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VIOLENCE: THE INTEGRATION OF PSYCHIATRIC AND SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

*Gurston D. Goldin**

I

Since the Second World War, with its aftermath of worldwide political upheaval and social convulsion, psychiatrists have found themselves concerned to a more significant degree than previously with the study of social turmoil and aggressive contention. It may be argued that the psychiatrist has taken his social responsibility as an imperative of professional obligation too seriously in terms of his scientific discipline and clinical training and experience. However, he seems to have been compelled by the very harshness and urgency of explosive world events to assume that what is socially dangerous is psychologically pathological and, therefore, lies within the province of his professional competence. A new and significant partnership has emerged between psychology and sociology as a result of the psychiatrist's increasing involvement in the investigation of social strife and violence, which offers promise of fruitful collaborative inquiry into these complex and pressing problems.

An earlier generation of psychiatrists had justified its indifference to such issues on the grounds of scientific detachment and objectivity. Perhaps this attitude is cogently expressed in Freud's remark to Ernest Jones with respect to the First World War, "I refuse to assume responsibility for the follies of mankind." This statement undoubtedly reflects Freud's position that psychoanalysis as a scientific discipline had to maintain an amoralistic, nonpolitical and indifferent objectivity towards overriding political and social issues in order to remain an empirical and objective method of investigation of human behavior and personality. In recent years, however, psychiatrists in increasing numbers have elected not to remain above the battle of social strife as disinterested scientific observers of social phenomena, but to enter upon the field as active combatants, equipped with the scientific armament of their professional skills and knowledge.¹

As a clinician, I have been trained to study and treat emotional disorders in individual patients and to inquire into the psychological motivation and determinants of a single person's malfunctioning and maladjustment. My assignment today has given me the unsettling feeling that as a psychiatrist I have been asked to enter deep and troubled waters and an uncharted sea in a vessel which may not be fully designed for the service it has undertaken. The sturdy scientific planks of experimental evidence and knowledge that would make for a stout ship on an excursion such as this may not be available yet. This preliminary word of caution is not offered as a basis for psychiatric abdication of interest in urgent social issues or for regression to the attitude of studied indifference to such phe-

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¹ See, e.g., GROUP FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF PSYCHIATRY, REP'T No. 57, PSYCHIATRIC ASPECTS OF THE PREVENTION OF NUCLEAR WAR (1964).

nomena taught by an earlier generation of psychiatrist. Hopefully, through such collaborative undertakings as our mutual examination of violence, we will achieve a better understanding of the dynamic causes of these ills of the body politic that will allow us with greater confidence to diagnose the nature of these social ailments and to prescribe remedies for their relief and to offer recommendations for their prevention. As a psychiatrist, I am also constantly alert to the danger that in periods of intense social crisis we must avoid revival of an old tradition of condemning as pathological that which we consider socially undesirable. Thus, we may unwittingly re-establish the old equation between illness and evil and call insane or crazy everything that we consider harmful or undesirable.

As a psychiatrist I am interested in antisocial behavior as a legitimate form of psychopathology, not *because* it is antisocial but because psychologically such behavior is not normal or mature, regardless of whether society labels such acts antisocial or not. As a clinician, I am more interested in the individual actor and his violent behavior than in the phenomenon of violence per se. I regard this issue as an appropriate topic for psychiatric attention not because the law or social convention may regard such behavior as abnormal, but because, as a psychiatrist, I view such socially disruptive behavior as the maladaptive effort of maladjusted individuals to resolve *internal* conflicts. We shall have to consider the nature of psychological conflicts which are not effectively internalized and resolved intrapsychically but which, through a psychological short-circuiting process, lead to behavior that is from both a personal and social perspective unsatisfactory and disturbing.

The main focus of the clinician's attention is still the therapeutic effort directed at influencing and modifying psychological maladjustment and distress in the traditional one-to-one treatment model of any medical intervention. As the psychiatrist considers the influence of complex sociocultural patterns and the role of social disorganization in the formation of those disabilities classified as psychological malfunctioning, he must remember that a disturbance in internal psychological operations remains the final common pathway mediating the effects of social factors on personality disorder.

