

# When prisoners take over the prison: A social psychology of resistance

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## Abstract

There is a general tendency for social psychologists to focus on processes of oppression rather than resistance. This is exemplified and entrenched by the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). Consequently, researchers and commentators have come to see domination, tyranny, and abuse as natural or inevitable in the world at large. Challenging this view, research suggests that where members of low-status groups are bound together by a sense of shared social identity this can be the basis for effective leadership and organization that allows them to counteract stress, secure support, challenge authority, and promote social change in even the most extreme of situations. This view is supported by a review of experimental research — notably the SPE and the BBC Prison Study — and case studies of rebellion against carceral regimes in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Nazi Germany. This evidence is used to develop a Social Identity Model of Resistance Dynamics.

## Keywords

social identity, self-categorization, prison, resistance, leadership

In what kind of prisons are prisoners in charge? How could such an eventuality become manifest? (Zimbardo, 2006, p.49)

The inmates seemed to be running the prison not the authorities. (Mandela, 1994, p.536)

## Introduction: Conformity Bias and the Dominance of Domination

A number of commentators have observed that, as it has evolved as a discipline, social psychology has become preoccupied with the psychology of oppression (Montenegro, 2004; Turner, 2006). There are good reasons for this, of course. Not the least of these is the fact that the last century was scarred by brutal systems of tyranny and repression that loom large in our collective consciousness (e.g., Hobsbawm, 1995) — the largest probably being that of the Holocaust.

Nevertheless, to fixate on processes of exploitation and abuse can risk losing sight of countervailing processes. It can lead to the dehumanization of those who suffered as mere victims, and it can imply blame of those who supposedly went meekly as lambs to slaughter. More seriously perhaps, to deny the possibility of resistance is to put the topic beyond the realm of scientific imagination. And, as we will see, this in turn may militate against the political ability of

people to challenge their oppressors. It is important, then, to recover and to analyze an alternative history of resistance which can be found in even the most oppressive and tyrannical of circumstances (Einwohner, 2007; Langbein, 1994).

The process of focusing on oppression rather than resistance can be seen as one particularly vivid example of what Moscovici (1976) referred to as social psychology's *conformity bias* — the tendency to generate theories and data which show only how the status quo is reproduced. Moscovici's specific interest was in the way that dominant models of social influence imply that the only possible outcome of influence processes is a consolidation of existing power structures in society. If this were the case, then innovation, creativity and progress would never occur. This is

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plainly absurd, and Moscovici's own work on minority influence (e.g., Moscovici, Lage & Naffrechoux, 1969) was designed to show when and how a coherent and consistent group can, over time, transform dominant social beliefs. Consistent with Foucault's (1990, p.94) assertion that "where there is [coercive] power there is resistance", Moscovici shows that power and influence do not only flow in one direction but instead are distributed in complex ways throughout any social system.

In setting out on the task of developing a social psychology of resistance, it is important to recognize from the outset that this term describes a very diverse range of behaviors, and hence has many different meanings in the social scientific literature. Nevertheless, we follow Hollander and Einwohner's (2004) comprehensive review (primarily of work in sociology, anthropology, and political science), which identifies *action* and *opposition* as core elements in previous treatments of this issue. More formally, we define resistance as *the process and action of challenging one's subordinated position in a given social system*.

We start our examination of this topic by examining the nature of conformity bias, using as an example the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). As one of social psychology's 'classic studies', this has played a dual role in framing psychological understandings of why people act hostilely and oppressively towards others. In the first instance, it has helped shift the analysis of oppression from the level of individual personality to the level of contextual (and, more specifically, group) influences. This is a shift that we strongly endorse. At the same time, though, the study has become synonymous with a negative view of groups in which people are seen to conform blindly to collective pressures that (almost) inevitably lead to oppression. This is a stance that we reject.

Following this, in the paper's second section we outline an alternative perspective on these issues derived from work in the social identity tradition. This rejects the association between group process and oppression by drawing attention to the fact that resistance and social change also have a collective basis. We also review evidence from another prison experiment — the BBC Prison Study (BPS; Reicher & Haslam, 2006a) — which provides empirical support for the predictions of the social identity approach. This indicates that even in a prison-like setting (which can be seen as an extreme metaphor for the inequalities that are characteristic of many, if not most, institutions)

prisoners can resist and even subvert the authority of their guards.

Yet as indicated by the quotation at the start of this paper, the BPS has elicited a strong reaction from the chief architect of the SPE — Philip Zimbardo. In particular, he asks how one can take seriously a study in which prisoners take over the prison: how could such events occur "in any real prison anywhere in the known universe" (2006, p.49)? In the paper's third section, we take this question seriously. Can we find prison settings in which inmates gain power over those who imprison them and, if so, can we identify any common patterns that explain such an outcome? We do this principally through three case studies: the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland; Robben Island in South Africa; and the Nazi extermination camp, Sobibor. The point of this examination, however, is not simply to learn about prisons. Rather, as implied in the reference to prison studies as 'an extreme metaphor', we seek to make the point that, if resistance is possible even in the most unfavorable and unequal of circumstances, then it should be possible anywhere. Moreover, the processes that make resistance possible in such circumstances should also prove capable of stimulating resistance in more favorable settings.

In the paper's fourth and final section we then pull together evidence from these various prison studies in order to elaborate a psychological model of resistance and to determine the conditions under which people are motivated to challenge their oppressors and thereby promote social change. We conclude that, however quiescent people might seem, the possibility of resistance is ever present. Yet rather than naturalizing resistance (in the way that psychologists have previously naturalized conformity) our scientific focus seeks instead to explore the factors which determine whether this (or conformity) predominates in any given social context.

## 1. Power and Resistance in the Stanford Prison Experiment

In February 1971 nine college students were arrested by members of the Palo Alto Police Department in California — five for burglary, four for armed robbery. They were then imprisoned in a simulated prison that had been created in the basement of the Stanford Psychology Department. The prisoners had not actually committed any offences but had volunteered to take part in a psychological study that came to be known as the

Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE; Haney, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973; see also Zimbardo, 1971, 2004, 2007).

In its first six days, five of the original prisoners had broken down and been released as a result of the humiliation, degradation and abuse that they had suffered at the hands of guards. At this point the study — which was scheduled to last two weeks — was called off due to concerns for the welfare of those who had been imprisoned. Significantly, though, the guards who had meted out this vicious punishment were, like the prisoners, simply ‘normal’ college students who had been randomly assigned to play a role as prisoners or guards in the study.

These findings are well known not only to students of psychology but also in the world at large. So too, are the claims of Zimbardo and his colleagues that the outcomes can be understood as a straightforward consequence of the assignment of participants to groups with distinct roles. On the one hand, this analysis argues that the prisoners’ subordinate role led to them becoming passive and disturbed — or, in Zimbardo’s more graphic language, “zombie-like in yielding to the whims of the ever-escalating guard-power” (2007, p.196). On the other hand, the guards are understood to have become oppressive and brutal “as a ‘natural’ consequence of being in the uniform of a ‘guard’ and asserting the power inherent in that role” (Haney, et al., 1973, p.12).

This analysis of the psychology of tyranny has come to particular prominence because, in the 40 years since the SPE was conducted, it has been used to explain a range of real-life cases of oppression. Most notably, Zimbardo has invoked the analysis of brutality in the SPE in order to explain the torture of Iraqi prisoners by US military police at Abu Ghraib Prison during the Iraq war — arguing that the “basic psychological dynamics ... are comparable in both” (2007, p.378). Furthermore, commitment to this analysis led him to testify in court on behalf of one of the soldiers accused of prisoner abuse since it led him to see the soldiers as “fine young men and women” (Zimbardo, 2007, p.324) who had — through little or no fault of their own — been brought low by the situation into which they were thrust.

Clearly, the practical impact of these issues renders the requirement for rigorous analysis and theoretical clarity extremely important. In seeking to provide this, we do not question the power of the SPE to confirm that ordinary people can be turned into oppressors (what Zimbardo, 2007, refers to as the ‘Lucifer effect’). What we do

question is the emphasis on conformity over resistance, and, still more, the inter-related notions that conformity is natural and inevitable and that resistance is unnatural and unthinkable.

Our stance is lent initial support by the fact that the SPE is itself replete with examples of resistance. Thus, in the first phase of the study during which the participants were “adjusting to their roles”, the prisoners challenged the guards, refused to obey their orders, and mocked their authority (Zimbardo, 2007, p.54). At the start of the study this meant that the prisoners were ascendant.

Things then started to escalate once the guards reacted by clamping down on misbehaviour. At this point the prisoners became angered and frustrated and started to formulate concrete plans for rebellion. They began by displaying signs of insubordination — complaining about their conditions, swearing at the guards, and refusing to follow their orders. This culminated in the occupants of two cells removing their caps and prison numbers and barricading themselves in their cell. As one cried out in a rallying call to his fellow prisoners: “the time has come for violent revolution!” (Zimbardo, 2007, p.61).

The processes through which this rebellion was crushed are unclear. What is apparent, however, is that, in his role as prison superintendent, Zimbardo had a key part to play — in particular, by recruiting one rebel to act as a ‘snitch’ and offering him preferential treatment for informing on his fellow prisoners. On top of this, the rebel in question came away from his meeting with Zimbardo with the belief that it was no longer possible to leave the prison. Accordingly, he returned to his fellow prisoners exclaiming “You can’t get out of here!” As Zimbardo recounts, this had a “transformational impact on the prisoners” — crushing their collective will and consolidating the power of the guards (2007, p.71). After this, some prisoners continued to resist the guards but their resistance was ineffective because it was not collective.

Yet resistance in the SPE was not confined to the prisoners. Indeed, among the guards relatively few appear to have conformed straightforwardly to role. Thus although “about a third” of the guards “became tyrannical in their arbitrary use of power” (1971, p.154), among the remaining guards (the majority), some strove to be “tough but fair” while others endeavoured to be “good guards”, being friendly to the prisoners and doing them small favours. Nevertheless, in formal accounts (e.g., Zimbardo, 1989, 2007), it is a single brutal guard

who stands out — an individual who, because of his swagger and drawl is dubbed ‘John Wayne’. Yet even in this case, it is apparent that the guard is no mere cipher who acts automatically (Haslam & Reicher, 2007b). In an interaction with one of his victims after the study (which appears in the film of the SPE, *Quiet Rage*, Zimbardo, 2007), the latter thus reproaches him primarily for the *creative* ways in which he tormented those in his charge. When ‘John Wayne’ asks the prisoner what he would have done had he been a guard, the prisoner replies “I don’t know. But I don’t think I would have been so *inventive*. I don’t think I would have applied as much *imagination* to what I was doing.”

Given that ‘John Wayne’ is in the minority, one might ask why other guards appear to have condoned, or at least not challenged, his behavior. Again, one answer is provided by examination of Zimbardo’s own actions — since he can be seen to have established norms that legitimated brutality (Banyard, 2007). Thus, although Zimbardo (2004, p.39) states that participants in the study received no training in their roles, it is apparent that, when briefing his guards, he gave rather strong indications as to how they should behave:

We can create in the prisoners feelings of boredom, a sense of fear to some degree, we can create a notion of arbitrariness that their life is totally controlled by us, by the system, you, me .... they’ll have no freedom of action, they can do nothing, or say nothing that we don’t permit, we’re going to take away their individuality in various ways. In general what all this leads to is a sense of powerlessness. (Zimbardo, 2007, p.55)

To the extent that there is conformity to group norms, then, it is hard to ignore the role of Zimbardo’s *leadership* in establishing and policing those norms. Moreover, this provides additional cause to doubt the claim that people adapted ‘naturally’ to role requirements (Reicher & Haslam, 2006a).

In the SPE, it thus appears that a one-sided emphasis on conformity and oppression provides only a very partial view of proceedings (Krueger & Funder, 2004). What is more, a theoretical stance that portrays conformity as inevitable stops us probing more deeply to inquire *when* people accept the status quo and *when* they challenge it. Moreover, while Zimbardo’s analysis blames the descent into tyranny on people’s membership of social groups (and the conformity to role that these induce), the SPE also provides evidence that collectivity is as important in *challenging* oppression as in generating it.

In one sense of course, there is nothing particularly surprising in all this, especially if one looks to the world outside psychology. After all, the idea that the power of the powerless comes through their combination is a commonplace of many social movements. But that still leaves us in need of an understanding of the antecedents and consequences of group action. For that, we turn to social identity theory.

