THE COMPARATIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF LEONARD T. HOBHOUSE: ITS CONTEXT AND CONCEPTION

Charles W. Tolman
University of Victoria

ABSTRACT: Hobhouse viewed comparative psychology as playing a key role in his politically liberal, social-ethical worldview. The main feature of evolving mind was the increased capacity for democratic self-direction. Political reaction, identified with imperialism, attempts ideologically to obscure this fact, and thus to impede social progress. Its instruments are philosophical idealism and pseudo-scientific biologism or Social Darwinism. Comparative psychology, conceived as an essentially human psychology, could counteract this reactionary ideology with genuine scientific knowledge of present human capacity and future potential. These can only be revealed by a correct scientific approach, which, Hobhouse maintained, had to be evolutionary and comparative.

> . . . .I have long felt that the prevailing tendency to regard all the marked distinctions of human character as innate, and in the main indelible, and to ignore the irresistible proofs that by far the greater part of those differences, whether between individuals, races, or sexes, are such as not only might but naturally would be produced by differences in circumstances, is one of the chief hindrances to the rational treatment of great social questions, and one of the greatest stumbling blocks to human improvement.
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> John Stuart Mill, 1873
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> The doctrine that human progress depends upon the forces which condition all biological evolution has in fact been the primary intellectual cause of the [social-political] reaction.
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> Leonard T. Hobhouse, 1904

Most comparative psychologists know that Leonard T. Hobhouse (1864-1929) wrote a book called *Mind in Evolution* (1901/1926) in which he described some problem solving techniques for the investigation of learning and "practical intelligence" in animals, techniques which Wolfgang Köhler borrowed—with proper acknowledgement—and improved upon in his well known work on the *Mentality of Apes* (1917/1925). It is probably safe to surmise that acquaintance with Hobhouse is limited

Correspondence should be sent to: Charles W. Tolman, Department of Psychology, University of Victoria, P.O. Box 1700, Victoria, B.C. V8W 2Y2 CANADA.

for many to these few details. More can hardly be expected, considering that the influential textbook of Warden, Jenkins and Warner (1934) mentioned Hobhouse merely as someone who had invented some clever problem-solving methods. Regarding the substance of his investigations, they reported simply that "his results were far from convincing" (p. 559). Edwin G. Boring (1950) disposed of Hobhouse in two sentences relating that he did experiments like those of Lloyd Morgan and Köhler, but that his lacked "the added significance of being related to a new system of psychology" (p. 475). J. C. Flugel (1964) gave Hobhouse a single, even less informative sentence, a bare mention of his surname and title of his book, in passing from Lloyd Morgan to Loeb (p. 102). The majority of more recent textbooks on the history of psychology do not mention him at all. (Notable exceptions are Thomson, 1968, and Murray, 1983, both of whom have evidently taken the trouble to read all or a good part of *Mind in Evolution.*)

Hobhouse might have been treated with such indifference because his work was in fact "not convincing," because he offered no "new system of psychology," or because he simply had little of interest or importance to say. I maintain, however, that he fails on none of these counts. The reasons for his invisibility have had more to do with the *kind* of theory he was proposing, coupled with a general historical turn at the end of the 19th century toward the hegemony of a contrary conception of science and psychology, a conception with which we now associate neopositivism and behaviorism. The fact that this latter hegemony is now manifestly in decline should be taken as an opportunity to reexamine the systems of thought that it smothered in their early stages of development.

For present day comparative psychology, beset as it is by various forms of crisis, not the least of which is one of identity, the ideas of Leonard Hobhouse are particularly pertinent. He had a very clear idea about the identity and mission of comparative psychology. In support of this he had an equally clear idea of its philosophic, historic, and scientific contexts. Especially remarkable was his understanding of comparative psychology's relevance to the human condition. It is my intention here to outline this conception and its manifold context, confident that much of Hobhouse's thought on these matters remains as pertinent today as it was in his own time. Indeed, we may be in a *better* position today to appreciate what he was trying to do than were his contemporaries.