II

We need to remind ourselves that there is a stage of social maladjustment in our lives which is characteristic for that period in our emotional and psychological development. I refer, of course, to the relationship between the young child and his environment. Although we do not generally apply the term "antisocial" to the emotional upsets which occur in the first social community to which the child belongs — the family — there is, nevertheless, a pattern of disorderly and disruptive behavior that the child displays which is extremely disturbing to his family.

This antisocial situation results from a human predicament that is rooted in man's biological condition. He is born totally helpless to provide for his physical security and to satisfy his instinctual demands. He depends upon the benevolent intervention of others in his environment to enjoy the pleasurable

sensations and the relief of painful tension which accompany the gratification of instinctual needs and desires. The inherent social maladjustment of infantile behavior is characterized by an inability to defer such gratification and to endure the frustration and tolerate the anxiety that such postponement of pleasure causes. However, we recognize that the child cannot be expected to respond in a more socially appropriate way until such time as psychological maturation allows him to perceive and to understand the nature of his relationship to his environment, and his psychic structure enables him to tolerate frustration and anxiety, accept restrictions and achieve a more appropriate social adjustment.

In some individuals, infantile modes of functioning persist beyond the time considered normal for their presence, and the individual's behavior pattern is classified as antisocial from a social point of view or psychologically maladjusted from a clinical viewpoint. We see, therefore, that in the course of satisfactory emotional growth and development, a well-adjusted individual develops the psychological capacity to resolve the conflict which may arise between the demand for gratification of instinctual drives and the need to adapt his behavior to the realities of the physical and social environment. Within such an individual there is an internal equilibrium between his psychological drives and the executive mechanism of his psyche, the ego, which governs his capacity to relate to and deal with the external environment. It either permits the satisfaction of his desires, denies such gratification or postpones the pleasurable sensation of drive discharge and enables the individual to tolerate such a frustration without disrupting his psychological or physiological equilibrium. As psychic functioning matures with the formation of the various functional components of the psychic apparatus, a number of psychological mechanisms develop which permit modification of the expression of instinctual drives to accommodate them to the realities and imperatives of man's social and physical environment, and to provide outlets for their discharge which are both socially approved and acceptable to the conscience of the individual.

We have now identified a new function in our conceptual model of the psychic machinery which significantly influences the performance of the intrapsychic executor, the ego, in its essential task of mediating between the drives and the external environment. This crucial force within the psyche is referred to in psychoanalytic literature as the superego, and is familiar to us as the conscience of man.

III

The superego is a key link between the psychic system and the social system. It operates in a way similar to that in which a norm functions in society — by distributing rewards and punishment. The rewards of the superego consist of self-satisfaction and an absence of anxiety. The punishment is a feeling of guilt and the fear of punitive reprisal. Psychologically, the superego serves as a device for handling anxiety by enabling the psyche to control the emergence of impulses seen as threatening or undesirable. Sociologically, it constitutes the backbone of culture by making it possible to transmit the normative order from one generation to another.

To summarize a complex psychoanalytic theory, the superego arises from the incorporation of the moral aspects of the parental images as a distinct part of the psychic system. These introjected images govern the expression of psychologically forbidden impulses by creating a feeling of guilt whenever drives dangerous to psychic integrity arise. Guilt signals a state of psychological danger, which is unconsciously represented and experienced as an adverse parental reaction, either withdrawal of love and support or retaliation and annihilation.

Defective superego formation will manifest itself in a disturbed social adjustment. Our age has been described by one author as characterized by the breakdown of superego authority, in which individuals fail to establish those identifications which should become the core of a strong and efficient conscience which would guide human behavior in accord with desirable social standards.²

Social psychiatric research by a Cornell University team has confirmed the importance of a sense of belonging to a moral order for psychological well-being.³ This epidemiological investigation demonstrates that one of the important distinctions between a noxious sociocultural environment, with a high order of psychological impairment, and a benign one is a feeling by the individual of a sense of membership in a moral order. Such a feeling of moral certainty has become a casualty of the rational, secular age in which we live.

