

# PEOPLE AND POLITICS

## A Four-Dimensional Model of Individual and Social Change by Nigel Collingwood

*Nigel Collingwood is a counsellor and a revolutionary socialist. We asked him how he integrates the two.*

Is there anything in common between the psychopathology of individuals and the disasters of politics? Is there any analogy between personal and social change? Can we devise a language that will bridge the gap between psychology and matters political?

Having struggled with these questions for about twenty years, while practising as a counsellor and Gestalt therapist and taking part in revolutionary socialist politics, I am delighted to be asked to write about what I have been doing in this hinterland, between the privacy of the counselling room and the exposure of regular meetings and the occasional picket line. Although I take responsibility for my conclusions, I am sure I could not have reached them without the support and scepticism of various small groups of colleagues and friends. Similar themes have, of course, been taken up in this journal from time to time, notably by Roger Horrocks (1986) and John Rowan (1978).

### **Marxism enriched**

Early on I noticed that there is a parallel between the physical foundations of psychotherapy as developed in the Reichian tradition and the material base of social change as understood in the Marxist tradition. Intrapersonal, interpersonal and intergroup reality are all based on the body and its needs. This led me to look more closely at character armour and its relation to social structures. I noticed, too, that introjection in the Gestalt, "forced-feeding" sense was analogous to alienation, understood as the effect of working not for your own or your community's needs but for another's financial profit. However, the parallelism dawned on me most forcefully when I digested David Boadella's (1976) work relating psychopathology to the successive layers of the growing human embryo. His concepts of grounding, centering and facing, the tasks of the organs deriving from the mesoderm, endoderm and ectoderm respectively, offered physiological analogues for the three layers of Marxist analysis: the material substructure (productive forces), social relationships and ideology. I gathered my own interpretation of these ideas in an article (1986) that examined Reich's maxim that "every social order creates those character forms which it needs for its own preservation" (1933, 1950). For all the detailed theorising,

the crucial question was still how to relate individual process to social change. Yet there was something missing: the transpersonal. I had touched on this in a brief dialogue with Rowan (1984), but it was Boadella's speculation (1987) about a field of energy around the embryo - a possible "morphoderm"- that encouraged me to suggest a fourth dimension to the model. Was there then a social counterpart to spiritual experience? Surely Marxism was incurably blind to such a question. Yet through learning from David Wasdell I found that his work on the paranoid projections of the common unconscious (again related to quite physical pre- and perinatal events and their overwhelming subjective consequences) did not threaten Marxism but only enriched it. (I'm not saying he would agree!)

### **Margaret Thatcher was right!**

How then do I understand Marxism? As an interpretation of history it stresses the constraining force of material circumstances; as a project for revolutionary transformation through the activity of the working class its vision is of a world that has out-grown the accumulation of wealth by the few at the expense of the many. Marx claimed that the historical interpretation saved the vision from being utopian, but he underestimated the collusion between capital and labour, an only partly conscious preference for a split society. As for the so-called Marxist countries, they have, whatever the intentions of their originators, acquired a class structure and a form of capitalism run by the state. Hence the recent dismemberment of the Soviet empire represents not a disillusionment with a classless society (they did not have one) but rather a coming to terms with the increasing internationalisation of capital.

So much for my route towards what might be called psychopolitics, in the sense of a psychological approach to political understanding and practice. In a necessarily terse style I will now expound a four-dimensional model of intrapersonal, interpersonal and social being. One preliminary point. In a way Mrs Thatcher was right. There is no such thing as society. But then there is no such thing as an individual either. Both are abstractions. All we know are individuals embedded in society: groups small, medium and large, each person being like a group (of sub-personalities) and each group being like a person (unifying diverse functions).

*There is no such thing as society. But then there is no such thing as an individual either.*

### **The model**

There are at least four dimensions to a human being. We exist in all of them all the time more or less consciously, or unconsciously, and either grow in healthy collaboration or become stuck in unhealthy patterns of domination or being dominated

### *The Foundational dimension*

The issue is how we are grounded on the surface of the planet; how we interact with it. Individually we are grounded through the organ-systems deriving from the mesoderm: the skeleto-muscular and cardio-vascular systems. The deepest mutual "grounding" between individuals is through the sex-organs, which are also mainly mesodermal in origin. (Sexuality, of course, embraces all four dimensions.) Socially we are grounded in our engagement with the earth to produce what we need (Marx's "forces of material production"). So this is the ecological dimension, surprisingly adumbrated by Marx, with his occasional asides about nature being mankind's "inorganic body" (1844, 1975; 1858, 1973) (see Collier, 1991).

