

PSYCHOLOGY REVIVALS

# The Psychology of Society

Morris Ginsberg





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## The Psychology of Society

First published in 1964, *The Psychology of Society* deals with the idea of building up a social psychology or the science of human nature. The author confines himself to a discussion of certain of its fundamental problems and offers a critical account of the theories as to the nature of the social mind. This edition includes a new introduction and new material brought into the appendices, but the central themes remain valid and therefore unaltered. This book will be of interest to students of psychology and sociology.



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# The Psychology of Society



MORRIS GINSBERG

D.Lit., F.B.A.

*Professor Emeritus of Sociology  
in the University of London*

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## Introduction to the Ninth Edition

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THIS BOOK WAS first published in 1921 and has been reprinted several times without revision. In considering a new edition at the request of Messrs Methuen I have decided not to attempt a recast but to let the text speak for itself from the past. It seemed desirable, however, to add in appendices two papers published in the intervening period bearing on the topics dealt with in the book and to write a new introductory chapter indicating my present attitude to its central themes.

In essentials the book was concerned with two groups of problems: How is the individual related to society? And, How are the irrational or non-rational elements of the mind related to the rational? In the climate of thought prevailing at the time the two themes were closely interwoven. The questions that both raised were expressed in the form, what are the elements in the human mind which determine social relations, and, conversely, how do these social relations react on the mind? To answer these questions it was necessary to arrive at some notion of the role of intelligence and instinct, will and impulse, and of the way in which these are affected as they affect the action of mind upon mind in society.

Comparative psychology and especially the study of animal behaviour was then beginning to throw new light on the interpretation of human conduct. Psychological hedonism, the theory that all action is ultimately to be traced to anticipation of pleasure and pain, had been philosophically refuted by Bishop Butler, who showed conclusively that the springs of action were to be found in 'particular propensities' which 'tend towards their objects' rather than to the feelings attending their satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> The new psychology effectively reinforced this refutation. It was

<sup>1</sup> *Butler's Works*, ed. Gladstone, vol. II. XI. 3.

shown that pleasure and pain had the function of confirming and controlling rather than of initiating impulses, and that, even in those cases in which feeling does not appear to depend upon prior appetition or want, we might assume the existence of susceptibilities or interests stimulating attention or action without which the feelings would not supervene.

The theory that gained most support for a time was that based on the concept of instinct. This was due in part to the growing influence of evolutionary ideas and the desire to link human with animal behaviour. Reinforcement came later from another source, that of psycho-analysis which required a theory of inborn drives in dealing with conflict, repression and sublimation. In any event, the instinct theory, especially in the form given to it by McDougall, came to be widely used in the various fields of social inquiry, e.g. education, industry, social and political organization. There is no doubt that it was wildly abused. The term instinct was allowed to run riot and was used to cover all sorts of actions, however contingent and variable, provided they could be assumed to have some sort of hereditary basis and could be contrasted with the rational or consciously purposive.

The theory, however, very soon came under attack. From the side of philosophy it was dismissed as pseudo-scientific, substituting occult qualities or mere naming for explanation and analysis. The behaviourists and their sympathizers objected to it, at any rate, as applied to man, as incapable of experimental verification. Seen in retrospect, the scepticism with which the whole notion of instinct in man was viewed by psychologists had two roots. In the first place, it formed part of what may be called the flight from the mind characteristic of the early behaviourists. To them the use of such notions as impulse, effort, end or purpose was anathema. Connected with this was the wish to believe that human conduct could be changed at will by changes in the environment. It was clear to me at the time that the belief in the omnipotence of the environment, like the eighteenth-century belief in the indefinite perfectibility of man, was mistaken and that it would inevitably provoke a reversal to

the opposite view of the overriding importance of inborn factors. In fact, the arguments swayed to and fro, entangled in the wider but equally confused controversy of nature *versus* nurture.

As far as animal behaviour is concerned the concept of instinct has in recent work been resuscitated by the ethologists. There seems to be general agreement among them that instincts are (1) innate, that is inherited and specific; (2) that they usually involve complex action patterns; (3) that they are evoked by complex environmental situations to which the senses are inherently attuned, so that the animal tends to attend to particular objects or to seek for them with great perseverance and sometimes intelligence. (Cf. W. H. Thorpe, *Learning and Instinct in Animals*, 1956, p. 17.)