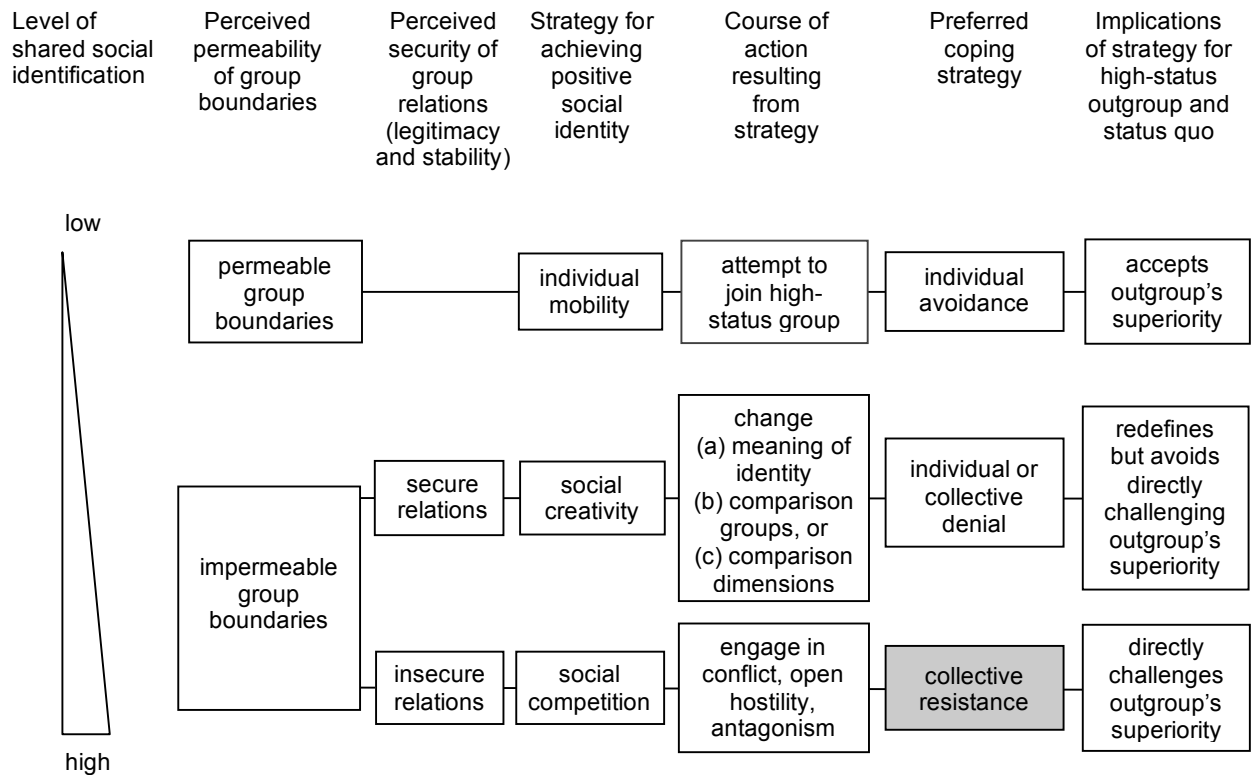
## 2. Social Identity, Collective Resistance, and the BBC Prison Study

### *Social identity theory*

Social identity theory is informed by two general assumptions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The first is that people can define themselves, and act, either as individuals (in terms of personal identity; Turner, 1982) or as members of social groups (in terms of social identity). The second is that, however they define themselves, people are motivated to have a positive and distinct self-concept. Putting these points together, the theory posits that, when a given social identity is salient, people strive to see their ingroup as different from, and superior to, other relevant outgroups.

Yet however much we may wish to define ingroups as superior, it is evident that we live in a world where many (possibly most) people belong to groups that are defined as inferior. Women have to live in a sexist world, black people in a racist world, gay people in a homophobic world, older adults in an ageist world, and so on. A key issue, then, is how people deal with such realities. When do they work individually to accommodate to existing conditions and when do they act together to alter those conditions? In other words, how do psychological processes of differentiation play out in an unequal world (Israel & Tajfel, 1972)?

In contrast to many accounts, then, social identity theory is ultimately oriented to the conditions collective action and social change. Although Tajfel died in 1982, shortly after developing this focus — and while, as a result, the theory cannot be considered a finished account of change dynamics — it does point to two sets of factors that are critical to understanding how subordinate group members react to their position (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see Figure 1 for a schematic representation of the model). The first relates to individuals’ beliefs about their ability to improve their status despite their group membership (i.e., the perceived *permeability* of category boundaries).



**Figure 1.** Schematic representation of the relationship between perceived social structure, strategies for self-enhancement and preferred coping strategies for members of low-status groups, as predicted by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the Integrated Social Identity Model of Stress (ISIS; Haslam & Reicher, 2006, p.1039)

A belief that such improvement is possible (because boundaries are permeable) encourages strategies of individual mobility (i.e., those that advance personal identity), but a belief that such movement is impossible (because boundaries are impermeable) encourages people to perceive themselves, and act, as group members in terms of a shared *social identity* (Tajfel, 1972).

Even if boundaries are seen to be impermeable, though, whether or not individuals work together to challenge inequality is still contingent upon a second factor: the perceived *security* of intergroup relations. This itself is comprised of two further elements: the perceived *legitimacy* of intergroup inequalities and their perceived *stability*. When relations are perceived to be insecure individuals are aware of *cognitive alternatives* to the status quo and hence can envisage specific ways in which it could be changed. Accordingly, it is predicted that individuals will be most inclined to work together to resist domination when they share

the view that inequality is both illegitimate and unstable and these views generate an envisaged set of cognitive alternatives.

This theoretical framework clearly endorses and extends the turn to a group-level explanation of oppression and conflict encouraged by the SPE (e.g., Zimbardo, 2007). However, it departs from standard interpretations of this study in two fundamental ways. First, it challenges the notion that people accept social positions and roles automatically, unthinkingly, and helplessly. There is, then, a critical difference between the social categories assumed by an observer or imposed by an outsider and the social *self-categories* through which participants understand themselves (Turner, 1982; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). It is one thing, for instance, to label someone a woman (or a black person, or a Catholic, or whatever) and quite another for that someone to think of herself, and act, in terms of her gender. A

basic ambition of social identity theory is precisely to understand when people assume collective identities and act together in terms of these identities. Moreover, it is suggested that when they do, it is because it is meaningful and productive to do so.

The second fundamental difference between approaches is that the focus of social identity theory extends beyond a consideration of when people accept existing power relations to also examine how people collectively resist and challenge the status quo. For a social identity theorist interested in gender, this might involve examining how women, through shared identification, come to challenge gender inequality rather than merely fit into their subordinate place (e.g., Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996; Schmitt, Branscombe & Postmes, 2003; Schmitt, Ellemers, & Branscombe, 2003). Alternatively, in a prison context, researchers might be interested in how prisoners could come together through their mutual identification in order to challenge the authority of guards rather than succumb to it. In this way, rather than seeing group members as slaves to circumstance (or “the system”; Zimbardo, 2007), the theory examines the way in which shared group membership allows people to exercise collective agency and, through this, to shape their own circumstances (Reicher & Haslam, 2006b).

There is by now a substantial empirical literature which addresses and supports the predictions of social identity theory. In particular, this work demonstrates the importance of permeability and security in both (a) contributing to a sense of shared social identity amongst members of low-status groups and (b) enhancing their willingness to engage in strategies of social competition and protest that challenge the authority of high-status groups (e.g., Ellemers, 1993; Ellemers, van Knippenberg & Wilke, 1990; Ellemers, Wilke & van Knippenberg, 1993; Wright, Taylor & Moghaddam, 1990; see also Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996; Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Significantly, though — in common with other areas of social psychological enquiry (Haslam & McGarty, 2001; Levine, 2003) — most of this work has involved experimental studies in which there is limited interaction between participants and little opportunity for the development of a sense of group history. As a result, although such work has provided insights into processes of resistance, and although it has served to confirm specific predictions of the social identity analysis,

it lacks the scale and drama of social psychology’s classic field studies. The outcomes that are studied — characteristically self-report measures of past behavior or future intentions — pale into insignificance alongside video footage of ‘John Wayne’ humiliating prisoners in the SPE and of a prisoner screaming in anger and frustration (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007). Moreover, this is one reason, we would suggest, why conceptual claims made in accounts of the classic studies continue to be reproduced despite their many problems (Haslam, in press). It was therefore with a view to generating equally vivid evidence with which to challenge these claims that, in late 2002, we undertook the BBC Prison Study (BPS; Reicher & Haslam, 2006a; see also Haslam & Reicher, 2006a; 2007a). Like the SPE, this was an experimental field study in which men were divided into groups as prisoners and guards and placed within a simulated prison environment for an extended period.

### *The BBC Prison Study (BPS)*

While the aim of the BPS was to revisit the questions raised by Zimbardo’s SPE, it was not an attempt to replicate it. In particular, this was because the study incorporated several procedural features that departed from those of the SPE. On the one hand, as experimenters we were careful not to take a leadership role and tell the guards how they should behave. On the other hand, we designed a series of interventions, based on the predictions of social identity theory, in order to investigate the conditions under which prisoners would either adapt to or challenge the inequalities of the prison system. This involved, first, manipulating the permeability of group boundaries by initially allowing, but then eliminating, opportunities for promotion from prisoner to guard (e.g., along lines suggested by Ellemers, van Knippenberg, De Vries & Wilke, 1988; Ellemers, et al., 1990; Wright et al., 1990). Second, it involved the introduction of a trades unionist whose political perspective was expected to lead him to perceive the guards’ regime as both illegitimate and changeable, thereby increasing the prisoners’ sense of cognitive alternatives (see Reicher & Haslam, 2006a, for details).

The findings of the BPS differed markedly from those of the SPE. In the first instance, there was no evidence that the guards took on their role naturally or uncritically. On the contrary, several were troubled by the power they had been given and were reluctant to exercise authority.

Uncomfortable with their task, the guards disagreed amongst each other about how this role should be interpreted and, as a result, they never developed a shared sense of social identity. This in turn led to a lack of organization amongst the guards and meant that they became increasingly incapable of maintaining order. It also led them to become increasingly despondent, stressed, and burnt-out (see Haslam & Reicher, 2006a, 2006b; Reicher & Haslam, 2006a).

Set against this, the behavior of prisoners was highly consistent with predictions, but again quite different from that observed in the SPE. Specifically, when boundaries between the groups were permeable, the prisoners adopted individual strategies for dealing with the guards and with the privations associated with their low status. These were experienced most keenly in their cramped living space, restriction of movement, poor quality food, and lack of privileges (most particularly, being unable to smoke). This meant that some prisoners were hostile, some adopted a stance of detached indifference, and some worked hard to improve their situation in the hope of gaining promotion. However, once boundaries were rendered impermeable and as prisoners became aware of cognitive alternatives to the status quo, they came to define themselves more in terms of a shared social identity and began to develop collective strategies for undermining and challenging the guards — working together to exploit the cracks that were emerging in their regime. Moreover, as it developed, this shared identity among the prisoners led to predicted improvements in their organization, effectiveness and mental well-being (Haslam & Reicher, 2006a, 2006b; Reicher & Haslam, 2006a).

Yet the most dramatic departure from the SPE came as these distinct trajectories of guards and prisoners co-evolved. Rather than the scenes of guard brutality witnessed in Stanford, the prisoners began to mock, challenge, and undermine the guards. The divided and incoherent response of the guards to these acts (several of whom were reluctant to impose their authority) only emboldened the prisoners to escalate their challenges. This came to a head on the Day 6 of the study when the prisoners of one cell organized a breakout that led to an occupation of the guards' quarters. The prisoners' refusal to leave then precipitated the collapse of the prisoner-guard structure.

Significantly, then, there was no descent into tyranny in this first phase of the study since (a) the guards did not identify with their roles, (b) a lack

of shared identity meant that the guards' position had become neither consensual nor extreme, and (c) there was no leadership on the part of experimenters that might legitimate oppression. Instead, it was the prisoners who gained the upper hand because (a) changes to the social structure led them to define themselves in terms of shared identity, (b) their position of defiance was strengthened through group-based interaction, and (c) an emergent leadership served to promote and justify acts which challenged the guards' regime and ultimately led to its downfall (see Haslam & Reicher, 2007b, for details).

