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## CONTENTS

DEATH—UNACCEPTABLE PROBLEM OR ACCEPTABLE FACT— <i>Dr. Joshua Bierer</i> ... ..	1
THE FIRST-YEAR RESIDENT IN PSYCHIATRY: HOW HE SEES THE PSYCHIATRIC PATIENT'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEATH AND DYING— <i>R. Gertler, M.B., B.S. AND E. Ferneau, M.A.</i> ...	4
FACTOR ANALYTIC STUDY OF ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS— <i>R. E. Pandey</i> ... ..	7
SOME THOUGHTS ON BEING AND HAVING— <i>D. M. Donovan</i> ...	12
COMMUNITY TRANSFERENCE: TOWARD A PSYCHIATRY-OF-THE- COMMUNITY— <i>James Henderson, M.D., M.P.H., F.R.C.P.(C.)</i> ...	14
THE MYTH OF POLITICAL RATIONALITY— <i>Francisco José Moreno</i>	21
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FAMILY LIFE CENTRES FOR RURAL AND SEMI-RURAL COMMUNI- TIES— <i>Mario D. Bartoletti, B.A., M.A.</i> ... ..	27
FAMILY COPING PATTERNS IN TIMES OF CHANGE— <i>Ralph G. Hirschowitz, M.B., CH.B.</i> ... ..	37
SOME IMPLICATIONS OF A COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH MODEL FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES— <i>Amir Mehryar, PH. D. Farrokh Khajavi, M.D.</i> ... ..	45
THE ROLE AND TRAINING OF THE AUXILIARY WORKER IN ACUTE PSYCHIATRY— <i>F. Van Ree, M.D.</i> ... ..	53
TRAINING COMMUNITY CONSULTANTS FOR SYSTEM CHANGE— <i>Roderick S. Carman</i> ... ..	62
SOME SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF UTILIZING NON-PHYSICIANS AS CHEMOTHERAPISTS— <i>Stanley R. Platman, Richard E. Dorgan and Ronald J. Gerhard</i> ... ..	65
NEWS ... ..	70
BOOK REVIEWS ... ..	72

## THE MYTH OF POLITICAL RATIONALITY

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**W**E usually look at politics upside down. We try to learn about politics by accepting assumptions that are unwarranted and in which we do not really believe. We assume, for example, that a well-educated and well informed electorate would make wiser decisions than an uninformed and uneducated one. At first sight this appears to be a very simple and reasonable thing to expect, and a good many people's political views are based upon it. But a close look at the relationship between education, information and voting would render such an apparently reasonable expectancy a most questionable proposition. (1)

Linking education, information and wise voting is not only highly arbitrary but it runs counter to what we know about human behavior. Such a linkage presupposes a good many things, but above everything else, it presupposes rational behavior on the part of man. It assumes that man's political action will be based on the intelligent and open-minded evaluation of the available information. Psychological knowledge and psychoanalytical experience, among other things, cast great doubts about the role of reason in motivating behavior. It is not, of course, that we do not make use of information and knowledge—we most certainly do. But information and knowledge do not determine by themselves, in a rational, non-affective sequence, our behavior, but become inextricably involved with our non-rational mechanisms. The usual result is that we use our acquired information not to alter our basic orientations but to justify them. In other words, knowledge and information help us to rationalize, rather than determine our political actions and opinions. (2)

An honest look at how we act politically would leave us with little doubt. We know, for example that American and British voters choose parties on the basis of non-rational mechanisms. (3) Family tradition, geographic location, social extraction, ethnic background, response to powerful personalities, and even weather conditions seem to have a greater effect on the results of elections in the U.S.A. and Great Britain than careful appraisal of the issues in question or detailed consideration of the proposed solutions.