In its application to man the rejection of the concept of instinct was never as thoroughgoing as its critics pretended. They usually allowed it to come back by a side-door under another name, e.g. innate tendencies, wishes or 'drives'. They were right in maintaining that instinct in the sense of inborn fixed action patterns was not very useful in explaining human behaviour. They were further right in their criticism of the various lists of human instincts which had been suggested. These were open to the objection that they included tendencies so diverse as the very general instinct of self-preservation, and instincts like those of sex and maternity, in which it was more plausible to maintain that there was an innate drive organizing behaviour on lines which were in general, though not in detail, innately determined, and others again, such as acquisitiveness, based largely on doubtful analogies drawn from animal behaviour and mostly from species not very near to man. Despite all this, it seems to me that the conception of instinct in its application to human behaviour is still useful, first, as a 'limiting' notion applicable to modes of behaviour according as they approach the type of action in which both the end or object and the mode of its attainment are mainly determined by heredity. On this view ends innately determined come in the course of experience to be apprehended with varying degrees of clarity, to be related to each other, and to be controlled and

checked in the interests of relatively wide and comprehensive purposes. Secondly, the notion of instinct is required to describe forms of behaviour in which drives are in conflict with each other and can challenge, though not necessarily defeat, rational control. This seems to be the use of the notion of instinct found especially helpful in psychopathology, and it is one which has been largely ignored by the critics. It may be noted further that it survives even among the Neo-Freudians, e.g. Karen Horney and Erich Fromm, despite their criticism of what they take to be Freud's failure to make sufficient allowances for variations in cultural conditions.<sup>1</sup>

In dealing with the relation of instinct and intelligence I adopted what may be best described as a theory of ascending levels of development, and I tried to show that at all stages conation, cognition and feeling are closely interwoven. Thus instinct, desire and volition have each their corresponding cognitive and affective structure. On the instinctive level there is perception of objects directly present to the senses and there is a feeling tone sustaining the chain of acts. On the level of desire the cognitive structure is at least that of 'free ideas', involving the power of recall and of anticipating future situations. It is characteristic of desire that there is a gap between the impulse and its fulfilment. Hence in connexion with desire we find emotions which Shand has called the emotions of desire – hope, anxiety, confidence, disappointment, despair – which cannot arise until the subject is able to look backward and forward. Finally, in the stage of volition the cognitive structure is that of analytic comparison, general concepts and principles and on the affective side the organization of emotional dispositions into sentiments. Volition implies the action of the self as a permanent entity, having continuity and identity, endowed with the capacity of forming or accepting general rules of action and of considering and weighing alternatives both as regards fact and value. The act of volition is on this view a new act and not merely the triumph of the stronger impulse or desire. This act,

<sup>1</sup> For a full discussion of recent work on instinct see Ronald Fletcher, *Instinct in Man*, 1957.

however, is not due to a unique factor but is a response of the more organized systems of desire and the emotional and cognitive dispositions connected with them. On this view then the function of intelligence is (1) to bring the ends of the impulses into consciousness; (2) to relate them to one another so as to form comprehensive purposes; (3) to control and regulate partial and immediate impulses and desires with the aid of sentiments or systems of sentiments and (4) to vary the means as growing experience shows what is most effective.

The theory of levels of conation seemed to me important as against the view which was gaining ground that the ends of action were given by the hereditary structure and that the function of reason was confined to the discovery of the means needed to attain them, aided in the choice of the means, as McDougall insisted, by pleasure and pain. It was equally important, on the other hand, to avoid the opposite extreme of claiming for reason powers of its own, capable of initiating action by itself and of controlling impulse and desire, as it were, from above. The effect of my argument was that we had not to choose between Hume's view, supposed to be strengthened by the psychology of instinct and the unconscious, of reason as the slave of the passions and Kant's view as independent of them and overriding them. The lesson of comparative psychology was, it seemed to me, that cognition, feeling and conation are in varying degrees intertwined at all stages of behaviour. The primary needs of the organism are laid down in the hereditary structure, but they are transformed by the growth of knowledge and the influence of social factors. As the individual matures he discovers that what he wants and what he needs are not necessarily the same. Analytic reflection is required to reveal what it is in the objects we pursue that we desire, and how it is that we seek satisfaction where it is not to be found. New needs, purposes and ideals are generated with the growth of knowledge of human capacities and the opportunities that nature provides for their fulfilment. The individual's tastes and wants are shaped and conditioned by social factors. Far from being simply 'given' the ends of action are complex and variable. They cannot be

attributed to feeling or cognition 'in themselves'. There are desires which are only possible at certain levels of cognitive development and there are thoughts which are only possible at certain levels of emotional intensity.

