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The Politics of Group Participation and the New Social Revolution

Where We Are

With the world swirling in a heap of problems - from pollution to overpopulation to famine to war - it is strange and striking that the major political concepts to guide a radical transformation of society came from 100 years ago. It was in 1871 that Karl Marx organised the International Working Men's Association, which was to form the base of a mass movement to overturn the capitalist system and give birth to 'a new world.'

The October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution succeeded in toppling the old order, but the purges and brutalities of the Stalin regime, the continued repression of liberties in the U.S.S.R. and the development of a new managerial group which parallels the capitalist hierarchy, all show that the Marxist revolution has fundamentally failed.

What is proposed in this paper is *not* that a truly Marxian revolution failed to take place in the U.S.S.R., but rather that the Marxian *program* for revolutionary social change has been basically inadequate. This thesis will be developed subsequently.

The 'crime' (in the sense of pathetic disappointment, as well as actual violence and murder) is that 'social-political revolution' continues to adopt a basically Marxian approach to radical change. *Class war* is the trumpeter's herald. And throughout most of the world, whether capitalist, socialist or 'Third World', the rebelling group fights to liquidate its opponents, if not violently, then at least by a 'political victory.' This is Marxian thinking brought to fruition in our century; and, from the point of view of 'the politics of group participation', it is the idealogical mistake that contributes heavily to our present world plight.

'The politics of group participation' is presented here as the most difficult and yet the most rational foundation for all social change and, finally, for all processes that influence our destiny. In other words, the methodology of group participation or, more precisely, of *effective action in a small face-to-face, self-regulating group*, is presented here as the most mature and advanced way for human beings to regulate their group lives.

Why is 'group participation' posited to be 'the most difficult' political form? Because it demands the most active and highest level of functioning from *each participant*. 'Participation by all' is the keynote. No longer, 'Leave it to the leader', but 'Each person contributes his best.' Leadership functions are shared, discussion is open to all (with the expectation that everyone add his individual word), decision-making is effected by the total group, the decision accepted is carried out by group participants, and feedback reports allow re-evaluation so that new action plans may be generated.

All this takes place in a 'face-to-face' group - eight to fifteen members (or up to twenty-five) so that there is *time* for every voice to be heard and *space* for every face to be seen. The anonymity which washes out our lives today so that we are nothing more than bleached forms to one another finds its most radical transformation: each one of us potentiates our uniqueness in the *small, self-regulating* group. The process alters our individual realization as well as, in final terms, the total social fabric. So the horizon is unlimited.

Group Participation: 'I Want to have My Say In What Goes On Here.'

'But you are just talking politics,' comes one objection. But no, not 'just politics' in the sense of political parties, or even legislation by the government and execution of its laws. 'Group participation' is the politics (or mode of action in the context of differing forces of power) for *all human situations* - the family, education, working conditions and leisure time spent with others. Imagine a worker in a factory, a typist in an office, a congregationalist in a church, a mental patient in a hospital, a child in a family - and each one begins to think, 'I want to have *my* say in what goes on here.' Every person wants to claim his rightful position where his point of view will be heard, respected, and influential to a degree equal with others, in determining the conditions and behaviour required in his specific situation.

So 'group participation', on a theoretical basis, throws a spanner in the works of our authoritarian civilization. (The 'authoritarian' mode which 'group participation' hopes to replace is *not* just a characteristic of our modern Occidental civilization, nor even of the present world culture, but of almost all large groupings or civilizations in history of humanity. To succumb to the authoritarian hierarchy has been the line of least resistance whenever people have not known their own capacities for 'self-regulation in a group context.')

But throwing a spanner in the theoretical basis of the authoritarian ('the leader tells us what to do') mode of human relationships does *not* at all mean a quick violent revolution against the authoritarian power structure. Quite the reverse. What will be emphasized, to the dismay of 'change-it-all-now' radical activists (or 'revolutionaries') is that the present authoritarian power structure which dominates even most revolutionary groups, is adapted to people's *deep needs* for security and effective action. Only when 'the education of the people' can so thoroughly transform itself and expand to the point where 'everyone can do the leader's job' and where 'each person can participate fully in the small self-regulating groups to realise the group's efficiency', will the authoritarian hierarchy no longer be needed. Then the structure of power can slowly evolve toward the group participation method, which is self-reinforcing because it *demand*s people practice its methods. (The ends are the means). No guns, no violence, no threats to people's security. *Everybody wins* because nobody is wiped out or exterminated 'for the sake of the movement.' Group participation is a slow, extremely complicated and extremely trying process, *taxing the human potential of everyone to its limit*. That is why it is described as the 'most difficult' process conceivable for guiding our destinies.

