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## How the past weighs on the present: Social representations of history and their role in identity politics

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Socially shared representations of history have been important in creating, maintaining and changing a people's identity. Their management and negotiation are central to interethnic and international relations. We present a narrative framework to represent how collectively significant events become (selectively) incorporated in social representations that enable positioning of ethnic, national and supranational identities. This perspective creates diachronic (temporal) links between the functional (e.g. realistic conflict theory), social identity, and cognitive perspectives on intergroup relations. The *charters* embedded in these representations condition nations with similar interests to adopt different political stances in dealing with current events, and can influence the perceived stability and legitimacy of social orders. They are also instrumental in determining social identity strategies for reacting to negative social comparisons, and can influence the relationships between national and ethnic identities.

History provides us with narratives that tell us who we are, where we came from and where we should be going. It defines a trajectory which helps construct the essence of a group's identity, how it relates to other groups, and ascertains what its options are for facing present challenges. A group's representation of its history will condition its sense of what it was, is, can and should be, and is thus central to the construction of its identity, norms, and values. Representations of history help to define the social identity of peoples, especially in how they relate to other peoples and to current issues of international politics and internal diversity.

Taking groups' representations of their history into account can help us understand why countries will react differently to a challenge where their common interests are ostensibly the same. Britain, France and Germany faced a similar challenge after the attack on the World Trade Centre on September 11th 2001: they were all close allies of the US; they all had harboured suspected terrorist groups; they were all likely

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destinations for refugees from Afghanistan; they were all morally obliged by NATO to offer support to the Americans and so on. Nevertheless, the differences in response were striking: Britain was America's principal military ally and dispatched troops immediately; France promised military aid but with rather more reticence than the British; and in Germany, the debate about whether to send troops to Afghanistan was sufficiently serious that Chancellor Schroeder called a vote of confidence in his government (the first in Germany in over 20 years). That the same challenge elicited such diverse reactions from three allies confronted with the same problem is not difficult to understand in the light of history: Britain's charter sees it as a world policeman with the US just as in 1941 when the two nations combined to defend democracy against Germany, Italy and Japan; France's charter sees it as defending human rights, but as a nation resistant to Anglo-Saxon world hegemony; finally, Germany is in quest of a new charter that will allow it to define a 'normal' role in the world without arousing historically grounded fears of German aggression both at home and abroad.

A central part of a group's representation of its history is thus its *charter*, an account of its origin and historical mission, which will have been amended and renegotiated over time to reflect changing circumstances, and frame its responses to new challenges. Such charters are *constitutional*: they serve the function of a foundational myth for a society, defining rights and obligations for a group and legitimizing its social and political arrangements (Malinowski, 1926). As well as explaining the group's present and shaping its future, charters help define the timeless essence of a group (Hamilton, Sherman, & Castelli, 2002) - their shared experience and culture transmitted across generations and to newcomers such as immigrants through education and other media.

Social representations of history will comprise elements that are shared within a group (Moscovici, 1988): for example, with respect to foreign policy both public opinion and elite decision-making groups in Britain and France may be likely to recall the Munich fiasco of 1938, when failure to stand up to Hitler merely led to a later war with him on more unfavourable terms. However, the prescriptive aspect of charters means that they are more than just collective memories or shared perceptions in that they define roles for a group ('defender of the free world', 'light of civilization', or 'beacon against militarism', etc.) and legitimize actions (e.g. 'send troops to Afghanistan', 'send a philosopher to Afghanistan'<sup>1</sup>, 'send aid to Afghanistan', etc.) that are justified as the 'right thing to do' through reference to historical experience. Charters may become formalized and incorporated in legal institutions: for example, the claims of Britain and France to be 'world policemen' are institutionalized through their permanent seats on the U.N. Security Council. A group's representation of its history can explain how its world has come to be the way it is and justify its responses to current challenges.

Our focus accordingly is on aspects of historical representation that are central to understanding the identity of a people and how this conditions responses to political events, rather than collective remembering (Pennebaker, Paez, & Rimé, 1997) or collective memory (Halbwachs, 1950/1980) *per se* (see Devine-Wright, 2005, for a review).

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<sup>1</sup> In February 2002, the French philosopher Bernd-Henri Levy was despatched by right-wing President Chirac and socialist Prime Minister Jospin as France's special envoy to Afghanistan.

### **Social representations of history: From cultural myth to societal charter**

There is a broad consensus developing across the social sciences that history is an essential ingredient in constructing and maintaining the imagined community of nationhood (e.g. Anderson, 1983; Condor, 1996; Hobsbawm, 1990; Kohl & Fawcett, 1996; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Wertsch, 2002). We suggest that social representations of history provide myths of origin for peoples as described by Malinowski (1926).

*Myth* comes into play when rite, ceremony, or a social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality and sanctity. . . . myth is not only looked upon as a comment of additional information, but it is a warrant, a charter, and even a practical guide to the activities with which it is connected.

It is through providing such charters that are informally accepted by public opinion as true that social representations of history legitimize a society's current social and political arrangements. We note that the notion of a charter is particularly useful in defining groups that we call *peoples*. Women, the rich, and garage mechanics are social groups, but they are not peoples, whereas the British, Maori, and Europeans can be considered as peoples who have constituted societies.