In reflecting on these arguments after an interval of forty years it is clear that even in the form in which I have just restated them they are much too general to be effective as against the anti-intellectualists or anti-rationalists. In any event the distrust of the part of reason in human affairs has persisted and even gained in strength. This has taken many forms and I propose now to discuss some of them briefly. There is first the impact of psycho-analysis. This has often been taken as implying that the ultimate sources of action are to be found in unconscious drives and that what reason does is to 'rationalize', that is, to present the impulses in a form acceptable to the conscious mind. As an account of Freud's own views of the role of reason this is absurd. To begin with Freud had great faith in the power of rational inquiry. He dismisses subjectivist or relativist views of knowledge as 'intellectual nihilism'. (*New Introductory Lectures*, p. 224.) Though our knowledge of nature is affected by the structure of the mind, this does not make knowledge necessarily subjective, since the structure of the mind can itself be scientifically investigated and the errors due to subjective factors allowed for. In Freud's own account of mental structure the role of reason is by no means insignificant. The 'ego' is that part of the mind which is influenced by perception and reasoning and helps the organism to act in accordance with the 'reality principle' or in other words, to learn from experience. It is true that the 'id', that is, the untamed impulses, is said to have no organization and to persist unchanged. But this cannot be intended to be taken strictly, for we are also told that the ego is the organized portion of the id (*Inhibition, Symptoms and Anxiety*, p. 32), so that some part of the id at any rate is organized. Furthermore, the ego is said to make for unity and synthesis. To it, therefore, are assigned functions which in general psychology are assigned to 'reason'. On the therapeutic side, it is clear that it is taken for granted that the non-rational



elements of the mind are subject to rational control. The aims of analysis are said to be: 'To strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the super-ego, to widen its field of vision and so to extend its organization that it can take over new portions of the id. Where id was, there shall ego be'. (*New Introductory Lectures*, p. 106.) Elsewhere hopes are held out for a rational ethic. The ultimate ideal is said to be 'the primacy of reason' and on the moral side 'the brotherhood of man and the reduction of suffering'.

How is it then that Freud's theory has been described as anti-rationalist? Apart from errors due to misunderstanding, there seems to have been a failure to distinguish between the ideal functions of reason and its actual operation in the lives of men. As regards the former Freud differs in no way from other rationalists; as regards the latter his outlook is pessimistic. He and his followers lay great stress on the imperviousness of the instincts to the influence of the ego and the difficulty the ego has in maintaining its superiority over them. His conception of the history of civilization is even more sombre. Eros is pitted against Thanatos and the antagonism will in all probability never be overcome. Even the love instincts are divided among themselves. The striving for happiness comes into conflict with the impulse towards union with others. Repression or renunciation is essential to culture, yet cannot achieve liberation or harmony. His views on the future of mankind are, however, purely speculative. To substantiate them it would be necessary to undertake a wide comparative study of the role of repression in the history of culture, in particular, of what Freud calls the 'cultural super-ego' as represented in the ethics of the higher religions. Such a study, as Freud well knew, was only in its initial stages.

Pareto, to whom anti-rationalists also appeal, is far less cautious than Freud. He thinks himself justified in concluding that while in the arts and sciences and in economic production reason has on the whole gained in strength, it has not affected political and social activities to any great extent. But this is not substantiated by anything like a methodical survey of the history

of law, morals or social and political institutions. He makes a great parade of what he calls the 'logico-experimental method', but particularly when he comes to deal with the dynamics of social change, the empirical evidence given is very slight, the facts cited being hardly more than illustrative of the hypotheses put forward. In any event, if we agree that there is no law of human progress, and no one nowadays believes in automatic progress or in unlimited perfectibility, we must insist as against Pareto, that neither is there any law of cyclical recurrence or of decadence.

The bulk of Pareto's *Treatise* is devoted to stressing the strength and constancy of what he calls the 'non-logical' elements in human behaviour and to an account of the various ways in which people try to give a flavour of rationality to conduct that is really rooted in feeling and impulse.

His book makes fascinating reading, but it provides no basis for a scientific sociology. The fundamental terms are astonishingly vague. There is no adequate definition of 'instincts', 'sentiments', 'interests' or 'residues' nor of their relations to each other. The 'residues' in particular are so loosely described that it is easy to find the same residue in very different movements of thought or practice. Thus, to take but one example, to find the 'residual' that is to say, the constant and invariable elements in religious manifestations in the 'residue of activity' without further specifying the kinds of activity or considering the intellectual and emotional needs which are at work can hardly be said to constitute a profound contribution to the psychology of religion.