The importance of these factors was further illustrated by what happened after the guards' regime collapsed. At this point a group of former prisoners and guards set about the process of reinstating the guard-prisoner regime along more authoritarian lines, in a manner much closer to that which was witnessed in the SPE. However, in contrast to the earlier guard administration, this authoritarian turn only came about once (a) events had led the "new guards" to identify highly with their role, (b) the will of the new guards had been galvanized through social interaction, and (c) the case for a new leadership had been made stronger by the collapse of the self-governing "Commune" that had been created in the wake of the earlier prisoner revolt (see Haslam & Reicher 2007b; Reicher & Haslam, 2006a).

Thus in contrast to the idea that tyranny is a 'natural' outcome of situations in which normal people are assigned to roles which give them power over others, findings from the BPS (and other related work; e.g., see Turner, 2006), suggest a very different analysis. First, they suggest that individuals will only move towards tyranny when they identify with their roles. Second, they suggest that this sense of identification needs to be developed and shared with other ingroup members, and reinforced through group interaction. Third, they suggest that the case for tyranny needs to be promoted by means of active leadership which is grounded in shared identity and which promotes a particular vision of the way in which interests associated with that identity need to be advanced in context (Reicher et al., 2005).

Significantly, though, the BPS makes it clear that the very same processes that allow those in positions of responsibility to oppress others can also be the means whereby those in subordinate positions engage in activities that challenge (and have the potential to change) the prevailing power structure (Turner, 2005; see also Simon & Oakes, 2006). In short, shared social identity can be a

basis for tyranny, but it can also be a basis for resistance — a point that accords with a large body of research into different forms of protest behavior (e.g., Kelly & Kelly, 1991, 1994; Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996; Reicher, 1984; 2004; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Reynolds, Oakes, Haslam, Nolan, & Dolnik, 2000; Veenstra & Haslam, 2000). In his commentary on the study, Turner (2006) summarizes the contrast between this conclusion and the conformity bias perspective:

Instead of a picture in which a universal human nature seems to be at work — ‘provide the role identity and they will conform’ — a much more interesting theoretical question emerges .... under what conditions and how do groups with apparently little authority, power, resources or status come to redefine their position as illegitimate and create from nothing the social and political power that allows them to exert their collective will and change the system? (p.42).

### *Social identity processes and prison realities*

As the extract at the start of this paper indicates, Zimbardo’s response to the BPS has been unenthusiastic. In particular, he contends that the BPS failed to create prison-like conditions and that these deficiencies of operationalization not only explain why its findings were different from those of the SPE but also render the study pointless. In one sense, this criticism is well-founded. Of course our study did not recreate a real prison (and, as several commentators have pointed out, neither did the SPE; e.g., see Banuazizi & Movahedi, 1975; Saletan, 2004). People do not volunteer to go to prisons, prisoners do not get promoted to guards, and they cannot leave simply because they want to. However, in setting up the BPS our intention was not to create a real prison. Instead, the aim was to use the physical structure of a prison in order to establish and make salient a situation of meaningful inequality between groups. Our ambition was then to use this in order to gain conceptual understanding of how people respond to such inequalities. It is therefore at this conceptual level that we would then seek to generalize our findings (Calder, Phillips & Tybout, 1983; Haslam & McGarty, 2004; Turner, 1981). Our analysis of process, if valid, should then be applicable to all situations of inequality, whether in civil society, in the work place, or anywhere else (Haslam & Reicher, 2006c) — in exactly the same way that Zimbardo’s analysis of the way that situation subverts character should, if valid, apply in multiple settings.

In this sense, the applicability of our findings to prisons should not be privileged above their applicability elsewhere, but nor should it be ignored. Our analysis should be as relevant to prisons as to any other domain of inequality. If it is not — if prisoner resistance and prisoner dominance can be found nowhere in the known universe — then, at the very least, it suggests a serious limitation to the social identity analysis.

In these terms, Zimbardo’s challenge is therefore both valid and meaningful. Indeed, there is a sense in which the issue of prison resistance provides a stringent test case for social identity analyses. For if we can demonstrate that successful resistance is possible even in the most repressive institutions then we can conclude that it must be possible anywhere. Moreover, if we can show that the factors identified by a social identity analysis explain how such resistance becomes manifest then it provides strong support for the value of this analysis.

### **3. Three Case Studies of Prison Resistance**

We can state from the outset that effective prisoner resistance — even prisoner dominance — does exist. Indeed, there are a plethora of examples in the literature. This is especially true if one uses a broad definition of prisoner resistance as “characterized by purpose, either implicit or explicit, manifesting itself in opposition, or taunting, undermining and attacking the exercise of power” (McEvoy, McConnachie, & Jamieson, 2007, p.307; see also Crewe, 2007; Foucault, 1986; Pile, 1997). As McEvoy and colleagues (2007) note, such resistance can take many forms depending on circumstances, opportunity, and motivation. These include (a) the creation of alternative communities and cultures, (b) attempts to escape, (c) prolonged legal challenge, (d) hunger strike and other forms of self-harm, and (e) violence and rioting. Indeed, in light of the breadth of these activities, it would be hard to find an example of a prison which has not, at one point or another, witnessed some form of resistance that threatens the institutional power of authorities<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> In English and Welsh prisons there were 95 successful escapes and 108,400 proven disciplinary offences in 2002 (in a population of 66,503 prisoners; Councell & Olagundoye, 2003). In Scotland in 2003 there were 8 escapes, and 20,029 disciplinary offences — including 8,090 instances of disobeying a rule or order (in a population of 6,227 prisoners; Scottish Executive,



But one might object that such a definition of resistance is too broad and that challenging the system is not the same as taking over the system. But even using a stricter criterion, instances come easily to hand. The prison farm of Pavón, Guatemala, provides a notorious example of a penal institution which, over a 20-year period from the mid-1980s onward, moved from being a state-controlled penitentiary to being a self-managed “republic” run by an internal “order committee” comprised of hardened criminals. This was the result of a formal pact between the authorities and key inmate groups (led by powerful druglords), in which the authorities agreed not to interfere in the prison’s running, so long as inmates did not escape. Ultimately this meant that:

Inmates with money had access to plush homes, restaurants, whirlpool baths, prostitutes, cocaine and high-speed internet access, all contained within the wire-fence perimeter. Those of modest means were condemned to squalid dormitories and indentured labour in crack cocaine and marijuana laboratories. (Carroll, 2006, p.19).

Those who angered the “order committee” of inmates who ran the prison faced beatings and banishment to a punishment block known as the “North Pole”. According to the director of penal service, Alejandro Giammattei, some were forced to hand over wives and daughters to the committee as concubines: “It was a state within a state, one without sentiment or scruples” (Carroll, 2006, p.19).

But inmate control is not limited to developing countries. In US prisons, it is not uncommon for criminal groups and gangs to work as effectively within the prison system as they do outside it (e.g., Wood, 2006). Indeed, Barak-Glanz (1981) identifies “inmate control” as one of the four main models of prison management and notes that this commonly occurs when authorities (wholly or partially) surrender responsibility to gangs and other criminal groups (Dumond, 2003; Prison Reform Trust, 2005). This point was recently

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2004). Comparable statistics are not kept in other countries but studies suggest that instances of prisoners displaying “challenging behavior” are far from uncommon. For example, Naylor (2002) notes that in a representative sample of five Australian prisons, 10.7% of prisoners faced a governor’s hearing for disciplinary breaches within a one-month period in 2001. Likewise, a study by McClellan (1994) indicated that in Texas in the early 1990s 57% of male inmates had been reported for disciplinary offences and that prison authorities found many rules impossible to enforce.

confirmed in a major review of 34 US state prisons commissioned by the humanitarian organization, Human Rights Watch. This concluded:

Formally at least, prisoners are not supposed to be able to exercise power over each other. The reality, however, is that in most prisons, even those where correctional authorities make a reasonable effort to maintain control of their charges, an inmate hierarchy exists by which certain prisoners enjoy a great deal of power.... This power imbalance is of course much more marked in prisons where the authorities have ceded effective control to the inmate population, an all too common occurrence. (Mariner, 2001, pp.83-84)

As one prisoner cited in the report put it: “Prisoners pretty much run the prison system inside the walls. The guards don’t care and just want to make it through the day” (Mariner, 2001, p.169).

If our aim were simply to document the occurrence of resistance, then, we could stop here — noting from the examples already provided that it is important not to place a generic evaluative label on resistance (Bosworth & Carrabine, 2001; see also Shaw, 2003). Challenging and replacing an unequal system can be good or bad depending upon whether it is superseded by a more or less repressive regime. However, as noted above, we also wish to gain insight into the processes that produce resistance. For that reason we need to look in more detail at specific cases of resistance.

In this regard, our choice of cases is based on three criteria:

1. *Social significance*. In each case the prison system we will examine assumed considerable importance in the broader society. Moreover, what happened in the prison had implications for what happened in the society at large;
2. *Diversity*. We will examine prison systems in different countries with different social and political systems;
3. *Availability of authoritative source information*. We will examine instances that are extensively documented in respected sources and where the nature of available information has the potential to inform theoretical understanding by pointing to the operation of relevant social psychological processes.

### *Case 1. The Maze, Northern Ireland (1972-1994)*

Located nine miles outside Belfast, the Maze prison — and in particular the eight ‘H-blocks’ at its heart — came to prominence in the mid 1970s

as a focal point of ongoing conflict between British authorities and Irish republicans. Initially known as Long Kesh detention centre, the prison was established in 1971 following the outbreak of “the troubles” and the introduction by the British government of a policy of internment (i.e., imprisonment without trial) for individuals suspected of being involved in paramilitary activity. By 1975 nearly 2,000 prisoners had been interred and of these 95% were Catholic — the vast majority being members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Consistent with the policy of internment, initially the British government had granted these prisoners, and other paramilitary members who were subsequently convicted of criminal charges related to acts of terrorism, “Special Category Status” (SCS). This accorded the prisoners privileges consonant with their being, in effect, prisoners of war (e.g., according them the right to not wear prison uniforms or do prison work, allowing extra visits and food parcels). However, in 1976 the British government withdrew SCS and turned the detention centre into a regular prison, seeking to treat paramilitary detainees as ‘common criminals’ and refusing to recognize their claims to be political prisoners. This sparked a series of ongoing protests that galvanized both the prisoners and the Catholic community outside the prison, and which set in train a process that completely transformed the political landscape of Northern Ireland.

The dissent of republican prisoners began in 1976 as ‘blanket protests’ in which — pursuant of the right not to wear prison uniform — prisoners wore nothing other than their prison sheets and blankets. As Campbell, McKeown and O’Hagen (1994) note, the defining feature of the prison at this point was “the solidarity and commitment of prisoners and their determination that neither they nor the libertarian struggle were ever to be criminalized” (p.2). Aside from the discomfort involved, these acts of defiance exposed the prisoners to physical retribution from the authorities. In the words of one inmate, Jackie McMullan:

Brutality was the order of the day. All the prisoners in the Block were under 21, a lot of them only 17 or 18, and the screws [prison officers] took great delight in bullying and terrorizing us all. There were numerous rules that were enforced through fear and beatings.... We weren’t allowed to smoke. I’ve often thought this is one of the most cruel aspects of prison: denying people cigarettes. I know what its like to crave for a smoke for weeks on end, to be able to think of little

else. It’s torture.... The screws had power, and like the bullies they are, they abused it to the full (Campbell et al., 1994, pp.9-10)

Yet this oppression notwithstanding, when the prison officers refused to allow the prisoners more than one towel when going to wash, resistance escalated into ‘dirty protests’. The prisoners refused to go to the washrooms where toilets were located. Instead they smeared the walls of their cells with their own urine and excrement. Although this brought with it additional threats to the prisoners’ well-being in the form of serious illness (as well as a loss of rights, privileges and remission, thereby effectively doubling their sentences), this phase of the protest created a new sense of purpose and empowerment as “increasingly ... they began to use their bodies as practical and symbolic subjects of their resistance to criminalization” (McEvoy, 2001, p.83; see also Foucault, 1979). In the words of one inmate, Jaz McCann:

Morale was sky-high. We felt that we were winning and for a change we, not the screws, had control over our lives and were dictating the pace of events. The screws for their part were demoralized because they had no control over what happened next. They dreaded Mondays because that was the day that we kept upping the tempo of the protest by introducing something new. (Campbell et al., 1994, p.32)

Significantly too, this phase of protest had a polarizing impact outside the prison. For while loyalist groups and government representatives saw the protest as bestial and degraded (Robinson, 1980), the protesters themselves were encouraged by growing support from sections of the Catholic community that had now started to stage mass rallies of support.