Social representations of history contain descriptive components (Moscovici, 1988). These include important events and people, woven into stories with temporal form referred to as *narratives of origin*. In general, there seems to be a broad consensus across ethnic and regional groups as to what events and figures are important in constituting their nation's history (see Huang, Liu, & Chang, 2004; Liu, Lawrence, Ward, & Abraham, 2002; Liu, Wilson, McClure, & Higgins, 1999). The temporal sequence of nominated events tends to follow a U shape, with recent and foundational events nominated by lay people more frequently than intermediate events in time.

Hence, history furnishes both concreteness (widely recognized people and events) and temporality (a compelling form of narrative structure, see Carr, 1986), both of which are powerful tools in constructing narratives about identity that have dynamic implications for action. These narratives contain other descriptive components such as category systems that embody the collective experience and wisdom of the group, as well as their emotional implications (see Rimé, 1997).

Parts of social representations function as charters that are quasi-legal and confer legitimacy through normative and constitutive components (Hart, 1961). Charters are normative in that they establish rules, norms, moral codes, laws, 'do's' and 'don'ts'. For example, pacifist Germans may use Germany's experience in the 1930s to point to the folly of being seduced by militaristic rhetoric in the time of a crisis (e.g. the Gulf War in 1991) and brandish slogans that are essentially a list of don'ts: *Kein Krieg mehr, Kein Blut fuer Oel* etc. ('No more war', 'No blood for oil'). Conversely, pacifists may advocate a range of alternative actions (a list of do's) such as the search for economic solutions and/or dispatch of humanitarian aid.

While the main events and people that constitute lay representations of history tend to be uncontroversial, their meaning and relevance to current events is often highly contested (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001, pp.131-150). Hence, history is appealing as a symbolic reserve (Reichler, 1992 as cited in Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) for nation building because it offers concrete events and people with widely shared emotional resonance whose relevance to the current situation is open to interpretation. A great advantage of history for politicians is that most of the

participants in it are dead, and while immortal as symbols, can speak only through the tongues of present day interpreters.

Charters are also constitutive in that they endow groups with status and position. For example, being victors in the Second World War allows Britain and France to play the role of world policemen who can send troops to trouble spots in their spheres of influence (e.g. Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Ivory Coast) without asking the permission of their allies. Charters (e.g. 'This is our land') endow certain groups with rights, particularly the perceived legitimacy of land rights. An extremely striking case is Israel, where some Jews base their land claims on biblical accounts. Charters constitute roles in which certain groups are recognized as holding a special place in society.

History hence provides the outlines of an open-ended drama (Laszlo, 2003), with prescriptive roles connecting the individual to a larger collective that has evolved through time and is aware of itself as a temporal entity. The drama is open-ended because the charter components of social representations are negotiated: they can be challenged by constituent groups and may be renegotiated. Their principles can be extended beyond the original groups for whom they were intended. For example, when Thomas Jefferson was writing about the rights of man, he probably intended an audience primarily of other land-owning White males, but over time, women and people of colour were able to extend the mandate of the charter to include them (Huntington, 1981). Intercultural and international contact enables national charters to be challenged: for example, many Germans profited from the Queen of England's visit to Dresden in 1993 to register their opposition to the aerial bombardment of that city by the Royal Air Force in 1945, and thus implicitly to accuse the British of a war crime.

#### ***Charters in traditional and modern societies***

In contrast to the pre-literate societies that Malinowski studied, in modern societies the existence of written records (and other information storage) renders possible the production of objective historical records. The conflict between myth and objective history is illustrated by Goody and Watt's (1963) account of the state of Gonja in Ghana, which is divided into a number of divisional chiefdoms, each of which are recognized as providing in turn the ruler of the whole nation. When asked to explain their system, the Gonja recount how the founder of the state, Ndewura Jakpa, came down from the Niger Bend in search of gold, conquered the indigenous inhabitants of the area, and enthroned himself as chief of the state and his sons as rulers of territorial divisions. When this story was first recorded at the beginning of the 20th century, as the British were extending their control over the area, Jakpa was said to have begotten seven sons, corresponding to the seven divisions. However, some 60 years later, when there were only five divisions, due to the tribal incorporation of one division because its ruler had supported a Mandingo invader, and to boundary changes made by the British administration, Jakpa was credited with only five sons and no mention was made of the founders of the two political divisions which had since disappeared from the political map.

The historical charters of modern societies share many characteristics with that of the Gonja (see for example Halbwachs, 1950/1980; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). The biased propagation of scientific accounts has been a central theme of Moscovici's theory of social representations (1961). Facts can be reconstructed with to fit with political currents of the day (Hanson, 1989). Although we will be arguing that modern peoples also show a considerable talent for historical myth-making, we should nevertheless note some important differences between preliterate and modern societies.

First, the existence of objective records creates the possibility for inconsistencies between stories to be noted and for the historical reality of accounts to be challenged (Evans, 2003; Nerone, 1989); indeed Goody and Watt (1963) recount how early Greek historians such as Thucydides used written records to make a decisive distinction between myth and history.

Nevertheless, despite the propensity to maintain traditions and the existence of objective records, there seems to us still to be considerable scope in modern societies for biased social representations of the past to emerge (Halbwachs, 1950/1980). This is due to a number of factors: the existence of any number of motivational and cognitive biases in social perception and cognition; as well as the manipulation of history to serve political ends, ranging from Stalinist rewriting by totalitarian regimes to its selective reporting and use in more open societies (Evans, 2003; Hein & Selden, 2000). The existence of an agreed upon objective reality enables questions to be posed about the accuracy of human memory and judgment, and cognitive and social psychologists have documented the existence of such inaccuracies. However, objectively agreed facts (e.g. the siege of Masada in A.D. 72–73 by the Roman occupants of Israel) may be left dormant until called into play by a group as relevant history to justify some pragmatic end (e.g. the creation of the state of Israel, Zerubavel, 1994; see also Adamczyk, 2002; Huang, 2000 for other examples).

