Tom Osborn

The British Experience

This is a shortened version of a contribution to a conference set up by ARIP (l'Assocation pour Recherche et Intervention Psychosociologique). *It was called the Politics of Groups (or* Training-Formation *is the french word) and its aim was to look at the implications of a law passed in France as a result of the 1968 crisis by which every adult has* right *to time for continuing further education, including social skills learning.*

In May 1968, which is a date that has become part of the French language, I ran a happenings group. We did improvised events, not directly political, aimed at affecting people's view of the world but not specifically their political consciousness. We performed in the London Arts Laboratory, in colleges and in the street. We took a minor part in the sit-ins at Hornsey School of Art and at the London School of Economics. One of our most successful events was when we stuck rubbish down on the pavement in Tottenham Court Road.

I think my own experience symbolises the difference between Britain and France, at least at that time. In my country, whatever happened in 1968, it only manifestly affected the student world and the art world, the avant-garde if you like. Factories, the commercial world, the working population, were untouched.

There has been some more serious political activity in Britain since, but in a way it still characterises the British experience. Britain is a place where a lot of exciting, innovative, sophisticated new-world activity, and I call our work exciting, innovative, often sophisticated and 'new-world' in the sense that it is striving for clearly a new and better way of life, Britain is a place where a lot of such activity goes on; in small enclosed pockets in London and one or two university towns; which has no impact whatever on the general economic or cultural or educational life of the country.

Your law of 1971 would be quite extraordinary in Britain. There is a complete absence of any equivalent. It's true there is provision for training in technical skills, on a 'day-release' basis. What this means is that companies are *encouraged* to give some people one day a week off to study. But this is given and taken in order to learn some skill which will improve the employee's usefulness, as far as the company is concerned, and his career prospects as far as the student himself is concerned. Social skills training under this scheme would be quite unheard of.

Social skills training is in any case regarded with extreme suspicion by the trade unions and the working population altogether. They view it as a tool of management, and of course they are usually right. It is easy to understand this suspicion. Who pays, after all? What can someone, who is paid for at the rate of £100 per day or more, what can he know of the interests of the ordinary shop-floor worker?

But even within the co-operative movement, which is relatively small, not comparable with your movement in France, even within this movement for example in the Industrial Common Ownership Movement, of which I am a member there is an ignorance and suspicion of training and group methods. Interest is expressed at conference and in conversation, but there is no commitment to serious work in this way, although my perception is that these firms would greatly benefit from such work.

In the field of education, almost no work of this kind goes on, neither in schools nor in higher education institutions. Such work has been done for some years in Denmark and in Germany and is growing, but in my country it is virtually non-existent. There is a little organisation development work in the technical skills of administrators; and there are school counsellors for individuals. But nothing in the social skills or in the human relationships at the group and organisational levels, within the established system at any rate. There are Rogerian groups for teachers at the growth centre Community (run by Alan Lowen) and a sensitivity group at the Teachers' Centre which Neil Wilson managed to slip through before a disapproving Inspector noticed it.

The exception is in the management studies departments of polytechnics. Here, of course, it is normally geared to the needs of industrial companies or else to the needs of governmennt departments or social welfare agencies. But it is not related to an understanding of the change process that our society is going through, and to working on the difficult, deliberate, conscious transition, in individual people and in social organisms, that this process requires. This would be too close to political action.

I worked for four years at the Polytechnic of North London, where we did succeed in developing such a course. I think it was a rather unique situation. I would like to describe it's development to you now. I think it is interesting because of the way our small unit related to its environment, within the Polytechnic and outside it. And because I can now see how what we were attempting to do, was influenced and shaped and limited, and perhaps subverted, by many circumstances which had nothing to do with our deliberate intention or our degree of political consciousness. These circumstances were sometimes quite arbitrary and sometimes a part of the institutional structure within which we were working. Often they were outside our control and sometimes outside our consciousness. And I can now see how these circumstances affected the political success or failure of what we were doing.

I worked in a unit called the Applied Behavioural Science Division, which was a rather small part of the Management Studies Department. Polytechnics in England are geared to a practical training for a job. Success is seen in terms of how well students have been equipped to compete in the job market. They are not, like Universities are, geared to pure knowledge or the research that goes with it. So the Management Studies Department was for people who were following careers in some kind of management occupation. All the students were 'post-experience'. They had already been in jobs. They were usually studying for some kind of Diploma or Masters degree which would give them additional skills and greater value at work. This context within which we worked has some importance in my story.

The people who came on our courses just came for a week or two, and were not

evaluated by means of a diploma or in any other way.