But also, once we understand the way the group participation process can permit us to transform our lives, and then transform it again, and then again, without finality, and once we can understand the scope of its penetration into almost all aspects and even the smallest crevices of our group interactional existence, then we can see that we are here touching a branch of the human tree which spans its breadth to a most beautiful and distant horizon.

Confronting The Objections To Group Participation

In a small 'self-regulating group' we have eight to fifteen participants, whose members have equal status, and where each member is given the opportunity to participate *actively and fully* for the group's goals. Active and full participation potentiates each individual's capacities and gives him personal satisfaction. The group's goals include a balance between *practical (hence, 'political')* tasks and *social functioning* designed to facilitate warmth and personal sharing among the members.

We have discussed how group participation must form the basis for all radical change. Let us now examine some objections:

Is It Irrelevant?

'Is the group participation process so very important? After all, the world is bogged down with so many important and complicated problems, and now someone starts talking about 'group participation' and 'decision-making by all.' That sounds very idealistic and fancy, but why don't we just get on with the job?'

Because 'the group participation' point of view doesn't start out with a presentation of end-results, but suggests *how* those end-results can be formulated - that is, by everyone directly affected by the situation deciding together - this way of thinking can seem unimportant and 'missing the boat' in facing the problems we have.

But just the opposite is true. 'Group participation' looks at the *process* of planning effective action for every human situation and asks one fundamental question: 'Has everyone involved talked it over and decided what to do together?'

The answer, naturally, is 'No' for almost every major problem that exists for humanity today. If we look at major holocausts like the Israeli-Arabian wars, the armed conflict in Angola, the violence in Northern Ireland, the disputes among a number of African states, the military 'coup' in Chile, and so on, either the parties involved have never sat down to negotiate the problem and mediate their conflicting interests, or else, if they have attempted negotiation, they have not come to a common resolution. In other words, they have not reached the point of finding a mutual decision.

'This is all too evident,' one might object. 'These large political disputes have their depths in people's long-standing traditions, differences of culture that go back tens and even hundreds of years. Furthermore, the conflicts represent intense economic

rivalries, they are catalysed by the opposing ideological forces of the present era, and so on. To posit 'group participation' and mutual decision-making' is silly. This is just what conflicting nations and groups may want to accomplish, but 'deeper realities' prevent this from happening. We do not need 'lessons in group participation', (continues this objection). 'We need to approach and resolve the 'deeper realities.'

People who talk of 'deep change' often refer to 'spiritual awakening', 'personal evolution', 'illumination' and individual transformations of the psyche towards states of 'love and self-realization' with the supposition that such transformations must and can only *precede* changes of the social order. ('Something else comes first' is a way to bog down any argument, whereas social and biological processes are always cycling, interacting and multidimensional at every single moment.)

Conflicts are Dialectics

Before the 'group participation' position responds to the objection of 'irrelevance' to world problems, let us mention some other blights of the modern world and their 'conflictual' (dialectical) aspects; Pollution by industrial waste - but we cannot stop our industries. The building of super-highways that destroy the countryside - but the people use cars to travel, and so highways are needed. Minority groups (including children and women) suffer from economic discrimination, restriction of rights, (especially children), abuse by the police (especially the coloured population and juveniles), lack a quality in education (produced by thirty or more children in a classroom), and a depressingly low scale of social security and welfare benefits for all groups, (especially for unmarried women with children and aged people.) *But* the government is already taxing its people at high rates, and all public institutions and social agencies are working to the straining point in order to maintain the measures of law, order(1) and justice we have already achieved.

The point here is that in every problem, there is a 'dialectic of forces,' an interaction of opposing vested interests and their associated points of view: People impoverished - but the government is already spending so much money. Censure of books (political or pornographic) - but 'the call for violence and subversion' must be avoided, and the public morality must be defended and protected from licentious influences. A public park may be destroyed - but the electric power gained from damming its water flow is *especially* urgent during the current 'energy crisis.' Just recently we have the dilemma of the Concord jet, which causes noise and vibration difficulties for residents near the airport - but this important venture in 'international co-operation' (the jet is constructed under an Anglo-French collaborative effort) must be given all the opportunity necessary to succeed. And so on.