A second key difference between preliterate and modern societies concerns the effects of educational institutions and mass media. Whereas collectively shared representations of the past in both preliterate and modern societies will be generated through a series of interlocking conversations (e.g. Lau, Chiu, & Lee, 2004), modern societies also predispose the creation of intellectual elites through schooling and university education who will then direct public opinion through superior access to mass media and other tribunes (Moscovici, 1984; Thompson, 1990). As such we need to distinguish between professional and lay representations of history, in which the professionals arrogate themselves the role of repositories of the society's collective wisdom (Evans, 2003; Merridale, 2003; Nerone, 1989). In addition, we need to distinguish between two kinds of professionals: historians and political scientists on the one hand, versus politicians and opinion leaders. Professional historians and political scientists will aim, on the basis of collective wisdom derived from academic research, to provide a dispassionate record of the past and to formulate scientifically justified policies.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, politicians and opinion leaders will seek to persuade the public of the correctness of the policies they advocate. Often, these two groups will work together (Kohl & Fawcett, 1996), and there will be a percolation of ideas from the professional elites to the public (Moscovici, 1961). Successful reconstructions of history will then become anchored not only in discourse, but to monuments, textbooks, and public holidays (see for example Wertsch, 2002; Hein & Selden, 2000). Indeed, some theorists have argued that obliterating history (e.g. by destroying texts and historical buildings) destroys a people's ability to imagine themselves as a distinct community (Lowenthal, 1985), while others have shown that inventing traditions is a powerful tool for legitimizing new social functions (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

A third difference between preliterate and modern societies concerns the effects of globalization (see Tetlock, 1998). Through mass tourism, travel, and educational

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<sup>2</sup> Even if academic researchers and policy makers succeed in being dispassionate, they may be victims of cognitive biases such as misleading analogies and counterfactuals (Tetlock, 1998).

and professional exchange, people from different cultural traditions are coming increasingly into contact with one another (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Differences in thinking that were once ignored become increasingly visible through intercultural contact: for example, young Germans are often made acutely aware of their country's Nazi past when confronted with it when abroad. Such contact provides another source of challenge for a group's representation of history (Conrad, 2003; Hein & Selden, 2000). Social representations of history thus become pluralistic, in that a representation that is consensually shared in one nation may be challenged by an ally or trading partner - and in the case of the European Union - a fellow member of the same supranational state. The negotiation of conflicting representations of history by former enemies seems to us to be particularly important in achieving reconciliation. In addition, the creation of supranational states such as the European Union requires that the collective wisdoms of the elites of the participating countries to be sufficiently aligned for common policies to be agreed, and for public opinions to share sufficiently similar viewpoints for those policies to be accepted throughout the union.

#### **On the construction of social representations of history**

While every people has a history, not all peoples have a consensual social representation of their history, let alone an historical charter. Social representations of history may be, in Moscovici's terms, hegemonic (consensual throughout society), emancipated (different, smoothly interacting versions in different segments of society), or polemical (conflicting representations across different groups). A charter, allowing a people to think and act as one, through normative imperatives that provide justification for institutional practices, would seem to require a hegemonic social representation. This is easier said than done, and depends on a resonance between historical representations, physical artefacts and mass media, and the current political agenda.

History provides a symbolic reserve of materials that can be elaborated upon by group processes to create shared meaning through social representations. This symbolic reserve is not unconstrained. Various examinations of social representations of history, either at the national (Huang *et al.*, 2004; Liu *et al.*, 2002, 1999) or international level (Liu, 1999b; Liu *et al.*, 2005), using either open-ended nominations or content coding of historical novels (Laszlo, Vincze, & Somogyvari, 2003) have recurrently identified high group consensus in the people considered important in history and in the character of their responses to historical events. While it is possible to invent demonstrably fictional traditions (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983), an historical symbol gains resonance to the extent that it is corroborated by objective records obtained from physical resources and other media, as well as suiting some political agenda. It loses representational status to the extent that competing views undermine its claims to authenticity or when the things it symbolizes become irrelevant to the current political context.

The adoption of the kilt and the tartan as symbols of Scottish tradition depended on there being clothing similar to these in Scottish history (even if the exact form was invented, see Trevor-Roper, 1983; McCrone, 1989 for competing claims); but also because Scottish home rule has been on the agenda for Scotland for some time beyond the popularization of this tradition by British industrialists and military. The rediscovery of Masada as an important historical representation for Jews coincided with the creation of the state of Israel and its need for national symbols (Zerubavel, 1994). The physical ruins of the fortress, where Jewish 'nationalists' of 2,000 years ago ultimately decided to commit suicide rather than be captured by Rome are eminently usable as a site for

educating young Jews about the meaning of ‘never again’ in the context of the survival of the current Jewish state.

While there is often substantial agreement on what constitutes the major events and figures of history, research has shown there is also substantial contestation over their meaning and relevance to current events (Huang *et al.*, 2004; Liu *et al.*, 2002, 1999; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). For example, disagreement over the meaning and constitution of history has been documented in New Zealand, where a previously colonized group (Maori) is engaged in a movement to generate a cultural renaissance and gain self-determination (see Liu *et al.*, 1999; Liu, Huang, & Sibley, 2004).

