
The Unconscious in Culture and Society

Studies at the macro-social level needed to be made in the socio-psychological perspective as much as at the micro and intermediate levels. Experience of Nazism and Stalinism, or more recently that of a country such as Iran, has brought a realization of what can happen when unconscious forces gain control in a society. Both Freud and Jung issued warnings about what would happen should such possibilities become actual.

A number of Institute members, some doubly trained in psychoanalysis and social anthropology or working in teams containing this combination, have advanced understanding of the role of unconscious forces in the formation of culture and the larger structure of society. As with the projects concerned with smaller social units, these "macro projects" were brought to its attention by organizations having special responsibilities in the areas concerned. Because they represent responses to felt needs they are in as widely different areas as are the projects on organizational change. The underlying unity is not that of a formal research program but is provided by the continuing readiness to respond to generic themes that are field determined. They provide a set of opportunities for domain-based research at the macro level which complement those at the meso and micro levels.

Culture as a Psycho-Social Process. In an attempt to relate sociological and psychological frames of reference for the purpose of action research, Trist introduced a concept of culture as a psycho-social process. The concept derives from the personality-culture approach originally put forward by Edward Sapir (1927) but incorporates recent psychoanalytic and social theory. Cultural patterns are distinguished from cultural objects. One set of patterns is outwardly directed and the other inwardly directed. The latter contains unconscious as well as conscious elements. The psycho-social concept of culture, which enables a very wide range of phenomena to be treated in the same frame of reference, lies between the purely psycho-biological and purely sociological frames of reference, which can now be related to each other. This is necessary in action-research projects where different aspects of the phenomena under investigation have to be considered together in real time.

Thoughts on the Meaning of the Word Democracy. There have been many studies, both psychological and sociological, of various aspects of democracy. The one made by Donald Winnicott in 1947, is unique. A child psychiatrist and

analyst, he applies his well-known ideas concerning the “ordinary devoted mother and her baby” to society. So long as this relationship is “good enough” (it can scarcely be ideal in a workaday world) the infant is set on a trail that enables him or her to cope, as a reasonably responsible and tolerant adult, with a good deal of contradiction and uncertainty. This is necessary for people to be able to “live with democracy” inside themselves. Unless there is a critical mass of such individuals in a society it will not be able to sustain a democratic order. Factors that disturb the security of the mother/child relationship, such as the economic necessity of large numbers of women going out to work while their children are still too young to handle language, may have negative consequences for future capacity for democracy.

Notes on the Russian National Character. Dicks' contribution on the Russian national character is a shortened version of his monograph on this topic (Dicks, 1952). He was tri-lingual in Russian, German and English and spent a good deal of his youth in Russia and Germany. During World War II he undertook a study of Nazi ideology and the German national character from a psychoanalytic point of view in collaboration with the American sociologist, Edward Shils (Dicks, 1950). He and Shils reached similar conclusions to the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950) which strengthened confidence in this type of approach. Dicks now went on to make what he called *Observations on Contemporary Russian Behavior* (1960) at the Harvard Center for Russian Studies. The dynamics shown are substantially different from the German case, especially regarding the presence of an underlying “good mother figure” who coexisted with an authoritarian persecutory father. These studies point to a link between psychopathology and social pathology. Dicks shows that the basic social character of the large majority of Russians in the 1960s stemmed from that of the traditional peasant family. Further studies are needed to discover how far this may still be true after another 30 years.

Latent Content of Television Viewing. That the media in all their forms may have an unconscious as well as a conscious content is now widely accepted. This was not so in the late 1950s when Emery made a comprehensive analysis of the viewing situation. On the basis of this, he conducted a novel experimental study of the psychological effects on pre-adolescent boys of seeing a Western film on television. The results show that effective communication takes place between the latent content of the film and the latent preoccupations of the viewers. This, the second part of his study, is presented under this Theme.

Asylum and Society. Physical treatments, especially by drugs, have shortened the periods spent in hospital by psychotic patients but have created the

“re-admissions problem.” It would seem that the full benefits of these treatments cannot be realized while the attitude to mental illness in the larger society remains basically unchanged. The paper by Elizabeth Bott Spillius shows that the surrounding culture still demands that “madness” be contained in the mental hospital so that society can maintain an image of itself as “sane.” For deep unconscious reasons the split has to be preserved. This creates conflict inside hospitals between a duty to protect society and a wish to help the patient. This conflict is not fully recognized and creates dis-ease among medical staff, which impairs performance. In the long run contact with a supporting family is the most important factor in determining whether or not a patient becomes permanently hospitalized, not his “psychosis.” When he loses this support he has no social place outside the hospital, which becomes his asylum.

This paper is unusual in the literature on mental hospitals in that it gives an anthropological picture of the hospital as an open system in its society, together with an analysis of its dynamic in terms of psychoanalytic concepts.

References

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