When I first arrived, which was in 1969, the unit was doing conventional skills training with mainly managerial groups. We ran a lot of T-Groups with some structured exercises put in. We also ran groups for the nursing staffs of hospitals and for child care officers doing further training. But the ideological context in all groups was managerial.

By this I mean that the work was based on the practice of skills useful to people who were taking the roles of managers in their social organism. So these groups were concerned with the work relationships between such people, and with their ability to influence subordinates.

They did not question the nature of the economic and power structure in the organisations from which the group participants came. They did not investigate together how far participants could, or should, or wanted to, extend their level of decision-making in their organisations. They did not develop a collective approach to the use of the resources of their organisation. These issues did not occur to the participants, and they were not raised by us. The work focussed on the effects of the behaviour of individuals on the group; on interpersonal issues, such as communication between individuals; on individual skills such as listening, making a case, giving support etcetera; on leadership and influence issues; on group skills such as decision-making; and on inter-group issues of conflict and co-operation. An awareness of group process was brought in relating to such skills. An over-all picture seeing skills as sensitivity skills, diagnostic skills and action skills was drawn. The Schutz phases of inclusion, control and affection provided another kind of picture, developing through time. And other concepts were sometimes drawn on, such as the avoidance behaviours described by Bion.

The training style and the designs were based on the work of the National Training Laboratories, USA, which the Polytechnic group had acquired at Leeds. The style was open and participative: in the way the trainer behaved. It was rarely open in areas such as how much trainers (or participants at their job either) were paid. Nor was it participative in the design or programme of the work. The group, or the groups in a workshop, were entities without a context. They did no work on their own structural organisation except in so far as this affected relationships within a group or in the way it related to another group. Such work as went on which could give rise to organisational learning took place within quite strict limits, imposed through a mute acceptance of the power structure of the client organisation.

You can see how the structuring of these groups within the context of the Polytechnic as a learning organisation reflects the situation of the participants in their own organisations. They were groups with a silent context; just as the work situation of most people exists in a silent context.

Where the job of the participants was dealing with people, then the kinds of skill, the modes of relating, were not different in the work of these groups. They were human only in order to make the working relationships more effective. Any radical change in

the power relationship between nurses and patients, or child care officers and their children was simply not considered.

I don't mean to say that these groups were without value. That was in 1969. Perhaps this is what most people who came to such groups in Britain were ready to learn, then. I am telling you these details so that you may understand how it was frustrating for me, and for John Southgate, who had been at the Polytechnic for some years when I arrived. And so that you may understand the relation between that existing situation (which I know is still the situation in most such Departments) and how we changed it.

Gradually, John Southgate and I formed an alliance. It certainly wasn't based on any stated political position. We both had a strong impulse towards giving more responsibility to participants. This led us to work with large groups where the participants themselves had increasing responsibility for design, and for management, such as decisions about where future groups should be held, what specialist staff should come (for example experts in music or drama for child care officers) and so on. This, of course, meant that a whole new area of skills was opened up. People had to collectively recognise what they were after, and jointly push for it. They no longer related individually to the trainers in their relation to management. And the consensus model, so beloved by the NTL school in the small group, became useless for the development of a large group. The small group can behave like a family, in which the *paterfamilias* relates to the outside world. The large group must behave like an organisation. Of course it is possible for a large group, like an organisation, to be run paternalistically also, under a dictatorship. It is my view that the Tavistock large groups operate on this basis. But where responsibility is given to the group, it has to face its relation to the outside world as a collective. And this at once makes the group somewhat political. We ran large groups and we structured in trainerless small groups.

The alliance between John and me became very powerful and had a big effect both on us and on the unit. For John, it had the effect of enabling him to bring politics into his job. For me, the rebellion that I had always felt against existing institutions, and acted on as an individual in various ways, crystallised into a political position. We influenced the designs and we influenced the nature of the clientele. We influenced them to such an extent that the commercial clients disappeared and the other staff also eventually left one by one! We replaced two of them with our colleagues Gary Robins and Troy Langley. They were both politically active.

Then we started the Diploma course. It was a 2-year, part time course. About 60 people came on the first intake, and continues to come each year. In this course, participants decided, for themselves as individuals, and for the course as a whole jointly with us, the staff, what their objectives were, how they would work at them, and also how well they had succeeded. In fact it was an extension of our aims as I have stated them. At the same time, it was also a response to a critically contracting market for behavioural work.

The course was extremely radical for a Polytechnic. I became a member of the Academic Board, representing the Management Studies Department, of which our unit was quite a small part, in order to help get the proposal for the course through. This in

itself was paradoxical. Academic Board Representatives were elected. At my election, there was no other candidate. The rest of the department couldn't be bothered to nominate anyone else. They liked me well enough personally and they were glad that someone else would be doing the work involved. That is what is sometimes called in England the 'silent majority'.