Are We Realistic?

'This is still stating the obvious,' will be the sceptical response. 'We all know that problems come from human conflict, and, in fact, the greater the conflict, the more difficult - sometimes even insurmountable - the problem. People will always fight for

their self-interest. Just as well they do, because no-one else will fight their battles for them. But what is new here? What does the 'group participation' movement add? We want people to get together, and always have. But they will always be driven apart by their rival needs. The 'group participation' ideal - that we can all be lovey-dovey together and forget our opposing interests - is very nice for idealists and fuzzy heads. But this world is real and, unfortunately, cruel at times. We're all doing our best, so what more can one do, or can anyone expect?

This is the obstacle.

Handling Conflicts in the Family

To answer it, let us continue to identify problems, but this time in another domain. In the following instance, the 'human scale' of the problem will be different - namely, coming from family life - and we will also mention possibilities of termination and resolution of conflicts.

To 'descend to the family situation' is a relatively new approach in social and historical analysis, although antecedents for this point of view can easily be found (eg. Wilhelm Reich in *The Psychology of Mass Fascism* and in his other writings). This 'new tendency' has also been embodied in a recently formed journal, *History of Childhood Quarterly, The Journal of Psychohistory*. Its editor, Lloyd Demause, compares the difference between traditional historians and the psychological orientation of 'psychohistorians': '(Traditional) history has long been considered a record of public not private events. Historians have concentrated so much on the noisy sandbox of history, with its fantastic castles and magnificent battles, that they have generally ignored what is going on in the homes around the playground. And where historians usually look to the sandbox battles of yesterday for the causes of those today, we (psychohistorians) instead ask how each generation of parents and children creates these issues which are later acted out in the arena of public life.' (1)

Mother hears a loud scream in the next room. She enters. Little Johnny says:

'He pulled my hair.'

Little Joey: 'He pushed me.'

Little Johnny: 'He took my red train.'

Little Joey: 'He said I could have it because I gave him my picture book to draw in.'

POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS:

1. Mother: *'Stop that noise and bickering! The both of you play nicely or I'll take all your toys away from you.'*
(Punishment threat).

The mother could also threaten to send them to their rooms, scold Joey because 'he's older' and 'should know better,' demand that Joey give back to Johnny his red train and that Joey should not offer his picture book to Johnny (or demand the reverse), or intervene in still another fashion that avoids 'mediation of the conflict.'

Alternatively:

2. Mother: *'Do you want to talk this out while I listen to both or you? (Mediation offer)*
(Even more advanced: 'Do you want to talk this out together and I'll help make sure each of you listen to the other?')

Mother can initiate an arbitration of the conflict.

Her manner of intervention can influence the children's basic comprehension of how conflicts are terminated. We can have termination dominated by force, whether it be the older child's physically forcing the younger, the younger 'blackmailing' the older, or mother threatening and punishing one or both of them. We can also have a termination accomplished by a to-and-fro dialogue, mother helping as arbiter when that is needed. But does she know how to do this effectively? And does she value the new pathway of negotiation? We would all like the answers to these questions to be 'Yes.' But then, who has taught the mother (or father) the fundamentals of resolving conflicts by negotiation? Their parents? Probably not. The schoolroom? No. Their bosses at work? Hardly.

Perhaps some people still read books and articles that teach new ideas.

To negotiate conflicts is hard work. Beyond the basic strategies of reformulating positions, making sure the talking and listening time is evenly divided, offering compromise positions, there is a hard ideological job to 'know you don't know.' This means to avoid an overweighted identification with either one party or the other or with the situation, and to stay concerned while still neutral as far as the compromise solution. Can a person brought up in our 'Competitive-test' civilization where questions have 'right or wrong' answers, where people discuss and dispute to show, 'I am right!' - while they really mean, 'just listen to me, please!' - avoid the 'Who is right?' trap in conflict-negotiation? And can all the emotional traps provoked by important questions - whether it be the right-wing tendency to indignantly demand *security* without limits, or the left-wing cry for *justice and liberty* immediately and without preconditions - be surpassed by 'new ways of thinking'?

