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Rethinking the Golden Age of Social Psychology

Sosyal Psikolojinin Altın Çağını Yeniden Düşünmek

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ABSTRACT

It is tragic yet curious to realize that a historical period of great human misery can motivate great scientific endeavour. This paper argues that the “golden age” of social psychology was driven by the traumas of fascism. We first trace the roots of the World War II to modernism. We then compare the social psychological studies conducted before and after the World War II in relation to this historical background and the rationality-irrationality debate. Overall, we present a series of examples which purport to show that the “golden age” of social psychology emerged as a response to humans’ violation of different rationality norms. We conclude with a set of proposals for the amelioration of irrationality derived again from social psychological studies.

Keywords: Social psychology, golden age, modernism, history of psychology, rationality

ÖZ

İnsanlığın büyük acılar çektiği tarihsel bir dönemin önemli bilimsel çalışmalara yol açabildiğinin farkına varmak gerek trajik gerekse ilginçtir. Bu yazı sosyal psikolojinin “altın çağı”nın faşizmin yarattığı travmalardan kaynaklandığını savunmaktadır. İlk olarak, İkinci Dünya Savaşı’nın kökenlerini modernizmle ilişkilendiriyoruz. Daha sonra, İkinci Dünya Savaşı öncesi ve sonrası yapılan sosyal psikolojik çalışmaları bu tarihsel dönemle ve rasyonellik-irrasyonellik tartışmasıyla bağlantılı olarak karşılaştırıyoruz. Genel olarak, bu makalede sosyal psikolojinin “altın çağı”nın insanların farklı tipteki rasyonellik normlarını ihlal etmesine bir tepki olarak ortaya çıktığını gösteren bir dizi örnek sunmaktayız. Son olarak gene sosyal psikolojik araştırmalardan yola çıkarak irrasyonelliğin giderilmesine dair bir takım çözüm yolları öneriyoruz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal psikoloji, altın çağ, modernizm, psikoloji tarihi, rasyonellik

Rethinking the Golden Age of Social Psychology

Fascism and the resulting world war in the middle of the 20th century were devastating. They not only caused immense violence and human misery but also led to the questioning of meta-narratives like rationality and modernity. The aftermath of Nazism weakened our confidence in the notions of progress, modernization, and civilization. The related world-view of humanism—with seeds sown by the likes of Descartes and Spinoza in the 17th century—was stained as well. This historical period is also highly related to the development of social psychology as a science. We think that social psychological studies conducted after the World War II (WWII) are informative in terms of the psychology of war times from both the perpetrators' and victims' angle. Speaking of perpetrators, Jones (1998) mentions that Hitler's rise had a significant impact on the progress of applied social psychology. As a matter of fact, Brehm, Kassir, and Fein (1999) also claim that no social psychologist had a greater impact than Hitler on social psychology. However, we think it is primarily important to recognize the key role that the notion of modernity and its assumption of human rationality play in understanding the golden age of social psychology.

Modernity

In his famous paper entitled "What is Enlightenment?" Kant (1784/2009) defines enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage" where nonage is defined as "the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance." This definition implies that human agents do not need guidance from external authority to make decisions for themselves because individual human reason is sufficient for rational decision making. In other words, the central ideal of enlightenment modernism in Kant's view is human rationality.

Similarly, modernity in Hegelian philosophy (1837/1956) stands for the rule of law, civilization and rational reasoning. In the Hegelian sense, the modernist ideas that were created by Western rationality cannot entail such an atrocity as witnessed during the WWII. Deleuze and Guattari (1983, p. 29), inspired by Reich's work, also remarked in relation to social psychological research done after the WWII: "The masses were not deceived at a certain moment of fascism; they desire fascism and fascism without this desire and libidinal investment could not succeed for a moment (see also Holland, 2002).

Rationality

To better understand how events encountered during the WWII and empirical studies conducted after the WWII challenged the ideals of modernism, and especially its assumption of rationality, we need a more precise definition of rationality. Rationality is used in different senses in philosophical and everyday discourses, and even within philosophical discourse itself. In its most common philosophical meaning, rationality refers to instrumental rationality, which simply means that an agent's actions are consistent with, or conducive to, its goals (Kukla & Walmsley, 2006). More formally, if an agent A desires to bring about the state of affairs X, and believes that Y is the best way to achieve X, then it is instrumentally rational for agent A to do Y. In other words, instrumental rationality points to the best action for an agent given its beliefs and desires. Notice that there is no questioning of the truth or of the reasonableness of the agent's beliefs and desires in instrumental rationality. The beliefs and desires are simply treated as given; instrumental rationality just tells the best action that follows from them.

