

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Abstract

The core focus of "Political Psychology: Critical Perspectives" is an interrelated set of European-based theories and perspectives that emphasize both the social context of the individual and the capacity of citizens to engage in strategic discursive and rhetorical agency. Through an explanation of social representations, social identity, self-categorization and other theories, Tileagă raises questions about mainstream methodologies in political psychology and offers alternatives. The core achievements of the book consist of the integrated presentation of a range of critical European-based political psychology approaches as well as a subtle exploration of the interplay between the individual and the social.

Keywords: critical, discourse, rhetoric, social identity theory, social representations, self-categorization theory, memory, narrative, public opinion, values

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In a field dominated by individualistic, positivist, and largely North American-based literature, *Political Psychology: Critical Perspectives* is a wide-ranging, persuasive and highly successful invitation to European-based social psychological theories and methodologies that integrate both the social context and human agency into studies of the self and the political system.

My Commentary consists of two sections, first, a summary and appraisal of each chapter in turn and, second, a general commentary on the book as a whole.

The Chapters

The core chapters of the book expand upon Tileagă’s claim in his introduction that political psychology needs to take human agency seriously and thereby adopt interpretive methodologies that are better attuned to real life practices in all their complexity and in the depth of the real world. Following Moscovici (1972), Tileagă calls upon us to look to the “relative, particularistic aspects of social and political experience” (p. 4). Across the substantive chapters of the book, Tileagă articulates basically the same argument in different contexts: That political psychology must be based upon not only the already social constitution of the self but also the situated contingency, specificity and complexity of how individuals perceive, think and symbolically interact. In other words, while it is important to pay attention to the manner in which social structures and historical circumstances shape individuals, they remain the central agents in the reproduction, development and transformation of the very social circumstances that they inhabit. Tileagă’s argument is threaded through his analyses of social identity and self-categorization theories as well as social representations, discourse, rhetorical and narrative analyses.

In Chapter 1, Tileagă makes the convincing point that attitudes are not pre-given, but are in constant circulation as social actors make use of them. Mainstream political psychology regards attitudes as ‘found objects’ that somehow emerge from abstracted individuals and then are aggregated for further analysis. Tileagă thus problematises the very concept of ‘public’ – as in the rhetorical hailing of the ‘majority’, ‘average person’, and so on. Opinion itself is a technical artifact of the procedures that measure it. Tileagă calls for a study of public opinion based on everyday political meanings and experiences. In so doing, he appropriately takes us back to Robert Lane (1962) and David Riesman (1954), who understood opinion in all its social and rhetorical complexity. Attitudes are positions rather than possessions.

In Chapter 2 on mass subjectivity, values and democratic promotion, Tileagă extends his argument from the study of attitudes to those of deeper values. He argues: “Values should be studied more as ideologically and culturally situated argumentative resources: *ways of talking* about people, society and democracy, and less as *predictions* based on statistical models, or emergent properties of aggregation across contexts and life experiences” (p. 40). However, Tileagă offers no account of the social structural explanations of how ideologies work. Without this, we are left only with complexity as such and no *social* theory of how and when ideologies – specific belief systems – arise, and why. In other words in this chapter and elsewhere, Tileagă’s work would be complemented through the integration of (post)structuralist and postcolonial political psychology (Hook, 2012; Kinnvall, 2004; Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011; Nesbitt-Larking, 2003). Such balances would help to reduce the often voluntaristic cast of Tileagă’s approach.

In Chapter 3, Tileagă examines the political psychology of intolerance and argues that right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and other personality scales and measures need to be supplemented by attention to culture, language and context. While the F scale and other measures have merit, *social* factors also explain prejudice, over and above personality. Even a scale as robust as RWA only predicts prejudice under certain conditions (Cohrs & Stelzl, 2010). Research from social identity theory and self-categorization theory demonstrates how categorization and comparison affects discrimination. Tileagă, following Condor (2006; Condor, Abell, Figgou, Gibson, & Stevenson, 2006), shows that prejudice is not a precondition to encounter, but worked up in situations of encounter and therefore context dependent.

