

SOCIAL INTEREST, A PURPOSEFUL MOTIVE FOR CONSTRUCTIVE OR DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR*

Ernst Papanek, Ed.D. (New York)

Social interest is inherited only as one of many potentialities; it must be developed in the interplay of the individual and his society. It can become a destructive component of human behavior if it is limited to the interests in a family, gang or nation. In the service of such a limited social interest, behavior would become antagonistic, even violent against other smaller or larger groups and individuals. Social interest awakened and developed from early childhood beginning as interaction with mother and family and positively educated to the "cosmic" extension of relationship with, at least, all human beings will make it an active and constructive factor influencing socializing and humanizing all other behavior forming factors.

Only a few months ago Ashley Montague, brilliant British-American interpreter and creator of new concepts in psychology, made a very interesting remark during a radio interview in New York. It did not arouse much opposition in either professional or non-professional circles. He declared that the human infant is born almost wholly incapable of surviving on its own, that it is far worse prepared for life at the moment of birth than are most other animals. The apparent reason for this, said Dr. Montague, is that if the human foetus remained in the womb more than nine months, it would grow so large and heavy that normal delivery would be all but impossible.

I share Dr. Montague's conviction that there must be some teleological explanation for this immaturity of the human newborn, that it must have a purpose. But it seems to me most unlikely that the difficulty in giving birth to a large infant is the explanation; nature would certainly have found some other solution to the problem — such as permitting the child to mature sufficiently without growing too large.

Even the so-called premature birth serves quite positive purposes. There are many physiological functions possible for the unborn foetus; even the potential breathing function can be tried out or the moving of the limbs can be practiced in the womb. But social responses, social potentialities certainly cannot be tried out and certainly cannot be practiced within that shelter. The child must be exposed to social stimuli and social challenges, in moderation at first; he must be subjected to educative trial and error in harmony with a continuously changing social environment. This is a tremendous task that demands years and years of help, of learning and re-learning; there is no end to the pitfalls and mistakes, the misinterpretations and the misconceptions. There are the errors due to biological deficiencies; there are the biases and the outdated beliefs provided by an environment

*Presented at International Congress of Individual Psychology in Paris — August 1963.

which took its own inspiration and conceptions from a past when the adults of today were still youngsters. In this unending interplay between the individual's potentialities and his changing, progressing society, individual and society are both growing — to use Allport's phrase — in an eternal, more and more beneficial "becoming." Certainly Freud was right to stress the importance of society and its dependence upon the social contributions of the individual; but we must firmly and repeatedly underline that it is the individual and his wellbeing for whom societies and civilizations are created.

Freud wondered whether we would ever be able to build a well-structured society except by disregarding the individual happiness of its members. Society, he said, "represents the authority whose punishment we fear and for which we have submitted to so many repressions"; "the price of progress in civilization is paid by forfeiting happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt." I should like to suggest — despite my great respect for this great pioneer in dynamic psychology — that all the concepts so heavily emphasized in "Civilization and Its Discontents" simply attest to what Adler would call Freud's own "erroneous style of life" and his own "inferiority complex", which he here confers upon the whole human race.

What I would call one of the psychological principles most tragic and, as originally defined, most destructive to each and every individual and to the whole of each and every society, is the concept that there are one or two bad inherited instincts. These are allegedly so evil in their biological structure and functioning that their inventor, Freud, could only advise us, if we want to survive (and he rightly perceived that we can survive only as social beings) to repress them or to sublimate them. By this method he believed we could replace the pleasure principle of the child with either a broken spirit or a "human spirit" — deadened, sublimated, esoteric, "realistic." A civilization based upon such repression or sublimation must inevitably produce discontent, anxiety, fear, conformism, tension.

No doubt there is an "awful tension" created by modern man's experience in relation to his society. But man and society are not trapped, as Freud and also Robert Lindner pessimistically insist, between aggressions born of two or three instincts (the sex instinct, the death instinct of Freud and the instinct of rebellion, which Lindner had added to the two and their repression or sublimation). There are, no doubt, tremendous discrepancies between human needs and what society has thus far been able to offer to all its members. These discrepancies have inevitably created a ruthless competitive spirit and the numberless emotional stresses and dangers that flow from such a spirit. These discrepancies have also fostered biased psychological interpretations and divisions of human society which are not only destructive in themselves but are conducive to the degeneration and withering away (to the size of an appendix) of our most important psychological potentialities: social feeling and social interest.

It is impossible to discuss here in any detail the problem of social interest and *Gemeinschaftsgefuehl*. There have been and there will be enough people to tackle this subject from a variety of standpoints — those of the philosopher, the natural scientist, the teacher, the parent, the politician, the therapist, the social worker, and so on. Mine, then, are just a few remarks

on this subject and on the handicaps we face, consciously, subconsciously, unconsciously, in our effort to promote and realize a constructive use of social interest. It is our belief that without a greater *Gemeinschaftsgefuehl*, without more social feeling, not even the social groupings that have existed till now — poorly though they have functioned, physically and psychologically — not even these can survive. A limited sort of social feeling has, of course, operated often enough within small groups: family, nation, class, race, religious community, etc. These social groupings have functioned to protect certain social units against others; frequently the opposing groups have been suppressed, destroyed, enslaved. In the atomic age, however, we cannot destroy our enemies without destroying ourselves.