THE PHILOSOPHIC AND HISTORIC CONTEXTS

The Importance of Evolution

Hobhouse was the last of the 19th century comparative psychologists who intended to develop a general evolutionary theory of mind. Owing to a naive Cartesianism, Darwin did not extend his theory of evolutionary

transmutation to the mind. The less timid materialist Spencer was perfectly happy to do so, but he did it by the crudest of means, reductionism. Romanes, a more sensitive thinker, recognized this as an error and made the first tentative steps toward a theoretical solution to the evolution of mind that was both materialistic and nonreductionist. Lloyd Morgan became well known, at least in theoretical biology if not in comparative psychology, for his further development of nonreductionist theory, which he called "emergentism." These ideas of Morgan were undoubtedly less influential than they might have been had he not abandoned the traditional scientific materialism for a mystified form of Spinozism (for an earlier treatment of these issues, see Tolman, 1987).

It is interesting that both Romanes and Morgan suffered historical fates in comparative psychology similar to Hobhouse's. Each became caricatured, Romanes for the "anecdotal method," Morgan for his "canon," which many behaviorists perversely appropriated as part of their justification for forsaking everything he otherwise stood for. Meanwhile, the substantive theoretical contributions of each of these men were ignored or forgotten.

Yet Hobhouse differed from Romanes and Morgan in that he was not a biologist but a social philosopher, and his motives were not solely scientific. He was concerned with the evolution of mind not for its own sake, but because it posed problems that had to be solved if a scientifically grounded social ethic was to be established. Thus comparative psychology was also not an end in itself; it was seen as an integral part of a larger science of humanity in nature. The overriding concern was with social ethics. But a correct social ethics required a correct metaphysics, understood as epistemology and ontology. "Correct" here meant "scientific," and this, in turn, meant "evolutionary." In his words: ". . . .I was convinced that a philosophy that was to possess more than a speculative interest must rest on a synthesis of experience as interpreted by science, and that to such a synthesis the general conceptions of evolution offered a key" (Hobhouse, 1913/1927, pp. xx-xxi).

Progress and Reaction

The social ethical problem that occupied Hobhouse throughout his life and which provided the unifying element to all of his diverse enquires was, broadly speaking, the "right action" of Socrates. It was, however, a right action more completely *socially* conceived than that of Socrates or of practically all social philosophers writing prior to the late 19th century, with the exception possibly of Karl Marx. The right action that Hobhouse sought was the action of the individual, the community, the nation and its state, and ultimately the whole of earthly humanity in its essential unity. It was right action that was at once ethical, social, and political.

At the heart of this conception of right action was a belief in progress, a social-historical movement toward ever greater harmony both between

human and human, and between human and nature. This meant not only improvements in the means of production, but also in social relations, i.e., in both the production and the distribution of wealth.

Closely linked to social progress, in Hobhouse's view, was the increasing capacity for conscious direction of that progress:

> To the fully conscious mind in man everything would lead up, and from it, once formed, all future movement would be derived. This was indeed to assume that along with knowledge there would go control, . . . as the full meaning of the self-conscious mind worked itself out it was seen to imply a grip on those underlying conditions of life which, as long as they remain obscure, thwart human effort and distract man from that social collaboration which is necessary to the greatest efforts (Hobhouse, 1913/1927, p. xxii).
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> Now it seemed to me that it was precisely on this line that modern civilization has made its chief advance, that through science it is beginning to control the physical conditions of life, and that on the side of ethics and religion it is forming those ideas of the unity of the race, and of the subordination of the law, morals and social constitutions generally to the needs of human development which are the condition of the control that is required. (Hobhouse, 1913/1927, pp. xxiv-xxv).

The early middle 19th century was a period of comparatively great social progress in Britain. A succession of liberalizing social and political reforms began in the 1820s and had achieved considerable momentum in the following decade with the passage of the first Reform Act in 1832, an act that "extended political power to new social classes" (Trevelyan, 1959, p. 474). Hobhouse summarized this period as follows:

> The sixty years which followed the Battle of Waterloo formed a period of fairly rapid social progress correlated with an advance of social and moral science. Political enfranchisement, the reform of the Government services, Free Trade, the progressive regulation of the new industrial system, the abolition of negro slavery, the removal of the most barbarous features of the criminal law—these and many other reforms were all part of a great humanizing movement stimulated and guided by the thought of the day (Hobhouse, 1904, pp. 57-58).