Liu and Liu (2003) use the idea of ‘historical affordances’ to argue that each culture has elaborated a repertoire of interrelated symbols and representations that not only constrains the extent to which new representations can be brought into play, but also contain agreed upon facts that may be exploited politically. Manifestations of centrally represented historical affordances can be found in media practices, monuments, educational textbooks, and the stories people are told as children and tell their grandchildren. But the canon is not closed; new historical events and figures can be brought into representational play as the current political situation changes.

### **Culture-specific group processes and the passage of time**

The study of history places intergroup relations into diachronic perspective, where with the passage of time the past experience of groups enters into social representations that are mobilized as part and parcel of the content of a group’s social identity. Historical representations can thus act as group narratives that shape responses to new challenges.

There is no one-to-one relationship between an historical event and a group’s social representation of it. The passage of time dictates that stimulus → response approaches (e.g. direct action of an historical situation on group behaviour through objective resource conditions) will be less fruitful than stimulus → collective organism → response approaches in understanding how history shapes group behaviour. The example of the rise and fall and rise again of the Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand shows how an historical event can be the constitutional basis for the founding of a nation at one time (1840), a legal nullity 37 years later, and then remobilized as a social representation with charter status another hundred or so years later (Belich, 1986; Orange, 1987). Even today, when the Treaty serves as a psychological and somewhat institutionalized structure for New Zealand (Liu *et al.*, 1999), there are challenges to its representational status, most recently by an opposition leader who has argued against Maori having special rights and a claim to a unique status position in New Zealand (Sibley & Liu, 2004).

In our view, the relationship between functional, identity-based, and cognitive approaches to the study of peoples has a temporal structure. In the next three sections, we (1) outline how realistic group conflicts (at the functional level) survive through social representations that provide a symbolic resource for national identities. Following this, we (2) detail the impact of these social representations of history on identity dynamics. Finally, we (3) examine the role of cognitive processes in biasing the construction of social representations and the use of historical representations in decision-making processes.



**Functional approaches (realistic group conflict theory)**

Social representations of history often reflect real conflicts between groups. Indeed, ethnic and national identities are often formed when disparate groups unify to achieve some shared goal, such as defending themselves against a shared opponent. The development of French national identity was accelerated by their 100 years war against the English in the middle Ages. Similarly, New Zealand Maori in the 19th century became conscious of themselves as Maori (rather than as competing tribes) through the process of fighting British colonization. Survey research by Liu and his colleagues (Liu, 1999b; Liu *et al.*, 2005) reveals that warfare is privileged above all other categories in open-ended lay nominations of the most important events in world history. Together, politics and war accounted for about 70% of the events named as the most important in world history, and about 60% of the individuals named as the most influential. Information about past behaviour in politics and war appears to be central in popular constructions of world history, which unlike national histories show a simple recency effect with decreasing nominations as distance from the present grows (Liu *et al.*, 2005). Specifically, all 12 samples of university students from Eastern and Western cultures named World War II as the single most important event in world history in the last 1,000 years, and 11 of 12 (including Germany) named Hitler as its most influential person (Liu *et al.*, 2005). This places Germany in an unenviable identity position as a universal historical villain.

The response of Germany to recent American led wars can be traced through this historical legacy. Germany cannot afford to be perceived as engaging in warlike adventures on foreign soil. In order to justify Germany's first deployment of troops on foreign soil since World War II, Minister of Foreign Affairs Joschka Fischer repositioned Germany as 'an early warning station against genocide'. Germany's historical legacy was turned from a burden into a strength as part of an argument about the necessity of deploying of forces in Kosovo to prevent further genocide. This illustrates the latitude of interpretation a political leader has in mobilizing an historical event (WW II) that cannot be avoided in any discussion of war in Germany.

More generally, we argue that World War II is the closest thing the human species has to a hegemonic representation of global history. The importance of this event and the universally negative evaluation of Hitler has implications as a nascent global charter, wherein civilized nations have a mandate to band together to combat genocide. Both Kosovo and more particularly East Timor were areas where the objective interests of Western nations were not threatened, and yet action was taken to defend the weaker group against the perceived genocidal intentions of the stronger group.

To a great extent, social representations of history summarize realistic group conflict. To a lesser extent, they also summarize positive forms of interdependence such as the signing of treaties and the making of constitutions. If popular representations of history are stories about politics and war, then they should function as group-based narratives to identify friends, foes and the mission of the group. The roles of protagonist and antagonist in intergroup conflict appear to be exceptionally well-elaborated in historical narratives. For many nations (Germany being a major exception), assuming the mantle of a wartime leader has exceptional historical currency for a politician wanting to legitimize political actions. However, as Liu and Allen (1999) observed in their study of the evolution of a Maori chiefdom, failure in war can have extreme consequences for leaders, such as death or loss of position.

**Identity-based approaches (social identity theory and self-categorization theory)**

Social representations of history function as resources for managing the interplay of social identities. In this section we examine their impact on the individual, with a focus on culture-specific reactions to negative social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The basic principle of self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), that social identity depends on the situational context, can be extended diachronically through the analysis of historical representations. For example, events with enduring significance like colonization and war create content that enables the mobilization of social identities in particular directions that shape the perception of the situational context.