In essentials, Pareto's approach is psychological and not sociological. He does not endeavour to study the social influences affecting belief and behaviour but, on the contrary, finds the explanation of social behaviour in the permanent underlying psychological elements and their varying combinations in different societies. His approach therefore requires a comparative study of individual differences and of the varying distribution of mental traits in different societies. But he makes no effort to establish such a differential psychology, nor does he pay

any attention to what psychologists have to say on the analysis of motives.

In brief, Pareto has provided abundant examples of the vagaries of bias, prejudice, self-deception and sophistication, but his analysis of the processes involved lacks precision, and I doubt whether much of it can survive critical scrutiny. In particular, his account is open to the objection that he never questions its fundamental assumptions. He accepts without question the dogma that reason is concerned with means only and has nothing to do with the choice of ends and that value judgements or norms of action are just the expression of 'sentiments'. He is impressed by the fact that in making moral judgements, for example, people are swayed by superstitions and prejudices which deceive both themselves and others. But this applies to all human thought and action and, if seriously pressed, would lead inevitably to the conclusion that there can be no logical thought or action at all. There is in his vast treatise no serious effort to examine the difficulties which stand in the way of collective rational action and the endless misunderstandings, maladjustments and mutual frustration which it has to meet. The result is that he greatly underestimates the role of rational reflection in shaping the lives of individuals and the history of societies.<sup>1</sup>

Marxism or rather, misunderstanding of Marxism, has also contributed to the distrust of reason. This seems to have happened in two ways. The first is connected with the view adopted of the role to be assigned to individual conscious striving in the historical process. 'We make our own history' Engels tells us. 'Nothing occurs without conscious intent . . . yet only seldom does that occur which is willed . . . Out of the conflict of innumerable wills and acts there arises in the social world a situation which is quite analogous to that in the unconscious natural one' (*Feuerbach*. Duncker, ed., p. 56). Elsewhere he adds that historical events may be viewed as the 'product of a force acting as a whole without consciousness or intent'. But this does

<sup>1</sup> For further discussion see 'The Sociology of Pareto' in my *Reason and Unreason in Society*, ch. iv.

not necessarily involve a denial of the importance of consciously directed action. As Engels explains, from the fact that individuals in interaction produce results which as such were never willed by any one, it does not follow that what individuals contribute equals zero. 'On the contrary every will contributes to the result and is so far included within it' (Letter to Bloch). Engels further explains that the forces at work in society operate blindly only so long as we do not understand them. But as in other fields growing knowledge will enable us to subject social forces to our will, so that the use of them for the attainment of our aims will come to depend entirely upon ourselves. (*Anti-Dühring*, Eng. Trans. p. 307).

There is, however, a certain ambiguity in all this, for the growth of knowledge itself is held to be determined by economic conditions. This brings us to a second source of the distrust of reason, namely the emphasis on 'ideology' that is, the distortion of thought due to class bias, conscious or unconscious. This has been taken by many to rule out all objectivity. Marx himself had no doubt that when class antagonisms have disappeared valid knowledge, untainted by ideology, would become possible. But Marxist exegesis is notoriously controversial. Some would hold that the passage to the classless society involves a radical break, a passage from pre-history to history, and that until this has occurred no objective knowledge is attainable. Others argue that even in the intervening period thought may be more or less objective, in proportion as it is practically useful in bringing about the ends to which the revolution is committed. Others, less friendly, argue that this view of the nature of scientific development and of the society of the future is itself conditioned by the class struggle and may no longer hold when the capitalist system has been overthrown. Other truths would then emerge which would be valid for the societies then formed. Whether objectivity is possible in human affairs or in what degree thus depends on which of these interpretations is adopted. Those who are not in the Marxist fold will agree that knowledge is always 'relative' in the sense that it cannot claim to have reached final or absolute truth, but that it can be more or less

objective in proportion as methods are available for avoiding bias and prejudice. In other words, the study of human behaviour necessarily suffers from a certain relativity of outlook and this affects history as well as the social sciences, but in both cases, it admits, in varying measure, of self-correction.

