



## The Contribution of the Social Sciences to Mental Hygiene

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The answer to the question, what contribution the *social sciences can make* to the problems of mental health, depends on *our* concept of *mental* health. For the purpose of this discussion I want to *differentiate between* two concepts of mental health.

If mental health is *adjustment* to the norms and habits *of an existing society*, mental illness is *maladjustment*. From this relativistic *standpoint any given* culture is assumed to be normal, not only in *the statistical sense*, but also in the *normative sense* of being good and *desirable*. The concept of mental health is based on the assumption *that the nature* of man, in spite of all differences is the same in *all cultures, races* and historical periods; that the same laws govern *him not only physically* but also psychologically and that certain values *and aims for his* development follow from his nature.

Any society that is *conducive* to man's development toward these goals, which is *furthering life*, is good; any society that blocks this development and obstructs the *unfolding* of life is *evil*. Any culture must be judged from this criterion; *it is not* good because it exists and has power, but only if it fulfills *the function* of making man more human. Needless to say that there is no necessary *or* absolute contradiction between adjustment and the striving *for these*

human goals. It is a relative contradiction which varies *according to the* approximation of any given culture to the aims of humanity.

From this position, mental health is not the same as *adaptation* to society, but it is to be defined *objectively* as the state of mind *which is* in accordance with the nature of man and the goals and values *which* follow from his nature. Just as a society in which the majority *of people* suffer from tuberculosis is not for this reason a society of healthy people.

A culture in which the majority of people fail to realize *the aims* of humanity is not a culture conducive to mental health. *Moreover, there* to be ample evidence for the assumption that man's *character structure is* molded by the organization of society, its mode *of production* and distribution, its social and political structure, its *ideals and* values stemming from its practice of life. *From these premises the conclusion follows that mental health is primarily a* social, economic, political and ethical problem and hence one which can be properly approached only by the cooperation of all social scientists.

I want to show more concretely why I believe that, especially at the present moment, the goals of mental hygiene require a thorough and critical appraisal of our social structure and cul-



ture, and hence such cooperation of all social sciences.

The premise of the following considerations is the thesis that our contemporary Western society, in spite of its material, intellectual and political progress, is increasingly less conducive to mental health, and tends to undermine the inner security, happiness, reason and the capacity for love in the individual; that it tends to turn him into an automaton who pays for his human failure with increasing mental sickness, and with despair hidden under a frantic drive for work and so-called pleasure. I propose that those concerned with mental hygiene must examine whether this assumption is borne out by the facts, and, if so, what are the causes for modern society's destructive effect on mental health and which social changes are necessary for a sane and mentally healthy life.

There is widespread agreement that the dictatorial systems which have emerged in the last decades are destructive of mental health. Indeed, who can seriously doubt that a life of fear, of intellectual subservience, of mutual distrust must be destructive of mental health? But while this seems obvious to most people, the same people still share the naive optimism that better machines plus shorter working hours plus greater material comfort plus political freedom are not only necessary, but sufficient conditions to ensure mental health.

What is *in fact* the *human situation* in contemporary Western society?

Man has become a commodity. He is not only busy selling commodities and services; his chief interest is to sell himself. His aim is to become a success; not as a human being, not by developing reason, love or his artistic capacities, but by developing the kind of personality which is in demand on the personality market. He has to have the feelings and ideas which are not contrary to anyone, he has to develop a "pleasant personality", whose *opinions* are always up-to-date and who has no *convictions* and no doubts. His sense of self-respect and value depend on his salability, his success; hence he is

always insecure, haunted by inferiority feelings, dependent on others' approval, on changing personality fashions. This orientation is hardly avoidable in a culture where the production of things has become the main aim of human effort, an end in itself, and not a means for a more human life. Being chiefly concerned with selling things, and making a profit, *man has become a thing himself*.

But do we not find a great deal of enjoyment and pleasure in modern culture? People listen to the radio, go to the movies, look at television and so on, and so on. Only the superficial observer will find that these activities are a genuine expression of pleasure. They are to a large extent a compulsive and frantic attempt to escape from inner emptiness; they are symptoms of the inability to be with oneself – or, for that matter, with any one else, without the protection of such escape devices. Man wants to have leisure time, but he is afraid of it when he has it – and tries to kill it. There is a curious contradiction in his character: his work is compulsive because he has to prove his human worth by success; but as compensation for his obsession with work he has developed an extraordinary craving for laziness. We are obsessed with a desire for pushbutton-power with the wish to achieve great results without effort, by twisting a dial, or moving a gear shift.

This, too, results from our practice of life. Man spends most of his energy in a kind of work which in itself is meaningless to him. Whether he is high up or at the bottom of the social ladder, he is a cog in the machine whether he feels consciously powerless and insignificant, or whether he has to hide an unconscious feeling of insignificance and human impotence by having power over others, or being important. Whatever his position is, he is filled with a deep indifference towards his works which makes him a prisoner and absorbs his best energies, without making him happy. He is indifferent to, and often unconsciously hates, his commodity, his customers, his competitors, his superiors, and those below him and – most important of all – he hates himself. He is politically free, and



can vote for his representatives. This is indeed an important achievement and further progress depends on its preservation. But it is not enough.

When people lack critical judgment, sound information, how can their act of choosing be meaningful? Moreover, we do not have the social and political arrangements to give the individual citizen the possibility of participating effectively in making political decisions. This is left, like most other important decisions, to the *specialist*, the political specialist, who feeds the individual with the illusion that it is he, the voter, who makes the decisions. We do not develop political intelligence and responsibility, because there are no effective ways of active participation – and must not only think before one acts, *one must also be able to act in order to think*.