Within the H-Blocks too, the prisoners became more organized. Two features of the prison were particularly indicative of this. First, Gaelic (Irish language) classes were organized thereby enabling prisoners to learn a language that was both symbolic of their struggle and a means of resistance:

It [learning Gaelic] became a weapon in our hands to use against the screws. They hadn’t a clue what we were saying and this really got to them. It helped to isolate them. (Campbell et al., 1994, p.48)

Second, a clear leadership structure started to emerge among prisoners and became a source of particular concern for the authorities (McEvoy, 2001, pp.86-87). In an attempt to weaken the impact of this leadership, the authorities decided to move all its members into the same block — H6.

However, this proved counter-productive since, once placed together, the republican leaders were now in a position to organize and plan even more effective means of protest. As Beresford (1994) explains: "It was the equivalent, in prison terms, of setting up an officer's training academy, and the men... set about developing a philosophical and strategic approach — including a refined training course for prisoners" (p.29)

The authorities soon realized their mistake and dispersed the leadership amongst different Blocks. But by then it was too late. The enhanced organization was a basis for two events that are amongst the most significant in British penal history. The first of these were two hunger strikes staged in 1980 and 1981 with the attention of putting yet more pressure on the British government to recognize prisoners' political status. The 1980 strike was called off after it appeared that the government had conceded to the prisoners' demands (McEvoy, 2001, p.92). However, when the government reneged on the concessions that had been agreed, a second commenced six months later on March 1, 1981<sup>4</sup>. The strike was led by the IRA's commanding officer, Bobby Sands, who, 40 days after going on strike, was elected MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, thereby bringing the Maze to worldwide media attention and piling yet more pressure onto the government. This was heightened still further when Sands died without taking his seat in parliament and his funeral was attended by over 100,000 mourners.

In many ways the hunger strikes can be seen as the most powerful statement of the social identity that the republican prisoners shared — embodying their willingness to promote the collective cause to the total exclusion of personal interests (in the same way that their terrorism valued republican objectives over the lives of individual victims). Although a further nine prisoners died in the hunger strikes, the British government never formally acceded to their claims and neither side was able to claim a clear victory. Nevertheless, the

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that these protests were organized along sectarian lines. Thus alongside the first republican hunger strike, several loyalist (i.e., Protestant) prisoners also mounted a 'clean' protest in which they too argued for recognition as political prisoners. Anxious to differentiate themselves from the republicans, this involved them refusing to wear prison uniform, but keeping their cells spotless. However, after five months, these strikes were called off by loyalist leaders outside the prison as it was felt that the strikes bore too close a resemblance to those of the republicans (see McEvoy, 2001, pp.100-101).

government did grant several key concessions to the prisoners. In particular, it allowed them to wear their own clothes and gave them greater freedom of association (McEvoy, 2001, p.97). Moreover, the hunger strikes marked a significant turning point in the power relations between prisoners and prison officers as it allowed the republicans "to expropriate power, denigrate legitimacy and politically contest the position of an intransigent British government" (McEvoy, 2001, p.106). In practical terms this also meant that now:

The prisoners ... effectively controlled the space within their compounds at Long Kesh. They were able to drill, to hold military and political lectures, and effectively to exclude prison officers and soldiers for large parts of the prison day. Such places allowed prisoners to "rework and divert space to other ends" (Pile, 1997, p.16), to create sites of resistance. (McEvoy, 2001, p.130)

As one prison officer observed: "They had the cell, then they had the landing, then they had the hall" (McEvoy, 2001, p.131).

The increasing self-assurance of the prisoners was also mirrored by a marked reduction in the confidence and morale of the prison staff — associated with an expansion in their duties, higher levels of accountability (brought about by increased media awareness, and shifts towards a more managerialist and bureaucratic system of prison management; see McEvoy, 2001, pp.203, 248-313), and difficulties of recruitment. McEvoy (2001, p.193) draws on a description by Philliber (1997) in characterizing prison officers at the time as "alienated, cynical, burnt out, stressed but unable to admit it, suffering from role conflict of every kind and stressed beyond imagining". Somewhat more colorfully, one prison officer described the Maze as "like Butlin's<sup>5</sup> and we're the bloody red-coats" (Ryder, 2001, p.336).

As Ryder (2001) notes, this state of affairs meant that "there was endless opportunity for the dangerously subversive terrorist prisoner population to seek to undermine, manipulate and intimidate the prison staff for their own ends, a proposition all the more damaging because so many of the prison staff were inexperienced" (p.267). This subversion also now manifested itself in more sophisticated and creative forms than it

<sup>5</sup> Butlins is well-known as a chain of family holiday camps with multiple sites around the UK. Its famed red-coats are responsible for entertaining holidaymakers and organizing recreational activities.

had previously — as the prisoners started resorting to ‘mind games’ rather than outright conflict in order to weaken the guards:

The tactics ... included friendliness to officers, reasonableness of demands and willingness to compromise, physical isolation of prison staff, changeability, good prisoner/bad prisoner routines, creating and exploiting divergences both between management levels and at different locations in the prison.... [in order to] ‘play staff off’ against one another. (McEvoy, 2001, p.132, 134)

In stark opposition to the earlier state of affairs in which the prison officers were brutalizing the prisoners, now it was the prisoners who were ‘conditioning’ the guards. Commenting retrospectively on this period, the prison governor recalled “times when an officer would call me up and he was under so much pressure that I thought this is actually a prisoner I am talking to” (McEvoy, 2001, p.134).

One consequence of the new confidence with which the prisoners were able to organize themselves was the second major event for which the Maze is well-known: the escape of 38 prisoners in September 1983 — the largest ever escape of prisoners from a British prison. The series of formal enquiries that followed this and another foiled escape plan 14 years later, all pointed to the role that the prisoners’ management of prison staff through the process of ‘conditioning’ had played in facilitating this escape and in contributing to the general inability of prison staff to maintain order in the Maze (e.g., see McEvoy, 2001, pp.132-133). Indeed, as the parliamentary record attests, by the 1990s it was widely recognized that the prison was no longer under the authorities’ complete control:

Attempts to treat prisoners as individuals in the Maze have largely been foiled as the prisoners regard themselves as prisoners of war. That has created a different ethos with regard to prisoners’ behavior. They enjoy the support of significant sections of the community, which places prison officers under immense pressure when trying to maintain order. In 1994, the management decided to withdraw staff from patrolling duties in the residential areas of the wings because officers were effectively hostages, unable to enforce orders against the will of organised prisoner groups. (Hansard, 27 Jan 2000, Column 112WH)

An indication of the degree to which various parts of the prison had become a ‘no-go area’ for prison staff was that when the tunnel that was central to the 1997 escape plan was discovered, two prisoners’ cells were found packed to the ceiling

with 25 tonnes of rubble and soil (Ryder, 2001). At this time an enquiry commissioned by the Northern Ireland Office concluded frankly that “prison rules were no longer operative, or were respected only when it suited the prisoners to do so” (Ramsbotham, 1998; cited in Ryder, 2001, p.326). Reports at the time also indicated that “staff were demoralized and considered themselves no more than ‘gophers’ for the inmates” (Milne, 1998, p.2).

This change in power dynamics also reflected the fact that, outside the Maze, the hunger strikes had proved to be a major turning point. Internationally, the British government was widely criticized for its intransigence and, growing in confidence, the republican movement began to shift away from a strategy of violence towards one of political engagement. This was marked by the emergence of Sinn Fein as a major political force, with several former Maze prisoners — including Gerry Adams — at the core of its leadership. As the peace process gathered steam with the 1994 and 1996 ceasefires, it also became clear that resolution of conflict in Northern Ireland required a major rethink of relations between the British government and both republican and loyalist constituencies. This led not only to the release of all paramilitary prisoners under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, but also to a referendum, a subsequent redrawing of the constitution, and the creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It also led to the closure of the Maze in 2000 and to its demolition in 2006. Significantly, though, one of the H-blocks was preserved in recognition of the prison’s status as a site of cultural and historical significance.

As both the focal point and instigators of many of these changes, prisoners from the Maze have been at the heart of all these developments (e.g., see McEvoy, 2001, pp.314-353). Although their collective resistance was enormously controversial, it is clear that it succeeded not only in transforming power dynamics within the prison, but also contributed to changing those outside it.

Nevertheless, it might be argued that this interaction between the prison regime and the wider society places limits on the utility of our analysis. For all its shortcomings (especially in Northern Ireland), Britain remains a liberal-democratic system in which the state has to be responsive to majority public opinion and in which the rights and well-being of all, including prisoners, have to be respected. Prisoners in the Maze were well aware of this. They were able to use democratic sensibilities and democratic

elections to delegitimize the state and advance their case. By contrast, there were clear limits to how the state was able to respond. Perhaps prison resistance would be less possible in a more unequal society with a more tyrannical regime and with less concern for its population (or at least for certain sections of its population)? To explore this possibility we turn to the case of South Africa under Apartheid.

### *Case 2. Robben Island, South Africa (1962-1991)*

Robben Island is located in Table Bay, 7.5 miles (12 km) off the coast from Cape Town, South Africa, and was a site of banishment and imprisonment for over 400 years. However, it achieved notoriety in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the place to which the South African government sent individuals who had been convicted of crimes associated with opposition to the state policy of Apartheid — the system of ethnic separation that formalized a “white South Africa” policy. This policy preserved political and social privileges for the white minority while other groups (in particular, the indigenous black population) were disenfranchised.

From 1959 to 1996 around 750 political prisoners were housed on the island (together with around 2,250 common-law prisoners) in brutal conditions designed to crush both the spirit of the individual inmates and the broader movement of which they were part. Ultimately, though, the prison had exactly the opposite function, serving as a crucible for liberation politics that played a major part in the development of the anti-Apartheid cause and in the emergence of a leadership that was geared up to fight that cause (Buntman, 2003, p.230). Indeed, over time, the Robben Island inmates — including Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Jacob Zuma, Govan Mbeki and Tokyo Sexwale — came to see themselves as a “government in waiting”, and, on their release, the leadership developed in prison was able to play a major role in the new political order that was created once the state of Apartheid had been dismantled.

Accounts of life on Robben Island suggest that a number of factors were central to these dramatic developments but that these were all grounded in the prisoners’ sense that they shared a meaningful identity as political prisoners with a common conviction (see Buntman, 2003, pp.236-271; Mandela, 1995, p.494). As one inmate, Patrick Nkosi Molala noted: “it is very, very

crucial for people to understand that we may have ... belong[ed] to different organizations, and we may have had our tiffs, our conflict, our battles, but when it came to the authorities ... we would always act as one” (Buntman, 2003, p.238). Furthermore, this sense of shared identity was reinforced by the fact that, as in the Maze, on Robben Island political prisoners were kept apart from the general prison population (Mandela, 1994).

This sense of shared identity was also actively policed by the prisoners themselves, largely by means of an informal code that structured resistance activities. This code centred around principles of self-determination designed to create a world in which prisoners were in control of their own community and not subject to the authority of the state (an authority which they did not recognize). The core tenet of this code was that “you don’t allow the warden to impose discipline on you, but you impose discipline on yourselves as a group” (Buntman, 2003, p.237). As Mandela subsequently put it: “Ultimately we had to create our own lives in prison. In a way that even the authorities recognized, order in prison was preserved not by warders but by ourselves” (1994, p.464).

The strong sense of shared social identity that was cultivated within the prisoner community was also a basis for effective information sharing and other forms of social support (Haslam, O’Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penna, 2005; Haslam & Reicher, 2006; Haslam, Reicher & Levine, 2011; Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005; Reicher, Cassidy, Wolpert, Hopkins, & Levine, 2006). Thus in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela notes that:

Our survival depended on understanding what the authorities were attempting to do to us, and sharing that understanding with each other. It would be hard, if not impossible for one man alone to resist... The authorities’ greatest mistake was to keep us together, for together our determination was reinforced. We supported each other and gained strength from each other. Whatever we knew, whatever we learned, we shared, and by sharing we multiplied whatever courage we had individually (1994, p.463).

A corollary of this was that while prisoners were encouraged to make idiosyncratic contributions to the community that reflected their unique skills and competencies, those forms of individuality that undermined a sense of shared political identity — and the political struggle with which this was associated — were actively sanctioned. Indeed, prisoners who failed to live up to group norms

were subjected to a range of formal and informal punishments. These were in some cases more severe than those imposed by the guards, and were certainly more keenly felt. For example, when one of the prisoners, Enoch Mathibela, wrote to the justice minister pleading for pardon on grounds that he was not a member of a political organization, he was taunted, mocked and ostracized by other prisoners, to the extent that he became the “loneliest and most hated man on the island” (Buntman, 2003, p.240).

