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# The Psychology of Political Oppression: Studying False Consciousness

Editor

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Abstract. Starting with this Issue, IBPP will be reporting on a series of research presentations--each with relevance to political psychology--from the 1998 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association. The following article describes the work of John T. Jost of Stanford University.

Dr. Jost's presentation was entitled "False Consciousness as a Problem for Social Psychology." In this presentation, he described his efforts to render the concept of false consciousness as developed by Karl Marx and Friederich Engels into a number of operational hypotheses--clearly stated and testable through empirical and experimental research.

To Marx and Engels, false consciousness denotes a worldview harbored by oppressed individuals that is conditioned by a society's economic oppressors in the interest and service of those oppressors. In essence, the oppressed experience a psychology that reflects and contributes to his or her own oppression. Jost has developed and carried out research on at least seven aspects of what might constitute false consciousness: (1) Denial of Injustice and Disadvantage. The oppressed may not recognize examples of the injustice and disadvantage in their lives, much as psychodynamically conflicted individuals may not recognize threatening information as an unconscious means of psychological defense. (2) Fatalism. The oppressed may recognize injustice and disadvantage but believe that there is little of efficacy available to change it. Some observers might note the similarity of this to learned helplessness. (3) Rationalization of Social Roles. The oppressed may not only recognize injustice and disadvantage but believe that there is a certain logic to this state of affairs. In essence, things are supposed to be the way they are. Or rationalization may mask a primitive denial or function as a more sophisticated denial. In these last two cases, rationalization facilitates injustice, and disadvantage becoming something else. (4) False Attribution of Blame. The oppressed ascribe the blame for injustice and disadvantage elsewhere than where it truly belongs. Often the oppressed even may blame themselves. (5) Internalization of Inferiority and the Depressed Entitlement Effect. Even more insidious than false attribution of blame is this notion that the oppressed may believe that they are not only to blame but are significantly inferior as have-nots when compared to the haves. In essence, the oppressed advocate that they deserve what they get or don't have. (6) Outgroup Favoritism and Identification with the Aggressor. The converse of internalization of inferiority is internalization of others' superiority. And as effectively described by Bruno Bettelheim among prison camp internees, there is a pitiful and overcompensatory attempt at emulation of the oppressors. (7) Psychological Conservatism and Resistance to Change. Perhaps because the oppressed's false consciousness constitutes much of the self--and protecting the self is a basic human enterprise--efforts to protect the self inevitably lead to efforts to conserve the noxious social and political status quo as well.

Several points of contention emerged in dialogue with Jost. (1) In an era wherein United States intellectuals still seriously wield the analytic tool of postmodernism, is there an objective reality without which false consciousness as a valid phenomenon becomes problematic? (2) Is false consciousness accurate consciousness? As the clinically depressed may be unhappier but more accurate in self-perception than the nondepressed, are the oppressed more accurate--or at least more accurate than the oppressors? (3) How applicable is Jost's operationalization of false consciousness beyond the

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analysis of class groups to racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, and gender minorities--even to specific types of organizations or phenomena within organizations? (4) How much variability among members of the oppressed seems to be the case for specific groups and situations? (5) Can false consciousness be differentially explicated through global, regional, and local levels of analyses? (6) And does it make sense to conceive of a false consciousness of oppressors?

Jost's work is significant for its linkage to great social science of the past, value to help elucidate and influence social science of today and tomorrow, and potential to inform public policy--especially national security and criminal justice policy. (See Bettelheim, B. (1943). Individual and mass behavior in extreme situations. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 30, 417-452; Gabel, J. (1978). False consciousness: An essay on reification. NY: Harper & Row; Jost, J. T. (April 14, 1998). False consciousness as a problem for social psychology. In M. A. Small (Chair). Use and misuse of psychology in justice studies. Symposium presented at the 1998 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, CA; Jost, J. T. (1995). Negative illusions: Conceptual clarification and psychological evidence concerning false consciousness. *Political Psychology*, 16, 397-424; Pines, C.L. (1993). Ideology and false consciousness: Marx and his historical progenitors. State University of New York Press; Rosen, M. (1996). *On voluntary servitude: False consciousness and the theory of ideology*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.) (Keywords: False Consciousness, Political Oppression.)