A curious but indirect influence of Marxism is to be seen in the use made of it by some theologians. Thus Niebuhr credits Marxism with having revealed the essential weakness of human nature, erring only in confining the tendency to hide self-interest behind a façade of general interest to the dominant class, while in fact all alike are tainted (*Nature and Destiny of Man*, I. p. 37). The social elements in human nature are not denied. But there is a reluctance to admit genuinely disinterested acts either by individuals or groups, or if allowed, they are not considered historically important. They are reduced to the occasions when there happens to be a coincidence between the interests of the individual and the wider community or between the interests of a particular community and other communities. As in the case of Pareto, who holds a similar view, this despondent attitude is not supported by any comprehensive survey of the achievements or failures of mankind, nor is any method suggested by which such a survey might be attempted. I doubt whether it finds any support in Marxism. Marxism requires no doctrine of original sin. Its underlying assumption is rather that altruistic and selfish motives alike will operate differently in different social structures. Marx himself explicitly repudiated egoistic interpretations of human behaviour and protested against the cynical efforts of those who discern 'behind the cloud of ideas and facts, only petty, envious, intriguing mannikins stringing the whole of things on their little threads' (Cited, Sidney Hook, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, p. 131).

Niebuhr's view raises the old question of the relations between 'human nature' and social institutions to which already Aristotle drew attention in his criticism of Plato's communism. (Cf. my brief discussion in the chapter on Associations and Institutions, p. 108.) Niebuhr holds that there are defects in human nature so ingrained that they will never be eliminated

by a reorganization of society. Changes in social regulations, e.g. changes in the rules of the road, may leave the fundamental stock of human selfishness unaltered, while reducing the occasions which bring it out. On this view improvements in institutions may well have the effect of making men appear better than they are. Likewise it would seem to follow that bad institutions make men appear worse than they are, though this conclusion is not usually drawn. Underlying this view is the belief in 'original' sin, that is, the doctrine that there are in human nature evil impulses which institutions may control, but not eradicate. By contrast, those who think that human nature is somehow better than its performance believe in the fundamental goodness of man. Both views rest on too abstract a conception of human nature; separating it too sharply from its manifestations in behaviour. The concept of an 'original' human nature, good or bad, has little meaning.

The various anti-rationalist trends of thought which I have briefly described owe their influence, I think, not to their inner coherence, but to the fact that they gave expression to a more general disillusionment due to the collapse of the high hopes for speedy progress held out by the humanitarian thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The two world wars, the horror and savagery of the Nazi period, all the more terrible for its cold and systematic ruthlessness, revealed the weakness of reason in human affairs and raised the question whether we can trust it to save us from the repetition of like or worse disasters. It is now clear that the virtues of popular education and of the machinery of democracy had been vastly overestimated. Educational systems have even now hardly begun to tackle the unconscious forces that stand in the way of rational thought. Even among the most advanced nations they have not been successful in equipping the large majority with a greater capacity for independent judgement, with the power of resisting the tendency to hasty generalization or withstanding the pressure of mass suggestion. As far as higher education is concerned the tendency to excessive specialization has brought with it dangers to which already Comte drew attention, but which are now

greater than in his time. The specialisms attract men of the highest ability, whilst the task of co-ordination is left to men not conspicuous for width of knowledge or moral wisdom. Hence advance in special skills is not necessarily reflected in general social policy and even gives rise, as is happening now in the case of atomic physics, to special temptations and dangers which the available social wisdom may not be able to control.

As to democratic institutions no one could write of them now with the Mazzinian enthusiasm. Yet the critics must be reminded of two things. First, totalitarian forms of dictatorship succeeded in establishing themselves only in countries which have had very little experience of democracy. The others not only remained democratic but widened the application of the democratic principle by giving votes to women and by enabling the working-classes for the first time in history to establish parties of great strength. Secondly, democracies on anything like a popular basis have only existed for about, say, 150 years and their achievements during this short period are by no means contemptible. Consider the cautious verdict of Lord Bryce writing in 1921:

‘If we look back from the world of today to the world of the sixteenth century, comfort can be found in seeing how many sources of misery have been reduced under the rule of the people and the recognition of the equal rights of all. If it has not brought all the blessings that were expected, it has in some countries destroyed, in others materially diminished, many of the cruelties and terrors, injustices and oppressions that had darkened the souls of men for many generations.’

(*Modern Democracies*, vol. 2, p. 585.)

Democracy is still faced by three great difficulties. The first is the persistence of great social and economic inequalities. The second is the failure to apply the democratic principle to nationalities and dependencies. For these difficulties solutions are now available, at least in theory, and in recent decades considerable progress has been made in applying them. The third is the most intractable. It arises from the persistence of sovereign