In many ways this period marked the completion of the bourgeois revolution begun in the 17th century. In Hobhouse's view this was a turning point for the development of conscious direction of social progress. Writing in 1904, however, Hobhouse observed: "During some twenty, or it may be thirty years, a wave of reaction has spread over the civilized world and invaded one department after another of thought and action." But, he went on: "This is no unprecedented occurrence. In the onward movement of mankind, history shows us each forward step followed by a pause, and too often by a backsliding in which the ground gained is lost" (Hobhouse, 1904, p. 2). Hobhouse literally devoted

his life to the prevention of such a loss. Surely if the reaction itself were understood and struggled against, it could be overcome and, in the future, prevented.

By Hobhouse's analysis the root cause of the reaction at home was imperialism abroad:

> Little by little it became clearer that the new Imperialism stood, not for a widened and ennobled sense of national responsibility, but for a hard assertion of racial supremacy and material force . . . The central principle of Liberalism is self-government. The central principle of Imperialism, whatever words may be used to cloak it, is the subordination of self-government to Empire (Hobhouse, 1904, pp. 45, 47).

Liberal democracy and freedom could not survive in Britain linked to illiberal autocracy and repression in the colonies. In Hobhouse's view, the subordination of self-government could not be confined to the colonies.[1]

Idealism and Reductionism

Imperialism, according to Hobhouse, had two important ideological supports: *philosophical idealism* and *biologistic reductionism.* These may appear to be quite separate, but they prove in the end to be essentially related. This relationship was intuited by J. S. Mill in 1873. As can be seen in the epigram above, Mill saw the belief in "human character as innate" as "one of the greatest stumbling blocks to human improvement." He continued:

> This tendency has its source in the intuitional metaphysics which characterized the reaction of the nineteenth century against the eighteenth, and it is a tendency so agreeable to human indolence, as well as to the conservative interests generally, that unless attacked at the very root, it is sure to be carried to even a greater length than is really justified by the more moderate forms of the intuitional philosophy (Mill, 1873/1944, p. 192).

The connections between idealism, biologism and reaction were left by Mill as unelaborated observations. By the end of the century the reaction of "conservative interests" had indeed been "carried to even greater lengths" and the connections were rediscovered and worked out in somewhat greater detail by Hobhouse.

Hobhouse's assessment of philosophical idealism can hardly be expressed more economically or cogently than when he wrote:

> The most popular philosophy of our time has had a reactionary influence, the extent of which is perhaps not generally appreciated. For thirty years and more English thought has been subject, not for the first time in its

> modern history, to powerful influences from abroad. The Rhine has flowed into the Thames, at any rate into those upper reaches of the Thames, known locally as the Isis, and from the Isis the stream of German idealism has been diffused over the academical world of Great Britain. It would be natural to look to an idealistic philosophy for a counterpoise to those crude doctrines of physical force which we shall find associated with the philosophy of science. Yet, in the main, the idealistic movement has swelled the current of retrogression. It is itself, in fact, one expression of the great reaction against the plain, human, rationalistic way of looking at life and its problems. Every institution and every belief is for it alike a manifestation of a spiritual principle, and thus for everything there is an inner and more spiritual interpretation. Hence, vulgar and stupid beliefs can be held with a refined and enlightening meaning, known only to him who so holds them, a convenient doctrine for men of a highly-rarified understanding, but for those of coarser texture who learn from them apt to degenerate into charlatanism. Indeed, it is scarcely too much to say that the effect of idealism on the world in general has been mainly to sap intellectual and moral sincerity, to excuse men in their consciences for professing beliefs which on the meaning ordinarily attached to them they do not hold, to soften the edges of all hard contrasts between right and wrong, truth and falsity, to throw a gloss over stupidity, and prejudice, and caste and tradition, to weaken the bases of reason, and disincline men to the searching analysis of their habitual ways of thinking. In these ways idealism has had a more subtly retrograde influence than any of the cruder creeds which it condemns, and has thus prepared the way for the scepticism which has been the popular philosophy of the last ten years. To judge by the popularity of teaching of this kind, what people who think a little mainly want at the present day is to be told that they need not follow where their own reason takes them. There is, they are glad to be assured, no logical foundation for the certainty which the sciences claim. Still less is there any rational groundwork of morality, in particular for that humanitarian morality, which they have found so exacting. They can, therefore, with a lightened conscience revert to the easy rule of authority and faith, a rule particularly attractive to a society which has become afraid of further progress and is lusting after the delights of barbarism (Hobhouse, 1904, pp. 77-80).

