

SELF-HELP AND COMMUNITY GROUPS'

A new *Association for Self-Help and Community Groups'* was inaugurated on February 19th 1977 mainly in response to the interest shown by community workers, health visitors and many other professions in developing human resources dormant in the community. At the moment the Association is seeking to recruit people from all over Britain to act as information points on how to start such groups, how to organise them and find local resources, how to lead them and how not to. The British Association for Humanistic Psychology has taken an interest in these developments and it is hoped that close ties will be established between these two bodies.

As a start the new association, ASHCOG, is offering to run two residential weekend workshops, March 25-27 and May 20-22, for £6.00 each which is made possible by people experienced in this field and in humanistic psychology methods.

Encouragement and help with drawing up a syllabus and finding suitable tutors is also being offered to local adult education centres and technical colleges which may be willing to put on courses in community action, group leadership and counselling.

Further details from ASHCOG, 7 Chesham Terrace, Ealing, London W.13.

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The Politics of Group Participation and the New Social Revolution Part II

'Group participation' demands questioning, alertness, knowledge, awareness, and other *vital* forces of functioning, as well as intense patience, tolerance and respect for others, when their *self-determined* individuality brings them to alternative ways of thinking and action. Evidently it is necessary that people have the opportunity of the 'group participation' situation in order to exercise and thereby actualize these vital functions. Yet, the old question: Not *being* vital in routinized situations - office-work, factory-work, the classroom, at home, in front of the television set - how can people *become* vitalized? And even if a vitalizing stimulus appears, what is the source of knowledge and the capacity to overcome the resistances to its use?

To Respect the Other's Needs And Also Your Own

We return again to the shape of the self-biting serpent and the previously quoted objection that the world isn't run by 'co-operation' and idealistic principles that sound like 'frilly niceties'. 'Reality' dictates a hard, competitive form of action for individual survival, to match the harsh competitive demands of the world.

But in the prior example of two brothers who fight over their toys and are *not* (in the

first instance) taught to negotiate by their mother, does this not suggest an ironic situation to help explain the 'hard (non-co-operative) realities' of our world? To help children negotiate their dispute over the toys, a mother must accept their needs to 'take' and to 'have', and also their capacity to defend their individual wishes by language and even force. Because if the mother *does not* accept these wishes, she will be moved to punish the children and invalidate their motivations by calling them 'selfish', 'infantile', 'egotistic', and so on. Such commonplace invalidations may be generated by a mother's (or father's) irritability at the moment, but there is a deep cultural bias to give support: that 'love' is, at bottom, an *altruistic* feeling towards another and comes with a denial or renunciation of self-needs and self-interest. The mother who punishes 'the brats' for fighting over their toys is teaching them in (in her mind) to stop being 'selfish'. Her reward will be to see their 'selfish behaviour' come to an end, whether this lesson of suppression be well-learned by 'timid' children who stop fighting for their self-interests, or whether the reproaches merely feed the 'rebellious hearts' of so-called 'aggressive' children who renew their fights as soon as the parent leaves the room. Either way, the punishing and admonishing parent acts with the sanction of the church tradition - which has been hardly 'Christ-like' in its treatment of children and non-believers - and with the support of most of our institutions - law, education, medicine - which apply the same repressive precepts in doing their job. And just as public institutions keep their clientele infantilized, so the repressive parent foments infantile outlooks and behaviour among the children.

These are the 'deeper realities' which prevent peaceful resolution of conflicts among nations. The population is conditioned and encouraged to see conflict as a human situation to be resolved by force rather than negotiation. Our family lives function according to this precept, and so no surprise that we are stuck in cycles of aggression and war that see no end from generation to generation.

What our civilization doesn't teach us is the process of negotiation, which is at the heart of the 'group participation' movement. We have not learned that parties in conflict can respect both their own and the other's self-strivings, that needs and motivations can be expressed clearly, and that there is a final joining of forces possible, even among independent people and groups in conflict, where a dialogue can unfold based on the precept: 'We can go further together than by each one pulling for himself alone.'

Transformation Everywhere

Another objection to 'the politics of group participation', as presented here, is that the argument is all too obvious. 'We know all of these ideals. They are very simple. (1) So what are we hearing that is new?'

