

THE LOSS OF RELATEDNESS AND THE PATHOLOGY OF AN ATOMISTIC DEMOCRACY

John Shotter

"We reduce things to mere Nature in order that we may conquer them" (C.S. Lewis, 1978, p.43).

Listening to yesterday's 'Psy Forum' speakers was for me a depressing experience. For I began nearly forty years ago – I am now 68 and 'retired' – to write against the totalitarianism that was even then being pursued in university psychology. Clearly, what was occurring at that time was an explicit dress rehearsal for the implementation of a totalitarian regime for the control of human behaviour – which, because it was explicit could be argued against – but which is now being implemented covertly, under the guise of it now being, not a matter of politics and ethics, but of economics. And it's no fun at all!!

With a background in mathematics, engineering, and electronics, and a psychology degree from Birkbeck College, I began to come of age, intellectually in the era of Harold Wilson's "White Heat of Technology." Indeed, my first published paper in 1966 (see Shotter, 1966), was to do with how one might programme a computer to learn and understand language as human children do – and I thought of myself as one of the elite group that would bring in the new technological age... and everyone would applaud me for it! I was young then...

But I soon began to turn against the elitist, domineering pretensions of the scientific social sciences. Many things contributed: One was a 'leader' in a Social Science Research Council (SSRC) newsletter by (now Sir) Marfarlane Burnett, which I remember went something like: *"The problem facing the social sciences today is how the talents and energies of a small elite can be applied in devising new patterns of living into which the large majority of people will have to be kicked and twisted if necessary, if we are to survive in this modern age."*

But there was more, much more: A then current issue of *Science Journal* (Oct. 1968) on "Machines like Men," contained a leader by Marvin Minsky, Professor of Electrical Engineering at M.I.T. In it he made the authoritarian pronouncement:

"Do not be bullied by authoritarian pronouncements about what machines will never do. Such statements are based upon pride, not fact. There has emerged no hint, in any scientific theory of machines, of limitations not shared by man."

In fact, bold claims, concerning the capabilities of machines had been made for the previous ten years or more. But they began then to take on an apocalyptic flavour. Stuart Sutherland, Professor of Psychology in Sussex, declared in an issue of *The Observer Review* Section, that, as computers could not be "selfish" or "irrational" they may become "the first true saints." And furthermore, they would soon transcend our limited understanding for " ...if we call design a machine more intelligent than ourselves, then *a fortiori* that machine will be able to design one more intelligent than itself," and so on. Minsky endorsed this, and added that: "Once a certain threshold is passed, this could lead to a spiral of acceleration. and that it may be hard to perfect a reliable 'governor' to restrain it." Thus, in the mechanical millennium to come, such developments, Sutherland forecasted, will lead us " ...to treat information-processing machines in the same way that we treat humans."

This, of course, was the motif running through Jean Luc Godard's *Alphaville* in 1969. But Lemmy Caution, the no-nonsense, old fashioned sleuth, beats the super-computer Alpha 60 by asking it the simple question it cannot answer: "What is Love?"

As if all this wasn't enough, Hans J. Eysenck (1969) – a follower of Clark L. Hull's (1943) *Principles of Behavior*¹ and pioneer of stimulus-response conditioning in psychotherapy – in a 1969 article in *New Society* called, "The Technology of Consent," outlined aspects of our then current forms of life (which at the time were rather 'strike' prone) that he thought worrying:

"...society is getting more and more closely knitted together, due to our advancing technology: production is nearing the point where... there is a greater and greater dependence upon co-operation between very large groups of people... Yet if even a small section within one of the co-ordinated complexes fails....the whole nexus breaks down, and far-reaching consequences are experienced over a wide area" (p.688).

Therefore, what was needed, he said, was "a technology of consent which will make people

behave in a socially adapted, law-abiding fashion, which will not lead to a breakdown of the intricately interwoven fabric of social life...a generally applicable method of inculcating suitable habits of socialized conduct into the citizens (and particularly the future citizens) of the country in question or preferably the whole world” (p.688).

This was to be achieved by manipulating people’s “conscience” – where their “*conscience is nothing more than the accumulated sum of conditioned rewards and punishments, produced by childhood upbringing, and later adolescent experience*” (p.689).

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While I felt quite explicitly oppressed and depressed by the confidence with which such people made such pronouncements, I began to search out the assumptions upon which they are based, to find some gaps within them, and formulate alternatives.

Here, I think, are the assumptions: They are straight out of Descartes’s (1637/1968) “Discourse on the Method of Properly Conducting One’s Reason and of Seeking the Truth in the Sciences.”