This is a powerful and, I believe, entirely correct indictment of idealism and its connection to conservatism, reaction, and—as he put it—barbarism. More needs hardly be said on the topic. But what of Hobhouse's own position? He eschewed materialism as well, but when he spoke of it, he was referring to the crude reductionistic and mechanical materialism that was coming to be rejected by most thoughtful scientists and philosophers of the late 19th century. He called his own position "rationalism," which is ontologically uninformative, possibly even misleading, since the label is an epistemological one. An assessment of his metaphysics independent of his own labeling of it reveals an eclecticism with a predominantly materialist caste to it. Where it is forceful and

effective it is transparently materialistic, as his remarks on idealism appear to suggest it ought to be. But Hobhouse had his obscure and evasive moments in which he slipped into a barely disguised, though always objective, idealism.

Although Hobhouse's critique obviously applied to the Kantian strain of idealism, it was Hegel whom he viewed as the greatest culprit. But he could not condemn Hegel without some ambivalence, and this turns out to be very important. Speaking of Hobhouse's doctrine of stages in the evolution of consciousness, Barnes noted: "Hobhouse admits the broad similarity of this doctrine and that of Hegel and holds that he accepts the element of truth advanced by Hegel, while rejecting his metaphysical vagaries and his contention that reality is entirely spiritual" (1948, p. 616). And what, precisely, was this "element of truth?" According to Hearnshaw: "Hobhouse, in spite of his quarrel with the idealist metaphysic, remained faithful to the idealist logic" (Hearnshaw, 1966, p. 17). Barnes described it as "Hegel's doctrine of the development of consciousness" (Barnes, 1948, p. 617). Both are referring to Hegel's dialectic. This is what allowed Hobhouse to retain a species of scientific materialism while avoiding the traps of mechanism and reductionism. Hobhouse's philosophical solutions to these problems were remarkably similar to those of Marx and Engels.

For Hobhouse biologism was epitomized in the doctrines of Herbert Spencer and of those who judged themselves to be Spencerians. Barnes summarized Hobhouse's opposition to Spencer:

> Spencer held that the course of evolution moves on automatically, regardless of the interference of man. He believed that the latter could, at least, have only an indifferent effect and was extremely likely to hinder the process. Hobhouse claimed, on the contrary, that however much the evolutionary process may depend upon automatically working factors, such as the struggle for existence, social evolution has come to rest more and more upon conscious control by the human mind. From our period onward, progress will depend primarily upon the conscious direction of the social process by the social mind. Again, while Spencer's conception of the organic nature of society rested upon a wide use of the biological analogy, Hobhouse eschewed the use of technical biological terms and only implied the essential unity and interdependence of social life (Barnes, 1948, p. 614).

The issue underlying Hobhouse's differences with the Spencerians was *reductionism*, a failure on their part to recognize qualitative differences between humans and animals. Hobhouse wrote:

> The biological view is that since men are animals the laws regulating human development must be identical with those which we observe in the breeding of shorthorns or of fantailed pigeons. The pigeon fancier should, it appears,

> have more to teach us of the conditions of human progress than Gibbon or Mommsen (1904, p. 97).
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> It was the temptation of an empirical, and in particular of an evolutionary [Spencerian] psychology, to explain away these higher developments of mind, to level distinctions of kind, and so reduce all mental phenomena as nearly as might be to the same level. This, I thought, might be the root of the trouble. . . . (1913/1927, p. xxi).

