

Letters to the editor

Sir,

The long article by Max Praed in the January issue gave a very good picture of the typical Tavistock group. But the article by Eric Hall says, I think, some misleading things about such groups and I would like to comment on these.

Hall says that the Tavistock situation (where the counsellor takes up a role which 'involves sitting in silence, refusing to make any normal contact with members of the group other than making enigmatic comments') puts 'all the responsibility for learning on the group member'. And he says that in this way the group member 'is brought face to face with the problem of dependency in the starkest possible way'.

What he does not say, and does not seem to appreciate, is that the group member is only brought face to face with the problem of dependency in a *hierarchical organisation*, where power is exerted from the top downwards. This is brought about by the behaviour of the consultant, who sets up a situation of one-way communication: the consultant can communicate with the group members, but the group member can never be sure of communicating with the consultant. As Hall rightly observes, in this way the consultant 'acquires a god-like position'. This is an exaggeration of the situation to be found in prisons, armies, churches, asylums and other total organisations. (Max Praed rightly points out the pyramidal nature of the set-up.)

It is for this reason that Michael Kahn, in a recent book of readings, describes the Tavistock group as extremely conservative rather than radical, and as encouraging adjustment rather than rebellion (again at the extreme of the scale).

The strange thing is that Eric Hall then goes on to say that 'Perhaps a measure of the worth of the study group is the strange irrational outbursts it produces from authoritarians, both from the right, such as most people who run institutions, and from the left (Humpty Dumpty No.3).' Now this sounds strange. One would expect those on the right to support the Tavistock group, and those on the left to oppose it. Personally I have never heard anyone on the right produce any outburst against the Tavistock - on

the contrary, it is the only institution running groups which they seem to support.

As for the 'irrational outburst' in Humpty Dumpty, it is a personal account by a woman, much along the lines of the Max Praed article, of actual events which took place. It shows clearly how any real examination of the power structure within the group is defused by the consultant, either by diverting the group on to sexual discussion, or by turning the questioning into an individual's 'problem'. And her conclusion is:- 'At best it was a failure, in that it missed out on the opportunity to increase our awareness of freedom and self-determination. At worst it was a malevolent attempt to strengthen the processes of social repression.' I don't find anything irrational about that. It is exactly the impression I get from reading Max Praed's account of his experiences.

I just wanted to try to correct Eric Hall's statement, because I think the Tavistock approach needs very careful watching as a possibly reactionary force.

John Rowan.
London N.3

Dear Sally Hyams,
Just to put the record straight, I am NOT a 'typical' reader and contributor to this magazine, and I think it is rather prejudiced of you to infer any such thing without taking the trouble to find out. How would you like to be called a 'typical dissatisfied housewife and mother' or some such label?

If you really want to help all the people you talk about, why don't you attempt to find out how you could do it? On the other hand, if you could merely be implying that the growth movement is a waste of time, 'making the neurotic more neurotic', fostering 'smug self-satisfaction' etc., why don't you come and risk finding out whether what you suspect is true or not?

Apart from all that, you sound as if you need a break from that man of yours.

Respectfully,
Madeleine Francis
London. SE17

Dear Vivian Milroy,
What exactly does John Southgate want anyone to do? (Vol. 1, No. 10). I find his arguments extremely confused and full of irrelevancies, (why bring in Buchenwald? In what way is this country now similar to Buchenwald?) but as far as I can see it reduces to the proposition that 'if any activity is not fighting large-scale oppression, then it is completely worthless'. Obviously what the Growth Movement is doing is not 'fighting large-scale oppression', and equally obviously there are many other things in life (even for revolutionaries) which are of great value. And one of them is unshrivelling spines (or self-actualisation, but that is a bit wishy-washy) which helps some people to be a little more comfortable in themselves and perhaps a little more effective and agreeable as members of society (or colleagues or parents or revolutionaries or capitalist lackeys or whatever).

Yours,
George Weeden
Edinburgh

Dear Vivian,
I've been wanting to write to you for some time about how I feel about SELF AND SOCIETY, and now I'm actually doing it! I think it was Sally Hyam's letter and John Southgate's article in the last issue that triggered off what I have to say.

The trouble with 'the woman who is tied to the house and gets into a rut' is that most likely she would not want Encounter. The prejudice - even superstition - among most people when it comes to Encounter is tremendous. I suggested the A.H.P. voluntary team first to my Head of Department, who turned it down - not at all to my surprise. I then suggested it to the President of the Students Union at my College, who after some polite initial interest took no further steps. That DID give me a surprise. Now, if students are not interested, how can the less educated classes be induced to overcome their fear of the unknown?

Though I feel sympathetic towards what John Southgate is saying, I'm sure that the Encounter movement has never had for its aim the overthrow of society. As I'm neither a historian nor a sociologist, I can't argue on that point, but an overthrow usually comes from above whilst the Growth Movement comes from below, even if it's not grass roots yet.

I've just been trying to be clever in case you want to publish this, or part of it - you have my blessing. (Very non-Encounter terminology!) So just a few words to be my 'self'. I remember the time before the birth of SELF AND SOCIETY, when the journal had no name but was yet clearly conceived by you. I followed the birth throes and before that, the anxious moments when abortion was imminent. Still the baby was born and its very beginning gave me great joy. The bit by Bob Jones - 'Live more fully, enjoy more, suffer more' - gave me and all my students great warmth. Dennis Westell's article on 'Encounter in the Classroom' was a creative source to me and I did the 'Anger' with my students very successfully.

The 'baby' has grown into a child. It has understanding parents who allow it to do what it likes. It has the wisdom of the child, yet is not always wise. It does not lie because it is not afraid to say what it wants. It is a pleasant sight too, in all its many colours. And so I hope that when the child turns into an adult it will not lose its frankness, outspokenness and even its little faults. I have learnt, late in life, that I do not want to be perfect. Nor do I expect others to be. So I'm accepting SELF AND SOCIETY as it is. I have no expectations and welcome its arrival every month. I'm grateful for the positive and sometimes negative responses it arouses in me. Could a friend do more?

Yours,
Danica Svoboda
London, N.W.3

P.S. As I loved Bob's contribution in the first issue, so I liked the Discussion in the last one, although for a different reason. I found it most stimulating, challenging and above all, courageous.