There have always been people who worried about these social distinctions, race discriminations, classes, religions, nations — but these critics were looking for a *Pax Romana*, or a *Pax Christiana*, or a *Pax Napoleon*. In the nineteenth century, the Free Masons, it may be suggested, were at least striving for solidarity among all peoples when they supported not only “solidarite syndicaliste” within the *Confederation Generale du Travail*, but also a “Brotherly Union of Employers” to practice solidarity by providing work.”* Not so Plato’s *Republic*, which took no thought for the Barbarians, and not so Jefferson’s “all men are created equal,” which excluded the slaves — captive enemies among the ancient Greeks and captive African Negroes in the United States.

No wonder then that Alfred Adler demanded social interest as a cosmic principle: otherwise it is no more than an extended egoistic perversion. As such it can easily be misused for socially destructive purposes and will operate chiefly to intensify selfish competitiveness. As such it does and will lead to destructive identification with one or another rather unimportant group; it must create mistaken loyalties, a total confusion of misunderstood and unreasonable identifications; it will exact conformity to old and outmoded social concepts, instead of opening men wide to dedication and commitment, to the self-searching curiosity and genuine social interest of every member of society.

It is no disrespect to Alfred Adler to urge that for the time being “cosmic” be interpreted as embracing only the whole of mankind. In spite of sputniks and astronauts, I suggest that if we are to employ social interest constructively, we should consider the entire community of human beings as the subject of our educational psychological guidance and treatment work. This will be difficult enough in a world still trammled by antique prejudices.

For instance, I am not at all happy to find this week’s newspapers reporting the Civil Rights March to Washington under the headline “Revolt of the Blacks.” I know that the emancipation of the colored people will have to be, in the main, the work of the colored people. But in the interest of white and blacks, we must all join in the fight.

Take another pertinent example: Is it not an absurdity to pay United States farmers for every acre of land they agree to leave fallow in order to keep food prices up — when elsewhere in the world hundreds of thousands

*Quoted from J. E. S. Hayward, “The Indoctrination of Solidarism,” in the *International Review of Social History*, Amsterdam, 1963.

are starving to death? If such a policy is even regarded as good economics, how has competitive thinking perverted our most primitive human fellow-feelings!

Men can — though not always easily — accept and even approve his own mistakes, even his inhumanities, if he is able to hide his personal motivations and emotions behind an irrational, traditional social structure. The human newborn does not inherit only physical and psychological potentialities; he inherits also the society into which he is born and which was built up by a continuous interaction among its members. This colossal heritage, eternally changing, must unavoidably turn sterile and inefficient if not all its inheritors are able to contribute to its further growth.

The normal child and youth is eager to commit himself to the cause of a progressing society which offers him stimulation and orientation. This commitment will enable him to belong, to participate in a group, in a community, in mankind. Until now he has been a receiving member of society; this society has promoted his social interest, has awakened and developed his sense of responsibility. Now he wants to become an actively contributing partner.

In every case, we learn from Adler, the “way to improvement” lies in increasing the cooperative and social abilities. But we also learn that mere conformity to society’s already expressed beliefs, timid adherence to conventional modes of thought and behavior, these add nothing to the already existing spiritual wealth of the community.

I should like to pass on an incident which occurred at Wiltwyck School, New York, an interracial treatment institute for severely emotionally disturbed delinquent boys, which I directed for almost nine years. One day a counselor told his group that a new boy would join them the following day. When asked by one of the boys whether the newcomer was white or Negro, the counselor — himself white — wanted to know why the question had been raised. The boys said they did not want a white boy because the whites were all bad. The counselor replied that there are good and bad whites, good and bad Negroes. When the boys disagreed, he said: “A little while ago you said you like Mr. Papanek, and he’s white.” They answered: “No, he’s a Negro.” When I took up the question at our weekly assembly and stated that to the best of my knowledge I was white, a majority of the Negro boys present said, “No, you’re a Negro, why not admit it?” When I said I would be as proud to be a Negro human being as I am proud to be a white human being, I won a point for being human, but many of the boys were not yet convinced that I was white. I must be a Negro, they insisted, since they, the Negro boys, liked me.

Another example of good intention and bad interpretation: In one of my classes on child psychology, we discussed a famous study on race awareness and patterns of identification among children. This study draws the conclusion that in addition to other racial difficulties, there is the desire of the Negro children to identify with the whites. The researchers had asked a group of children to draw any human figure they wanted to; all the children, white and Negro, drew white faces and hands. Obviously they all wanted to be white. One student, however, questioned this, and we decided to undertake another study on the same type of group, of the same

age level, with the same ratio between white and black. The only change we introduced was in the color of the paper: we handed out brown paper instead of white. All the pupils, with one exception, now came up with Negro figures — since nobody bothered to paint the brown paper white, just as nobody had bothered to blacken the white faces in the original study. Only one girl, about six years old, painted her figures orange. When asked why orange, she replied, “I like orange.”

Let me close with a quote from Adler: “Education towards human perspective must become the center of crystallization, formed in the pattern of service to one’s own community. It should equip the child to draw his strength from the evolution of the community, so that he will be capable and willing to enter and strengthen the community.”

1 West 64th St.
New York, N.Y. 10023