Significantly too, as it developed, the goal of the prisoners on Robben Island was not simply to resist the authorities, but to reconstrue, restructure, and remake their world in another form. In this way shared identity was the basis for emergent forms of leadership and organization (Haslam, Postmes & Ellemers, 2003; Turner & Haslam, 2001; Reicher et al., 2007). One of the clearest examples of this was seen in the creation of a self-regulated “university” with its own faculty, courses, and curriculum. This provided inmates with a structured education whose content and purpose was both academic and political (Mandela, 1994, p.556). More generally too, this and other collective activities provided prisoners with a range of fora in which they could envision, and work towards the creation of, an alternative order that moved beyond both the structure of the prison and the forms of organization that had existed on their entry into it. Buntman notes that by this means:

Prisoners challenged the status quo ... with the goal of using the prison as a laboratory for micro-experiments in creating the social order they sought and as a training school to develop social change agents to revolutionize the world outside and beyond the prison (2004, p.250, 253; see also Mandela, 1994, p.464)

By this means, then, the prisoners did not simply oppose the power of the guards, but also created an alternative identity-based power structure of their own (Scott, 1990; Turner, 2005).

Significantly too, history shows that in the struggle between guards and prisoners, conservatives and progressives, racists and democrats it was this alternative power structure that ultimately won out. Furthermore, the systems, structures and leadership that were developed on Robben Island not only challenged those of the Apartheid regime, but also formed the nucleus of a new polity that went on both to make that regime unworkable and, ultimately, to replace it. In fact, by this means, the prisoners ended up not just running the prison but also the country. And far

from resistance being rendered impossible by the unequal nature of society, resistance served to transform the society as well as the prison.

However, lest the argument that resistance is possible even under the most oppressive circumstances still remain unconvincing, let us consider one last case. If asked to name the most tyrannical and brutal of systems, few would demur from a decision to single out that which operated under the Nazis. Indeed, as we noted at the outset, this regime lies at the heart of contemporary concerns with discrimination, oppression, and tyranny (Newman & Erber, 2002; Milgram, 1974; Miller, 2004). As we will show shortly, not only would open opposition lead to almost certain death, but those who undertook such opposition were also well aware of the fact and did not expect to survive. So can we show that, even here, resistance could also be effective?

### *Case 3. Sobibor extermination camp (1942-1943)*

The issue of resistance to the Nazis, specifically Jewish resistance, has been the subject of considerable controversy and changing views over the years. Indeed, thinking on this subject has gone through at least three distinct phases. In the early post-war years there was a widespread sense that Jewish people had gone to Nazi camps ‘like lambs to the slaughter’ with rare and shining exceptions like the Warsaw Ghetto revolt which was and remains the ‘gold standard’ of Holocaust resistance (Epstein, 2008, p.283). Yet from the 1960s onwards, increasing evidence of the widespread nature of resistance began to be published (e.g. Krakowski, 1984; Langbein, 1994; Suhl, 1975; Yad Vashem, 1971). This evidence indicated that Warsaw was far from unique (there were more than 90 ghettos with armed undergrounds; Gurewitsch, 2007-8), and also that resistance was not limited to the ghettos but continued into the extermination camps themselves (Arad, 1987; Langbein, 1994; Mais, 2007-8a; Rashke, 1995; Willenberg, 1984). In a third and more recent phase, the very concept of resistance — and of what constitutes resistance — has begun to be reassessed (Mais, 2007-8a; see also Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Horwitz, 2010). The main conclusion here is that resistance, as evidenced not just by major acts of rebellion but also by smaller acts of self-assertion and insubordination, was omnipresent among those subjected to Nazi tyranny.

Nonetheless, insofar as our aim is to show that there are no parts of the known universe where effective resistance is absent, we deliberately focus here on the most repressive spaces in the Nazi's repressive world. That is, we will concentrate on resistance in the extermination camps and upon the most overt challenges to Nazi authority in the form of open revolt.

The occurrence of such revolt is especially remarkable since the Nazi camp system was carefully designed precisely in order to prevent resistance. As Sofsky (1997) shows, the constant fear of Nazi guards was that those crammed together would become united psychologically. The Nazis therefore sought to ensure that, despite their physical density, prisoners remained psychologically isolated and that: "their orientation is not to each other, but past one another" (p.154). Accordingly, camp life was based on elaborate systems of divide-and-rule that set different groups of prisoners (e.g., Jews, criminals, politicals, homosexuals) against each other (Levi, 1958/1987). On top of this, hierarchies of privilege were set up whereby a select few (the Capos) were able to survive and to gain privileges in return for maintaining order and imposing a regime of brutality on behalf of their captors. In effect, prisoners could gain the status of guards (at least for a period) while the Nazis could take a back seat as overseers of the camps. Sofsky explains that:

By making a small number of victims not accomplices, the regime blurred the boundary between personnel and inmates ... Hierarchies prevented solidarity by employing the gradual power of delegation ... The main purpose of the hierarchy was to establish a second camp administration, designed to relieve the burdens on SS personnel, organize everyday life in the camp, and have the prisoners run their own affairs. (1997, pp.130-131)

Undoubtedly, these structures proved partially successful from the Nazi point of view. As one ex-prisoner complained: "If only some clearly defined common consciousness bound us together! But this is not the case... Everyone is highly irritable and always ready to regard his fellow man as a personal enemy... Everything human is reduced to zero" (cited in Langbein, 1994, p. 82). But this is only part of the picture. As Langbein (1994) has meticulously documented, resistance was widespread in the camps and took many forms. Indeed, in a system designed to destroy, simple survival depended upon multiple small acts of defiance, from avoiding strenuous work to obtaining a little extra food, to faking illness, to

sustaining a spiritual life, to bolstering the morale of others through simple words of encouragement, to swapping the names of those designated for extermination with names of those who were already dead (see also Unger, 1986).

On occasions, resistance also manifested itself as collective revolt. Amongst the many camps, only six were designated for the systematic extermination of inmates: Belzec, Chelmo, Sobibor, Treblinka (which were purely for extermination) as well as Auschwitz and Majdanek (which also held inmates for labour). Of these, there were major revolts at three (Auschwitz, Sobibor and Treblinka) plus uncorroborated reports of a small revolt at a fourth (Belzec). However, we will focus on the events at Sobibor since of all the camp revolts this is probably the most significant and the best documented.

The camp was built over the course of 1942 on the outskirts of the town of Sobibor, 200 km east of Warsaw. Almost as soon as it was completed and occupied its inmates started planning various acts of resistance, including an escape and an uprising. These started when an underground group was formed and led by Leon Feldhendler — ex-Head of the *Judenrat* in the town of Zolkiew. Various actions were mooted, but these were stymied by the lack of anyone with the ability to develop an adequate plan or inspire others to support it (Arad, undated a, 1987). This changed when, in May 1943, a Dutch Jew and former naval officer Joseph Jacobs came to Sobibor and formulated a plan for an uprising. But before the plan could come to fruition, Jacobs was betrayed, tortured and killed. Shortly afterwards, however, a group of some 80 Jews who had served in the Red Army were brought to the camp. Amongst them was a former lieutenant Alexander (Sasha) Pechersky.

This collection of inmates was distinctive on a number of grounds. First, they were a cohesive group with a well developed sense of group identity prior to entry to the camp. Associated with this, second, they had pre-existing organizational structure that was both clear and effective. Third, the content of the group's identity was defined by the fighting norms and values of the Soviet army — and an associated sense that Jews could be strong and powerful fighters rather than helpless victims (Arad, 1987; Langbein, 1994; Rees, 2005).

All three factors were exemplified in the person of Pechersky who quickly assumed a key leadership role with Feldhendler as his deputy. The sense of strength and pride which he embodied and engendered is expressed in a story told by

Pechersky himself in his memoirs (Pechersky, 1975) and which rapidly circulated amongst the prisoners. One day, he was challenged by a German guard to split a huge stump in five minutes or receive 25 lashes. Pechersky managed it in four and a half minutes. The German, Frenzel, offered him a pack of cigarettes as reward, but Pechersky refused, saying he did not smoke, and continued working. Later Frenzel returned with bread and margarine (a great luxury). “Russian soldier, take it,” he said... “Thank you, the rations we are getting satisfy me fully” Pechersky replied with heavy irony (1975, p.16). Frenzel, furious at being so snubbed and ridiculed, turned and left.

The presence of Pechersky and his peers galvanized the prisoners as a whole and rallied them around plans for revolt. The complex plan that was formulated involved, first, luring SS guards individually to a range of different specified locations and killing them. Then, at the afternoon roll-call, the arms store would be seized, the remaining SS guards shot and all the prisoners would stage an orderly break out of from the camp.

The plan was put into action on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1943. Its early stages were executed with precision and proved largely successful. However, at roll-call the guards realized that a plot was afoot. They opened fire on the insurgents, killing many of them, defending the armoury from attack, and cutting off escape through the main gate. The insurgents returned fire using what weapons they already had, killing several of the guards. But from this point, the leaders of the uprising had lost control of events. People fled in all directions, cutting the camp fences and running through the minefields that surrounded it. Of around 600 prisoners in the camp some 300 escaped of whom roughly half were killed either by gunfire or mine explosions. In the end, some 50 survived to the end of the war. These included Pechersky who managed to link up and join ranks with Soviet partisans (Arad, 1987; Langbein, 1994).

In sum, even in the most oppressive regimes the world has known, prisoners did take on their guards and (at least temporarily) come out on top. Drawing attention to this reality allows us to counteract some of the pernicious consequences of claims that resistance was non-existent. Evidence of these consequences is seen in the memoirs of Gideon Hausner, the Israeli Attorney General who prosecuted Adolf Eichmann. In these, Hausner recalls receiving a letter during Eichmann’s trial which stated: “I could not honor all my relatives about whom I had heard from my father. I

loathed them for letting themselves be slaughtered” (1966, p.433).

Our point is not that revolt always happened. It didn’t. It was rare. But under certain conditions, it could occur. What is more, when people failed to revolt, this did not indicate ‘passivity’ but was generally a result of the adoption of deliberate and plausible strategies of survival which (due to the deceptions practised by the Nazis) ultimately proved ineffective. Mais (2007-8b) sums up the present consensus when he states: “(t)rue the Jews were slaughtered, but clearly not like sheep!” (p.19). There is certainly nothing to suggest that the acts of Jewish prisoners reflected a ‘natural’ conformity to their subjugated role.

In response to Zimbardo’s challenge, we can thus assert there is no part of the known universe — including prison systems — in which resistance is either unthinkable or completely absent. On the contrary, when one looks closely, resistance is everywhere: not only in the Stanford and BBC Prison Studies but also in the most repressive real-world regimes (Brehm, 1966; Foucault, 1990). To echo Moscovici (1976) and Turner (2006), the only place in which it is absent, is in mainstream social psychological theory. With a view to rectifying this situation, we now need to ask what can be drawn from evidence of prison resistance to explain when, where, and how it occurs. Our final section seeks to answer this question, and in the process to draw out a model that builds upon the framework provided by previous social identity theorizing.

#### **4. A Social Identity Model of Resistance Dynamics**

The evidence that we have considered, both from the BBC Prison Study and from real life examples, points to the importance of social identity processes for an understanding of the dynamics of resistance and change — both as they apply to prisons themselves and also more generally in situations of intergroup inequality. However, as well demonstrating the importance of the factors highlighted in the original statements of social identity theory, this evidence points to a number of ways in which the theory needs to be developed in order to provide a rounded explanation of change dynamics. In some cases, this is a matter of adding extra constructs, in some cases it is a matter of refining the constructs that are already used. More globally, though, we develop a dynamic and interactive approach to the resistance process,



whereby the actions of any one party are dependent upon the responses of the other. The importance of such an approach was clearly appreciated by Tajfel (1978) when he outlined the original social identity model, but he did not have time to work it into all elements of his analysis. Most importantly, then, we argue that the understandings that generate resistance, rather than being structural ‘givens’ or imposed from the outside, actually emerge out of the ongoing intergroup process itself.

In order to highlight both the continuities with and the developments of traditional social identity theorizing, we divide our discussion of the

evidence into three parts. The first has to do with the development of oppositional identities; the second has to do with the conditions under which groups choose strategies of overt resistance; the third has to do with the role of practical and organizational factors in generating effective resistance. In line with our dynamic approach, in each case we look at these processes from the perspective both of subordinate groups (who typically promote resistance) and of dominant groups (who typically seek to stymie it). The overall analysis is summarized schematically in Figure 2.