For Tileagă, the building blocks of negotiated and intersubjective constructions of political reality are social representations, as theorized by Moscovici. Chapter 4, which introduces social representations theory, consists of an elaboration of how social representations are constructed and how they condition social interactions and social identities. Social representations theory is an elaborated explanation of how social knowledge enters the self and how social representations construct and constitute social practices. The setting is one in which social and political forces are involved in ongoing dialogical positioning creating and conditioning the 'thinking society'. A thinking society is one in which all social agents play a role in the construction of reality and not one in which the masses select from among a range of available ideas and values on offer from the elites.

Such a theoretical elaboration distinguishes Tileagă's approach from the more familiar mainstream cognitive psychology of schema, in which discrete individuals somehow select from among a menu of available repertoires of thought (schema) but in which there is little explanation as to the mechanisms under which such circumstances arise. In a critique of Converse's cognitive constraint or consistency model, Tileagă says: "Whereas for Converse cognition and information are conceived as pre-given phenomena, for Moscovici social actors jointly construct their cognitions, and, in so doing, they establish social relations" (p. 64). On the basis of his elaboration of social representations theory, Tileagă offers a critique of basic survey methodology (pp. 74-75) in which he argues that it imposes categories rather than investigating the "subjective and intersubjective life-worlds" (p. 75) that come to be "expressed in social interactions and social relationships" (p. 75). Adopting a broadly constructionist perspective, Tileagă encourages a deep investigation of the ways in which political ideas and values come to be in circulation and a rejection of the often superficial imposition of variable-type constructs. With respect to lay political actors he says: "If their forms of reasoning do not happen to fit the schemas and models of political psychologists or political elites driving policy issues, it does not mean that their reasoning, their thinking is not valid in its own right" (p. 75).

Chapter 5 begins with an exposition and critique of social dominance theory. The biologistic and deterministic theoretical underpinnings of social dominance theory are contrasted with what Tileagă regards as the dynamic, complex and contingent social theories of social identity and self-categorization. Tileagă states that identities are socially constructed, multiple, partial and contingent on the setting and expectations. There are contested and strategic elements of identity construction and people live with multiple in-group memberships. Social identity and self-categorization theory research on category inclusion (who is us), category norms (what we and people like us do) and category interests (what we need and desire) shows that dominant groups do not have to be exclusivist or oppressive. Identities are not nouns but verbs – better seen as 'projects' than statuses.

Tileagă's perspective is further evidenced in Chapter 6 that begins with a critique of the encoding–storage–retrieval model of individualized memory. This model sets up an over-individualized understanding of cognition and memory, thereby avoiding the socio-cultural contexts of memory work and forgetting. To convey the richness of this many-layered embedding of shared memory and forgetting, Tileagă uses the concept of mnemonic socialization. Mnemonic socialization refers to the deep and yet often taken-for-granted immersion through habits, rituals, and daily interactions into the cultures, discourses and ideologies that surround us. Families are critical to these processes and: "Collective memories are contingent, intersubjective and inter-textual" (p. 112). The strategic shaping of narratives allows for inferences to be drawn, obscures certain truths and facts while bringing others into relief. The field of memory work and the construction of narratives operate at multiple levels in a society and national memories are often invoked in the service of unity, reassurance, anchoring and nostalgia. The deep power of

mnemonically grounded narratives creates bonds that underwrite specific identity projects as well as strategies of political resistance.

Political Psychology: Critical Perspectives begins with a listing of transcription notations employed in conversation analysis-based discursive and rhetorical political psychology. While not employed very extensively throughout the book, these notations are indicative of the heart of the book and Tileagă’s own approach toward critical political psychology. Tileagă is on his firmest footing when working with rhetorical and discursive psychology, the object of Chapters 7 and 8.

In Chapter 7, Tileagă stresses the need for political psychology to investigate how agents construct and make use of political categories and how such categories are then used in the service of strategic representations, identities and narratives that underwrite broader political projects (p. 139). Tileagă sets out how conventional political psychology, with its abstracted measurement of underlying attitudes and cognitions, is divorced from the socially embedded context of utterance and discourse. He insists on politics as something practiced by people rather than done to them. Political language is in itself a social activity and a way of doing politics. Calling for the abandonment of positivist approaches in which language is seen as an inert expression of underlying cognitive processes, Tileagă advocates the study of talk and text as socially implicated and contingent. Critical discourse analysis employs aspects of intertextuality to explore the ideological circulation and usage of elements of discourse in order to show how discourses reproduce inequalities in power relations. The outcomes of such discursive plays and struggles are “contingent, *situated* and *practical* accomplishments, and an integral part of *what goes on* in a variety of political practices and settings” (p. 185).

