

*Social Psychology and Politics*¹

Joseph P. Forgas, Klaus Fiedler & William D. Crano (Eds.)

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This edited book is Volume 17 in the Sydney Symposium of Social Psychology. This yearly event takes place at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, and brings together scholars from across the world working on a common substantive topic. The aim of this symposium and the volume which stems from it is to “provide new, integrative insights into key areas of contemporary research”. Previous volumes have indeed spanned the breadth of current social psychological research – from affect in social thinking, to evolutionary approaches, conflict and aggression. Volume 17 is a timely and welcome attempt to capture the diverse research currently being conducted which applies social psychological theory to the understanding of political phenomena and processes.

The volume's twenty chapters are organised into four parts. The first part comprises contributions investigating political attitudes and values, likely one of the key areas of interest to social psychologists. Topics discussed in this section include sacred values (Chapter 3), the relationship between moral conviction and political attitudes (Chapter 4) and the relationship between attitudes towards global warming and media usage (Chapter 5). In the second part of the volume, there is a focus on the interrelated issues of political communication and perception. There are chapters addressing topics such as facial appearance and perceptions of political attitudes (Chapter 9) as well as the relationship between emotions such as disgust, with political attitudes (Chapter 10) and with intergroup aggression and violence (Chapter 11). The third part of this volume addresses the broad topic of social cognition and democracy; chapters here explore issues such as political decision making (Chapters 12 and 13) and the psychology of power (Chapter 15). Finally, the fourth section addresses the politics of identity and intergroup relations, and considers topics such as the relationship between intergroup harmony and social change (Chapter 17), diversity and multiculturalism (Chapter 20).

The volume is effective because of the scope and breadth of the contributions. The literature reviewed in each of the chapters is cutting-edge material, and certainly gives the reader a good snapshot of current developments in the field. The chapters are uniformly comprehensive, well-researched and well-written. The diversity of the contributions, which includes theoretical and empirical work, gives one the impression of a dynamic and exciting field of study, and absolutely makes the case for the utility of applying social psychological theory to the understanding of political phenomena and processes.

One reason for the success of this edited volume is the sustained applied focus of the contributions, with each chapter concluding with some policy or other practical recommendations stemming from

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the empirical material. Dovidio, Saguy, Ufkes, Scheepers and Gaertner's contribution (Chapter 17) is particularly successful in its applied focus as it takes a critical perspective on intergroup harmony, and attempted to specify the conditions under which it could bring about social change that benefits disadvantaged groups, rather than merely bolstering the status quo. There are even sensible recommendations made for the discipline of social psychology itself; Jussim, Crawford, Anglin and Stevens (Chapter 6) consider the issue of ideological (left-wing) bias within the discipline and social psychological research and make a convincing case for increased awareness of this issue through training as well as increased ideological diversity among faculty.

While there is much to enjoy in this volume in terms of its breadth and applied focus, it is hard to avoid the fact that empirical chapters almost exclusively utilise quantitative methods. While there is certainly great diversity and creativity in the *use* of quantitative methods (e.g. Frank, Matsumoto & Hwang, Chapter 11), and there is clear attention paid to the *meaning* of political phenomena (e.g. Reynolds, Batalha, Subasic & Jones, Chapter 20) and to language more broadly (e.g. Landau & Keefer, Chapter 8), the inclusion of more qualitative research would, I feel, have improved the volume considerably. Due to this issue, this book represents somewhat of a missed opportunity - to really make the case for increased collaboration between (chiefly) North American quantitative and (mostly) European qualitative social psychologists, but also to present a rich and contextual account of political phenomena and processes.

Relatedly, the book approaches its subject matter mostly using the individual level of analysis (this was especially the case in Sections 1 and 2 of the volume), tending to offer explanations in terms of attitudes, values, or other properties of the individual. The final section of the volume attempts to address this with its focus on intergroup processes; however what to me is really missing is a substantive consideration of the ways in which the different explanations at different levels of analysis (e.g. individual, social, institutional etc.) *interact* to shape political processes or phenomena. One notable exception in the volume is the contribution of Forgas, Kelemen and László (Chapter 16), in which the authors present a fascinating and exciting analysis of the lack of public support for democratic institutions in Hungary, which rightly foregrounds the relevance of historical processes and collective memory, as well as the values and cognitive styles of Hungarian citizens, to its explanation. Equally wide in scope and ambition, Pratto and Bou Zeineddine (Chapter 15) offer a novel, multi-level account of the psychology of power, which is elucidated with reference to the needs of individuals, as well as to the behaviour of nation states.

A final minor comment concerns the absence of a summary or concluding chapter in the volume. This would have been welcome as it would have presented an opportunity for synthesis, and also to make plain the added value of the edited volume, aside from the co-presence of diverse, cutting-edge theoretical and empirical contributions. Irrespective of these issues, the edited volume is a thoroughly enjoyable read. It serves to remind the reader of the contribution which social psychology can make to the understanding of political issues and processes, and the clear potential which it possesses to make practical recommendations to effect positive social change. In terms of its recommended audience, it will likely be most appropriate for postgraduate researchers in social psychology, political psychology or political science. Certainly, given the breadth evident in the contributions, it could serve as a valuable starting point for those interested in applying social psychological theory to the domain of politics. At the same time, the volume would also make for useful reading for more senior scholars keen to stay up-to-date with developments relating to a particular issue or topic.