Perhaps there is nothing at all new here. But in following the logic of 'group participation' as the political base for *all* changes and interactions, we see that *every situation* must use its principles - at least partially, and with a vision of *totally* adhering to its methods - schools, work, the family, leisure. *Every* meeting, encounter! 'What do

you want to happen here? Fifty-fifty for couples, a piece of the decision-making pie for every group member.

'Good idea for the future when people will be ready.' But no! People only get ready to be ready by the introduction of these principles in a discussion, and then their application to the extent that initiatives are taken (by anyone in the group) and respected by everyone. Group participation is not a 'not now' philosophy, but an 'always now' process, because it is a step-wise transformation where a first step - even a 'tiny, little one' - can always be taken, and the last step is always ahead of us.

'But if we talk about *how* we make our decisions, we'll waste time and never get our decisions made.' This is a fine objection. It raises the whole notion of 'efficiency' which the 'group participation' philosophy says is always *potentially* greater under its principles than by the authoritarian hierarchy. But an endless discussion of 'group participation' will undo the effectiveness already achieved by any ongoing group and thus destroy, in concrete example, what it pretends to uphold as a future goal. 'Little changes' therefore, quickly achieved, and modestly appreciated, can forward a 'group participation' movement more realistically and effectively than the 'big bang' hopes of 'change it all now' revolutionaries. For example, there are radicals who can spend more time in talking over their 'revolutionary tactics' (including violence) with their elbows placed on the candle-lit table, and with Utopian society pictures crammed into their back pockets, than in actually getting up off their seats in order to enter into actions that organize 'the unorganized' and then to listen to them.

Why are 'little steps' hard to take? Have we been so bludgeoned and bamboozled by our mass modern culture - the very culture we wish to transform - satisfy - at least, not disappoint - the grandiose wishes in our heads? And have we no trust that the 'little steps' of others, *not identical to ours*, can also help change the world, and thus are worthy of our appreciation rather than derision based on envy but masked by contempt?

Using Saul Alinsky: 'Ask for 100%, take 30%, and call it a victory!'

Personal Satisfaction Is Needed for an Independent Group To Continue

Our situation today shows that the positive attitudes and the know-how necessary for co-operative action do not permeate our society - neither in the family, at school, nor at work. What about 'the new, marginal groups'? People now get together using the principles of collective action for various purposes: to extend the rights of women, to living together in communes, to preserve and protect the natural ecology, to initiate radical political and social change, to defend the rights of minorities, and so on. But what is most sad is that these groups often fail. People are not prepared to give themselves to the group project. Participants' attitudes are not sufficiently positive and, more important, the 'methodology' for acting effectively for the group goal is not sufficiently shared. So that 'active participation' is too often left to the several very talkative activists - who may be the ones who also 'founded' the group - while other

people come to try it for a while before they drop out.

Besides the lack of group know-how by individual participants, there is an astonishing unawareness by people who initiate a group that *the group must offer a direct personal satisfaction for all participants* if they are to continue to give their time in attending meetings and acting for the group project. (Institutional groups with professional employers don't have to face the problem of 'nonsatisfaction' in their meetings since members are both obligated and paid to come.

To repeat, the satisfaction of 'helping the group project' is not sufficient for most people to try out or stay with an 'independent group' which has socially useful aims, such as in groups for ecology or protecting people's rights. That is why these movements have had only limited success (and limited numbers of participants), despite the obvious rationality and justice of their social goals. These 'new independent groups' miss a certain 'personal interaction' level where people can relate directly outside of the group project aims in order to secure good contact and personal satisfaction. (1)

This obstacle and many others must be overcome for independent groups to keep enough participants 'interested and active' so that their goals of social change find success.

In The End We See Our Beginning

The planet earth is in trouble, and heading for even more trouble, according to many predictors. What can we do? We can let it all slide, or we can try to take a step which is meaningful and relevant to the problem.

There are already many diverse frontiers of 'avant-garde' action for the world's radical improvement. A number of them suggest directly the application of 'group participation' principles, whether the name be 'Worker's Control', 'Free University', 'Friends of the Earth', 'Consumer Protection', 'Family Planning' and so on.