We are all familiar with the great concern politicians place in developing a certain image. The emphasis on image rather than on substance is the acceptance by politicians of the basic rules of the game. They know that people are going to have a certain basic emotional reaction to the way they come across—not in terms of issues but of personality. They also know that it is this basic impression more than anything else that will determine the support they get from their constituency. (4)

The Kennedy family provides a good example of the non-rational basis on which politics rest. The record of John F. Kennedy as president is far from impressive. Internationally he contributed to U.S. involvement in Vietnam by accepting the principle that his country could fight conventional as well as atomic wars and by revamping the armed forces accordingly. He was responsible for the Bay of Pigs incident and a party to the atomic confrontation over the Cuban blockade. Internally, his domestic programs never found congressional support and his administration's accomplishments were rather meager. But in spite of his failure at home and the doubtfulness of his international policies, there appears to be in the United States a considerable reservoir of good will toward him and his administration.

A further illustration of the non-rational basis of the Kennedy political appeal is provided by the political fortunes of the two surviving brothers. The original appeal

of the older brother undoubtedly was compounded by the tragic form in which he died and by the melodrama built around it by the press. But whatever the specific emotional components might have been, their overpowering effect on the political fortunes of Robert and Edward Kennedy cannot be ignored.

The brothers' election to the U.S. Senate and their consideration as presidential candidates by the Democratic party, were not the result of rational conviction on the part of the American electorate, but rather by-products of strong emotional reactions bordering on hysteria. Neither by age, previous experience, or political views did they make exceptionally strong contenders for the offices they sought. What made them politically powerful was the emotional mystique surrounding their names, and, of course, their willingness to ride it.

The Kennedy example is not an exception, but an exaggerated version of the rule. There are rational elements in politics, but political behavior is basically irrational. (5) Some Kennedy followers when confronted with the facts justify their position by talking about the Kennedy "style". This is a far more honest and perceptive response, since by accepting that what drew them to support the Kennedys was "style", they are referring to the non-rational forces that allowed the establishment of a relationship between themselves and the brothers. "Style" thus implies a psychological appeal that we may not be able to describe with precision but whose impact is clearly felt.

Once we accept that the Kennedy appeal was primarily an emotional one in which intellectual positions played only an auxiliary role, we are able to understand a good many things. It would no longer be surprising to find out, for example, that a great number of those who voted for George Wallace in the Midwest in 1968 had previously supported Robert Kennedy.

By and large we like to believe, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that man behaves rationally when it comes to politics. (6) We like to believe that if he does not use intelligently the available information it is either because he does not fully understand the value of such information or because it has been kept from him. In this way we try to explain political irrationality in its democratic or dictatorial versions. In the first instance, man acts irrationally because he has not been taught the value of information. In the second, he does so because he has been deprived access to it. In neither case are we willing to entertain the assumption that man acts irrationally in a democracy or in a dictatorship because he is either unable or unwilling to do otherwise. We are too afraid to entertain this judgment of ourselves.

Two excuses are commonly put forward to justify political irrationality. We say that we act unwisely because we do not know what is going on, and then go on to assert that when we do know what is going on, we act unwisely because we are not able to perceive the liberating potential of information.

Even if we by-pass this implicit contradiction we are still faced with the question of information and knowledge. We talk about them as if they were some form of undiluted element that has the power to purify our political behavior. In fact, any perceptive student of anthropology or psychology is aware that the information available to us, as well as the educational system of our society—of any society—, is far from pure. Information is provided in limited amounts and through a careful system of selection. Not only politicians but newspapermen, editors, and community leaders are constantly acting as censors. They choose what we are going to see and read, when and how. Even if they do not think of themselves as censors but as selectors, the fact remains the same.

Information is always dispensed on a partisan basis even when those doing the dispensing think otherwise. During an election time, notice how some candidates are labelled "major" and others "minor". The excuse for doing this is that some belong to the parties that always win—Republican and Democratic—and others do not. This may seem at first sight rational and fair, but it is not. It is not because the labelling of candidates as "major" or "minor" before the actual voting takes place is absurd if we really believe in free elections. Such labelling is aimed at predisposing the potential voter to take some candidates more seriously than others. The distinction between "major" and "minor" candidates that appears at first sight to be based on common sense and experience is politically loaded. Also loaded is the preference, in terms of media exposure, some candidates are given over others. That the press may not know sometimes where it stands is a fact. That it is impartial is a myth.

