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# INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE AND CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: SOURCES OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN EVERYDAY LIFE\*

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## INTRODUCTION

Social scientists tend to interpret social change as the result of collective action. However, all collective action is at some level and time initiated and carried out by individuals, who, of course, are rooted in particular social contexts. A theory of social change needs to derive, therefore, not only from the study of collective action, but also from the study of individual initiation of, and involvement in, social change oriented practice.

The following observations on individual involvement in social change practice are based on personal experience and study over several decades. They are not a theory of social change but merely subjective contributions to the development of such a theory. I will first summarize a set of assumptions I have come to accept concerning societal evolution, continuity and change. Next, I will sketch one particular approach derived from these assumptions, which social change oriented individuals may want to pursue in everyday life. Finally, instead of listing references throughout the text, I will suggest a selection of sources which I found helpful in studying societal evolution and change, for readers interested to explore these issues further.

\* Based on a presentation at the 36th annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, New York City, N.Y., August 29, 1986.

## SELECTED ASSUMPTIONS CONCERNING SOCIETAL EVOLUTION, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Social orders evolved and are reproduced and transformed over time, by inter-actions and inter-communications of their members with one another and with their natural settings, in pursuit of survival in the face of relative scarcities of life-sustaining resources;

Human actions, inter-actions, and communications are motivated by basic needs (biological, psychological, spiritual, social) and are oriented toward survival and development of innate potential; survival and development depend on satisfaction of basic needs;

Any social order is a relatively stable, yet temporary, solution to the problems of existence in particular natural environments, at particular stages of socio-cultural and technical-scientific development;

Social orders have evolved by trial and error in contexts of comprehensive ignorance and resource scarcities. Once evolved, social orders reveal strong conservative tendencies to maintain established patterns, practices and relations. While social orders are not viable unless survival of large segments of their population is assured, they tend to vary in the extent to which different individuals and classes can meet their basic needs, and can attain optimal development of their innate potential;

Physical, emotional and social health of humans is related to the extent to which they can realize their basic needs; health and development depend therefore largely on the structures, values and dynamics of social orders which affect the extent to which individuals and classes can realize these needs; health and development depend also on the unique attributes of individuals;

Social orders have been organized throughout history along a continuum ranging from egalitarian-cooperative-communal patterns to inegalitarian-competitive-

individualistic ones. Pre-agricultural societies tended to be organized by the former set of principles, largely because the absence of an economic surplus during that early stage of technological development inhibited the emergence of significant inequalities among individuals and groups. Following the discovery of agriculture, some 10,000 years ago, which gradually led to an economic surplus and to spatial and occupational divisions, social, economic and political inequalities evolved in many, but not all, societies. Wherever inegalitarian ways of life were established, their origin seems to have involved coercive processes, as it is unlikely that people chose voluntarily to be disadvantaged, exploited and oppressed relative to others in their society. Once initiated, inegalitarian patterns seem to have required constant coercion and threats of coercion for their maintenance. However, physical coercion gradually came to be supplemented by ideological indoctrination which led to apparently willing submission and conformity to the demands of dominant classes by exploited and oppressed classes. Inegalitarian patterns of social life tended to intensify over time, whenever they evolved, and to permeate eventually all aspects of social existence;

Individual and collectively shared consciousness evolved along with the creation and reproduction of patterns of social life. Once evolved, consciousness and its interpersonal and intergenerational communication, became important means of maintaining and reproducing established patterns of social life. However, consciousness and its communication are also *potential means for reflecting upon established ways of life, criticizing them, and initiating changes in them*. Social changes from fragmentary-incremental to comprehensive-radical are always products of critical consciousness which can lead to non-conforming communications, actions and relations, initiated by individuals, transmitted to groups, and expanded into social movements. However, probabilities are usually low for individuals to develop critical con-

