

G. B. Grundy's 1917 proposal for political psychology:

"A science which has yet to be created"

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Abstract

G. B. Grundy (1861-1948) was an Oxford historian who proposed in 1917 that there should be a sub-discipline of history called "political psychology," which he defined as the psychology of men acting in masses. Such a science would have its greatest utility in preventing international wars that arise from mistaken beliefs about other peoples based on our mistaken beliefs about ourselves.

Introduction

The field of political psychology is usually conceived to be an interdisciplinary hybrid of psychology and political science. As shown in the following tabulations of “political psychology” articles and books in *PsycINFO*, it is also conceived to be a relatively new field of study:

YEARS	HITS
1881-1900:	0
1901-1920:	3
1921-1940:	8
1941-1960:	9
1961-1980:	37
1981-2000:	838

The purpose of this brief report is to disrupt these usual conceptions of political psychology by presenting an account from 1917 of G. B. Grundy’s proposal that political psychology be developed within the academic discipline of history.

George Beardoe Grundy (1861-1948) was an Oxford historian specialized in the military history of ancient Greece and Rome, with further scholarship on Saxon law and political culture. According to Grundy’s (1945) autobiography, he was born and raised in Cheshire, then a rural suburb of Liverpool. His family were of the “gentlemen class”, mostly priests, teachers, and merchants. He himself began teaching at age 16. At the relatively old age of 27, he entered Brasenose College, Oxford. In 1902, he was awarded Doctor of Letters. In 1903, he was elected Fellow and tutor of ancient history at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he served the remainder of his academic career.

Idea of Political Psychology

In January, 1917, at the height of World War I, Grundy published a proposal

entitled, "Political psychology: A science which has yet to be created." The opening paragraph argued thus:

"Those who are acquainted with history, and especially those who are by profession teachers of the subject, will recognize that this present War, and the circumstances which have preceded and accompanied it, have brought into prominence a new department of historical science, political psychology, the psychology, that is to say, not of the individual, but of men acting in masses. The mass may vary from a very small company of individuals to the millions of a modern nation"
(Grundy, 1917, p. 155).

National behavior, he argued, could be understood as the product of the inherited qualities and sentiments of human nature, further shaped by national education policies and by the unique circumstances of each nation's historical experiences.

He argued that many modern woes are caused by governments conceiving theories of political psychology for their own population, and then generalizing those to other nations. Thus, a government can engage in "*experiments of the most terrible nature on process of testing political theories which it believes to be sound*" (Gurndy, 1917, p. 158). For example, fearful nations feel the effects of fear on themselves and therefore misconceive that fear can be used to terrorize others into submission and into accepting peace at any price. Such faulty political psychology is likely in societies that have focussed education on sciences, to the neglect of humanities:

"Real-politik is science in its most ruthless form translated into political life. . . . But this real-politik is only an old friend who has masqueraded in the past under various aliases such as 'Might is Right' or 'the End justifies the Means' and so forth. Being criminal, he has a penchant for a change of name." (Grundy, 1917, p. 163).

Grundy would thus be opposed to a political psychology dominated by Popperian theory and quantitative methods, devoid of contact with the disciplines of the humanities:

“Is it really advisable from the point of view of the practical interests of the State that the ‘humanities’ should be thrust back into obscurity in the system of European education? They are the only educational means by which the national mind can be made to recognize the claims of foreigners abroad, and of minorities at home, to that sympathetic treatment without which each nation must live in a state of armed watchfulness against its neighbors outside and against oppressed elements within”
(Grundy, 1917, p. 163).

Grundy (1917, p. 170) closed his essay with the hope that political psychology would be able to decrease the frequency of wars waged out of ignorance of human psychology:

“Political psychology is, as has already been said, a science which has yet to be created. When it is established in something like a scientific form, not by the works of doctrinaire philosophers, but by compilation from the experience of those who are acquainted with the souls of their own and of other nations, there will be a good hope that those wars –and they are many– which are due to national and international ignorance may not in the future play the part which they have played in past history.”

Conclusion

Grundy’s 1917 proposal was far from the first consideration of political psychology. The expression “political psychology” had appeared in a *London Times* editorial in 1860, and in a *New York Times* book review in 1891. The first

conception of “political psychology” as an academic discipline probably should be credited to Adolf Bastian for his 1860 book *Der Mensch in der Geschichte* [*Man in History*], volume three of which was entitled, *Politische Psychologie* [*Political Psychology*]. Émile Boutmy (1901; 1902; 1904) was also writing on political psychology well before it became an academic topic in the English-speaking world.

Nevertheless, we would do well to heed Grundy’s 1917 argument that science itself may be a danger to political psychology, if the result is useful information that is amenable to the pragmatic practices of real-politik. Political psychology needs the moral tones and foreign perspectives found in history, literature, languages and the other humanities.

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