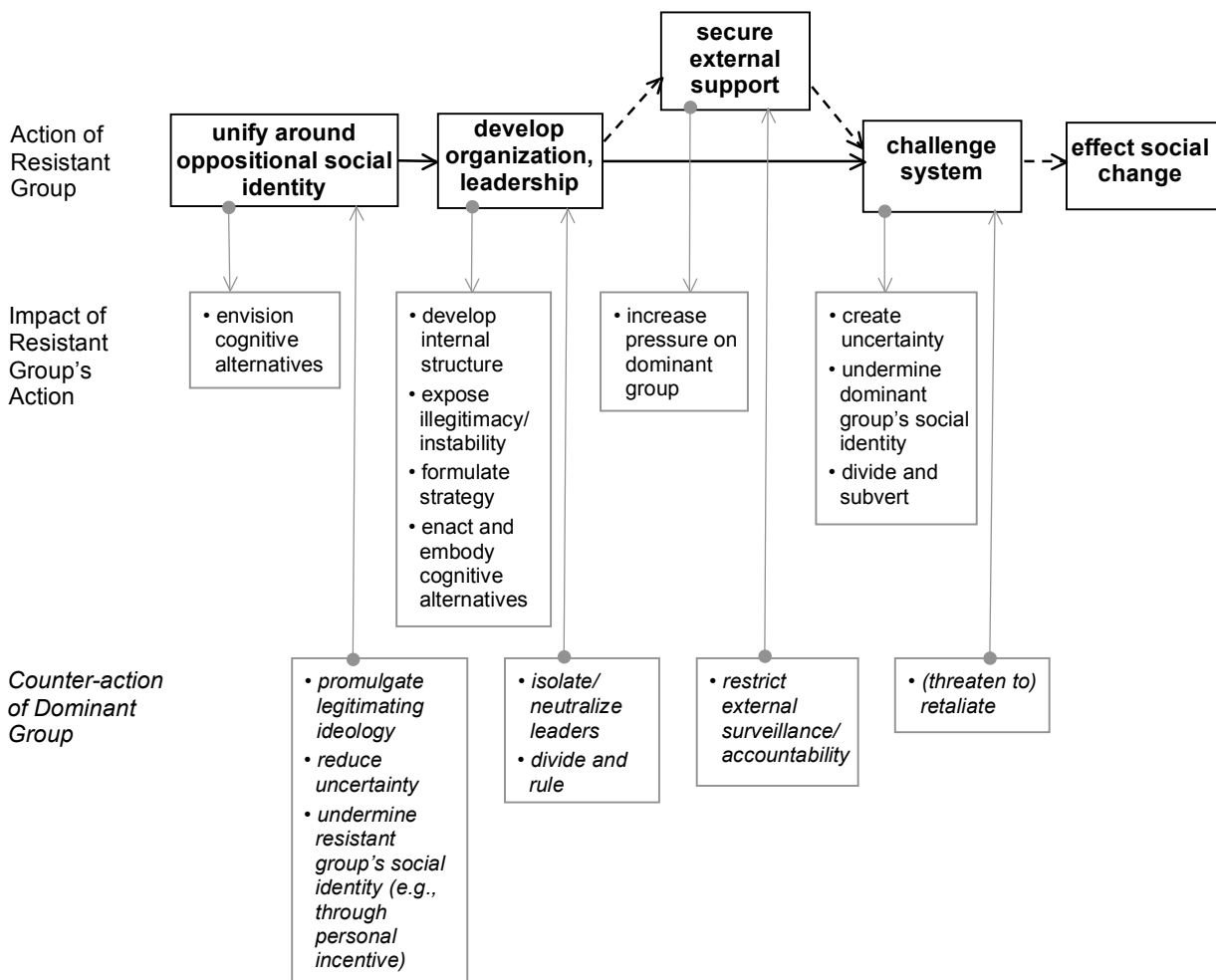


Figure 2. A Social Identity Model of Resistance Dynamics

### *Creating and impeding oppositional identities*

If there is one thing that stands out clearly from all the evidence it is the importance of shared identity for resistance. In the BBC Prison Study, whatever debate there might be about why the guards failed to achieve a shared identity while the prisoners did, there is no doubt that shared identity amongst the prisoners allowed them to work together effectively in challenging the guards and lack of shared identity amongst the guards prevented them from working together effectively to resist that challenge (Reicher & Haslam, 2006a). Likewise in the Stanford Prison experiment, Zimbardo observes that resistance peaked when prisoners were able to “combine to give [them] a new collective identity as something more than a collection of individuals trying to survive on their own” (2007, p.51). In each of our case studies, the importance of shared identity is equally apparent.

This is true on both an individual and a collective level. Individually, there was a strong association between survival and a strong sense of group identity (1958/ 1987). In this regard, Rousset (1965), a survivor of the Buchenwald camp, makes a telling observation. He explains that political prisoners could obtain their release by renouncing their politics. One might expect that this would ensure survival. However, under constant surveillance by the Gestapo, many of those who did gain freedom in this way eventually returned, broken physically and morally, and died. In contrast, it was those individuals and groups with the strongest sense of shared identity who were most able to endure the camps. Thus Cohen (1988), a Dutch physician and also a survivor of Ebensee concentration camp, argues that Jehovah’s Witnesses and Communists, in many ways polar opposites, had the greatest power of resistance in the camps because they both had a means of finding spiritual meaning in their circumstances (spiritual being used in its widest sense). They knew that they and the Nazis were mutually hostile. They knew why they were in the camps. In a sense, detention thus affirmed rather than obliterated their sense of selfhood. Langbein corroborates this (himself quoting Wijnen, a Dutch inmate of Buchenwald): “the great strength of the Russians consisted in their doing everything in groups” (1994, p.164). All this serves to give general validity to the Bosworth and Carrabine’s (2001, p.501) contention that “social identities mediate prisoner agency and are crucially implicated in acts of contestation”.

Often, this sense of shared identity exists in advance of imprisonment. This was true in all three of our case studies. But sometimes shared identity is an emergent property of the prison experience itself — for example, in the revolt at Auschwitz, where the Sonderkommando who led the revolt were formed out of prisoners assigned to the task of running the crematoria (Venezia, 2007; Zabluvovits & Robota, 2007-8). Moreover, it would be wrong to draw too rigid a distinction between pre-existent and emergent identities, for even in the case of political or religious groups, shared identity could either increase or atrophy depending upon what happened in the prisons.

Three factors seem to be critical in determining whether or not shared identity emerges. The first is a *common experience of subordination* at the hands of the prison officials. This induces both a sense of common fate and a strong sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’. There is wealth of evidence which confirms that both of these factors are powerful antecedents of psychological group membership (Campbell, 1958; Drury, 2011; Turner, 1985; Yzerbyt, Judd, & Corneille, 2004). It may seem self-evident that being locked up together will invoke these factors. However, on the one hand, it is important not to underestimate the way in which prisoners actively seek to promote common identities through shared activities — often activities that are not in themselves overtly oppositional. For instance, several commentators have pointed to the importance of the football league organized by the inmates of Robben Island in creating a sense of solidarity (Buntman, 2003; Korr & Close, 2009). On the other hand, as we have seen from case studies, there will be times when specific actions on the part of authorities can serve to increase the experience and sense of commonality. The housing of political prisoners together in the Maze and on Robben Island is a case in point. By the same token, we will see presently that there are a wide range of tactics that prison authorities can (and do) deliberately use to undermine shared experience, shared identity, and resistance.

The second factor is *time*. As Postmes and colleagues note, shared identity is generally an emergent product that arises from the bottom-up as people observe others and interact with them, as they see that the fate of others is the same as their own, and as they learn that they share the same self-understanding (Postmes, Haslam & Swaab, 2005; Smith & Postmes, 2009; Postmes, Spears, Lee, & Novak, 2005). Moreover, as we will see, if, in addition, organization and leadership further

facilitate this sense of sharedness, then the more time that people are able to spend together, then the more possible it is to develop shared identity. Thus, for instance, one of the major impediments to the emergence of shared identity in the Nazi camps was the fact that people simply did not survive long enough to cohere as a group. Even if people survived initial selection for immediate death, then in most camps their life expectancy was no more than a few months (Sofsky, 1997). At a completely different level, policies of prisoner transfer from cell to cell or from institution to institution also determine whether people are together long enough to become a group (Broude, 1974; Stojkovic, 1986).

The third factor is *permeability*. As we have shown, this has been the focus of previous research informed by social identity theory. As Tajfel insisted (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see also Ellemers, 1993; Ellemers et al., 1988), it is not enough that we have common experience with others in order to identify with them. The issue is whether our experience is necessarily yoked to theirs in the future as well as in the present. Will we always rise and fall together or else can we, through our own efforts, improve our own fate and leave others behind? Shared identification depends upon believing the former and is undermined if one believes the latter. This emerges clearly from the BBC Prison Study. It also emerges from the cases we have studied, where the practices of authorities (such as forcing Jews to wear yellow stars) did much to show prisoners that their fate would always be entwined with that of the group. And where official practices fell short, then prisoners themselves exerted a discipline that made it very difficult for individuals to try and distance themselves from their fellows — the ostracism of Enocj Mathibela on Robben Island being a case in point.

Perhaps, though, the most powerful evidence for the importance of these three factors and of shared identity more generally lies in the lengths to which prison administrations go in order to frustrate them. Indeed, rather than the achievement of shared identity being seen as a passive process, it needs to be understood as a site of struggle between those in the subordinate group who wish to mobilize resistance and those in the dominant group who wish to demobilize it.

We have, for instance, noted that the Nazi camp system was organized specifically to prevent common identity emerging (Sofsky, 1997). This included procedures for forcing people to participate in degrading acts that defiled their own

group membership (Levi, 1958/1987; see also Gourevitch & Morris, 2008, Zimbardo, 2007, on similar techniques used at Abu Ghraib). As shown in the SPE, it also commonly involves using informers to undermine trust and solidarity between prisoners. Indeed, there is a wide variety of evidence, both from historical events and psychological research, which suggests that the impact of informers lies less in the information they provide than in their capacity to promote a culture of paranoia, of denunciation, and of schism which destroy cohesion in the targeted group; see Hornsey & Jetten, 2003; Solzhenitsyn, 1973/1998; Warner, Hornsey & Jetten, 2007).

Most commonly of all, however, the Nazi camp system (and other systems besides) sought to break down a sense of common identity by creating divisions between prisoners and raising the prospect that some could obtain improvement and dominion over others through their compliance (Appelbaum, 2003; Levi, 1958/1987). Even as they trapped people in their group memberships, they simultaneously sought to fragment groups so as to prevent solidarity. On the one hand, of course, the yellow stars worn by Jews may have kept their group membership permanently salient but it equally served to divide them from others who were oppressed by the Nazis (e.g., the political prisoners who wore red triangles, the Roma Gypsies who wore brown triangles, the Jehovah's Witnesses who wore purple triangles). In addition, though, the Nazis created divisions amongst the Jews by offering privileges to those who were compliant. In the camps, this meant that favored individuals could be promoted to the ranks of Capo and thereby not only had better conditions and increased chances of survival, but also often had the power of life and death over other prisoners in determining who was placed on the lists of those selected for extermination.

While, of course, such permeability was limited, it remained highly consequential and highly effective as a form of atomizing prisoners and maintaining social control. More generally, the use of either formal positions of trust or else of particular privileges as rewards for those who comply is an almost universal technique of control in prison systems (e.g., Ditchfield, 1990; Marquart & Crouch, 1984; Wortley, 2002). To quote the conclusion of Colvin's (1992) study of *The Penitentiary in Crisis*: "Conflict is usually kept dormant in most prisons through an array of formal and informal structures of social control that offer inmates something to gain by conforming and something to lose by rebelling"

(p.207). In this sense, it could be argued that if there was something unrealistic about the BBC Prison Study, it was not the availability of promotion for ‘good behavior’ in the study’s first phase as a way of creating a sense of permeability. It was, rather, the situation in the study’s second phase in which there were no opportunities for improvement and prisoners would remain in the same position whatever they did. Nonetheless, on a conceptual level, this provides a stark and powerful illustration of the importance of impermeability as a condition for shared identity and of shared identity as a condition for resistance.