Beliefs, of course, can be false or unreasonable. A single belief, however, cannot be irrational. Only when a group of beliefs held by an agent is inconsistent with each other can we call the agent epistemically irrational. More specifically, it is not necessarily irrational to believe that ants are larger than wolves and that wolves are larger than elephants (although both beliefs are false), but it is irrational to believe those two and that elephants are larger than ants. The reason is that those three beliefs are inconsistent with each other given some basic logical rules. Epistemic irrationality has practical consequences as well: An epistemically irrational agent can never realize all of its goals.

The rationality (or otherwise) of desires can be treated in a way similar to the rationality of beliefs. A desire, unlike a belief, cannot be true or false. Furthermore, a single desire, just like a single belief, cannot be irrational. A desire to engage in an activity that will eventually hurt the agent itself or other agents is not necessarily irrational. It does become irrational, however, when it is coupled with other desires that conflict with each other. More specifically, an agent becomes motivationally irrational when it desires to hurt some specific others and also holds a superordinate desire to never hurt anyone. The practical consequence is similar: A motivationally irrational agent can never realize all of its goals.

In summary, there are three kinds of rationality: instrumental, epistemic and motivational. The first pertains to actions, the second to beliefs and the third to desires or

goals. As we shall see in the following sections, humans have been reported to systematically violate all three kinds of rationality norms and thus to display various forms of irrationality.

Social Psychology before the WWII

The modernist thought is related not only to Nazism but also to how psychology in general and social psychology in particular came into being as scientific disciplines. Positivism was making an impact on scientific practice in the 1880s, prescribing methods as preconditions for scientific knowledge. In line with the spirit of the time, Wundt—as a founder of the discipline—grounded his methodology in a modernist framework. Wundt’s approach to individual humans can be seen as stemming from a modernist viewpoint: Assuming that human reason is reliable and that humans can be trusted as to the accuracy of the reports of their own minds, he adopted introspection as his main method. Similarly, theories of Freud and Marx can also be seen as reflecting this early modernist period. Both Freud and Marx, for instance, viewed history from a socio-evolutionist perspective and claimed a deterministic transition from savage communities to civilized nation-states. This image of history following a linear trajectory is, without a doubt, a result of modernist thought.

Two kinds of approaches can be observed in the early works of social psychology: the relatively more empirical *psychological social psychology* led by McDougall and relatively more theoretical *sociological social psychology* led by Ross. The first comprehensive books about social psychology were written by McDougall (1908) and Ross (1908). McDougall’s book presents a deeper psychological grasp; in a sense, it offers a view from within the individual out towards the environment. On the other hand, Ross offers a sociological understanding whose line of research is the other way around: from the outside towards the inside. McDougall focussed upon the role instincts and motivation play in social behaviour. On the other hand, Ross took imitation as the determinant of social behaviour and dealt with social structures and groups rather than the individual. In the 1920s behaviourism became dominant in psychology, and social psychology had to rearrange its arguments based on this paradigm. Allport (1924) continued McDougall’s individualistic approach while replacing the notion of instincts with learning as the determinant of social behaviour. In terms of methodology, Wundtian methods of observation and introspection were abandoned, being replaced by the empirical inquiry of prediction, control, and manipulation. During the period between the 1920s and the 30s, both the number of social psychologists and empirically and

quantitatively conducted psychological studies increased. Similarly, Triplett, Moede and Allport's group studies were the first to prioritize laboratory studies (see Pepitone, 1981). This period can be seen as one where modernist practices are especially salient in social psychology because it is the first time social psychology tries to emulate the natural sciences and its experimental methodology.

Despite the huge effect behaviourism had on psychological science, sociological social psychological studies were also piling up at that time. For example, Cooley and Mead came up with the social interactionism theory, which emphasized the effects of social order and interaction on the emergence of psychological mechanisms to explain how an individual develops from a biological into a social being (Lundgren, 2004). Nevertheless, these studies were mainly theoretical rather than empirical.