We still profess to the *traditional ideals of Western culture*. But modern man rapidly becomes an automaton, living without love and without faith; without love not only for others, but without love for himself, without faith in life and in his own powers. Who should know better than the psychiatrist where this situation leads to? Mental illness is caused by inability to relate oneself to others, by lack of faith and integrity. If this inability to relate oneself reaches extreme proportions, the result is insanity. There is no need to quote statistics on the extent of mental illness in modern culture. But even the great number of normal people is no comfort. Many of them are normal because they are so well adjusted to our mode of life, and their human voice has been silenced so early in their lives, that they do not even struggle or suffer or develop symptoms, as the neurotic does. Indeed, let us beware to define mental hygiene as the prevention of symptoms. Symptoms as such are not our enemy, but our friend; where there are symptoms there is conflict, and conflict always indicates that the forces of life which strive for integration and happiness are still fighting.

While we still hang on the illusion of individuality we are moving rapidly toward an age of uniformity. Not only commodities are mass fabri-

cated, but also opinions, feelings, our taste. A society, in which the individual has no care from where his peculiar feelings and convictions stem, is bound to be manipulated and directed by a centralized authority, regardless of the political ideology which is employed. Indeed, *uniformity and freedom are incompatible. Uniformity and mental health are incompatible too*. Man is not made to be an automaton, and if he becomes one, the basis for mental health is destroyed. It is one of the most significant insights of modern psychology that mental health is rooted in man's ability to make productive use of his powers; if he is blocked in this, he is sick, whether his sickness manifests itself in symptoms or whether it is hidden under the frozen mask of complete adjustment.

I can not end this criticism of modern society without adding a remark which should correct the obvious one-sidedness of this criticism. Not only have I omitted to mention certain positive aspects of contemporary culture. I have also not mentioned the fact that many if not most cultures of the past have been equally or more destructive to mental health. Every society, past or present, which is built on force, which condones the exploitation of man by man, which rewards aggression and destructiveness, corrupts man; it corrupts the one who wields power as much as the one over whom he rules. Human relations which are based on power and exploitation are contrary to the requirements of human nature; they create fear and insecurity, and result in mental sickness. Human relations built on love and respect are not just a religious and philosophical ideal. The study of neurosis proves empirically that they are the necessary condition of sanity.

What then, is the task of those concerned with mental hygiene?

The tasks which the mental hygiene movement pursues at present are necessary and significant. But I believe that beyond those tasks a thorough criticism of our practice of life and our social structure is necessary. Specifically, I propose two tasks:



(1) To investigate in detail the problems which matter in this respect. What do we know, for instance, about such significant questions as these: Are people happy? (And by this question I mean whether they *are* happy, and not whether they think or say they are happy, as the public opinion polls are trying to find out).

What values and ethical norms do really, and not fictionally, determine their actions? What meaning does work have for them? What is their capacity to love, as differentiated from sexual desire or the wish to have the latest model of a partner – or the illusion that if one person who feels lonely and insecure, finds another person whom he mistakes for being strong and secure, they will be happy when they live together? What is modern man's attitude towards authority? Not only towards the overt authority of political or religious leaders, but towards the *anonymous authority* of public opinion, success, the specialist, the market? What do we mean by our ambiguous concepts of security, freedom, self-interest, and so on, which are glibly used without ever clarifying their different and often contradictory meanings? Hardly any research has been done in these fields; yet it can *be done with the research tools and theoretical knowledge* we have, if *only we consider those questions as vitally important; and, I should like to add, if we begin to criticize ourselves rather than to display our moral and sense only in judging the "enemy" – whoever he may be.*

(2) *On the basis of such research those concerned with mental hygiene must dare to have imagination in order to propose such changes in our social and political organization which could be basis of mental health, a practice of life where man becomes an end in himself, and ceases to be a pre-fabricated automaton. It is obvious that from this viewpoint the psychiatrist and psychologist have to integrate their work with that of the economist, sociologist, anthropologist, political scientist – and with that of the student of philosophy and ethics, in order to be able to make even the most tentative suggestions for an organization of society*

*more conducive to human unfolding and productiveness and harmony; that is, to mental health.*

*It seems most fitting that the International Congress of Mental Hygiene should take place in Mexico. Mexico has made great progress in its industrialization, and this city is not only one of the most beautiful, but also one of the most modern cities in the world. But Mexico is also a country in which an old, traditional culture is still alive; – a culture in which people can allow themselves to be "lazy" because they are able to enjoy life; where a carpenter still enjoys making a good chair, rather than to think how to make it quick and cheap; where a peasant may still prefer to have free time, to having more money. I am not speaking as a romantic admirer of ancient ways in stating that with regard to mental hygiene, modern man has to learn much from the great cultural traditions of the past. The task of a new synthesis is difficult indeed, but to acquiesce in the pattern of present day society and to try to cure only the symptoms of a fundamentally unhealthy situation would, in the long run, defeat our best efforts.*

What we need is critical *awareness of the dangers* inherent in our present way of life, and *imagination and vision* which springs from our faith in the striving for mental health and happiness, inherent in human nature. Only a culture in which man is restored to his place as the unique and sole purpose of society, when peculiarity rather than uniformity is his pride, where he is an active and responsible participant in political and social life – *only in such society* can there be progress toward mental health.