The course was surrounded by paradoxes. The political word for a paradox is 'contradiction'. The central contradiction was this. Here was a course based on the ideology of the collective use of resources. This was taken as far as we could take it. There was no selection. There were some formal requirements to meet the demands of the College, but no-one was ever refused entry. This is extremely unusual in England. There was collective management and collective decision-making. But the aim was to get a professional diploma to help people in the job market! Of course, this raised enormous problems over assessment. This was supposed to be by students themselves, in their work groups. They were supposed to assess each other by giving each other credits (or refusing credits) when they thought people had achieved competence in their chosen areas. However, this evaluation process, based on the idea of management by objectives and self control, has never yet been fully confronted. Well, the problem of standards and excellence seems to be very central in any revolutionary political programme. It only reflects the reality.

There were some other paradoxes. In our department, we were badly dressed, we had beards, we supported the student Union against the central authority of the Polytechnic, we were suspected of joining in the smoking of marijuana and promiscuous sexual relations on our courses. Yet we were the best qualified and had the most successful marketing policy.

Director Miller, who was against what we were doing and whom we opposed, privately and without any constitutional authority sent our Diploma Proposal to a friend of his in the Education Department at London University. At the Academic Board meeting where our proposal was considered, he got fed up with the discussion and suddenly said he had done this, hoping to get the reply from his academic friend that our proposal was rubbish, but in fact the answer had come back that it was rather good. So he suggested that it be given a try. And the proposal immediately went through, because of course the people who had been opposing it, being authoritarians like himself, obeyed his word without question. So in fact he used his autocratic style, to push through this radical educational proposal by a group of people who were active politically, and who had openly sided with the students who were trying to get him out and had occupied the college more then once for several weeks.

The students own position was paradoxical. They wanted Miller out because he was an educational elitist who declared he was going to run the Polytechnic like a University and so not geared to their needs. Yet their needs were to get a competitive professional training which would help them in the job market!

I want to say again that all these contradictions seem to be connected with the issue of quality and competence. One ultimate political problem seems to be: how do you

ensure that things are done *well* without competition and without central authority? I think we have each to face this issue in our own situations.

My own situation at the Polytechnic ended about this time, that is some two years ago. I left. There were a number of reasons. But the relevant one for today is that I came to feel that we had reached the limit of what can be achieved in collectivity within the structure of the traditional institution. The inevitable differences between staff and students were set by this structure. We were paid, they were paying. We were permanent, they were temporary. We were experts, they were learning. And so we mediated, in our roles within this structure, between the competitive, hierarchical nature of the real, outside world: outside the Polytechnic, and outside our unit within the Polytechnic; between those forces on the one hand, and the collective aspirations of ourselves and our students on the other. And this tension was not only very exhausting, but it often seemed unproductive in political significance.

I still feel it was a worthwhile achievement. Although I don't believe it has changed society, I do believe that many of the people who have done this course have much more power over their own lives than they had before. People have changed jobs, women have become assertive, homosexuals have come into the open. And sometimes I go to a meeting about one issue or another in London and I am s struck by the large proportion of the articulate and conscious speakers taking part in discussion from the floor of the meeting that have been on the Polytechnic course. I am clear that in their own personal growth there has been some political effect.

And that takes me to the last part of my story, no longer the story of the Polytechnic but the story of me in encounter groups and the 'new therapies', as we call them in England. I went through a kind of personal crisis, which led me to do a lot of personal growth work with myself. I'm not going to tell this story in any detail, because there isn't time. But I want to say that I discovered that it was impossible for me to bring my political impulse into this work. In all these activities, the direction is almost always exclusively towards individual growth. There is an ideology which says 'Take responsibility for yourself; and don't take it for other people'. I understand how this has arisen and often it is very constructive. But it isn't enough. It does not consider the many difficult boundary points where we have to make real decisions about responsibility for others, or for a social group. These activities have an aim of making a kind of perfect person - someone who feels and expresses freely what is in him, and whose energy flows without blocks. How can this be anything but a futile quest, since an individual is not an isolated energy system? These activities are not concerned with social growth or social awareness. In fact in their work, the individual *is* regarded as an isolated energy system. And in the structures that are set up, for groups and within the organisation of the growth centres where groups are held, they reproduce generally the same old traditional, authoritarian, non-participative structures, which now block energy in social organisms.

This is true of the management of most of the growth centres, and it is also true about the management of their groups. For instance, the ideology of 'take responsibility for yourself' means that time is just taken by an individual in competition with other individuals. No work is done on the issues of competition and collective leadership at a

group level, only in terms of personal hang-ups. Leaderless groups are very rare, and usually collapse within a few meetings. The normal pattern is that one pays a more perfect person than oneself to help one along the road to perfection.