CAN GROUP PARTICIPATION BE INTEGRATED INTO OUR ECONOMY?

The principles of 'group participation' - mutual decision-making and all of the associated capacities required by every participating member - *can transform all of our social realities*: the family, leisure-time activities, the school institution, all government projects and, finally, large industry and our economic life.

The power of 'group participation' is that despite the Utopian aspect of its final goals - goals which may *always* remain Utopian because it is not clear whether human beings will *ever* have the emotional and intellectual capacity to rule themselves by the 'group participation' vision the principles of self-regulation and mutual decision-making can still give the direction for *immediate* and *partial* transformation in every social situation.

The question, 'Can *my* point of view influence what goes on here?' can be asked by children, immigrants, minority group members, workers, students, everyone. To then realize a positive 'yes' when the tradition has been 'no' requires a *self* - educating and co-operative educating process in all of the arts of discussion, listening, action proposal, compromise formulation, persuasion of others to 'join the group', effective carry-through of action, 'feedback', project reformulation, co-operation with *other* movement groups, and so on.

But in exactly what ways and *against what obstacles* can the group 'participation' principles work to find their immediate use and impact? In the previous section we examined the family situation and its impact on the co-operative abilities of its members - an impact that has been largely negative rather than helpful and positive. However, families vary enormously, so we may still find examples of certain families representing 'pockets of freedom' where their members can *profit* from the intimacy to bring about deep mutual satisfaction and clear awareness.

In this section we will examine the question of whether 'group participation' principles can be applied to another broad domain of our society - the economic system.

A Historical Lesson to Avoid the Breakdown of Anarchy

'Our society is too complex to run by 'participation by everyone'. All of our power sources, like electricity, petrol, coal and gas, all of our large industries, like the production of automobiles, steel, heavy machinery, and even food production and distribution - all of these needs require careful centralized control. Otherwise there would be chaos.'

This objection is fundamentally correct for the present and for the indefinite future. Since the period of the industrial revolution,, we have overrun the planet with human beings who now live in an urban-suburban environment - an environment which is too large, which alienates each person and family from other persons and families, and which destroys the natural countryside to totally obstruct our relation with vegetation and animals. Nevertheless, this megapolitan modern environment, which deforms the face of the earth like a leprosy, still produces an immense pressure on energy resources, material distribution of goods, etc. To suddenly release our material economy from a centralized control can wreak havoc and perhaps even disaster. Like a giant who must be fed from a single tree, that tree must be preserved.

There is an important historical example of a period when centralized control of the material economy was suddenly lifted - namely, just after the October 1917 Bolshevik 'Revolution' in Russia. The proclamation of the Military-Revolution Community announced 'worker' control over production.' (1)

And the result of this long sought 'Utopian' situation? The Russian economy, already staggering because of the war, continued to hurtle towards the brink of economic collapse: local committees raised wages and prices indiscriminately. Factories refused to

share available supplies with other factories in direct need. Machinery was sold in order to buy raw materials. And in general, there was no co-ordinated planning. (2)

The Russian experiment was ended when V.I. Lenin created the Supreme Economic Council in order to centralize the country's economy. Workers' control was replaced by state control, and this brief lapse toward de-centralized self-regulation was summed up as 'an idyllic quest.' (3) I use the word 'lapse' to clarify that the Russian process did not occur as a *that required all workers for small group autonomous control to*

decentralization process did not occur as a *development* that required all workers participants to learn the skills needed for small group autonomous control to function *efficiently*. The Russian venture in decentralization occurred as the result of a sudden release from centralized national control, a liberty from constraint for which people were unprepared.

This supports the important objection against a *sudden* 'dissolving of state control' when it comes to our complex and gigantic material economy. In fact, there are so many people to feed, clothe and house, that people who advocate 'autonomous groups' as the basis for social change should make it clear that our vital necessities should not be tampered with in a way that might endanger their maintenance. 'Radical proposals' such as the concept of self-regulation, have been presented too often, as a *sudden total change of society*. This threatens, and rightly so, people's material security. In other words, the principle of 'autonomous groups' is a radical proposal which demands a *learning process* and also a positive and widespread change of attitude. Threats toward people's material existence will only hinder the way!