sciousness concerning their society's way of life, and to risk initiating major changes in consciousness, communications, and actions. This is due to a conservative tendency which the human species seems to have developed since early stages of social evolution. Several social-psychological factors seem to underlie this tendency: a sense of security derived from familiar patterns of life which work somehow to satisfy perceived needs and interests of people; fear of the unknown, and of untried solutions to existential problems; considerable ignorance and limited experience and skills; habit and inertia; and a tendency to deal with perceived problems as isolated fragments, by discrete steps, rather than by examining the societal context from which the problems arise and readjusting that context in order to prevent the problems at their sources. The conservative tendency of human societies seems also to emerge from interactions of biological, social and psychological factors inherent in the physical and mental immaturity of children, their powerlessness and economic and emotional dependence in relation to adults, and their limited capacity for critical reflection and consciousness during stages of life when they are socialized into established ways of life and ideologies of their societies;

As a result of processes of socialization, established ways of life come to be perceived as "the correct way of life." Non-conforming thoughts, communications, and actions are, therefore, viewed as threats and tend to be prohibited, repressed, and punished, while conforming thoughts, communications, and behavior are encouraged and rewarded. In societies which have been divided coercively into hierarchically structured, privileged and disadvantaged classes, the interests of powerful, privileged classes in the preservation of the societal status quo, become a further important source of resistance to the initiation of change by individuals and groups. Elaborate systems of rewards and sanctions tend

to be developed in such divided societies to reinforce status-quo conforming behaviors and consciousness, and to discourage and repress status-quo challenging consciousness and actions;

In the United States, a society divided along class, race and other dimensions, several ideological themes have emerged as major obstacles to the initiation by individuals of fundamental social change. These themes include:

- A. An ideology which equates freedom with "free enterprise" and asserts that the U.S. is a free and democratic society whose way of life reflects the choices of the people as expressed in elections;
- B. An ideology of "meritocracy" and "open social mobility" which asserts that people are free to better their conditions of life by working hard and by using their innate capacities. Those who fail ought not to blame the social order but only themselves for not trying hard enough, or for being inherently less capable than those who succeed. Everyone gets their "just desert"; ergo, those who get little, do not merit more, for they are not good enough;
- C. An ideology which asserts that humans are by nature selfish and evil and cannot be trusted; hence one has to look out for one's own interests in competition with everyone else, and every other group. Also, human nature is posited by this ideology as constant, rather than flexible and adaptable to evolving social conditions, and social change is therefore deemed impossible. Pursuing social change is consequently considered futile, naive, utopian, and a waste of time and energy which could be spent in efforts to advance oneself.

These ideological themes and their corollaries tend to be absorbed and reinforced throughout all stages and settings of socialization and through life-long encounters with institutional messages and practices shaped by these themes. As a result, people tend to feel powerless to initiate collective action toward fundamental change. They tend to channel their energies instead into atomized, individualistic efforts to get the most for themselves within the established way of life in competition with everyone else and every other group. Col-

lective action which is essential to achieve significant social change tends thus to be replaced by a maddening "rat-race," climbing hierarchical ladders toward material success and social prestige.

THE INDIVIDUAL AS SOCIAL CHANGE ACTIVIST:  
CHALLENGING IDEOLOGICAL HEGEMONY THROUGH  
"EXPLORATORY ENCOUNTERS" IN EVERYDAY LIFE.

In spite of the powerful conservative tendencies of human societies, their ways of life and ideologies have never been static, but have always undergone changes, usually gradually but often at accelerated rates. Social change has resulted from different sources including demographic processes, environmental conditions, technological and scientific developments, internal societal cooperation and conflicts, and interactions with "foreign" societies. In all these processes, critical thought, communications, and action by individuals have usually played important parts.

How do individuals become involved in social change movements? Some may become involved spontaneously as a result of reflection on personal experiences, especially oppressive and traumatic ones, which may lead to new insights concerning one's social situation, and which may then propel one to act. Alternatively, encountering critical thought and insights of others, in person or through literature, art, and other media, may induce individuals to examine their own experiences and social situation, and may motivate them to join social change oriented movements. When spontaneously aroused critical consciousness is reinforced and supported by encounters with the critical thought of others, the likelihood increases for individuals to join movements for social change.