### *Stabilizing and destabilizing intergroup inequality*

Thus far, we have been arguing as if the achievement of shared identity among a subordinated group will lead straightforwardly to resistance. However, the evidence we have provided suggests that, while it may be *necessary*, shared identity is not *sufficient* for resistance to occur. As social identity theory suggests, if people are to act collectively to change rather than simply accommodate to the status quo, it seems necessary both that they see the status quo as illegitimate and that they can envisage ways of changing it — that is, they must see existing inequalities as *insecure* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). To examine these issues we will concentrate first on the issue of legitimacy, looking at this issue from the perspective of the subordinate group, the dominant group, and in terms of the interaction between them. We will then turn to the issue of cognitive alternatives.

Useem and Goldstone (2002) note the general importance of illegitimacy for prison resistance. They state that: “Inmate ideologies ... unite inmates by providing a common framework for establishing opposition and justifying rebellion. Inmate ideologies claim that conditions in prison are not just bad but ‘wrong’” (p.501). Conversely, if the prison system and prison procedures are seen as legitimate then there is a reduction in the violation of prison rules (Reisig & Mesko, 2009).

The sense of wrong is so obvious in each of our case studies that one might almost neglect to mention it. In each case, prisoners belonged to groups that saw the system as a whole as involving the arbitrary power and privilege of one group over others (of Protestants over Catholics in Northern Ireland, of Whites over Blacks in South Africa, of Nazis over Jews, Communists, and other excluded groups in Germany). Moreover, they believed that the process by which they were

imprisoned generally served to exemplify the injustice of the system (e.g., internment without trial in Northern Ireland) and that the same was true of the way in which they were treated in prison. Indeed, in the Maze, the whole point of extreme protests — from refusing prison clothing to refusing toilet facilities to refusing to eat — was to contest the legitimacy of being treated as ordinary criminals.

In these cases a sense of illegitimacy was already present when people entered the prison system. However, as in the case a sense of shared identity, a sense of legitimacy/illegitimacy can also develop within the prison system and is affected by the behavior of the authorities in prisons (Sparks, Bottoms, & Hay, 1996). On the one hand, then, dehumanizing conditions, the pettiness of regulations, the brutality of guard behavior, or the refusal of guards to protect prisoners from brutalization by others can lead to a developing sense of illegitimacy amongst prisoners where little or none existed before (Carrabine, 2005; Useem & Goldstone, 2002). Prison authorities can also entrench a sense of illegitimacy by reproducing inequalities that exist in the wider society. A case in point was the segregation of black prisoners from their white peers who were involved in the American desegregation movement of the 1950s and 60s (Deming, 1966). To quote Sparks and Bottoms:

Every instance of brutality in prisons, every casual racist joke and demeaning remark, every ignored petition, every unwanted bureaucratic delay, every arbitrary decision to segregate or transfer without giving clear and unfounded reasons, every petty miscarriage of justice, every futile and inactive period of time — is delegitimizing (1996, p.60).

But while prison guards and prison authorities may sometimes impose policies and procedures that increase the sense of illegitimacy, they can equally implement practices designed to legitimize an unequal system. Indeed, if Sparks and Bottoms are right about all the things that increase a sense of illegitimacy, then their converse should lead to an increased sense of legitimacy. In line with Tyler and Blader’s (2003) group engagement model, Jackson, Tyler, Bradford, Taylor and Shiner (2010) seek to sketch out some procedures that would achieve such a result. They lay particular stress on the implementation of systematic, transparent and accountable procedures for structuring interactions between staff and prisoners on the grounds that these minimize the space for intergroup conflict and bias to flourish.

Sometimes, though, legitimation may present a less benign face and, rather than involving procedures that lead to different groups being treated equally, it may seek to naturalize and justify inequality. Guards in Nazi camps thus went to great lengths to debase and humiliate inmates at the same time that SS officers paid scrupulous attention to their own immaculate appearance. Rees (2005) shows how this was intended to reinforce the Nazi claim to be a 'Master Race' and to legitimate their subjugation of Jewish 'untermenschen'. The logic — and effect — here was that if inmates came to see their oppressed situation as in any sense justified, then they were more likely to accept it.

Let us now shift from the question of whether inmates see a prison system as wrong to the question of their ability to envisage change to that system — that is, to the notion of *cognitive alternatives* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Here there is a wealth of evidence from a variety of sources which shows that people are more likely to challenge a given social reality when they can both conceive of other preferable realities and when they can envisage ways of achieving them (Reicher & Haslam, in press). This articulates with the notion of 'opportunity structures' in social movement theory (McAdam, 1996; McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 1996) whereby action is seen as a function of weaknesses of the outgroup, of strengths (whether of resources or of confidence) amongst the ingroup, or of both. While there is some evidence of this in the cases we have considered, there is equally evidence of the opposite. In particular, if there is one factor that emerges time and again in the literature on Holocaust resistance, it is that revolts occurred precisely to the extent that Jewish populations believed that they would inevitably be killed (Iwaszko & Klodziński, 1977; Tiedens, 1997; Zabudovits, 2007-8).

This point was well understood by the Nazis themselves who devoted considerable efforts in both the ghettos and camps to hiding their true intentions (Gutman, 1971). They repeatedly assured Jews that if they worked hard and conformed to demands they would be spared. Deportations to the camps were always represented as relocations and deportees were often forced to write reassuring postcards from their supposed new homes which were then delivered to those left behind (Horwitz, 2010). Equally, on arrival, the nature of the death camps was disguised by camouflaging the railway terminals as ordinary stations (with pristine

buildings, well-kept lawns, and flower gardens) and the camps themselves as workplaces — something exemplified by the infamous slogan over the Auschwitz gates 'Arbeit Macht Frei' (Work makes you free). And even once within the gates, Pechersky (1975) reports that in Sobibor, rumours were spread that Hitler had decided to spare a proportion of Jews, including camp labourers.

The point here, then, is that the sense of positive cognitive alternatives reflects a belief that it is both *possible and desirable* to take particular steps in order to advance the group interest in the circumstances that the group confronts. But what counts as advancement, and hence the form of these steps, depends critically upon the group's circumstances — that is, the existing nature of the social world. As understandings of the present change (e.g., from the prospect of survival to the certainty of death) so the definition of advancement changes (from making the group endure by keeping more people alive to making the group endure by enhancing its honour and pride; e.g., Engel, 2007-8). To put it slightly differently, resistance will occur where people envisage that it will improve their lot, but the way people conceptualize 'improvement' depends on how they understand their lot in the absence of resistance (see Drury & Reicher, 2009).

### *Organizing and supporting resistance*

There is one further way in which our approach to cognitive alternatives expands upon the existing literature. Traditionally, cognitive alternatives have been understood primarily in terms of the ability to envisage *ends* (Reicher & Haslam, in press) — that is, the term has been used to denote people's ability to envisage a state of affairs which is different from the present. This end-state is clearly an important part of the process. But it is equally important to address the process of transition — that is, the belief that the group has the *means* to get from where it is in the present to where it wants to be in the future. More concretely, does the ingroup in question perceive itself to be capable of achieving its objectives even in the face of the outgroup's repressive power? We can break this issue down into two parts. First, does the group have sufficient internal resources to mount an effective challenge? Second, can it draw on sufficient external support to achieve success?

*Leadership.* The internal resources of an oppressed, and especially an imprisoned group, will have less to do with material possessions than

with the ability to organize and coordinate their actions most effectively (Turner, 2005). And if one point stands out from all our case studies it is that here the role of *leadership* is critical.

As so often, the importance of leadership to resistance is perhaps best illustrated by the lengths to which dominant groups will go in order to disrupt it. Sometimes this will take the form of trying to discredit the leadership of the oppressed or dividing them from their followers (Applebaum, 2003; Mahone, 2006). Other strategies include the attempt to isolate leaders from their constituencies by such devices as house arrest (as in the case of Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma), imprisonment (as with Nelson Mandela), and even separate confinement within the prison so that, in Mandela's own terms, leaders would not "infect" other prisoners with their political views (Mandela, 1994, p.457). Where all else fails, however, one can simply kill those in leadership positions. In Nazi Germany, the merest hint that one was a resistance leader meant a death sentence. Equally, the Apartheid regime, albeit a trifle less openly, had a systematic strategy of trying to decapitate the liberation movement, as in the case of Steve Biko (the leader of the Black Consciousness movement, who was beaten to death while in detention by South African police in Pretoria in September 1977; see Kane-Berman, 1993, for other examples).

In short, oppressors are highly attuned to the role of leadership in resistance. It is surprising to find, then, that academics are not. The literature on resistance and collective action in psychology almost completely ignores leadership process and the same is true in the area of social movement studies (Aminzade, Goldstone & Perry, 2001; Einwohner, 2007).

Yet, as we have argued recently (Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011), in reflecting on the nature of leadership (as it pertains to resistance, but in all other spheres too) this needs to be seen as deriving from a 'we' relationship between leaders and followers framed by their membership in a social group. For this reason, it is important not to flip from an analysis of resistance in which the focus is entirely on followers (and leaders are ignored) to one in which only leaders are celebrated (to the exclusion of followers). In line with this view, a wealth of recent research shows that leadership is predicated upon leaders and followers sharing a sense of common group identity (Ellemers, de Gilder & Haslam, 2004; Haslam, 2004; Haslam & Reicher, 2006; Haslam et al., 2011; Hogg, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000;

Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005; Turner & Haslam, 2001). In simpler terms, an individual can only represent and speak for a group if there is a group to represent in the first place. Equally, leaders will only be listened to if what they say accords with group norms and beliefs. Legendary as the leadership of Mandela, Sands, and Pechersky is, its success — and their charisma — were thus conditional on the coherence and the culture of the groups that they led.

But equally, strong and skilled leadership serves to create the representations of self and the social world on which resistance is based (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Most obviously, in the case of Jewish resistance, leadership was critical in leading people to understand that they all faced annihilation together (Arad, 1996; Einwohner, 2007; Gutman, 1971; Trunk, 1971). In this context, effective leaders must also be seen as acting in the group interest — as 'doing it for us' (Haslam & Platow, 2001; Haslam et al., 2011). Furthermore, their vision for the group (i.e., the set of cognitive alternatives they champion) has to be more than mere aspiration, it has to be translated into reality. Successful leaders thus have to possess the practical skills and analytic insight to organize and marshal ingroup forces effectively against the outgroup. Once again, all our case studies attest to this. Mandela, Sands and Pechersky were not just visionaries, they were also organizers and tacticians. What is more, they had the particular organizational skills that were required in the given context. Mandela's legal training was thus critical to challenging the authorities on Robben Island, Sands' skills as a writer (of prose, poetry, and song) were central to the mobilization of Republican forces both inside and outside the Maze, Pechersky's military training was required to formulate an effective and credible plan of revolt in Sobibor.

Drawing things together, we can see the importance of effective deployment of collective resources to the success of leadership, the importance of leadership to the effective deployment of group resources, and the critical importance of both elements in giving people confidence that the prevailing system can be challenged. Yet the sense that an existing order is vulnerable does not arise suddenly. As we saw in the BBC Prison Study, it evolves out of a series of challenges, initially often quite small in scale, and after seeing the response of the dominant group to them. In the Maze it arose as the republican inmates initiated and then scaled up small acts of

protest. In Sobibor it started with the defiance of Pechersky to a German officer.

*Third-party support.* But there is another element to the events of 1943 which is highly relevant to our considerations. For one reason why the Germans did not murder inmates as soon as they arrived at Sobibor (and other camps) was that they feared that any oppressive action might precipitate a hostile reaction on the part of a *third party* — in this case the broader Polish underground (particularly the Armia Krajowa or Home Army; Zuckerman, 1971). More generally, however effectively the forces of a subordinate group are marshalled, it still remains true that the dominant group will have the resources to crush any resistance. The success of the subordinate group is therefore at least partly a function of its ability to deter the dominant group from fully deploying its repressive power and this, in turn, relates to the stance adopted by other groups that have a potential interest in proceedings. This is an issue of considerable importance and needs to be addressed in order to complete our analysis.

At the most general level, we need to recognize that the interaction between dominant and subordinate groups is nearly always nested within a larger social context (Saroyan, 2008; Subašić, Reynolds & Turner, 2008). For even though a subordinate group has less power when the frame is restricted simply to its relationship with the dominant group, it often has the potential to turn the tables if the frame is broadened and it is able to win the support of others.