The "trouble" manifested itself in the failure of the Spencerians to distinguish between evolution and progress. On the one hand, it was clear that not all evolution was "upward" and very often in the struggle for existence the less advanced could and did prevail over the more advanced. On the other hand, human history clearly reveals an upward progress, one which is linked to human values and which biological evolution appears not to be able to explain. "But a little reflection," wrote Hobhouse, "suffices to show that if progress means anything which human beings can value or desire, it depends on the suppression of the struggle for existence, and the substitution in one form or another of social cooperation" (1913/1927, p. xviii).

Further, to believe that progress can be reduced to the "struggle for existence" provided direct support for the kind of reactionary ideology demanded by Imperialism. According to such a doctrine, wrote Hobhouse:

> Progress comes about through a conflict in which the fittest survives. It must, therefore, be unwise in the long run—however urgent it seems for the sake of the present generation—to interfere with the struggle. We must not sympathize with the beaten and the weak, lest we be tempted to preserve them. The best thing that can happen is that they should be utterly cut off, for they are the inferior stock, and their blood must not mix with ours. The justice, the mercy, the chivalry, which would induce the conqueror to forbear from enjoying the full fruits of his victory must be looked on with suspicion. It is better to smite the Amalekite hip and thigh and let the conquering race replenish the earth (1904, pp. 85-86).[2]

What links idealism and biologism is antirationalism, which replaces reason with "authority and faith." If idealism "softens the edges of all hard contrasts between right and wrong, truth and falsity," what is left to restore those edges so desperately needed for decisive action? The rule of force becomes a prime candidate, a force exercised by the powerful, the ruling classes and dominant nations. And what better justification—even tyrants seek to justify themselves—than science itself. "What has filtered through into the social and political thought of the time," wrote Hobhouse, "has been the belief that the time-honoured doctrine 'Might is Right' has a scientific foundation in the laws of biology" (1904, p. 85). The connection between idealism and biologism, then, is not an immediate one, but one mediated by what Marxist analysis identifies as class interest.

Though mediated, the connection is nonetheless, in the case of imperialism, an essential one.

THE SCIENTIFIC CONTEXT

The Role of Comparative Psychology

We are now in a position to understand the key role assigned to comparative psychology in Hobhouse's thinking. His liberalism demanded that he demonstrate precisely that which biologism denied: a real difference of kind between biological evolution and human social progress or history, between what he called the "mechanical" and the "mental." The distinction he had in mind was not a dualistic one, but one asserting simultaneous unity and difference, and the key to achieving that was a correct understanding of evolution and development. He wrote:

> Our main object . . . is to exhibit these differences to distinguish the principal types of correlation that are found in the behaviour of living beings. These will be found to range themselves under two great classes of the mechanical and the mental. Even if ultimate analysis should resolve one of these into the other or both into a more ultimate unity, within that unity the distinction would still hold (1901/1926, p. 10).
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> The first object then, as it seemed to me, was to show that mental evolution had in point of fact consisted in a development of consciousness from stage to stage in the manner supposed. To do this would require a very wide examination on the one hand of animal psychology, on the other of the growth of human thought and of social customs and traditions in which thought is embodied (1913/1927, p. xxv).

In 1911 Hobhouse summarized his conception of comparative psychology and its relationship to biology:

> . . . .suppose that the species that we chose is Man, and that we put the question in this way: as compared with the lowest organisms from which we assume him to have originated, what is Man? What distance has he traveled? What powers has he acquired? What is the nature of the changes which have brought this species to the birth? Are they changes of degree or changes which though continuous may yet be called changes of kind? What do they portend? Can we infer from the phases that have been passed through anything as to the future? Can we gain any insight into human potentialities? Can we learn anything of man's ultimate place in nature? It is clear that whatever else may be said of these questions they cannot be dismissed as lacking in interest. But for reasons of which we have seen something the biologist as such cannot answer them, and if he is wise does not meddle with them. But they suggest a way of treating