Of these possibilities, one seems especially relevant to individual involvement in social change practice: *consistent injection of critical thought, which challenges dominant ideologies and views of social reality, into everyday human encounters in social and occupational spheres.* Struggles to transform prevailing ways of life into alternatives shaped by values of social, economic, and political equality, involve different strategies such

as movement building, organizing around special issues, electoral politics, etc. Individual activism in everyday life is often overlooked as a viable social change strategy. And yet, were it practiced consistently by growing numbers of activists as a complement to more conventional approaches, it might become a powerful element of a comprehensive strategy for fundamental social change.

As conceived here, individual activism in everyday life is intended to facilitate the emergence and spread of critical consciousness. It does so by introducing critical questions and observations, which challenge dominant ideologies and views of social reality, into conversations at workplaces and other social situations, and into professional relations in settings providing human services, education and health care. This approach derives from the assumption that social orders are maintained and reproduced by people's actions in everyday life and by their consciousness which guides these actions and is, in turn, reinforced by them. Hence, a necessary, though not sufficient condition of fundamental social change is that large segments of a society overcome the ideological hegemony of the established way of life over their consciousness. A potentially effective means toward such transformation of consciousness could be to confront and challenge prevailing ideologies and modes of thought in human encounters of everyday life.

Individuals who choose to practice this approach toward social change should search consistently for opportunities in everyday situations, at work and in other social settings, to initiate meaningful explorations of personal and social conditions, and of links between personal problems and societal dynamics. Such explorations can facilitate the emergence and expansion of critical consciousness around everyday events and encounters, and can enable people to transcend the usual meaninglessness of polite and superficial social exchanges. Activists who choose this approach ought to be tactful and considerate of the dignity, thoughts, and feelings of people whom they are trying to engage in exploratory discussions. They should avoid alienating jargon and anything



which may be perceived as elitism, arrogance, pressure, and indoctrination. People must be free to reach their own conclusions, in their own way and time, and must not be presented with ready answers. A Socratic, dialogical approach, involving thoughtful, focused questions and observations concerning relevant situations, issues and experiences, seems to be an appropriate model for facilitating meaningful and productive discourse.

The relationship between activists who initiate such exploratory encounters and people who participate in them, ought to be egalitarian, informal, and free of hierarchical and authoritarian elements, irrespective of the positions people hold in existing formal organizations. In this way, the social context of the exploratory discourse would negate symbolically the structures and dynamics of the existing way of life, while affirming symbolically, and prefiguring possible alternative patterns for human existence, where everyone is to be free and equal, regardless of individual occupational roles. Thus, through substance and style, exploratory encounters should help people to unravel and overcome an intrinsic function of existing organizations and enterprises—the perpetuation of the established way of life, its institutions, values, ideological themes, and dominant consciousness.

The strategy of exploratory encounters toward critical consciousness can be incorporated not only into informal relations at workplaces and in other social settings, but also into professional practice in human services, health care, and education. In this way, formal relations and encounters between “providers” and “users” of services can become means for exploring, challenging and criticizing rather than affirming and validating the institutional status-quo, its dominant assumptions, and ideological themes.

Activists practicing the strategy of exploratory encounters toward critical consciousness should create local support groups and regional and country-wide networks to share and evaluate their experiences and to provide support for one another in their often lonely pursuits. Also, since these efforts are likely to encounter resistance from administrators of

status-quo committed settings, activists may need the support groups and networks to organize collective defensive action. The support groups and networks ought, in turn, be integrated into local, regional, and countrywide units of political movements working for liberation and social change. For the practice of exploratory encounters is merely one among many components of comprehensive efforts toward social transformation. The role of political movements is to coordinate these different components into a coherent strategy.

People, who will expand and change their consciousness as a result of exploratory encounters with social change activists may eventually want to join social change support groups and movements, and may choose to carry on the practice which has been meaningful in their own experience. They may also channel their formerly blocked, but now released energies, and their anger against oppressive institutions whose dehumanizing dynamics they have come to understand, into constructive projects such as workplace unions, worker cooperatives, community organizations, other forms of cooperation, and social change movements.