Against Violence and Dogmatism

In every violent revolution, people mainly learned to fear violence, and this fear is realistic when the need for social change leads some people to use guns. Nothing new is learned by violence. Certainly, the fundamental principles and methods of 'self-regulation and responsibility in a small group' cannot be learned by violent action, nor even supported by violence. Full responsible participation in a small group requires negotiation and also *respect for viewpoints different from the group's majority*. It would be very difficult to maintain these abilities in the heat of violent action, and, next to impossible during such a period that they might be *learned*. Thus, to threaten people's material security would be against an interest in their learning 'self-regulating' capacities. And our gigantic material economy is too complex and delicate for us to even dream of its being suddenly *rationaly* transformed by 'workers' decisions', since *most people have had almost no practice at being responsible and constructive within a group setting during their educational years*. To summarize, the original anarchist vision was an ideal where our society is organized and run by 'small autonomus groups', and each person participating at his fullest in his particular group, and all groups associating and co-ordinating their projects by co-operative action. This ideal

can only be reached by a development of people's capacities, that is, an educational process. To demand 'a spontaneous dissolving of the State', as suggested by Marx, or a 'liquidation of the State' as suggested by Bakunin, is to justify violence even before people are *prepared* for self-regulation in government, and to turn people's awareness away from the educational process they need to regulate their lives in co-ordination with others. In conclusion, the impatient distortions of the anarchist vision can only lead to destruction and recuperation by a tyranny, as they have already done.

Decentralized Control Justified in the Fields of Human Service

However, this need for caution and conservatism does not apply to *all* economic aspects of our society. This is the major limitation to the aforementioned objection. While the technological and material foundations of our urbanized (and suburbanized) lives might require centralised control and planning for a long time to come, especially in view of our present massive population and its vital material needs, there exists still another large economic domain - the 'human service' industry - where 'responsible participation by all' could lead in the long run to immense improvements of functioning and radical change of the social hierarchy. The 'human service industry' includes all those jobs which depend upon a human interaction rather than upon the creation of a product. In the narrow sense of the term, one would place in this category of 'human service industry' the following fields: education, care of the sick, public welfare service the mass media (television, radio, cinemas), and so on. But in a more general sense, we can see that even many 'departments' within the production industry also depend very highly on interpersonal relations, such as the departments of publicity, research and personnel. And finally, even an office of typists, secretaries and filing clerks depend to a large measure on good person-to-person relations for the most efficient (and also, personally satisfying) work, and so all these domains can profit from at least a partial (and eventually, total) transformation toward 'self-regulation and participation by all.'

The point is that these 'human service' jobs do not require *central* control for their survival, in contrast to the material production industry. Thus, it is in these economic domains that self-regulating principles can be introduced without *material* danger for the society. Of course, one can propose a *psychological* or *spiritual* danger for a society habituated to the authoritarian model to suddenly take up the *antiauthoritarian* model of *self-regulation in a small group setting*. The error here is the word 'suddenly'. The many aspects of the educational process needed for self-regulation, and the obstacles which must be overcome (whose subject forms the bulk of this paper) all *take time* for successful achievement. Again, the impatience of 'revolution' over-rides the evolutionary steps needed for people's political education toward self-regulation, and also the *unpredictable shaping* of the final step(s) if self-regulation by everyone were actually applied in the process of social change.

To return to the field of 'human service', it is here that self-regulation principles can find their most immediate application in terms of society's economy. Spontaneously organized groups *outside* of the economic domain, such as Woman's Liberation,

marginal political groups, leisure-time groups, and autonomous self-development groups, form the *very best* grounding for the learning and expansion of people's self-regulating abilities. But here we are concerned with groups and institutions *within* the economic domain because there are so many people involved in the economy, and as a result of their economic function, these groups are the most likely to perpetuate themselves. (Marginal political groups too often have a very short life.)