*Levels of self-categorization*

Historical representations can be used as a means of positioning the identity of another group in relation to one's own group. Reactions to this positioning can have important repercussions for the level of categorization chosen by the positioned group. In the cases described below, categorization is not voluntarily chosen by the ingroup, but rather imposed by outgroup members imbuing the category with content that can be uncomfortable for the person categorized.

Dresler-Hawke (2000) reported that Germans felt more shame when visiting monuments to Holocaust victims in the presence of Jewish persons and foreigners than with other Germans. Furthermore, shame about the Nazi past was correlated with a lower attachment to the national unit. So shame about negative events in a people's past has its greatest impact in the eyes of the other, in the eyes of the group that one has offended. One solution to the negative positioning imposed by their national history is to seek a higher level of identification, to identify as Europeans instead of as Germans. Another strategy is to self-categorize at a lower level (e.g. regional or individual), denying culpability for historical injustices by claiming that one's grandparents were members of the resistance (Dresler-Hawke, 2000).

At an intranational rather than international level, the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 between the British Crown and Maori chiefs is regarded by all groups in New Zealand as the most important event in the nation's history. Several influential histories (e.g. Belich, 1986; Orange, 1987) have developed negative accounts of the behaviour of Europeans during the colonization of New Zealand. This, together with Maori activists periodically calling NZ Europeans to account for failing to live up to the Treaty accounts for the finding that NZ Europeans rated Maori as having honoured the Treaty of Waitangi better than themselves (Liu *et al.*, 1999). This negative social comparison for New Zealand Europeans regarding the most important event in their history has had the impact of not only opening the door for millions of dollars worth of reparations based on Treaty claims by Maori, but it has also thrown the consensual label for the majority group into question (Liu, 1999a). Liu *et al.*'s (1999) work has shown that negative social comparisons are by no means restricted to minority groups, or to majorities on unimportant attributes (see Vaughan, 1978). Rather, identity positioning is a give and take between groups that can be instantiated using history as a resource that may result in acceptance of collective guilt and consequent reparations by a dominant group (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998).

Currently, there is no consensual label for White New Zealanders; one popular term (a Maori word), *Pakeha* is rejected by some as a pejorative to insult Europeans, embraced by others as a term to signify the importance of their relationship with Maori.

Like Germans, some New Zealand Europeans refuse all ethnic labels and try to refer to themselves as 'kiwis' or 'just New Zealanders', a superordinate label (Liu, 1999a). Others try to shift to the level of the individual, arguing that historical disadvantage is irrelevant to individual circumstances concerning resource distribution between Maori and non-Maori (Sibley & Liu, 2004).

To some extent, these strategies correspond to what Branscombe, Ellemers, Doosje, and Spears (1999) have called *identity threat*, the threat of being categorized against one's will. However, in our examples there is simultaneously a value threat as well, as the morality of the group has been called into question by historical misdeeds.

To avoid the negative positioning of history, both Germans in an international context and New Zealand Europeans in an intranational context used the strategies of either increasing the inclusiveness of identity (to European or New Zealander), or decreasing inclusiveness (down to the level of the individual). We suggest that these patterns illustrate culture-specific instantiations of self-categorization principles (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994). They illustrate a point made by Moscovici (1981), that processes of social identification and self-categorization are influenced by the content of social representations.

They also illustrate the power of historical charters on categorization processes at the individual level. Because an historical charter is widely regarded as true, an individual cannot afford to ignore it, even if they personally disagree with some of the implications of the charter. Even those Germans and New Zealand Europeans that attempt to avoid the negative positioning implied by their respective histories often acknowledge the moral implications of their charter discursively (Sibley & Liu, 2004). Hence, historical charters appear to have the properties of an anchoring and objectification system as described by Moscovici (1981).

#### *Functional antagonism (or sympathy) between social identities at similar levels of inclusiveness*

Related to this, social representations of history may constrain the relationship between national and ethnic or regional identity (Liu *et al.*, 2002). Hegemonic representations of history, shared by all groups within a nation, facilitate a positive correlation between national identity and subgroup identities. They exhibit properties of what Cinnirella (1996) has termed *positive networking*. That is, when all the subgroups within a nation share the same representation of history, it is likely because the history offers an adequate position for each of them. The representation should contain narratives that allow for conflict resolution and subgroup reconciliation, so that the activation of national identity may simultaneously activate ethnic identity, and vice versa. On the other hand, if minority representations of history are polemical with the majority, this would likely lead to a more antagonistic relationship between national and ethnic identity (Liu *et al.*, 2002).

Data from Malaysia and Singapore are consistent with the notion that hegemonic representations of history are associated with positive correlations between ethnic and national identity (Liu *et al.*, 2002). In these countries, the overall representation appears to be a narrative about the emergence of an independent nation from the forces of colonization. This representation appears to be capable of smoothing over ethnic and regional differences. Data from Taiwan, on the other hand (Huang *et al.*, 2004) indicates that emancipated representations (in the form of consensus about the events and figures in history, but polemics about the evaluation of leaders) are associated with a zero correlation between Chinese and Taiwanese identities.

Self-categorization theory posits a functional antagonism between identities at different levels of inclusiveness, such that activation of an individual level of identity suppresses group level identity, and activation of group level identity suppresses personal identity (Turner *et al.*, 1987). A useful elaboration provided by social representations theory is that hegemonic social representations of history, and most particularly historical charters, facilitate a functional sympathy between identities at similar levels of inclusiveness, such as national and subgroup identity.