In preparing for social change practice in everyday life, activists need to explore, critically and honestly, on their own or jointly with others, their social reality and experience. Such explorations are likely to reveal the extent to which the material, biological, psychological, and social needs of many people tend to be frustrated at work, at home, and in other social situations, and how these frustrations are conditioned by the structures and dynamics of the social, economic, political and ideological context in which workplaces, homes and social life are now embedded. They are also likely to discover that their consciousness mirrors prevailing, dominant ideological themes, that they tend to blame themselves for their limited personal achievements and unsatisfactory conditions, and that they assume that the social context which constantly frustrates their basic needs cannot be altered by human action.

As such explorations deepen insights into individual reality and the societal context, one may gradually risk to discuss

these matters with family members, co-workers and other social contacts. Such discussions may help others to engage in similar explorations, and are likely to reveal that people are not alone in their frustration and alienation, but that others share similar experiences and feelings. Gradually, society in the United States may no longer seem as free, fair, and democratic as claimed, but oppressive, exploiting, and controlling, especially when psychological dimensions are considered, rather than merely material ones. For people may live in satisfactory conditions in a material sense, but may nevertheless feel alienated, lonely, insecure, and unfulfilled in non-material aspects of their lives.

Once one has begun to communicate with family members and others about these issues, one may be ready for a further step: to organize support groups similar to the consciousness-raising groups of the women's liberation movement. Such groups would meet regularly to discuss and analyze experiences and feelings, to help members with efforts to confront and challenge the consciousness and ideology of co-workers and others whom they encounter in everyday life, and help them deal with the conflicts that may result. With support from such groups, individuals may deepen their commitments to social change, and they may take on an identity of social change activist and political organizer in addition to their existing personal and occupational roles. It is important that support groups come to understand social change as being in the interest of everyone whose development and self-actualization are obstructed by the structures, values, and dynamics of the prevailing way of life, and not merely in the interest of materially exploited and deprived classes.

## SUMMARY AND EPILOGUE

Starting with the assumption that fundamental social change requires that large segments of a population overcome the hegemonic ideologies of the established institutional order, I have sketched here a strategy for individual activism aimed at facilitating the emergence and spread of

critical consciousness by means of informal, exploratory encounters in everyday life, at places of work and in other social settings, and formal exploratory encounters in systems of human service, health and education. Such encounters are intended to enable growing numbers of people to develop a penetrating analysis of the oppressive dynamics of our present way of life and insights into possible alternatives, based on principles of equality, cooperation, community, freedom and democracy. These encounters should also help people overcome their sense of powerlessness, their tendency to blame themselves for their difficulties, and the fallacious notion that comprehensive social change is impossible since people are by nature mean and selfish and will not cooperate in efforts to transform oppressive social institutions into their opposites.

Whether the proposed strategy can work is not known. What is known, however, is that without a fundamental transformation of consciousness, an institutional revolution toward comprehensive human liberation cannot take place. Hence we need to experiment with a variety of approaches which may promote the necessary, large-scale transformation of consciousness. Based on my own practice over several decades, I tend to think that the approach suggested here can make significant contributions toward that end, provided growing numbers of activists will engage in it consistently with a sense of commitment, analogous to a "secular mission."

While resistance, threats and sanctions will be encountered by activists pursuing the proposed approach, these obstacles may not be insurmountable, provided we insist on exercising existing civil and political rights, do not act provocatively in an immature fashion, and develop appropriate mutual supports and defenses. What has inhibited this strategy is not resistance, threats and sanctions by status-quo committed institutions, but lack of interest in this approach by activists, and anticipation of repressive measures. We have not tested this approach widely, and we therefore do not know how far we could actually go, before someone

would try to stop us. We seem to stop ourselves out of fear long before we have reached the limits of the possible. Practice alone can tell us how far we can proceed.

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