As an additional example of this selective censorship I can offer the case of *The New York Times* and Chile. For over ten years I have read *The New York Times'* articles and editorials on Chile. During most of this time the Christian Democratic party was in power and articles and editorials on the party appeared with regularity in *The Times*. It has been rarely, though, and always in passing, that the falangist (fascist) origins of the Christian Democratic party have been referred to. Even the fact that the party kept the name National Falange until 1957 has gone generally unnoticed. Had the readers of this newspaper been told clearly and precisely where this party came from, their reaction to it would probably have been different. A different set of emotional forces would have been activated. Needless to say that editorially *The New York Times* has favored the Christian Democrats in Chile. I am sure the paper still claims that its news articles are free of partisanship.

If information comes to us already pre-selected and contaminated, our ability to make objective and impartial judgments is further impaired by the education we have received. We have built a mythology of education that has little resemblance to what really goes on. (8) We like to believe that the purpose of schools and universities is the pursuit of rational knowledge. Such a pursuit goes on indeed in educational establishments, but it constitutes only a minor sideline of the tasks and functions performed by the educational machinery of any society. (9)

When the newborn arrives we begin immediately to teach him how to go about things. Almost from the very moment the child is born he thus begins to learn how things are done in the world. Very quickly he is able to get food and attract attention. Perhaps, as some geneticists would argue, he is already predisposed before birth to do certain things. But even if this is the case he quickly learns how to implement those innate drives. If he is prone to cry when he is hungry, our feeding him when he cries teaches him that crying is what he has to do if he wants to eat. In fact, the education of the child begins with his experiences at the hands of doctors, nurses, midwives, and mothers. Verbal interpretations of the reasons behind our (and his) actions come a little later, when we tell the child why we feed him, why some food is better than others, why he ought to respect his parents, or not to wet his bed. These verbalizations are meant to convey to the young certain specific ideas, but we also convey ideas by a great variety of non-verbal means. We may tell a child that he should stop using a pacifier because it is not good for his teeth, but at the same time we may be making it quite clear to him, through non-verbal mechanisms, that he should be ashamed to use a pacifier after a certain age. It is probably the non-verbal communications that have the greatest impact upon the child; they are usually much more accurate representations of what we feel than the reasons so commonly verbalized.

Language itself is a subtle but powerful means of education. (10) The structure

of a language influences those who speak it in ways that go beyond the functions of description and communication that language performs. This structure conveys a whole conception of the relationship between the individual and the cosmos. (11)

For example, if a child is taught Spanish as his mother tongue, as I was, he would also be taught by implication to develop an essentially fatalistic attitude towards life. He will be taught to respond to things which will happen to him, but the inevitability of what happens to him will seldom be questioned. A very simple English statement as "I lost my keys", is impossible to reproduce in Spanish in a comparable psychological-linguistic form. In Spanish you would have to say "Se me han perdido las llaves", which literally translated means "The keys have gotten lost from me."

If you were taught English as your mother tongue you are probably horrified at the Spanish lack of willingness to accept responsibility for the loss of the keys. If this is the case, you are suffering from a mild case of cultural chauvinism. You are judging the attitude implicit in the Spanish statement in terms not of any objective philosophical idea but of the conditioning you have been subjected to through the structural mechanisms of the English language. You must keep in mind that the native speaker of Spanish would be equally horrified at your claim to have control over things he is sure you cannot control. Both languages convey different interpretations of man's role in relation to his surroundings. Philosophically neither position is correct or false since both refer to the way we see ourselves and our capacities. Objective logic, if such a thing exists, would lead to skepticism. We would end up accepting that we are not sure of anything. What allows the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking person to be sure of the inherent truth of their respective positions is that both have been successfully trained by their respective languages and cultural mechanisms to perceive themselves in a certain manner. Certainty results not from intellectual wisdom but from cultural and linguistic training and control.