The *New York Times* commented in a recent editorial that ours is "an era that has lost its bearings, that wanders in a wilderness crying with rage and striking out in its pain."⁴ Pessimism, bewilderment, anxiety, alienation, hostility, a sense of political futility, a negativistic and despairing outlook on one's own life and on the community in which one lives, describe the spiritual malaise characteristic of the state of normlessness of modern society. Sociologists subsume under the heading of Durkheim's term "anomie" the social distress and social dysfunction symptomatic of a malevolent sociocultural environment. Critics of modern society describe ours as an anomic society and this theme has become a striking leitmotif of contemporary American social criticism. A recent review of this topic states: "Finding no fixed reference points by which to locate itself, the soul tires of its wanderings through a social landscape desolate of norms. The struggle seems futile, life itself loses value, and the result for many is anomic self-destruction."⁵

I have elaborated on this modern sociological condition because of its profound impact both on the stability of social relations and on the adequacy of psychological adjustment and functioning. An anomic society is disorganized and lacks the normative structure which creates the moral authority to which members of the community are effectively able to subordinate their behavior. Where the hold of norms over individual conduct has broken down, there inevitably appear symptoms of impaired psychological functioning. The weaken-

2 Walter, *Power, Civilization and the Psychology of Conscience*, 53 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 641 (1959).

3 LEIGHTON, *THE CHARACTER OF DANGER* 385-89 (3 Stirling County Study of Psychiatric Disorder and Sociocultural Environment, 1963).

4 *Pacem in Terris?* N.Y. Times, Feb. 18, 1965, p. 32, col. 1 (editorial).

5 McClosky & Schaar, *Psychological Dimensions of Anomy*, 30 AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REV. 14, 15 (1965).

ing of moral restraint gives men a sense of wandering through an empty space with no landmarks from which to take a bearing or set a course.

A more psychological orientation to this state of sociocultural disintegration is found in Srole's term "psychological anomie."⁶ This describes a cluster of sentiments, the main components of which are a belief that society as a whole is indifferent to the needs of the individual and a general sense of the futility of life. His definition expresses the feeling that individuals lack firm convictions and standards and find it difficult to tell right from wrong in our complex and disorderly world, and that the traditional values which gave meaning to the individual and order to society have lost their force.

I have remarked that the superego — the force of conscience in man — is a key link between the psychic system and the social system. With the dissolution of social ties and the normative structure which once gave purpose and direction to the lives of men, there has been a weakening of the internal superego controls, which reflects the disturbance in the external moral order. As the force of moral and social standards has diminished, the superego, the device by which these external standards are incorporated and imposed as *internal* controls on human behavior, has functioned less effectively in the resolution of intrapsychic conflicts and in the regulation of psychological drives.

The weakening of the superego as the intrapsychic mechanism for enforcing moral restraints on behavior has a further detrimental effect. It subverts the entire network of psychological integrative operations essential for controlling the expression of fundamental psychic drives, such as aggression, and impairs their conversion into socially desirable forms and their discharge in socially appropriate outlets. Thus, with the weakening of superego controls, and the diminution of the moral authority of a normative structure, there has been a decrease in both the internal and external sanctions which serve to regulate human behavior and the expression of the emotions.

IV

Much has been written in recent years about the social and psychological effects of industrialization, automation and urbanization. It has been claimed that these phenomena of the modern scientific revolution have produced a sense of individual helplessness, of incompetence to control and direct affairs, a feeling of dehumanization and of alienation in mass society. It has become commonplace to say that, while man has established rational control over his physical environment, he has not done so over his own nature and self and has not yet been able to adjust to his new position in the order of things.

In a period of unmatched national prosperity, when physical security and the material conditions of existence are to be taken for granted by most people, we witness a state of unrest, turmoil and agitation among many of our young people. One writer has observed that, "among the young everywhere is a sense of alienation that turns even affluence and security into worthless prizes.

⁶ Letter from L. J. Srole to the *American Journal of Sociology* in 62 AMERICAN J. SOCIOLOGY 63 (1956); Srole, *Social Integration and Certain Corollaries: An Exploratory Study*, 21 AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REV. 709 (1956).