Perhaps the most important objection to the 'group participation' philosophy presented here, a philosophy that says negotiation and dialogue are *always* the pathways to beneficial change, is that it is just beyond the scope of the normal human potential. But the final resolution to this question - 'Is it possible? will never be known before the last person on earth has drawn his last breath.'

The Collaboration

Let us take another situation when Joey and Johnny are older. It is just before Christmas. Joey has saved up his money for about a year, with the thought of buying a new racing bicycle. Younger Johnny has also saved up his money with the intention to go to a well-known camp for two weeks during the summer. The boys talk about their plans. Johnny asks Joey if he will be able to use the new bicycle sometimes. Joey says he can use the old one all he likes. He adds that in some ways he feels a bit disappointed in buying a racing bicycle because he actually wanted to have enough money for a Moped (a two-wheeled motored vehicle); however, he didn't have enough money saved up for this.

SUDDENLY an idea comes to the two to them, almost simultaneously. If Johnny puts a part of his money into the buying of a Moped along with Joey, instead of towards his two weeks at a summer camp, then there would be enough money to buy the Moped. Joey prefers the Moped because he could then travel around with the rest of his friends who have the same bike. And his brother Johnny could use the bike frequently (proportionate to the money he has contributed), and would also have it as a 'gift' for six weeks during the summer, so that he could take a long bike-trip in the mountains, which he preferred to do rather than go to the summer camp.

What is the point? An open dialogue, a spirit of co-operation, and a collaborative effort with mutual trust allows a decision to arise where *each person profits*. The final result could not be achieved by either one alone, but only by the joint forces of both brothers in mutual accord.

This is the most fundamental reason for 'discussion and co-operative effort' in all human situations - to take each person to a further position than he could reach alone.

To mediate conflicts in order to reduce their destructive consequences is, in theoretical terms, a preliminary condition for co-operative ventures to work. But in actual practice, it is only when people can *recognise* that they can each gain more by co-operation than by conflict that they would be willing to submit to negotiation with a serious intent that they succeed. This suggests that 'co-operative projects' would be *prior* to negotiating conflicts, but people will too often refuse to even *consider* co-operative projects while there is still hostility in the air linked to unsolved conflicts.

So where can the first step be taken?

Two lovers, hurt and angry, stay paralysed after a bitter dispute, each one *wishing* the other 'come over' to give physical holding, to say, 'It's all right.' The first step will be taken by which side? And will the other party use this first step to help the reconciliation, or instead to 'take advantage' of the de-escalating move to re-enter the conflict with even greater force? (1)

Beyond Our Capacities?

The objection is that group participation is beyond people's capabilities. Furthermore, most people don't want this responsibility.

But we cannot know whether this objection is justified for all times or only for the present. Because we have all been raised in an authoritarian form of society, where planning, decision-making, evaluation and discussion, and often, the execution of important decisions, are all left to 'the leader' (patron, president, judge, father, etc.), we have *not* yet developed the capacities necessary to replace this system by autonomous groups where 'everybody participates'.

We don't know if this political-social ideal is actually *beyond* the human capacity. Certainly, it has never been tried on a widespread basis.

The fact that 'most people don't want this responsibility' is also a result of authoritarian doctrination, which leads the mass of individuals towards negative and fearful attitudes like 'leave it to people who know. We'd never know what to do ourselves.' Even more common is the distrust and lack of confidence in *other* self-regulating groups: 'They're biting off a bit more than they can chew.'

Obviously, these are the attitudes an authoritarian society *wishes* its people to have, for this keeps the generally pervasive dominance-subordination pattern intact and personally acceptable. Thus, we have a highly formidable barrier against the foundation of self-regulating groups.

One important response to this objection is that the proposed goal of self-regulating groups does *not* demand its realization in the immediate present. In fact, it is necessary to say that a total realization must *not* be sought after in the immediate present; this sort of urgency and impatience can over-ride the many *transitional steps* necessary to realize an *actual* success towards self-regulating groups. Time and special learning experiences are needed for people to develop the new capacities of effective participation in a small group-setting. In addition, the positive attitudes towards their application can only occur in a *profound* way after people have had several positive *experiences* with self-regulating groups. Each person must have a direct experience to know that *a group task can be accomplished in an effective and satisfying way by a co-operative effort*. This experience can be a pivotal turning point for many people. But it would be wrong to demand of people their adherence to the 'self-regulating group process' *before* they have directly experienced its potential success.