Applied social psychology was founded in the 1950s after the innovative studies of Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) and Sherif (1935), which demonstrated how the scientific method can be applied to social problems (Reich, 1981). Both Lewin, in his autocratic personality study, and Sherif, where he examined the formation of social norms in a lab environment, opposed American behaviourism and its presumption of the impossibility of an objective observation of the mind (Pepitone, 1981). These studies can be seen as the initial efforts to systematically document rationality and irrationality in human behaviour. What significantly accelerated these efforts, however, was the political developments in Europe. Fascism was reigning in Europe during the 1930s. Due to hostility against Jews and obstacles put against their scientific efforts in Germany and Europe at large, many European social psychologists immigrated to the US: Heider, Lewin, Adorno, Köhler, Wertheimer, Lazarsfeld, Brunswik and Ichheiser were among them. Cartwright (1979) claims that it is impossible to imagine what social psychology would be like today without the dramatic impact of Hitler's atrocities. Considering the contributions of these social scientists to the social psychology literature, Cartwright's claim seems quite accurate.

Social Psychology after the WWII

Linking fascism in general and Nazism in particular with modernism takes us to Heidegger because totalitarian regimes are among the outcomes of modernism for him (Zimmerman, 1990). In other words, in Heidegger (1956), modernism represents totalitarianism, exploitation, and alienation.

On the side of psychology, it is surprising to realize that the “golden age” of social psychology was motivated by a historical period of great human misery. The organized violence that Nazism and the WWII caused led to the realization of the dark side of human capabilities. One might imagine that if there had not been such cruel confrontation with the evils that human nature can allow, social psychologists may have continued to develop strategies for the American military. However, it should also be noted that social scientific studies for the US Army during the WWII contributed to the development of interdisciplinary social psychology when military researchers returned to universities after the war (Sewell, 1989). Seventy years later, these war-time studies still inform us about the spirit of the time.

When Lewin took part in the foundation of *Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues* and became the chairman of the organization in 1941, he argued for the unity of scientific theory and practice and suggested that the separation of the two is unnecessary in social psychology (Brehm et al., 1999). With this point of view, Lewin significantly contributed to the application of social psychological knowledge on current social problems.

Despite the fact that most classical studies were already present before 1945, the motivation and the desire to search for more grew with the end of the WWII. After the war, the psychology of group aggression and the underlying patterns of violence were the main motivators of psychological science (Smith & Haslam, 2017). Moreover, we claim that researchers who have conducted their studies after the WWII were implicitly motivated to re-evaluate and, if possible, legitimize Western civilization’s values of humanism and enlightenment, which were heavily wounded by Hitler’s cruelty. We summarize below some seminal studies that were conducted after the WWII to demonstrate the display of various forms of irrationality.

Seminal Works in the Post-War

Lewin, Heider, and Asch, who immigrated to the US with their families in the 1920s and the 1930s, brought a socio-cognitive perspective to social psychology. This productive atmosphere was largely sustained by personal motivations, although social events also had a considerable effect. For instance, after the Great Depression, studies of group phenomena became popular (Elder, 1994). The WWII was the second impactful historical event. After the WWII, numerous social scientists studied the motivations that resulted in the atrocities carried out in the course of the war.

Reich (1933/1970) was the first social psychologist to come up with an answer with his book *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. Reich (1933/1970) defines Nazism as a phenomenon of mass armament resulting from sexual dissatisfaction. As a theoretician fed both by Marxist and Freudian teachings, Reich refused orthodoxy. He criticizes Marx for grounding everything in the base structure through mere societal analysis. Freud's writings, on the other hand, lacked a sense of community. For these reasons, Reich defines his work as a blending of Freud and Marx. According to Reich (1933/1970), the economic base structure might explain society's main components; however, it becomes irrelevant when it comes to the irrationalities of group behaviour. If the topic is the unconscious of a society, Reich insists on consulting Freud. According to Reich (1933/1970), growing up in an irrational society results in irrational personality patterns, and these patterns lead to fascist community structures. Reich had written the original piece in 1933 during the fascist Nazi reign. However, his book motivated social psychological research after the WWII and served as a primary reference for social psychologists. Reich's description of irrationality during the Nazi regime corresponds to what we have called motivational irrationality. This is because the majority of the German public, who might be supposed to have internalized the Enlightenment ideals of humanism and the guidance of individual reason in one's conduct, at the same time appears to adopt the incompatible Nazi ideals of unequal worth of human races and unconditional obedience to authority.