This may prove to be the nation's critical challenge."⁷ At a recent conference, Thomas J. Watson, Jr., warned that for many teenagers, "our new age means just one thing: the prospect of apathy and despair in the midst of unprecedented national affluence."⁸ Another observer has put the issue this way: "War has always turned men into moral eunuchs. The danger is that the new technology will do the same."⁹

In an increasingly affluent society which has lost the anchor and amalgam that a stable normative structure should provide, we frequently encounter those sentiments of futility, alienation and despair which are symptomatic of the social malaise called anomie. At a time when many individuals are overwhelmed with a sense of helplessness and the purposelessness of life, the productive effort necessary to secure the material conditions for survival no longer provides an adequate channel for physical energies and psychological drives. A society which is characterized by decreasing opportunities for effective sublimation of basic energies in work activities has lost a crucial outlet for the discharge of tension in socially constructive forms. Hostile feelings, which stem from the frustrations increasingly felt by men in an anomic mass society, may frequently be acted-out in overt violence.

The ferment now agitating young people both on and off the campus may be viewed as a symptom of defiance against the indifference of corporate society. Confronting an increasingly impersonal set of corporate social arrangements with a sense of personal impotence and enforced submissiveness, young persons develop a mood of bitterness accompanying frustration. In such an emotionally volatile milieu, the rebellious activity which erupts is often a maladaptive acting-out to discharge tensions that have built up from unrelieved frustrations. Such defiant outbursts often promote among the participants the illusion of individual power and control over the course of events and help to mitigate their feelings of helplessness and alienation. Unfortunately, acting-out fails to resolve any psychological conflict or disturbance and only intensifies psychological disabilities and maladjustment.

V

Addressing a recent conference in Puerto Rico, Mayor Wagner of New York declared:

There are lions in the streets, angry lions, aggrieved lions, lions who have been caged until the cages crumbled. We had better do something about those lions, and when I speak of lions I do not mean individuals. I mean the spirit of the people. Those who have been neglected and oppressed and discriminated against and misunderstood and forgotten.¹⁰

After more than a century of neglect, oppression and discrimination, which the emancipated American Negro had suffered in submission, humiliation and despair, we witnessed the passage by the Congress of the Civil Rights Act of

7 Raskin, *The Berkeley Affair: Mr. Kerr vs. Mr. Savio & Co.*, N.Y. Times, Feb. 14, 1965, Magazine section, p. 24 at 88.

8 N.Y. Times, March 14, 1965, § 1, p. 55, col. 3.

9 N.Y. Times, March 3, 1965, p. 25, col. 3.

10 N.Y. Times, Feb. 19, 1965, p. 38, col. 6.

1964, which prohibited many of the practices which had undermined his self-respect and shattered his self-esteem. That summer there were outbreaks of violence with unquestionable racial overtones in New York City, Rochester, Philadelphia and other metropolitan communities in the North. It is of great interest to note that, when the possibility of change appeared, individuals who had borne with little complaint an oppressive system acted violently when improvement had begun to raise their hopes and expectations.

De Tocqueville, commenting on the French Revolution, observed that: "the French found their position insupportable, just when it had become better. . . . The evil, which was suffered patiently as inevitable, seems unendurable as soon as the idea of escaping from it is conceived."¹¹ How do we account for the paradox that individuals will patiently endure extreme deprivation in total submission until such time as some improvement offers the possibility of the fulfillment of aspirations long dormant? We know clinically that individuals will display an attitude of total submission to authority when they fear that defiant or resentful behavior may jeopardize the dependency ties they regard as essential for their security and survival. This submissive behavior is associated with damaged self-esteem and humiliation and feelings of deficiency and unworthiness. Frequently the intense emotions of rage and the desire for reprisal which accompany such a damaged self-awareness are not even allowed to enter the conscious thoughts and feelings of the individual, since they might seriously threaten his psychological equilibrium were they to be experienced on a conscious level. These feelings are thus driven underground by the psychological mechanisms of repression, suppression and denial, where they may produce psychological impairment and distress and subvert the personality of the individual while awaiting the opportunity for discharge. When the relationship between such a dependent person and the individuals who have been perceived by him as controlling and dangerous is altered, the repressed rage frequently erupts, since the previously submissive and compliant person feels less restrained as the result of his improved and more secure position. So it may be for the violence which convulsed many communities last summer with the significant acceleration of the social revolution of the races in this country as legislative and legal support was enlisted in its behalf.