What is important about this is that no consciousness of the social organism and its energy flow and how this affects individuals is worked on. And of course there is not a glimmer of understanding of the way in which people who go to these kind of groups are in fact *taken responsibility for* at a material level to quite an extent by the people in the social system of that society who do the material work, and by the poor nations of the world. And in fact all this adventurous activity in isolated pockets in one or two cities and university towns makes no impact whatever on the general culture of organisations.

The effect of this situation is that there's an almost complete polarisation between personal growth work and political activity. People either work on individual change, or they work on political change. But these two kinds of activity are combined by a very few people. One general exception is the women's movement.

The only places I know where there is a combination of our kind of work with political consciousness, such as communities in the country who have the idea of living in ecological balance with their environment, won't pay us a fee for working with them. For this reason I believe that all of us who work in this peculiar profession need to think very carefully about how we earn our money. I believe we should reduce our standard of living and learn another way of earning our living.

However, I was not asked here to make this kind of intervention. We can say, then, that our kind of work takes place in two ways in England. Firstly, in the context of management. This is for managers, usually of large concerns, both private companies and some public corporations and Government agencies. It is clearly and unashamedly work-orientated with the purpose of increasing productivity through improving relationships between managers, and of gaining the motivation of subordinates through improved managerial skill. It is paid for by the management. And there is virtually no work at shop-floor level in England, except in very skilled situations like some chemical research laboratories, where the workers involved cannot be called working class. For these reasons it is, in my view, reactionary.

The other situation is in a counter-culture setting. I am talking about the growth centres and the 'new therapies'. In London there are now two large, busy growth centres, Quaesitor and Community, plus several smaller ones. Also there is a Gestalt Centre, a Centre for Bio-energy, an Institute for Psychosynthesis, some meditation centres and at least one centre of alternative medicine. These are elitist, they reproduce the traditional structures in their organisation and they repress a social and political consciousness. For these reasons they are, in my view, reactionary.

These two situations, in which our sort of work goes on, are completely separate. And, what is even more important, you will see that they are both separate from political activity. In general, in situations where political activity goes on, our sort of work does not.

Our work, I believe, is concerned with individual and social consciousness and action. Praxis, we could say. It's significant that this word is almost unknown in the english vocabulary. It seems there is little need to express this meaning. So, the more that significant social action is prevented in terms of the weight of the realities of power and ownership in a society, the more our work is channeled into political insignificance.

In Britain at this time, it is either channeled into a greater and more extended individualistic growth, attempting to achieve the powers of a class of Yogis. Or it is channeled into a managerial technique. I find this frustrating.

Ian Holland

Atlantis is Alive and Well and Living in Co. Donegal

My first glance of the house - 'Atlantis' painted in red and black above the door, greens, blues, yellows, astrological symbols and a yin-yang sign on the walls. This isn't a THERAPY centre. Where's the seriousness? We are here to get into our past after all, to exercize our pain. The night before I left I told a friend, 'This is going to be the most painful period of my life'. Complete nonsense. The last 6 months has been the happiest. I don't get stuck in my blackness now, I can work through my depressions. It's painful doing it, but I come up out the other side after a session instead of as before sitting staring at the wall for hours hoping the mood would pass and having no idea how to make it, or guts to try.

I was straight-jacketed in a totally conventional middle-class prison known as the Holland family. The guards were known as 'the neighbours' (suitably anonymous) and there was something called the 'Family Name' which had to be appeased at all times.

The Family Name could feel threatened in several ways. I could swear (except till I was 10 I didn't know any swear words - they were very efficient). I could fart. I could mention sex or I could omit to salute my mother's friends in the street. Most of these public prohibitions were also enforcable within the family where they came under the civil as opposed to the criminal code, and were labelled 'cheek'. Punishment was much the same however: being dragged upstairs by the chief inspector, bouncing on the stairs behind him at the end of his arm, thrown at my bed, ordered to remove my trousers and administered in official terminology 'a damn good thrashing'. This helped make a man of me, albeit one who couldn't ejaculate.

Several allies were called in to help the inspectorate mould me into a fine upstanding citizen. 'We Cow Chidren' advertised Burnside Primary School in neon, flashing letters as I arrived to add my tears to the buckets already wept by a little group of kids most clutching flowers for TEACHER. Teacher I'd been told was a very nice lady, only I'd to do exactly as I was told or she'd produce a big thick length of leather and give me 'a little smack' with it. Some poor guy's mother hadn't warned him and he got belted the