Like Reich, Adorno belonged to the Frankfurt School where Marxist and Freudian teachings were blended. He also interprets Nazism and the WWII as irrational (Adorno et al., 1950). Adorno, trying to understand how a society as civilized as Germany could fall under the influence of a leader as brutal as Hitler, put forth the concept "authoritarian personality" and studied its psychological underpinnings in order to explain fascism. Adorno's main concern was to understand the reasons why some people start behaving in a prejudiced manner. Through a Freudian analysis, Adorno et al. (1950) claimed that people who had non-permissive parents and a rough childhood ultimately release their repressed anger towards less dangerous groups of people who are not like themselves. In short, they grow racist and discriminatory attitudes. This is how Adorno formulates Nazis' discriminatory attitudes against Jews. This is again an example of what we call motivational irrationality.

A year later, Asch (1951) began a series of experiments investigating the effect of group psychology on personal ideas and judgments. In this study, participants compared

the lengths of various lines. It was investigated whether participants remained under the influence of the majority of participants. The results showed that only 25% of 123 participants were accurate in the experimental group where fake participants insisted on incorrect answers in a group setting, whereas the ratio remained at a high rate (95%) in the control group. Five years later, Asch (1956) carried out another series of laboratory experiments on the subject of how a group of people is affected by the majority. In this study, the number of people who constitute the majority changed from 1 to 16, but the results remained constant. Consequently, it is true to say that Asch's laboratory experiments are among the classics of social psychology as they clearly demonstrated people's tendency for conformity and their openness to social influences (Turner, 1985). This can be interpreted as an example of instrumental irrationality in our formulation because what people really believe (and presumably desire) is not reflected in their overt behaviour.

Another intriguing topic during the WWII was persuasion, in part because countries entering the war had to motivate soldiers to continue to fight. For example, the US government recruited Hovland to prepare war propaganda and to do behavioural research. After the end of the war, Hovland returned to Yale University to continue his investigation. Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) emphasized that persuasion can not only be acquired but also changed through learning. Whether or not the message is persuasive depends on the characteristics of the person who gives this message as well as the content and the receiver of the message. Persuasion through propaganda might be interpreted as an example of epistemic irrationality because individuals acquire new beliefs through a process that they should know to be unreliable. In addition, some of the new beliefs, inculcated in the service of motivating support for the war effort, are clearly at odds with some of the already existing beliefs.

Following these studies, Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory appeared in the social psychology literature. According to this theory, people feel uneasy when their actions conflict with their attitudes. In order to avoid such negative emotions, one starts to change the way one believes (Festinger, 1957). In one of Festinger's classic experiments, one group of participants were paid \$20 to lie to future participants about a boring experiment they had just participated, whereas another group was paid only \$1. What was observed as a result was that the second group experienced a bigger attitude change towards really liking the experiment. Festinger's explanation was that, since the second group lacked a sufficient external motivation to lie about the experiment, they

unconsciously concluded that they must have in fact liked the experiment in order to make the discrepancy between their actual beliefs (the experiment was boring) and their overt behaviour (they reported that the experiment was interesting) disappear. In our formulation, this would be an example of epistemic irrationality because, in order not to appear instrumentally irrational, the participants are changing their beliefs through a process that does not conform to their actual experiences and thus one that is not conducive to true beliefs.

Thirteen years after Adorno's work, Milgram (1963) conducted an experiment on how people obey destructive authoritarian figures. What led him to this was the trial of German Nazi SS Colonel Adolf Eichmann. Milgram (1974) asked himself this question: "Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?" (Schulweis, 2010, p. 106). In fact, Eichmann had said that he was just doing his business (Baade, 1961). Milgram found that, just as soldiers obeyed their commanders' orders in concentration camps, participants in experiments obeyed the scientists in the white coats and apparently harmed other innocent participants, suggesting that science is the modern authority. The participants' behaviour in Milgram's experiment is a clear violation of instrumental rationality because what the participant really desires (not to harm the fellow participant) is in conflict with his behaviour.

