

Review: Brown R. (2020) *Henri Tajfel: Explorer of Identity and Difference*. London: Routledge.

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For now 50 years, Social Identity Theory (SIT) has been one of the major frameworks stimulating research in Social and Political Psychology, unlocking a vast research agenda on intergroup perception, prejudice, opposition, and violence. The many theoretical offshoots that grew out of the SIT root in one way or another (Self-Categorization Theory, System Justification Theory, etc.) have unveiled crucial insights on processes such as discrimination or the role of collective emotions in conflict; their empirical applications have shed light on phenomena ranging from depressed entitlement effects to large intractable conflicts (e.g. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). The theory, however, is hardly used and taught in Political Science and International Relations; Henri Tajfel, its architect, even less so. Such is the perverse nature of disciplinary boundaries.

Brown's *Henri Tajfel: Explorer of Identity and Difference* is the very first biography of the man who developed SIT on the basis of a range of experiments that sought to isolate the very essence of intergroup attitudes, some of them implementing one of the most powerful ideas ever designed in the social sciences: the "minimal group paradigm". The book therefore fills an important gap: although Henri Tajfel is widely seen as a founding father of contemporary Social and Political Psychology, alongside scholars like Gordon Allport, Stanley Milgram, or Muzafer Sherif, only fragmentary information on his life and intellectual journey was until now available. Written on the occasion of what would have been Tajfel's 100th birthday, the monograph articulates the results of an impressive investigation using numerous interviews, in-depth archival work, visits to key locations, and reading of Tajfel's correspondence. In so doing, Brown – himself a major Social Psychology scholar and Tajfel's PhD student in the 1970s – offers a fascinating and fine-grained picture of both the man and the scholar which should catch the attention of Political Scientists and International Relations scholars, for three main reasons.

First, Brown examines Tajfel's pre-academic years in a way that demonstrates the impact of socio-political contexts and life courses on the development of social theories. A Polish Jew growing up in the 1920s and 1930s, his itinerary was inevitably marked by discrimination, exile and, eventually, the extermination of most of his family; Tajfel himself was "lucky" enough to be detained as a PoW throughout the war. Tajfel's post-war work in orphanages is also vividly described in what are perhaps the most fascinating and touching pages of the book. The author's efforts to shed light on this period are not gratuitous; they locate the origins of Tajfel's later research concerns, a link already sketched but never revealed in a comprehensive way. Much like the man he studies, Brown proves to be himself an "explorer of identity".

Second, the depiction of Tajfel's rise to academic fame from a difficult start reveals a man of extraordinary ambition, a hard-working individual driven by an urge for recognition and prestige. The book lists countless stays in foreign universities and participations to conferences, describes Tajfel's relentless drive to expand his team and international networks, and discusses his ability to attract external funding and negotiate with universities (how this frantic activity and absences impacted his family is a puzzle that the book unfortunately never answers). These chapters are no panegyric; they constitute a frank and nuanced account of a brilliant but in several respects flawed man. For example, Brown does not gloss over Tajfel's

disregard for teaching, the controversy surrounding the real paternity of the minimal group paradigm idea, his cultivation of an intimidating atmosphere during research seminars, or his bitter feuds with rival colleagues. More significantly, the book partakes of the recent reckoning about Tajfel's sexual misconduct, sharing testimonies of those who directly experienced it whilst emphasising the contradictions of a man whose ambition was to reveal the working mechanisms of out-group oppression and discrimination. Together with similar projects (see Young & Hegarty 2019), this investigation has recently led the European Association of Social Psychology (EASP) – an organization co-founded by Tajfel himself – to abandon its most prestigious prize, The Henri Tajfel Award, in view of these “reprehensible and unacceptable behaviors” (EASP website). By portraying without filter the career path of one of the “big names” of the social sciences, Brown tells a story of success whose bitter notes no doubt resonate within the field of Political Science and International Relations.

Third, the final chapter critically examines the legacy of Tajfel's work in ways that should encourage Political Scientists and IR scholars to reflect on and broaden their analytic panorama. Recognizing that SIT never truly was the fundamental explanation of the Holocaust that Tajfel envisioned – perhaps because of its very ambition to reach through minimal group settings the bare bones of intergroup relations – Brown nonetheless stresses and spells out its “remarkable generative power in stimulating many diverging and highly productive lines of enquiry” (p.221).

Overall, Brown's biography provides a detailed, chronologically organized portrayal of the life and intellectual journey of a man whose enormous academic ambition was fuelled by an intimate experience of the most tragic events of the 20th Century. The book's emphasis on the influence of Tajfel's personal life course and socio-political context on his theories, its frank appraisal of an academic life that changed an entire discipline but fell into the deviances associated with power, and its critical analysis of one of the most ambitious theories of the social sciences, make this monograph valuable well beyond the boundaries of Psychology.

References:

Young J., Hegarty P. (2019) “Reasonable Men: Sexual Harassment and Norms of Conduct in Social Psychology”. *Feminism & Psychology* 29(4): 453-474.