It is important to note that the process of 'self-regulation in a group setting' has already expanded in certain 'pockets' of the human-service professions. We now have 'free schools' in education and 'therapeutic communities' in the avant-garde of psychiatry. Finally, 'anti-psychiatry' has created small households' where everyone participates and individual liberty is the keynote. The 'free commune' replaces the 'authoritarian family'. The experiments are tiny, and by themselves they cannot change the society around them. But they serve as symbols and guides. They show the incredulous, 'It can be done,' and those who already have a natural and spontaneous faith in the human capacity for self-regulation, 'You are right.'

Nevertheless, let us return to the larger proposition: The material production of our society cannot be transformed for a long time to come toward a model of 'auto-regulation.' However, in the parts of our economy where the 'service given' is not the creation of a product but of 'a human interaction', the principles of self-regulation can be developed and expanded with great benefit to all.

Group Participation Requires Training and Experience To Work

Another objection: 'Even in the 'human service' professions, we need experts, people well-trained and with sufficient experience. In fact, we need 'competent leaders' for all human groups to work well. Hierarchies, with leaders and executive committees to take responsibility for the decisions and supervise the efficient working of the group, will always be needed.'

The benefit of 'full participation and sharing of responsibility' is that it encourages each person to live and act from his greatest potential. But simultaneously, 'full participation' *demands* a large diversity of talents from each person - capacities in expression, listening, planning, realistic evaluation, negotiation and creativity. When the best of these capacities is drawn from each participant acting in mutual accord with his colleagues, it is obvious that the group decision will be more comprehensive and valuable than a decision made by a single leader. The major obstacle, however, is inefficiency, because of the time taken for discussion and then the reaching of a final decision for all. The 'time element' is always critical, even though we wish it were not. Because of this realistic pressure, training and practical experience in all of the 'group participation' capacities must reach a point of *excellence* if people are going to propose 'mutual decisionmaking' when *important* and *urgent* matters are at hand.

It is just these prerequisites of training and experience that demand an 'evolutionary process for the formation of self-regulating groups.' The rupture of social change by a

sudden revolution, as clarified before, cannot encourage a widespread education for the population in self-regulating capacities.

Group Participation For Effective Action

It is an 'objective fact' that if people participate in a group decision, they will then act *more effectively* to carry out that decision. If the decision or plan is determined by someone else, personal performance diminishes in quality. This is the political ethic of democracy. The important 'new step' is that research studies have proved this ethic is also more functional.

In the mid-1940's, psychologist Kurt Lewin instituted a number of studies which showed that participants more likely changed their behaviour when the influence came from mutual discussion and decision-making than when the influence came from authority's recommendations and explanations.

This principle of 'being influenced by a give-and-take discussion' became the basic principle for the development of the T-Group (Training Group). The T-Group used free discussion and feed-back to help participants see how they 'came across' to others, especially in terms of being 'intensive' or receptive' in their mode of communication. The T-Group has taught many participants the value of 'free discussion and group decisionmaking.' Also, the 'encounter group,' which pushes 'full participation' by all group members to its limits, especially in relation to possibilities of bodily expression for person-to-person communication, has itself developed from the T-Group and the application of the 'democratic ethic'. Again, the principle empirically substantiated by T-Group and encounter group participation is that people are most influenced and transformed by a group experience when they have been active rather than passive agents of that experience.

We now understand why 'experiments in group self-regulation' (i.e. 'full participation by all members') have taken place in the fields of education and psychiatry. Workers in these professions dramatically improve their capabilities when they are given the opportunity for free discussion and decision-making. More important, the clientele of these service - the student and the psychiatric patient - even more significantly improved *their* behaviour when *they* can change their passive role for one which is *active*. The passive position does not aid education nor healing. The process of personal growth, whether educative or therapeutic, occurs by an active mode of being. Thus, the free school and the therapeutic community have overcome many of the barriers against the self-regulating group, since it was evident that the job of personal growth would be best accomplished by the group participation process.

The corollary is that *all groups*, and especially those whose purpose is to offer person-to-person service, can more positively influence their participants' behaviour by 'full participation and self-regulation'. However, it should not be surprising that strong objections (as above) will be raised by people in diverse positions of the present authoritarian-dominated hierarchy.

(to be continued next month)