Reicher and Hopkins (2001, p. 38) describe how this might be accomplished. They argue that self categorization is not just a response to a situational context, but rather is an attempt to mobilize shared social identity with a socially constructed definition of who is in versus excluded from the group, what group norms for behaviour should be, and who has the right to speak for the group. According to these theorists, social identification is not just the process of activating an identity, but the process of constructing an identity with a particular agenda (e.g. a charter). This then colours the perception of the situation. A hegemonic historical representation of history should generally be able to allow minority ethnic group members the ability to participate in the national agenda and be included within the definition of nationality. Conversely, minority claims to distinctiveness or unfair treatment should be able to be incorporated within a national historical narrative defining a role for the group or adjudicating the veracity of their claims.

#### *Positive distinctiveness strategies*

While shifting the level of inclusiveness in self-categorization is one way to avoid the implications of negative positioning from an historical charter, there are other solutions related to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As alluded earlier, German political leaders used the classic social identity strategy of redefining the value of an attribute in trying to reposition themselves as an early warning station against genocide during the Kosovo war. Similarly, New Zealand identity writer Michael King (1999) has asserted that Pakeha are a second indigenous people of New Zealand, with no less attachment to the land than Maori. These strategies involve embracing and changing the meaning of an historical representation rather than avoiding it.

Doosje *et al.* (1998) showed that collective (rather than personal) guilt could be induced experimentally for past group behaviours for both minimal and national groups. High identifiers were less likely to experience collective guilt than low identifiers under conditions when the historical interpretations were ambiguous. Further, collective guilt was found to mediate desire to make compensation for the group's past misdeeds. Like Dresler-Hawke's (2000) work, this suggests that high identifiers are less likely to experience negative emotions about the group's past misdeeds to the extent that they are able to successfully employ strategies to deflect collective guilt. By comparison, low identifiers may be less able and willing to maintain positive distinctiveness for their group in the face of historical challenges from others.

On the positive side, Hilton (1993, unpublished data) has shown that the British and French think that economic strength is important to being a great nation, but diplomatic position (e.g. through having permanent seats on United Nations security council) and military strength (both countries possess nuclear deterrents) are considered important as well. The French also considered cultural distinction to be important in defining national greatness, whereas Germans tended to focus on economics alone. In line with the positive distinctiveness hypothesis of social identity theory, members of each nation

seemed to privilege those dimensions as important on which their own country was favourably positioned. Hence, social representations of history appear to be relevant to defining the content of what makes a people positively distinct compared to other peoples.

The dynamics between managing internal conflict within a nation while asserting positive distinctiveness in social comparisons with other nations is central to the identity positioning fostered by historical charters. An historical charter can be used internally by a disadvantaged group to call their nation to account for failing to live up to its ideals (Huntington, 1981). This may be particularly effective when the advantaged group wants to assert itself as 'great' on that dimension before other peoples. Thus, New Zealand's desire to appear as a nation with the 'most harmonious race relations in the world' together with the representational status of the Treaty has provided Maori with leverage for social change. This combination of coaxing (paying homage to national ideals of positive distinctiveness) and reproach (referring to past injustices) may be a particularly effective 'carrot and stick' for engineering social change, because it is inclusive and invokes national identity with a particular agenda in mind.

#### *Stability and legitimacy of the social order*

The two critical variables that determine a group's reaction to a negative social comparison in social identity theory are the perceived stability and legitimacy of the current social order (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Historical charters are very important here: for example, a recent special issue of *The Journal of Contemporary History* was devoted to the topic of rendering history in political transitions. The authors were in agreement that the use of history in maintaining and legitimizing the current political system is ubiquitous, and can be seen most clearly when regimes change (e.g. Conrad, 2003; Evans, 2003; Merridale, 2003).

(Re)presenting history is one means by which a disadvantaged group can challenge the legitimacy of the existing social order. Whether history can be used in this manner or not depends on how central the historical events in question are to the current national identity. For New Zealanders, the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi between Maori and the British Crown (representing modern day Europeans) is rated as the most important event in their nation's history (Liu *et al.*, 1999). Hence, the civil rights movement begun in the late 1960s has gained rather than lost momentum in New Zealand, to the point where the ideal of a 'bicultural nation of indigenous peoples and Europeans has become viable (if contested, see Sibley & Liu, 2004).

By contrast, the civil rights movement in the US has diminished. Many of the key institutional reforms undertaken in the 1970s, like busing to enforce desegregation and affirmative action to increase institutional entrance for Blacks have been reversed. The historical charter for the US is largely a product of western liberalism, based on individual rights. Once the most obvious legal barriers to equality for Blacks had been abolished, there was no further mandate for change.

#### *Assimilation of minorities to the dominant group*

Social representations of history are also necessary for a social identity-based theory of acculturation (see Ward *et al.*, 2001). This is because history furnishes raw materials to create ideals. We read the failure of the Roots discourse to take hold long-term in the US to be related to the popularity of the Cosby show: that Blacks succeed through

becoming 'White' and integrating into American society. The American Dream is a highly individualist myth, based on liberal ideology that predisposes individual solutions to threatened minority identities.