Historians have demonstrated that lower-status categories are disproportionately involved in both mob actions and in acts of violence during revolutions. E. J. Hobsbawn, a student of the city mob in the eighteenth century, has asked: "Who, then, were the 'mob'? Its main strength lay in the strata commonly described on the Continent as 'the little people'. . . . It was a combination of wage-earners, small property owners and the unclassifiable urban poor."¹² Frustration and deprivation, which create an inflammatory state in the psyche in the form of rage and the need for its discharge, are not absolute. Coser has used the term "relative deprivation"¹³ to refer to that condition which arises not from the absolute amount of frustration but from the experienced

11 DE TOCQUEVILLE, *L'ANCIEN REGIME* 186 (Patterson transl. 1949).

12 HOBBSAWN, *SOCIAL BANDITS AND PRIMITIVE REBELS* 113 (1959).

13 Coser, *Violence and the Social Structure*, in 6 *SCIENCE AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY* 32-33 (Masserman ed. 1963).

discrepancy between one's lot and that of other persons or groups which serve as standards of reference. In a caste society, for example, the members of the lower castes may not feel frustrated by a system of unequal rights and privileges which they feel may not be legitimately attainable by a group accepted as subordinate. However, when a group recognizes that it is illegitimately being denied rights and privileges and opportunities, the degree of frustration and resentment experienced is likely to be intense. When hopes are raised by the promise of change, these deprived groups, who had lived in apathy and despair prior to the possibility of real improvement, albeit with repressed rage and hostility, are likely to find delay intolerable, and the anxiety and repressed hostilities may find an outlet in violent behavior.

Social psychologists have observed that persons low in the social structure tend to have less effective built-in barriers against the acting-out of aggression as compared to middle class individuals who have developed a greater degree of internalized control. Where the standards for behavior have been externally enforced, as in the lower classes, rather than internalized, as is generally true of upper classes, the hostile feelings born of long-continued deprivation and frustration are more likely to find an outlet in the defiance of institutional authority when the opportunity for such behavior presents itself.

Grimshaw has shown that the composition of the participants in one of the major forms of mass violence that occurs in our society, urban race riots, shows a consistently higher rate in the lower-status categories.¹⁴ Participants in race riots, both Negro and white antagonists, are of predominantly low status, such as the unemployed, the unskilled or little-educated, the inarticulate, the illiterate and socially weak and defenseless elements in our communities. We have seen that with regard to the internalization of norms in the various strata of the population, it is in these low status groups that guiding norms and values are imperfectly internalized and the standards of behavior are generally externally enforced.¹⁵ When such groups, having experienced deprivation and frustration, sense a weakening of external restraints, there is a greater likelihood for the psychological short-circuiting process of an aggressive acting-out to occur as an outlet for the tensions and rage that have accumulated and demand discharge. Anger and hostility that are born of deprivation and frustration are the incendiary elements which ignite in social disorder and disrupt the peace of our communities when there has been poor internalization of social controls and when adequate psychological outlets for the discharge of tension are not available.

VI

Solomon and Associates reports data which convincingly demonstrates that there was a diminished incidence of crime committed by Negroes, in the three communities which they studied, during periods of direct action for civil rights.¹⁶

14 *Id.* at 39, citing Grimshaw, *A Study in Social Violence: Urban Race Riots in the United States, 1959* (unpublished thesis in University of Pennsylvania Library).

15 Kohn, *Social Class and the Exercise of Parental Authority*, 24 *AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REV.* 352 (1959).

16 Solomon, *Civil Rights Activity and Reduction in Crime Among Negroes*, 12 *ARCHIVES OF GENERAL PSYCHIATRY* 227 (1965).

This evidence, documenting the existence of an association between direct action and a substantial reduction in crimes of violence, suggests one solution to the psychological and social distress that has been characterized by social turmoil and a sense of futility and alienation.

Social activism, such as organized civil rights activity, or participation in the Peace Corps and in domestic antipoverty programs, provides a constructive outlet for human energies and offers its participants the satisfactions of achievement, a sense of purposeful activity and a feeling of personal responsibility and dignity. Public action for significant social goals not only enhances self-esteem and restores a sense of individual competence, but serves to discharge energies and decrease potentially dangerous frustrations. It thus allows development of a more adaptive and satisfying pattern of response to the problems of our time.