1. First, he outlines how to make use of those “long chains of reasoning, quite simple and easy, which geometers use to teach their most difficult demonstrations” (1968, p.41).
2. He then goes on to state its goal thus: it is to put “fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens and all the other bodies that surround us... [to] all the uses for which they are appropriate, and thereby make ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature” (p.78).
3. But, if these *geometric, calculational* forms of reasoning are to work, they need to be applied, not in the world of our everyday lives, but in “a new world, if God were to create, somewhere in imaginary space, enough matter to compose it, and if he were to agitate diversely and confusedly the different parts of this matter, ... and afterwards did no more than to lend his usual preserving action to nature, and to let her act according to his established laws” (1968, p.62).
4. There are more, but these are, perhaps, already enough to see what we are missing in this Cartesian vision of our lives together.

Here, I think, are some of the gaps: Life and the spontaneous livingness of our bodies is missing, for a start. Our capacity to *do* things, and to *judge* whether, in the course of our doing them, we are performing them or not in ways intelligible to those around us, is also missing. So confident was Descartes that his methods of reasoning involved *clear, simple, and easy steps* of which it was *impossible to doubt the correctness*, that he ignored the need to take into account the *judgment of others*.

In other words, not only are our living bodies missing, along with their spontaneous, i.e., unconscious, reactivities to events occurring in our surroundings, but *embodied others* – along with their spontaneous responsiveness to us – are also missing. Both the *differences* between ourselves and others are ignored, as well as all the *relations* between us, both actual and possible.

And here, at least, is one point of departure for beginning to formulate alternatives: We can begin by noting that scientists must be able to judge, when acting in accord with their theories of what the world might be like, whether the results of their actions accord with or depart from the *publicly shared* expectations engendered by their theories. If they cannot, then they cannot put their theories to empirical test. For there is no other proof that a theory has been proved true, than people being able to justify their explicit claims to each other by appealing to spontaneously expressed understandings based in people’s shared, embodied reactions to events and gestures. If words like ‘Stop!’, ‘Look!’, ‘Listen!’ (along with the appropriate bodily gestures)... if questions like: ‘How many are there now?’ ‘Which came first, A or B?’... and so on, were to lose their spontaneous capacity to *call out* intelligible reactions from all the others around us, the very doing of science would be impossible².

This, of course, also, is the pathology of an atomized democracy: without our spontaneous, living relatedness to each other, with all our relations to each other regulated – like Descartes’s particle set in motion according to God’s laws – we not only lose our capacity to *make history*, to be irreversibly creative, we lose the embodied *sensus communis*, the embodied “common sense” which makes the implementation of all the written directives we receive possible... there may be cold, dead orderliness in the short run, yes, but in the long run, sooner or later, bewilderment, disorientation, and chaos will ensue... the “Velvet Revolution” across Eastern Europe in 1989 (Garton Ash, 1990).

In short, what we lack, or have lost, in Descartes’s new mechanical world of separate, only *externally related* particles – i.e., related only according to laws originally imposed on them by a now

absent God – is any conception of ourselves both as indivisible, living unities in ourselves, able to grow *continuously in relation to our surroundings*,... and of ourselves as also participant parts in certain larger indivisible living and developing unities, able also to develop *continuously in relation to their surroundings*.

If I had more time, I would go on to show how the work of such writers as: William James, Henri Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, G.H. Mead, Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Voloshinov, and Wittgenstein can all help us to restore our lost relatedness both to each other and to all the othernesses in our surroundings. And they would show us too, why dialogue, i.e., free talk with each other, is inevitably creative of new possibilities in a way that debate, inevitably, is not. Bakhtin (1981) has been an inspiration to me in pursuing my work on the creative power of dialogue, and I will use a remark of his upon which to end:

“Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation of any living dialogue” (p.280).

Without the answering utterances of the other (Lacanian will say this is obvious), there can be no making of meaning. In other words, there is no last word. It's not over yet... there's always more of all of us to come.

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1. Hull (1943) himself, of course, had dreamt of running the world on the basis of a mathematically expressed “behavioural equation,” and he too expressed himself in combative terms: “There will be encountered vituperative opposition from those who cannot or will not think in terms of mathematics, from those who prefer to have their scientific pictures out of focus, from those who are apprehensive of the ultimate exposure of certain personally cherished superstitions and magical practices, and from those who are associated with institutions whose vested interests may be fancied as endangered... [But] hope lies, as always, in the coming youth... The present work is addressed primarily to them” (pp.398-401).

2. Merleau-Ponty (1962) gives a nice example of what is meant by such a form of communication: “I beckon across the world,” he says, “I beckon over there, where my friend is: the distance between us, his consent or refusal are immediately read in my gesture; there is not a perception followed by a movement, for both form a system that varies as a whole. If, for example, noticing that there is no response to my move, I vary my gesture, we have here, not two distinct acts of consciousness. What happens is that I see my partner's unwillingness, and my gesture of impatience emerges from this situation without any intervening thought” (p.111). Out in the open, in the world between us, I can ‘see’ my friend's *feelings* of unwillingness, and he can ‘see’ my impatience.

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