Likewise, Zimbardo, Haney, Banks and Jaffe (1972) demonstrated the huge influence of social norms on human behaviour, criticizing earlier views that attribute evil deeds to evil personalities. In their prison experiments, Stanford University students, who were intelligent, free of apparent psychopathology and presumably fully adopting the ideals of modernism and humanism, quickly turned into cruel wardens after a few days of experience in that capacity. This again demonstrates how easy it is to display behaviour inconsistent with one's beliefs and desires, i.e., instrumental irrationality, under the appropriate social circumstances.

As a final example, consider the ground-breaking studies of Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman starting in the 1970s which eventually led to the awarding of the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics to Kahneman. They argue that humans cannot be perfectly rational because of the computational limitations of our minds (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). We therefore rely on heuristics when making social judgments.

These heuristics mostly work well by giving us approximately correct answers without spending much time and computational effort. However, there are times when they systematically lead us into error. When we use the representativeness heuristic, the idea that members of a category are more likely to have the typical properties of that category, we judge that Linda, a woman described as college educated, intelligent and liberal, is more likely to be a feminist bank teller than a bank teller, a clear violation of the conjunction rule in probability. This would be an example of epistemic irrationality: beliefs that clash with the rules of basic probability theory.

Possible Solutions

All the studies summarized above document the violations of one or more of the three kinds of rationality defined at the beginning of the paper. This brings us to a more practical question: Are humans doomed to irrationality by their very nature or are there ways to prevent the negative consequences of irrationality? Social psychological studies conducted after the WWII offer some possible solutions as well.

For example, the Holocaust and the WWII compelled researchers to analyse the underlying patterns of prejudice and racism. In the 1950s, the US education system was racially segregated. By showing the negative effects of segregation on African American children's sense of self, Clark (1953) motivated changes in the education system and helped the U.S. Supreme Court to rescind the segregation policies. In fact, these policies were at odds with the "human rights" concept of modernity. Around the same time, Allport (1954) asserted that terminating racial segregation would decrease prejudice. Social contact, one of the most robust findings in the social psychology literature, is still referred to today for reducing the hostility between groups. In other words, the blatant instrumental irrationality in this situation has been mended through a new social contract.

In addition, the WWII showed us the extent of violence and prejudice that can occur between groups as well as the extremes of obedience and conformity. Searching for the psychological mechanisms of such behaviour began with the naïve curiosity of social psychologists. Likewise, Sherif (1966), in his summer camp experiments, showed that competition can create conflict and hostility between groups in zero-sum games. On the other hand, working together for common goals would increase solidarity between groups, thereby eroding prejudice and tension. In other words, this study suggests intergroup cooperation as one factor that can alleviate the instrumental rationality embedded in this case.

Lastly, Bandura (1973) showed that aggression is not simply natural but that it is learnt through observation and imitation. In this sense, Bandura cared about the individual's relation to his environment more than his biological means. Therefore, warring aggression cannot be attributed completely to *Thanatos* or our death instinct as Freud (1933/1959) would suggest. Instead, it can be interpreted as learned behaviour caused by our relation to our environment. Since what has been learnt can be unlearned, as learning theorists would have it, Bandura's theory points to an escape from the cycle of mindless violence.

CONCLUSION

This essay presents a series of examples which show that the "golden age" of social psychology came out of the traumas of Nazism and the Second World War. When we summarize the social psychological research done after the WWII, it is plausible to say that the motivation for these studies come from the impact of the WWII on social psychologists. Genocide stumped on Western rationality and social psychologists tried to resurrect it. Perhaps, one of the most important reasons why the period after the WWII is called as the "golden age" of social psychology was the need to re-evaluate and re-legitimize Western rationality. Rationality was to be resurrected because the atrocities of the WWII resulted in narcissist wounds in humanity's common history.

Within the frame of the literature summarized above, we argue that social psychology took an interesting direction after the WWII, seeking to explain away the traumas of fascism and war with respect to the break from modernist and humanist thought. However, this paper does not provide an exhaustive analysis of the current thesis and should be seen as preliminary. The thesis deserves deeper historical investigations. As a limitation, we should further note that so many years after these studies were conducted, it is impossible to reliably show that some kind of motivated cognition has occurred in the researchers' minds who conducted these classical studies. However, at least, one might argue that the direction of social psychology was influenced by a reaction to Nazism and the WWII.

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