By comparison, from the 1970s, new legislation in New Zealand has increasingly contained the proviso that its implementation should be consistent with the spirit of the Treaty of Waitangi. By a social process of persistent negotiation and challenge, the interpretation of this clause has evolved from being a toothless formality to having resource implications. Maori language has become a growth industry in New Zealand, and the ideal of a bicultural nation is becoming more of a reality. Nations such as New Zealand and Singapore demonstrate that relatively harmonious race relations can be maintained under an official policy of biculturalism or multiculturalism if a supporting historical charter is in place (Liu *et al.*, 2002, 1999).

#### **Cognitive processes and decision-making**

Social representations of history are capable of influencing groups' thinking about their futures; for example, Hilton *et al.* (1996) found evidence that the attitudes of British, French and German respondents to European unification (in the form of the Maastricht treaty concerning monetary union) was influenced by beliefs about the causes of Hitler's rise to power in 1933. Thus British and French respondents were more likely to support European unification if they attributed Hitler's rise to power to external factors, whereas Germans were less likely to support European unification if they attributed it to the economic instability of the Weimar republic - perhaps reflecting a belief that the loss of the Deutschmark required by European monetary union would undermine the economic prosperity that Germany had enjoyed since the Second World War. Strikingly, these relations emerged independently of those between 'pocketbook politics' factors and attitudes to European unification (beliefs about the effect of the Maastricht treaty on the economy, job prospects, national security etc.).

Research does indeed suggest that mobilization of core lessons from history will structure people's responses to new challenges. For example, historical narratives about war were used to prime Chinese identity above Hong Kong identity in an experimental study (Hong, Wang, & Liu, 2001). An historical narrative of the Japanese invasion of China and the sack of Nanjing reminded Hong Kong Chinese of their ties to Chinese ethnicity and the mainland, whereas in other circumstances there has been a strong move for Hong Kongers to assert their distinctiveness from mainland Chinese.

#### *Lessons from the past: The use of historical analogy*

Lessons from the past are often presented through drawing analogies from experience. In this way, a group can use its collective wisdom to manage present crises through its memory of past ones, often with the aim of preventing history from repeating itself. For example, survey data showed that more Americans adopted the Munich analogy (favouring intervention) over the Vietnam analogy (favouring non-intervention) the closer that America drew to declaring war on Saddam Hussein in 1991 (Schuman & Rieger, 1992). The power of the Munich analogy to influence policy recommendations about such crises was demonstrated in an experiment by Gilovich (1981).

Nevertheless Spellman and Holyoak (1993) show how analogies may be flexibly interpreted. For example, they were able to contextualize the Munich analogy such that

American students were more likely to map Saudi Arabia into Britain's role in World War II (neighbour of the invaded country, attacked from the air, springboard for US intervention) if American leadership in World War II was emphasized, but mapped Saudi Arabia onto France if British leadership in World War II was emphasized (essentially through identifying Britain's neo-Churchillian role as chief Western ally in the Gulf crisis).

The Munich analogy can further demonstrate how perspective differences may allow quite different lessons to be drawn from history by other groups. In particular, modern Germans may remember Munich as the time when their people were manipulated by propaganda and seduced by militaristic rhetoric into invading smaller countries, thus setting off a cataclysmic World War which resulted in total defeat for Germany, with its cities being bombed to ruin. This Munich analogy can be read to have quite different implications for response to the Gulf Crisis: thus, a substantial body of German public opinion denounced the interventionist attitude taken by the US and her allies such as Britain. The debate within Germany was vividly illustrated by two opposing leader articles published by editors of *Die Zeit*, a leading opinion-forming weekly in Germany. One, written by Theo Sommer, denounced the militaristic rhetoric of the US and Britain, that he contrasted with that of continental Europe. In discussing how to react to the Gulf crisis, Sommer's article implicitly referred to the German perspective on the Second World War, highlighting the dangers of being seduced by militaristic rhetoric into a war that would later be regretted, and denouncing the humanity of aerial bombardment of civilian populations. The other article, written by Helmut Schmidt, warned of the dangers of Germany finding itself out of line with its NATO partners (led of course, by the US and Britain), and seemed implicitly to draw on the allied perspective on the Second World War, highlighting the criminal nature of Saddam Hussein's use of poison gas and emphasizing a moral responsibility to protect the Jews in Israel. That the same newspaper should publish two such different gestalts on the same day illustrates not only the quite different perspectives that Germany - as former enemy and present ally of the countries in the NATO alliance - has on war, but also that winning this kind of political debate may reside in getting to impose your representation of history. Similar illustrations were provided by Reicher and Hopkins (2001, pp. 131-150) in the use of William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, and the Battle of Bannockburn in arguments for and against Scottish home rule.

## Conclusions

We have argued that a group's representation of its history has a significant impact on its sense of identity and its response to new challenges. In particular, survey research has shown that popular history is often a collective memory of conflicts against other groups. These collective memories form the descriptive background and support for prescriptive charters, which legitimize roles and mandate actions. Policy makers in modern states need to take these social representations into account when considering what courses of action will be acceptable to public opinion (Liu *et al.*, 2004).

Representations of history have important implications for a group's social identity: thus Dresler-Hawke's (2000) work and that of Doosje *et al.* (1998) have shown that the salience of positive and negative aspects of a group's history can affect feelings of collective shame or guilt and willingness to compensate 'wronged' groups. While Branscombe *et al.* (1999) discuss the importance of perceived legitimacy of group advantages very pertinently from the perspective of social identity theory, we think that

the social representations approach allows us to expand the analysis in many ways. First, the descriptive component of social representations of a group's history contain not only stereotypes but explanatory narratives, which often form analogies that guide responses to present situations. Second, we argue that social representations of history contain charters, buttressed by narratives that designate heroes and villains, create roles, confer legitimacy and prescribe policies. Social representations thus include descriptive and prescriptive components that include but are richer than simple stereotypes and self-images.

