

Book Review

Zak Cope

Dimensions of Prejudice: Towards a Political Economy of Bigotry

Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2008

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Just about every pattern of contemporary human belief and behaviour can be studied from three basic social scientific perspectives, each with distinctive loci of investigation: the individual, the group and society (both domestic and global). Psychology has enduring claims on the first; sociology dominates the second; and political economy has dibs on the third.

When addressing controversial issues, people with normative concerns about matters of economic stability, social justice, personal morality and the like, use these three perspectives with different ends in mind. In all cases, however, the fundamental purpose of the social sciences is the same. Operating on the implied slogan, “knowledge is power,” that purpose is to gain control. Just as the natural sciences give us the information necessary to exercise dominion over non-human nature (or to provide us with the illusion that we do), likewise the social sciences promise to give us the insights needed to control human nature. Of course, social scientists are generally convinced not only that this sort of control is feasible but are also hopeful that this “mastery” will be enforced in the most benign manner and in the best interests of all concerned.

As for the levels of investigation, when discussing abnormal behaviour, deviance, crime and violence, for example: psychological insights into personality type may explain why a particular person behaves badly; sociological studies may reveal the ways in which peer group influences, religion or ethnic identity affect behaviour within a particular subculture; and political economy may relate specific actions to larger patterns of power and ideology in a society or culture—sometimes defining miscreancy as a symptom of a larger civilizational pathology rather than a social disease on its own.

Each perspective (operating at what I often call the “micro,” “meso” and “macro” levels of analysis) has its place, and each one has different but complementary claims on the truth value of its data, the utility of its hypotheses and the worth of the theoretical links that may be drawn among them. Each also has a particular practical domain of competence.

Whether we are discussing tensions that arise over intergenerational attitudes and actions, the structure and function of marriage, questions of equity in taxation policy or any other issue large or small, certain kinds of information will be more or less relevant depending on the discipline involved. Since our use of the social sciences has some sort of purpose other than disinterested description and explanation, we will probably select our level of

approach and our attendant methodologies with a view toward coming up with solutions to what we choose to define as social problems. (Of course, if our purpose is to rule without information which can be used to discredit our ideological preferences by, for example, severely limiting the collection and analysis of primary data, then there are ways to suppress information gathering and dissemination as well, but that's a different story.)

So, while domestic violence, drug abuse, schoolyard bullying, cultural marginalization, economic inequity, social disintegration and suicide all have dimensions that are susceptible to investigation by psychologists, sociologists and political economists, much will turn on the question: How narrowly or broadly do we wish to understand these issues, and at what level might we wish to intervene in order to correct some perceived trouble?

For Zak Cope, the problem at hand is prejudice or, as his subtitle less subtly states: bigotry.” Prejudice is perceived as a problem in most complex societies and among almost all peoples who are not wholly exclusionary in their relations with others. Eugenicists, racists, religious fundamentalists, misogynists and others of their sort are not likely to consider their attitudes toward people of a different background, gender or faith to be “prejudice” in any way that carries a pejorative connotation; so, their attitudes are not problematic, at least to them. In the alternative, anyone who believes that contempt, hatred or even a strong belief in essential differences among human types (usually involving what sociologists call “ascribed characteristics”) is apt to see an essential unfairness when certain groups of people are considered “naturally” superior or inferior to others, and are thus treated with undue deference on the one hand or disrespect on the other.

The social problem of prejudice is, of course, highlighted in contemporary society, where multiethnic populations are commonly the result of a general increase in geographical mobility. Demographic shifts resulting from ecological degradation, cultural conflict, economic failures, tyrannical governments and war combine to promote movements from rural to urban areas, amongst regions within a nation, from country to country and continent to continent. Whether in the form of an individual seeking political asylum or massive dislocations of whole populations, demographic changes have become familiar and are expected to grow. In most cases, bringing diverse populations into immediate contact with others unlike themselves—especially in times of stress and circumstances of potential rivalry—can make for suspicion, antagonism and violence.

In *Dimensions of Prejudice*, Zak Cope offers a solid, persuasive argument for the macroanalysis of prejudice. He draws successfully upon a range of sources including but not limited to Marxist theories of racism and imperialism as well as critical theory and cultural studies. He does not neglect psychoanalysis, feminist and the more recently invented “whiteness studies,” but he accommodates them within a workable classification system that permits the exploration of the contributions of psychology and sociology as well as philosophy (especially epistemology) without losing sight of the theme that prejudice is best viewed from an overarching structural point of view.

Cope plainly appreciates that prejudice is the result of constraints upon both the capacity for empathy and the relative absence of scientific and rational thinking in individuals and in entire cultures. His task is to discover the primal causes of these constraints. His inquiry can be informed by microanalysis and mesoanalysis, which define intervening and enabling variables, but the fundamental sources of prejudice in attitude and discrimination in action are located in political economy.

Zak Cope presents his case in clear language and in a coherent argument that moves stepwise through sound and sensible accounts not only of “academic” studies of prejudice, but also of the way in which academic accounts embody and display their own prejudices. His explication and explanation of psychological and sociological work aimed at understanding bigotry are comprehensive and compelling. His discussion of capitalism is especially worthwhile, for he describes in ordinary language some of the essential features of Marxist analysis without either oversimplifying or underestimating the power of the theory he elucidates. Of special worth are his excellent presentations of the politics of ethnicity and of the “racialized” society.

There is, I think, little value in claiming that any single book is a “must read” contribution to the literature on any subject. Cope’s *Dimensions of Prejudice*, however, comes as close as can be expected. Back in the day when Neandertals roamed the Earth, the Ku Klux Klan paraded openly and I took my first undergraduate course in “race and ethnic relations,” two books dominated: T. W. Adorno’s *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) and Robert W. Allport’s *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), though some adventurous souls also looked at Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* (1944). The field is by no means as spare today, yet Zak Cope’s contribution deserves to be held in the highest esteem, not least because it puts those “classics” in perspective and adds a good deal of its own.

In the end, Cope provides a balanced summary of our best efforts to understand and overcome the problem of bigotry. In seeing it as an issue in the broadest available terms, he displays nothing but respect for alternative, particularistic approaches and incorporates their astute and incisive observations where he can. At the same time, he makes clear that more than individual therapy and social rehabilitation is needed to comprehend the nature of what might properly be called a major human pathology of our time.

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