We pass on to our children our ways and beliefs. (12) We familiarize them right away with the customs and values of the two basic groups we belong to—family and community. If our own beliefs are deep-rooted and clearly upheld, the education we impart is forceful and consistent. Our conviction and that of those around us has important didactic value. In other words, to effectively teach our children something we must believe in it. And by believing I do not mean paying lip service to it. The non-verbal ways of communication would make it perfectly clear to a child where his parents—or instructors—stood. Today, for example, it is fashionable to tell children in school, and perhaps at home too, that racial discrimination is bad, and that people of different racial and cultural backgrounds are equal. But we really teach them something else. By our actions, insinuations, and sometimes our comments we make it perfectly clear that we do not believe in racial equality or in the fairness of treatment that should come from it. The result is that belief in racial equality remains hollow. We have really taught our children not to believe in it and, at best, if they take the ideas propagated at school seriously, they grow up in confusion, trying to follow two different kinds of directives. This lack of coordination between what we really teach and what we say—and think—we teach is the result of our failure to take into account the forcefulness of our irrational mechanisms.

Effective education requires agreement and good synchronization between personal, family, and community values. (13) Effective education is what makes what we call stable societies, that is, societies in which there is general agreement on basic values and beliefs. Such agreement, obviously, can only result through proper training of the society's members. Effective education is, therefore, the means used

by a society to retain its cohesiveness through the control of its members. Such control is propagated and perpetuated primarily through non-verbal means and its appeal is to the irrational forces that move man to seek acceptance and companionship.

In this kind of stable society what the parent does or says at home cannot be challenged or contradicted by what the teacher does or says at school. Such contradictions would create dissent. This is not to say that parent and teacher have to agree on everything. On the contrary, schools are to provide areas in which challenges are brought forth, but some important things are to be kept in mind. These challenges concern the way in which things are done rather than why things are done. It is the technology and the know-how that can be challenged without necessarily undermining the whole structure of society. The reason for this is simple: school teaches better ways of doing the things society wants to do. The conflict is minimal. The younger tell their elders that they have found better ways to do the things the elders want done. Scientific advances and technological developments do not, by themselves, challenge the foundations of society. Biological discoveries, for example, are applied to the preservation and prolongation of human life. The knowledge is new but the use it is put to is the traditional one. What would really present a challenge to the structure of a stable society would be if a teacher of biology questioned the assumption that human life is worth preserving or prolonging, and advocating that we de-emphasize the study of human biology and emphasize the study of animals and plants in order to preserve and prolong their lives.

The myth of political rationality has prospered much more in stable societies than in unstable ones. The reason for this must be found in the use to which the myth has been put. Belief in political rationality has provided the rationalization for the perpetuation of the society's values.

For example, I have taught courses in political science in the United States for over twelve years. I have read and have been exposed to a great many American analysts of the American political system. For years I could not find an American political scientist who rejected the American political system. If the study of American politics by Americans has been as objective, detached, and unbiased as political scientists claimed, sheer statistical probability would have dictated that some opinions should have gone in the negative direction. But nobody was against good American democracy. The objections that there were took the form of minor readjustments to make the system operate better. This was done while at the same time Americans were outraged at the impossibility for Soviet professors to criticize their political system. The unanimity of Soviet scholars in praising their system was taken as the result of oppression and lack of academic freedom. The unanimity of American scholars was accepted as the outcome of the dispassionate conviction that the American system was intrinsically good. Lack of criticism in the United States was viewed as the logical result of a rational situation. As the French sociologist Jacques Ellul (14) points out, the propaganda mechanisms of the democratic countries are more subtle, but more effective, than those of totalitarian regimes.

The more recent questioning of political institutions by some intellectuals and large segments of the youth is only a partial challenge to the irrational foundations of politics. Together with a desire to apply rational means of analysis and judgment to political behavior, new irrational positions are introduced. The criticism springs primarily from the breakdown of traditional social values and the search for new ones. No wonder that in most cases the attack is as dogmatic as was the defense.

A further example of our unwillingness to behave rationally is provided in the

many studies of newspaper and magazine readership. People read newspapers and magazines that agree with their political positions to a much, much greater extent than they read those with whose views they differ. Not only is information pre-selected by others before it reaches us, but we make sure that we do not read any material that could possibly make us change our views—or become a little less self-righteous.

Here is where psychology would have something to tell us. (15) Why are we so afraid to be proven wrong, even in our own eyes? Obviously there must be important reasons for this kind of behavior, otherwise it would not exist. Whether the underlying fear is biologically determined or learned is a moot point at present. We must first realize its existence and acknowledge its effects.