We need a better understanding of the role representations of a group's history play in identification with a group. Doosje and Branscombe (2003) have shown that groups make ingroup-serving attributions concerning history (e.g. concerning the Germans' treatment of Jews in World War II); however, are such biases knowledge-based (due to knowing only one's own side's point of view), or motivational in nature? Douchet, Giudicelli, and Hilton (2002) found that their cognitive measures of counterfactual and causal reasoning could not explain French Jews' greater severity in judging Maurice Papon (a French administrator in Bordeaux in 1942) as guilty of sending Jews to their death in Nazi concentration camps. In a similar (motivational) vein, Doosje and Branscombe found that high identifiers are more likely to make ingroup-serving attributions for historical events than low identifiers. Doosje *et al.* (1998) also suggest that high identifiers may suppress or reinterpret negative aspects of their group's history and thus repress feelings of collective guilt.

Of course, identification with one's group and socialization into its perspective will often co-vary. Do high identifiers with groups make ingroup-serving attributions because they know more about the group's history than low identifiers, or do low identifiers simply have a less self-serving view of the group's history? These questions seem to us to be important as our own data (Hilton, 1993, unpublished) and that of Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) suggest that partisans are more expert about the historical background of conflicts involving their group, as well as being more polarized. However, Liu *et al.*'s (1999) study of Maori-Pakeha relations in New Zealand shows that majority group members who know most about the minority's historical perspective are also most likely to favour conciliatory policies to the minority. This raises the possibility that educating group members about the outgroup's historical perspective could be an important tool for achieving reconciliation in cases of intergroup conflict. At the moment very little is known about this process: for example, would a 'softly softly' approach to changing a partisan's view of his group's history work better than a frontal attack? Would this have an indirect effect on his identification with his group? We also need to know more about the effect of changing representations of history on attitudes to related issues. For example, would changing German (or British) attitudes to Dresden change attitudes to using air power in NATO interventions abroad, such as in the Gulf, Serbia or Afghanistan?

It seems to us that a better understanding of these issues could be of use in conflict resolution. For example, the institution of truth commissions was used to attempt reconciliation between Blacks and Whites in South Africa in the 1990s (Asmal, Asmal, & Roberts, 1996), and analogous proposals have been made for Northern Ireland with, for example, the institution of an inquiry some 30 years afterwards into the Bloody Sunday massacre. While such attempts to set the history books straight have been welcomed by many, others have cautioned that they risk reopening old wounds. At an international level, would a Japanese acknowledgment of and apology for its acts in the Second World War (analogous to that of Germany)



render the creation of an Asian supranational state possible? Or would it indeed be preferable to simply forget, as De Gaulle's France did after the Second World War in its policy of *oubli* (forgetting) of Vichy? If a society decides to remember, are there ways of achieving reconciliation with this technique that are better than others? These seem to us to be important questions, which motivate a better understanding of the social psychology of history.

Whatever the answers to these difficult questions, we believe that a diachronic and culture-appropriate approach will be important to their resolution. In the framework outlined for the psychological study of group-based history, time and culture weave their way implicitly through the body of the narrative. The operation of feedback loops between the raw events of history (events and people), their social representations, and social identity provide a rich framework for considering how interventions for conflict resolution may be amplified or dampened by the dynamics already inherent in the history of intergroup relations between groups. Social representations of history may be useful in defining the zeitgeist, or spirit of the times by highlighting collective remembrances of what has gone before. This variable has been shown to be important in studies of minority influence (Maass & Clark, 1984), but is notoriously difficult to define. We suggest that zeitgeist is a dynamic of positive feedback between social representations and social identities driven by the politics of the day. The utility of this definition will be put to the test under societies, like Taiwan, that are rapidly changing in terms of social identity (Huang, 2000; Huang *et al.*, 2004).

Rather than pit variables from realistic group conflict theory like *threat* against ones from social identity theory like *degree of identification*, social representations of history invite theorists to consider how threat may be built into a group's historical representations, and how degree of identification may become an issue if a group is perceived as the cause of historical injustice. Social representations of history invite theorists to ground their experiments and theories in collective remembrances that form a people's shared experiences and wisdom about the past. They underline Moscovici's warning that content and process may not be entirely separable. If social psychology is to be able to step beyond the laboratory and have more direct relevance for current events and political emergencies, it must have a way to operationalize the sociocultural context for intergroup relations. We have argued for social representations of history as precisely such a lever to use in prying open the door of time and making relevant the issues of the day.

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- Q1** Please update references Devine-Wright (in press), Liu, Goldstein-Hawes, Hilton, Huang, Gastardo-Conaco, Dresler-Hawke, Pittolo, Hong, Ward, Abraham, Kashima, Kashima, Ohashi, Yuki, Hidaka (in press), Liu, Huang, and Sibley (2004).
- Q2** Should this passage have a reference? Foreign Affairs Joschka Fischer repositioned Germany as 'an early warning station against genocide'.
- Q3** Please check that references Breakwell and Lyons (1996), Devine-Wright (2001), Devine-Wright and Lyons (1997), Igartua and Paez (1997), Oakes, Haslam, Reynolds (1999), Schwartz (1997) are uncited in the text.
- Q4** Please check the inserted year.