One of the first aims of a resistance movement, then, is often to make the plight of their group visible so that the support of third parties can be invoked. Conversely, one of the aims of dominant groups is to keep internal struggles invisible. In this regard, one of the primary aims of Jewish resistance to the Holocaust was simply to make what was happening known to the outside world. Escape, as well as being an end in itself, was also a means of achieving this (Vrba, 2003). The effectiveness of this is illustrated by the fact that, in 1944 when it was becoming increasingly clear that Germany was losing the war, Himmler started attempting to do deals with the allies that involved liberating Jews in return for resources (Cesarini, 2004). What is more, by 1945, the guards in the camps themselves began to desert their posts or even give help to the inmates for fear of what would happen to them upon liberation. At Auschwitz, this meant that, by the end, “the rigid system of supervision by Kapos and guards had

broken down and the prisoners looked after themselves” (Rees, 2005, p.326).

McEvoy et al. (2007) discuss two strategies that prisoners often take in order to achieve visibility: legal challenge and political protest. In the former case, “courts may become practical and symbolic sites of resistance” in which authority is formally challenged either in terms that the state accepts or by questioning aspects of the legal process itself (e.g., the legality of the court, the probity of the law; McEvoy et al., 2007, p.310). A critical point here is that courts provide a platform that allows defendants to do much more than simply engage in question-and-answer sequences related to the facts of a particular case (Atkinson & Drew, 1979; McEvoy, 2001, p.177). Indeed this explains why many of the most powerful political speeches in history have been delivered by defendants immediately prior to their being sentenced to imprisonment (e.g., see court statements by Steve Biko, Roger Casement, Robert Emmet, Nelson Mandela, Oscar Wilde, Woolf Tone; MacArthur, 1995). Awareness of the capacity for defendants’ oratory to reach a far wider audience than the court alone and of its appeal to those with whom they share social identity, is evident in the opening words of Casement’s testimony after being found guilty of treason by the English government in 1916:

My Lord Chief Justice as I wish my words to reach a much wider audience than I see before me here, I intend to read all that I propose to say... I may say my lord, at once, that I protest against the jurisdiction of this court in my case and the argument, that I am now going to read, is addressed not to this court but to my countrymen.... If I did wrong in making that appeal to Irishmen to join with me in an effort to fight for Ireland, it is by Irishmen, and them alone that I can be rightfully judged. (MacArthur, 1995, pp.418-421)

By the same token, precisely because, as a republican prisoner in Northern Ireland noted, “the law has the capacity to be ‘a real pain in the arse’ for those who run the prison system” (McEvoy et al., 2007, p.310), it is common for authorities to attempt to deny those who challenge them with access to due legal process. It was for this reason that the U.S. government set up a prison for ‘enemy combatants’ in its ‘War on Terror’ at Guantánamo Bay, outside U.S. jurisdiction (Dickinson, 2002). Less drastically, authorities may hold trials in camera, or with limited reporting rights, with a view to depriving defendants of what Margaret Thatcher referred to as “the oxygen of

publicity” that their cases would otherwise provide (Edgerton, 1996).

When formal channels for raising awareness of their plight are ruled out in this way, groups often have to resort to protest in order to achieve this end. As seen in both the Maze and Robben Island, but also Guantánomo Bay and prisons dating back over 2,000 years (e.g., to the *Troscad* in pre-Christian Ireland; Beresford, 1994), one common form that this takes is the hunger strike. The power of this tactic lies precisely in its dramatic nature and hence its capacity to generate publicity in the public domain. Nelson Mandela was keenly aware of this:

In order for a hunger strike to succeed, the outside world must learn of it. Otherwise prisoners will simply starve themselves to death and no-one will know. Smuggled out information that we were on hunger strike would generate newspaper stories which in turn would generate pressure from support groups (Mandela, 1994, p.502).

But there is an additional dimension to hunger strike campaigns. That is, they do not just make the resistance struggle known to a wider audience, but also represent that struggle in such a way as to generate both sympathy and support for the subordinate group and opprobrium for the dominant group. This goal is apparent in a statement that was read out on behalf of the Maze prisoners at a public demonstration that was held in West Belfast to mark the start of the second IRA Hunger Strike:

We are politically motivated and not motivated by selfish reasons for selfish ends. As ... demonstration of our selflessness and the justice of our cause, a number of our comrades, beginning today with Bobby Sands, will hunger-strike to the death unless the British Government abandons its criminalization policy and meets our demands (cited in Beresford, 1994, p. 83).

More generally, it is not sufficient for resistance groups to make their struggle visible, it is also necessary for them to define that struggle in ways that speak to the norms and values of those third parties whose support they wish to engage. Conversely, dominant groups (if they cannot stop the struggle becoming visible) need to define the struggle as violating the norms and values of these groups. Simply put, are members of the resistance groups moral or immoral, victims or perpetrators, freedom fighters or terrorists? In recent times (but not only recent times), the discourse of terrorism has become probably the most powerful means of manipulating sympathy and support. To define a group as terrorist serves to define people as

unsympathetic, unreasonable, not worthy of understanding, and hence containable only through force or violence (Kapitan, 2003; Picard, 1993).

Thus, it is a commonplace of all the case studies we have examined that resisters have sought to show themselves as reasonable and moral actors both in their words and deeds while the state has defined them as terrorists. This is well-known in the cases of Northern Ireland and South Africa. But equally, the Nazis denounced Jewish insurgents as terrorists (Herman & O’Sullivan, 1989). Similarly, those who resisted Stalin in the 1920s and 1930s were routinely represented as saboteurs, Nazi agents, and terrorists. Indeed, as Overy (2004) shows, whereas now we think of ‘the terror’ as Stalin’s acts against those who opposed him (and hence our sympathies lie with the victims), at the time, Stalin’s acts were represented as a war *against* terror, and this explains why much of the population sided with the authorities against the opposition. This support was not simply a result of coercion and fear. There was genuine consent driven by an acceptance of the official representation that dissenters and resisters were vicious and immoral individuals who stood against the people.

For this reason, resistance often struggles to survive — and is far less likely to flourish — if those involved are unable to turn around the dominant group’s representation of them as legitimately incarcerated and if they are unable to be seen as championing the norms and values of third-party groups. However, if this reversal occurs, then these third parties are more likely to shift from championing the dominant group to championing the subordinate group. This has both direct and indirect effects. The direct effect is that third parties may intervene to stop or to punish the dominant group if it continues to be repressive. The indirect effect concerns the psychological impact on both subordinate and dominant group members — more specifically, on prisoners and guards. For prisoners, the mere knowledge of outside support may increase the belief of resisters that change is possible and hence motivate them to continue with, and even increase, their efforts. Mandela (1994), for instance, indicates how news of international anti-Apartheid activity provided a considerable boost to prisoners on Robben Island. For guards, the knowledge that one will be seen as ignoble and illegitimate undermines willingness to be identified with the system, increases stress, and contributes to chronically high levels of absenteeism and turnover among prison staff (see Buntman, 2003, pp.201-206; Garland, 2004;



Lindquist & Whitehead, 1986; McEvoy, 2001, pp.195-203). Ultimately this undermines the efficacy of the prison regimes themselves (Hennessey, 1994; Prison Reform Trust, 2003; Ryder, 2001). Putting the prisoner and guard perspectives together, we see in the real world exactly what we saw in the BBC Prison study: a shift in overall power relations away from the guards and towards the prisoners.

In sum, we can see a dynamic interplay between practical and representational dimensions in the generation of cognitive alternatives and of resistance more generally. People are more likely to resist as a group when they have the concrete means to reach their desired ends — whether those means are in their own hands or in the hands of third parties. But equally, their ability to generate these means depends upon formulating actions in ways that engage both ingroup and outgroup norms. As we have also seen, leadership is essential to the achievement of all of these things.

## Conclusion

This paper has been concerned with developing a social psychology of resistance. But before we were able to address that issue, there was a prior point that needed to be made. This involved establishing that resistance is an important phenomenon, a common phenomenon, and one worthy of study. This might seem self-evident, but the starting point for our argument was that social psychology has been so focused on processes of conformity that resistance has been forgotten as a topic of study. Moreover, the conceptual models that have arisen from this focus on conformity go on to imply (usually implicitly, but sometimes explicitly) that resistance is neither imaginable nor possible (see Moscovici, 1976; Turner, 2006). So, it is worth stressing again that, even if nothing else is retained, the one thing that comes out unambiguously from our analysis is that resistance is always possible, even in the most unequal and the most repressive of situations. Even in prison. Even in the Nazi extermination camps. Prisoners can subvert and, on occasion, even take over their prisons. For this reason alone, resistance should always be on the theoretical agenda.

Of course, we do not mean by this that resistance always happens, still less that it is always successful. It would do us as little good to posit a world where oppression and inequality never endure as to retain the conceit that oppression and inequality are inevitable and

eternal. We certainly do need to consider the question of how systems of inequality persist, often with the consent of those who are subordinated (Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). But we need to balance that by asking when it is that people withdraw their consent and challenge the status quo. That is, to reprise Turner's phrase, the question we need to answer is *under what conditions and how* do people either sustain or subvert the social system (Turner, 2006, p.42). Our fundamental ambition is to place that question on the agenda — or, rather, recognizing that we are far from alone in our concerns, to help move it up the agenda of social psychology.

The starting point for our own analysis of the conditions of resistance is to reject two assumptions which, together, render social conformity inevitable. The first is the assumption that people automatically accept the social roles and social group memberships that they are assigned by others. The second is the assumption that any acceptance of roles or group memberships automatically means acceptance of the ways in which they are positioned in society. These assumptions are most clearly articulated in Zimbardo's analysis of the Stanford Prison Experiment. Yet evidence both from the SPE, from studies of prison life, and from the broader literature on intergroup relations indicates that these assumptions are unwarranted. Prisoners do not always identify as prisoners. They may adopt alternative social identities (as 'criminal' or 'political' in the Gulag, for example; Solzhenitsyn, 1973/1998) or refuse any collective identification with others. And when they do identify as a prisoner this does not go hand-in-hand with accepting subordination but can also be a basis for challenging that subordination.

In this respect, our analysis is entirely consistent with the classic account proposed by social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). But in other ways we modify and develop this account in order to incorporate developments that have taken place in the broader social identity tradition over the past 30 years (see Reicher et al., 2010) while at the same time turning back upon the theory's foundational concern with resistance and change.

There are three developments in particular which have influenced us. The first is work which shows that shared social identity is a source of social power (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Turner, 2005). That is, an internalized sense of 'us-ness' creates the potential for a set of people to align and

coordinate their actions and to support each other such that individual efforts become summative. Those who are able to define the content of social identities thereby become able to direct the application of collective effort and to gain power through the group. This then helps to explain how the achievement of shared identity generates the possibility of successful social change.

It also points to a second development concerning the importance of leadership and organization in generating effective group action (Haslam et al., 2011; Reicher et al., 2005; Turner & Haslam, 2001). That is, shared social identity does not, in and of itself, create agreement on group goals and the optimum deployment of group resources in reaching the goals. Rather, it creates the expectation and motivation to agree, along with the capability of developing the organizational forms that can turn expectation into reality.

The third development concerns the importance of studying group processes in the context of developing intergroup dynamics (Drury & Reicher, 2009). Social reality should not be seen as simply something outside the relationships which condition its nature. Rather, the reality for the one group is constituted by the perceptions and actions of the other. Thus constructs like illegitimacy do not need to be imposed but may rather arise out of the way that dominant group members act in relation to their own professed norms. Equally, the sense that the system can be challenged is generally an incremental process which starts by observing how the authorities respond to relatively trivial challenges and escalates if they prove unable or unwilling to respond. This is what happened in the BBC Prison Study (Reicher & Haslam, 2006), and according to Therborn (1980) it is what happens in every revolutionary process. The experience of the present fuels our imagination of what can or cannot be hoped for in the future.

This brings us to our concluding point. A social psychology so limited in its imagination that it cannot envisage social change bears one of two relations to the real world. On the one hand, it could be that we are taken seriously, that we lead ordinary people to see the status quo as inevitable and, by that very token, render change less likely. On the other hand (and we write at the end of February 2011 as mass resistance has toppled carceral regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, has put Libya in the balance, and has started to destabilize a series of regimes from Algeria to Yemen across North Africa and the Middle East) it could be that

we are not taken seriously, and that our models and theories are seen as incapable of accounting for real-world change. This is not an enviable choice. To move beyond it, as Turner (2006) advises, there therefore a pressing need for social psychology to escape its regime of conformity and for our intellectual imagination to be freed from its current imprisonment.

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