Our present unwillingness to face the real nature of political behavior is very telling, for by fooling ourselves into thinking that we act rationally we protect irrationality. The myth of rational behavior allows us to cover up the irrational forces within ourselves. Perhaps human nature is incapable of anything else—but only perhaps. To the degree that there is doubt, it is incumbent upon those who are dissatisfied with the results of irrational political behavior to prod more deeply into the real nature of politics.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Educational institutions are part of the propaganda system of the communities to which they belong. The idealization of formal education as "rational" and "non-partisan" is not supported by the analysis of reality. As Robert A. Dahl (Pluralist Democracy in the United States: Conflict and Consent. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1967, p. 335) has said, "... the greater one's formal education, the more likely one is to endorse the key propositions in the prevailing ideology." Harold D. Lasswell and Dorothy Blumenstock (World Revolutionary Propaganda: A Chicago Study. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939, p. 10) defined education as "the manipulation of symbols to transmit accepted attitudes". For a study of the relationship between propaganda and education, see Jacques Ellul, Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), pp. 108-112.
2. As C. G. Jung (The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche, translated by R. F. C. Hull. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 134. (See also p. 314) explained it, "... we have grown accustomed to scrutinizing our own actions and to seeking rational explanations for them. But it is by no means certain that our explanations will hold water, indeed it is highly unlikely." For more on the non-rational elements affecting political behavior, see Graham Wallas, Human Nature in Politics (London: Constable & Company Ltd., 1938), pp. 21ff; and Pierre Flottes, L'Histoire et l'Inconscient Humains (Geneva: Editions du Mont Blanc, 1965), Introduction and Chapter 1.
3. J. Blondel, Voters, Parties and Leaders: The Social Fabric of British Politics (London: Penguin Books, 1965); and Seymour M. Lipset, Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics (New York: Anchor Books, 1963), pp. 286-296.
4. The symbolic, psychological, and non-rational aspects of elections have never been properly studied.
5. We could apply to politics in general Abram Karkiner's (The Psychological Frontiers of Society. New York: Columbia University Press, 1945, p. 41) understanding of social ideologies: "The most complicated forms of rationalization are to be found in social ideologies."
6. For a case in favor of rational political behavior, see Robert A. Dahl, op. cit., pp. 250-257. An alert reader will have no difficulty in detecting the weakness of Dahl's arguments. For a case in favor of intelligence's dependence on irrational forces, see Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" (article published in 1915) in Standard Edition of Works by Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIV (London).
7. See Richard R. Fagen, Politics and Communication (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966), pp. 34ff.
8. For a discussion of the relationship between education and values, see Clyde Kluckhohn, Culture and Behavior (New York: The Free Press, 1962), pp. 286ff.; and Peter Brücknes, "Sobre la patología de la obediencia" in Aurin von Baeyer, et al., Politische Psychologie, translated into Spanish by J. M. Pomares (Barcelona: Barral Editores, S.A., 1971), pp. 169-191.
9. For discussions of the cultural functions of education, see Melford E. Spiro, "Ifaluk Ghosts: An Anthropological Inquiry into Learning and Perception" in Robert Hunt (ed.) Personalities and Cultures: Readings in Psychological Anthropology (New York: The Natural History Press, 1967), pp. 238-250; and Marion J. Levy, Modernization and the Structure of Societies (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 624-634.
10. C. G. Jung, Symbols of Transition, translated by R. F. C. Hull (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), p. 16.
11. Weston LaBarre, The Human Animal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 163-207.
12. See Talcott Parsons, The Social System (New York: The Free Press, 1951), pp. 239ff.; and Kenneth P. Langton, Political Socialization (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 84ff.
13. Sebastian de Grazia, The Political Community: A Study of Anomie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 7-76.
14. Op. cit., pp. 75ff.
15. For a theoretical discussion of the contribution psychology could make to the study of politics, see Robert E. Lane, Political Thinking and Consciousness: The Private Life of the Political Mind (Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1969); and Aurin von Baeyer, et al., op. cit. For a critical commentary on the necessity to integrate psychological and psychoanalytical knowledge into the study of politics see Marvin D. Markowitz, "Psychology and Politics: A Critique and Proposal!" (unpublished essay).