

Book Review: Psychology and Politics: a Social Identity Perspective

by Blog Admin

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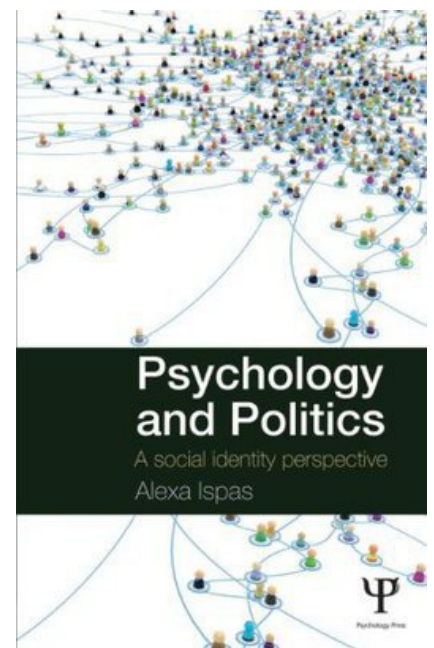
This book covers a wide range of political topics, such as the way in which categorising ourselves into groups influences how we perceive the social world, the implications of categorisation for social influence, and the mechanisms underlying obedience under authoritarian regimes. Yves Laberge thinks this book serves as an excellent update on the social identity perspective.

Psychology and Politics: a Social Identity Perspective. Alexa Ispas. Psychology Press. December 2012.

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Psychology and Politics: a Social Identity Perspective aims to describe the dynamics of group identities and intergroup relations: why do we adhere to a group or to certain values? This short multidisciplinary book links political psychology with social theory, in order to understand how groups are made and delimited, but it also focuses on the sentiment of belonging, adhering to groups, to their ideas, ideals, and ideology. The author, Dr. Alexa Ispas, is a scholar and consultant in Australia and Great Britain, and the theoretical background to this book lies mainly in the works of twentieth century social psychologist Henri Tajfel, who articulated the concept of 'social identity' (see [Social Identity and Intergroup Relations](#)). Here, 'social identity' is defined as "a sense of self that derives from group membership rather than personal characteristics" (p. 117).

Belonging to one specific group often creates implicitly the impression that there are separate entities, and for most individuals, a division between 'us' and 'them' (p. 17). However, the categories of 'us' and 'them' do not necessarily designate individuals from different race or ethnic groups. In fact, we all simultaneously belong to many groups at various levels, individually and collectively. Some of these groups are almost permanent (ethnicity, gender) while others are fluctuant, depending on contexts and situations. While these categories used to target ethnic groups or 'visible minorities', this simple 'us' and 'them' dichotomy is now transposed to distinguish other models of belonging / exclusion that are not based on race; rather on adherence to specific ideologies or conflicting worldviews. Various examples are given by Ispas: "we' are fans of football club on a losing streak, women in a sexist society or Catholics in a Protestant town" (p. 22).



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Chapter 2, on 'The Psychology of Social Influence', focuses on social influence and how minorities can influence a majority group; it presents as well the positive feelings of belonging to the right group with our partners described as "one of us" (p. 50). Chapter 3, on the theories and empirical research related to 'The Psychology of Crowd Events' (for example, riots), revisits the idea of crowd perceived as a place for "crowd members to unleash their repressed animalistic impulses" (p. 54), taking from a critique of Gustave Le Bon's studying of the "irrational crowds" (from his 1895 book *The Crowd: A Study of the popular Mind*) to some recent studies by Stephen Reicher relying on social psychology. However, some studies relying on the social identity perspective indicate that rioters' attitudes adopt another definition of their self: "instead of losing their sense of self, members of the crowd shift from a personal to a group-based definition of the self" (p. 55). Other forms of contextualisation have to be brought whenever studying crowd initiatives, for example in the distinction between peaceful and violent demonstrations, introducing the concept of perceptions and the legitimacy of actions made as well by demonstrators and authorities (e.g. the police) (p. 56).

As the theoretical framework constructed in the first half of this book is applied to real cases in the second half, the heart of this book lies in Chapter 4, 'The Psychology of Political Leadership', on leadership situations and leader categorisation theory: "a leader's effectiveness is dependant on the extent to which they are able to remain prototypical of the group in the face of changes in context" (p. 76). The examples studied are political leaders of 20th century who succeeded in adapting their discourse, attitudes, and public image to a new political situation: Nelson Mandela in South Africa and Corneliu Coposu in Romania (p. 76). Other cases focusing on political speeches as vectors of group identification mention leaders from New Zealand, the USA (George W. Bush), but also Margaret Thatcher (p. 88). At some point, even different examples related to art and tastes are introduced in order to show how individuals would likely adopt their group's point of view, even when contestable (p. 83). But leaders or charisma are not enough in themselves: followers who perceive positively their leader can generate an effective leader into a visionary, either in sports, politics, or business, at the condition of maintaining their prototypicality (pp. 76, 86, and 90). In this context, the prototypicality of a leader indicates how "a member of a category (e.g. a prospective leader) resembles the 'prototype' for that category" (p. 71).

Despite this book's qualities, I was somewhat disappointed with the last pages about groups gaining social influence, mainly because there was no real recapitulation as such at the end, only a short summary like in the previous chapters (p. 110). There is no conclusion as such here, which is a pity, although the author pleads for a greater awareness regarding "the power that collective action has of opposing tyranny, and harness that power for the good" (p. 110).

All in all, *Psychology and Politics: a Social Identity Perspective* is a well balanced and clear overview which combines theory, applications, and case studies, relying on works published mainly during the last four decades (with the obvious exception of the contested works by Le Bon from the 19th Century). This concise book would be instructive for advanced undergraduates, either in social psychology, political science, cognitive science, or almost any field in-between such as political psychology. Among some very good points, the author also provides a valuable glossary of terms with short definitions, from "accentuation effect" to "Unstable status differences" (pp. 114-118). On the down side, the two-page index is perhaps too short. Academic libraries should offer this title to their readers. But since many of Henri Tajfel's books are now out of print or hard to find, this *Psychology and Politics: a Social Identity Perspective* will serve as an excellent update on the social identity perspective according to Tajfel and some of his followers.

Dr. Yves Laberge is a Canadian sociologist. He is Associate fellow at the Groupe de recherche EA 1796, ACE, at the "Département d'anglais" of the Université européenne de Haute-Bretagne (Rennes 2, France). He serves as a Series editor for the Book series "L'espace public" and "Cinéma et société" at 'Les Presses de l'Université Laval', and also for a Parisian publisher, L'Harmattan. Among various publications, Yves Laberge has contributed more than 100 articles and entries in a dozen of encyclopedias and reference books. He served as a member of the advisory board for three encyclopedias: *France and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History* (Transatlantic Relations Series, ABC-Clio, 2005), *Germany and the Americas* (Transatlantic Relations Series, ABC-Clio, 2005), and *Encyclopedia of the Blues* (Routledge, 2006).

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