The individual is healthily ("well enough") grounded by collaborating with gravitational and sexual energies. Poor grounding shows up in attitudes of dominating or being dominated: unbending or collapsed posture, also the character structure of rigidity (with rape as an extreme expression). Socially we are healthily grounded if we co-operate with our environment. Poor grounding is evinced by "raping" and polluting nature, while manufacturing what is profitable rather than what is needed.

### *The Relational dimension*

The issue is how we assimilate what is external into our physical or social "bodies". Individually this is through the organ-systems of the endoderm: the gastro-intestinal tube and lungs (sites of feeding, emotional charge and breathing). Socially we assimilate other people, let them into our world, by the respect, acceptance and sharing that can be either interpersonal or intergroup. Within individuals the healthy process can be seen as centering ourselves, the unhealthy as dominative in the character structures of psychopathy and obsessional-compulsiveness, as dominated in those of masochism and orality, and as both dominative and dominated in the fight/flight dynamics of the paranoid character structure. Socially, i.e. interpersonally and intergroup-wise, the healthy process is co-operation, synergy; the unhealthy is collusion across the dominative/dominated boundary, through exploitative and oppressive patterns and structures.

### *The Representational dimension*

The issue is how we communicate within ourselves and between us. Individually this is through the organs of the ectoderm: skin, sense organs and nervous systems. Socially it is through language and the various media. Individuals have healthy communication, if they are free to focus on any channel of external or internal perception. The unhealthy process is to limit oneself to certain perceptions, habitually filtering out the rest, in the hysterical character structure (flight to the skin etc.), the schizoid (flight to the head) and the paranoid (projecting inner badness outwards). Socially the healthy process re-

quires access to information and non-oppressive language. The unhealthy process is through the manipulation of information -- the ideology that subtly legitimates oppression and intergroup paranoia.

### *The Fusional dimension*

The issue is how we cope with experiences that transcend duality, so that subject and object are fused. Ken Wilber has clarified this area brilliantly (1980, 1983a, 1983b), but I do not follow him in so firmly separating very early fusion from adult mysticism. Rather I see the latter as regression, albeit in an adult body and personality, to the former, a view for which I find some support in the theory of Michael Washburn (1988). Above all I am influenced by David Wasdell's view (1990) that the blind spots of whole societies (their "common unconscious") are created by pre-and perinatal traumata which nearly everyone has undergone. We act out our internal splits in the social environment, which continually reinforces them.

Individually the healthy adult fusional experience is mystical experience in various degrees, in so far as it is a regression to "oceanic" experiences that actually occurred. The unhealthy form is where there is a regression to an idealising oceanic fantasy needed to support a paranoid denial of overwhelming trauma. (I admit to being very tentative here).

Socially the healthy form occurs when a group gives at least some of its members a sense of enclosure, as though in the womb: this is the deepest source of synergy and of political yearnings for harmony. The unhealthy form occurs when one's own group is idealised as good, and all badness is projected on to some other group. This is the deepest root of the paranoid processes already noticed on other dimensions. A specially telling case is where someone is allowed to be a fusional leader (see Smith, 1980), mesmerising masses of people to share in a paranoid fantasy about some allegedly persecutory, actually persecuted other group.

### **From theory to practice**

It is difficult to get much of a hearing for, let alone a practical response to these ideas in left-wing political circles. But I cannot agree with those who, despairing of such a project, turn away from politics altogether. The Green movement is clearly open to the project (see *Self and Society* XVIII no 4), although it seems to me to underestimate the tenacity of the economic system. Anyhow, in the end a model has to be put to the test of practice. Puddings are proved in the eating, and this pudding, with its unavoidably complicated recipe, is still perhaps at the stage of being baked, while not, I trust, being half-baked!

I am at present writing a book to expound the model. Any comments from readers of this article will be most welcome at 67 Heights Road, Upton, Poole, Dorset, BH16 5RD. Another exploratory avenue is the network, such as Connect: a Network between Therapy and Politics (same address) and the Person-

Planet Affinity Network (92 Wenlock Street, Luton, Beds, LU2 ONN). David Wasdell's workshops (URCHIN, 115 Poplar High Street, London E14 OAE), covering the full range of dynamics from individual to global, are making important strides in deep experiential learning about these themes. My own courses on psychopolitics are more theoretical in approach, but I find that participants are keen to join in experiential ways of dealing with the material; they can, of course, devise some of their own.

However, whether we start from the personal or the political end of the spectrum, it is urgent that, having grasped that it is indeed a single spectrum, we put this insight into practice. For just as intrapersonal and interpersonal dominative patterns can be unlearned by individual and small group work that refuses to collude with them, i.e. by means of therapy, so intergroup -- interclass and international -- dominative patterns must surely be able to be unlearned by political work that also refuses to collude with them.

The task is daunting. We need to tackle it now.

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