This is why *any small group experiment* - whether a group organized for encounter, political discussion, personal education, women's rights, tenants' rights, protection of our ecological environment, and so on - which tries to function in terms of *full participation by everyone*, can be an important step for its members to *increase their capacities and develop positive attitudes* for the principle of autonomous, small group functioning.

To continue along the lines of the former objection, which might be termed the 'put realities first' argument:

'How can we help people to realize that co-operation is better than conflict? Of course, that's always true. But the world isn't run by such ideals. People at war, or ready to cut each other's throats, or just angry with each other, can't listen to such frilly-sounding niceties. We've got to be realistic, and realities aren't so pretty as our ideals would have it.'

True, the world is not ready to act with co-operation among people as its guiding beacon, nor rationally mediate conflicts and untie the knots of opposition while bathed in this idealistic light.

The world is not ready, and yet, where do we begin?

The 'knot' of where to start off can resemble the problem of entering certain foreign countries to work. In order to obtain the job, the employer is required to see your government work permit. By law, he cannot write you out a contract until you have obtained that permit.

When you go to the Bureau of Permits in the Government Building, you discover that you can only obtain a permit to work if you bring a fully completed contract to work made out by an employer. (But your potential employer has refused to do this because he had to see your work permit before giving you the contract.)

To rephrase the question - how can we change people's actions towards conflict-mediation and co-operative efforts when that depends on a change of attitude, that is, an attitude of valuing mediation and co-operation? And then, how do we change people's attitudes (in the same direction) towards co-operation when those attitudes are opposed by the norms and rules of action which dominate our civilization (competition in the schoolroom, in industry, in the family, as well as lack of mutual trust in these situations), and authoritarian decision-making rather than 'participation by all' procedures in the normal group?

So we are caught up by spirals that negate the possibility of undoing the spirals that prevent co-operation and negotiation.

The Positive Obstacle

To better 'understand what is missing', let us talk about the family situation of our two brothers: Joey and Johnny could collaborate to buy a motorbike because they had a history of collaboration with successful out-comes before that. These two brothers shared a mutual trust and confidence because each was 'reliable' and 'kept his word' in the past co-operative projects. Most significantly, the two brothers *thought* of a co-operative project which could help each one obtain a greater satisfaction of his own needs. This is 'most significant' because not only are many couples and groups of

people blocked with 'lack of confidence' in each other, or lack of 'negotiating abilities' to actualize a suggested project, but most people interacting do not even *think* of co-operative projects to enhance the fulfilment of their needs. This obstacle to co-operation could be attributed to the competitive pattern of our upbringing. However, there are more profound inculcations which prevent co-operative tasks - fear and passivity. People do not even 'think up' potential projects of co-operation to actualize with their peers, colleagues, friends or family members, because they have never been encouraged to do so by our 'system' - that is, the centralized decision-making (or patriarchal) manner of our civilization. 'The boss gives the orders', people believe, so there is little incentive to suggest an alternative. The result is *passivity*.

And in cases where a few 'strongminded' or 'bullheaded' individuals take it upon themselves to offer some new suggestion to the boss (teacher, parent, etc.), that person could be treated as rather 'impertinent', 'tacky', or sometimes 'aggressive' for his initiation, because *the leader never even asked for the suggestions!* So fear of criticism, reprisal, punishment, are associated with 'taking the initiative' when the authority in power (which could be merely the Unknown in an unstructured, nonauthoritarian group) has not asked for new ideas.

Are Joey and Johnny unusual brothers? We don't know. But the world functions and turns round on principles where it is *as if* Joey and Johnny are unusual brothers, that is, where initiatives for co-operative action are unusual. Many aspects of our modern society do 'work' in the sense of 'maintenance of functions'. But the active principle comes from competition, breeding hatred, envy and suspicion, when there are no co-operative forces at play at the same moment to temper its thrust. Then, too, the passive maintaining of routine duties comes from *obedience*. (1) And more destructive than competition, which has, at least, a vitalizing and activating pulsation, is the deadening and numbing effect of obedience. Obedience to unquestioned rules and routines produces apathy and withdrawal. It is these states of spiritual deadness which most impede social change.

to be continued next month

FOR YOUR BOOKLIST

Free To Feel by *Jerome Liss, M.S.* (London Wildwood House, 1974), for all those interested in 'the new therapies' - Gestalt, Bioenergetics, co-counselling - with a *Political* point of view nourished by Laing and Reich.