> evolutionary problems of which much more will be heard in the future than has been heard hitherto. They suggest the necessity of what I have called a formula of descriptive synthesis, the object of which is to measure the direction and the distance traversed in the evolution of man. By such a measure we arrive at an answer to the question, to put it in a common phrase, of what evolution amounts to. We assess its value. We are able to take a comprehensive and accurate view of what it has done, and we get a firm basis for measuring its further possibilities.
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> Now the sciences which deal with man from this point of view are two. The first is Comparative Psychology, the second is Sociology. The first is especially concerned with the genesis of the human mind as such. It seeks to determine the stages of development which lead from the first beginnings of psychic life to the emergence of human reason. It seeks for links to connect what at first sight may appear severed and even disparate, but if it is genuinely scientific, it proceeds without any attempt to slur over differences. In this manner it arrives at a true sense of the distance traveled by in the evolution of mind. It has a morphology, too, of its own. The forms in which it is interested are the forms of mental operation, and it seeks to arrange them in such a way as to show how the most elaborate are joined by a series of intermediaries with the most simple. These intermediate phases it finds both in the mind of man itself, where higher and lower operate together, and in various species of the animal world where as it descends the scale it finds the higher functions disappearing one after the other (1911/1968, pp. 115-117).

Comparative Psychology as Human Psychology

Hobhouse's comparative psychology was first and foremost a human psychology, concerned with identifying those aspects of human functioning that distinguish humans from nonhuman animals. These aspects and their characteristics, which prove to be mainly psychological and social, and which Hobhouse called Mind, are revealed through comparison of humans with nonhumans. But Hobhouse did not settle for differences alone. This could easily lead to dualism, and thereby once again to the idealism which he so vigorously resisted. A scientific—as opposed to metaphysical—account of mind must show how it has developed from lower forms of adaptation. It was this emphasis on development that allowed Hobhouse to account for the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity in the relationship between human and nonhuman animals. Hobhouse succeeded in his conception of development largely because he adopted the logic needed to support it, namely the Hegelian dialectic.

As an evolutionary approach to mind, Hobhouse's comparative psychology yielded a theory that was characterized by both stages and levels. Evolution was conceived as having passed through successive stages of which the more advanced was qualitatively distinct from the more primitive, yet quantitatively connected to it through a process of

development. The more primitive, however, is not lost in this process but is preserved so that a more advanced species represents within itself an organization of differing, but ordered levels of functioning.

By far the most important stage or level is that attained by the human species. This is a stage at which the very biological evolutionary process that produced it is transcended and replaced by a new process of change which Hobhouse identified with progress. It is marked by conscious self-determination and social cooperation. Human beings collectively change the world to suit their own developing needs and in so doing change themselves. They become, in a way only vaguely foreshadowed in the more advanced subhuman species, true subjects of their own history.

The course of human historical development is, however, fraught with many pitfalls. From time to time it works to the selfish advantage of certain segments of the human community to work for the arrest of development, to exploit and repress others. Knowledge is anathema to these exploiters and repressers, and therefore they promote ignorance and prejudice, especially about human capabilities and the possibilities of social development. For democratically-minded progressives and liberals it is precisely this knowledge which is the key to effectual collective action and meaningful self-determination, in short, to progress. And thus we return to the social-historical context and role of comparative psychology. It alone, as conceived by Hobhouse, can provide the correct understanding of human psychological functioning needed for the conscious direction of the collective process, and therefore for real historical progress.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. Hobhouse's arguments supporting this interesting claim, form a large part of *Democracy and Reaction* (1904). It would go beyond the scope of the present article to repeat or even to summarize them. For present purposes it will suffice to appeal to the common intuition that there is at least *some* connection between foreign policy and some of the more disagreeable aspects of life at home and that ideological control at home is often linked to justification of policies abroad.
2. It is important to note here that Hobhouse is not rejecting "struggle" or natural selection as the dynamic of *biological* evolution. He claims simply that these concepts are inadequate to explain *historical progress*. His attempt to find an alternative explanation represents a particularly transparent example of his tendency to lapse into philosophical idealism, which resulted from a lack of clarity regarding ontology. He understood progress to result from an inexorable increase in "harmony" brought about by the Mind's essential tendency to "bring things together." In short, he was much clearer—and more correct—about what did *not* account for progress.

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