The public use of language – political rhetoric – is the focus of Chapter 8 that extends discourse analysis into the realm of rhetoric and persuasive communication. Speakers and writers are involved in attempts to discursively construct realities and to be able to persuade others of their emotional and logical coherence. Tileagă explains the working of metaphors to include/exclude groups and to prefer/dismiss explanations. The important work of using discourse to establish and construct in-groups/out-groups and identity markers enables politicians to justify policies, make rules and assign resources (p. 163).

The final chapter, Chapter 9, engages in a critical exploration of the familiar concepts of framing, agenda setting and priming. Among Tileagă’s most important contributions is to raise the importance of taking priming and framing studies beyond the laboratory. Mainstream experimental and survey approaches toward political communications miss the already-given interplay of social and cultural discourses at the very heart of language. The cognitive processing and affective work of agents in political communications should be grounded in a view of the citizen as a producer, reproducer, innovator and even subverter of meaning and agency through the use of language in the natural setting.

The Book

The foregoing summaries and appraisals of the chapters in *Political Psychology: Critical Perspectives* convey the breadth and richness of Tileagă’s contribution. It is an elegant synthesis of a range of theoretical approaches and perspectives that together underscore the critical importance of examining the social in the individual as well as the individual in society. This is a book of considerable merit. Despite this, I have certain reservations.

First, Tileagă acknowledges that his book offers "a selective, yet coherent, presentation of a diverse field. Inevitably, only a segment of relevant literature has been included" (p. 6). However, it is unclear how Tileagă understands the nature of such absences. I would argue that it is more than a matter of missing relevant literature. There are in fact major epistemological perspectives on political psychology that remain unmentioned throughout the book. The book offers no engagement with Foucauldian (Hook, 2007; Rose, 1990, 1999), postcolonial (Hook & Truscott, 2013; Kinnvall, 2004, 2009), Freudian and neo-Freudian (Frosh, 1987; Roazen, 1999), Marxist (Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996), and other critical approaches to political psychology. As far as I can tell, there are no references to Freud, Fanon or Foucault. Such omissions do not necessarily detract from the coherence of the book. However, their unmentioned absence leaves open the question as to how far Tileagă regards such approaches as alternative critical approaches or as conventional ones, and how he might relate such theories and models to those he adopts.

Second, the overall tone of the book is necessarily one of exhortation, which occasionally verges on entreaty as when he urges political psychologists to "resist the temptation" to engage in one-dimensional analyses (p. 103). Tileagă's task, after all, is to convince us that there are better ways of conducting political psychology.

I hope that Tileagă's work stimulates the critical encounters that it deserves. My concern is that he will have preached well to those of us who are already converted, but not reach those who he is in fact addressing. Part of the challenge is that those other political psychologists do not in fact regard themselves as succumbing to temptation, but rather as engaged in sound and replicable scientific practices grounded in experimental design and/or survey research methodology. Moreover, they are frequently engaged in highly successful research programmes that place a premium upon the paradigmatic integrity and intensity of Kuhnian normal scientific activity. In other words, they have neither the time nor the academic inclination for broader encounters to take place.

Tileagă wants political psychology to move beyond the positivist and pragmatist approaches of surveys and experimental methods – of individualistic political psychology - and to enter into an interpretive political psychology based upon already socially constituted identities that are immersed in the real-life muddiness and complexities and lived practices. We need both scientific and lay accounts and we need to use social representations, discourses, narratives, rhetoric and symbolic communication to open up political behaviour as a social practice.

Political Psychology: Critical Perspectives is an intelligent, thought-provoking and indeed critical contribution to the field. Despite my misgivings, I believe that it should be read and discussed by professional practitioners and graduate students alike.

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