

Terms of Engagement: Looking backwards and forwards at the Tavistock Enterprise¹

“Whether our country, of all countries, and our group of all other groups in the country, are capable of meeting the challenge of our times will only be determined by what we ourselves do”.
(Bion 1948)

When Lionel Stapley first invited me to give this Memorial Lecture, in honour of a man who had been my guide and mentor near on 50 years ago, I hesitated. I had recently retired from my position at the Tavistock. I didn't think I had anything new to say and didn't really want to say the same things again in a different way. Lionel, very kindly, persisted: “think about it and get back”. I did and I have. Why?

In the interim a number of things had begun to jostle together in my mind. Michael Rustin had invited me to work with him on a paper to be called ‘What happened to democratic leadership?’, to give at one of the Tavistock Policy Seminars at Swiss Cottage. This had taken me back to the early days of the Tavistock, both Clinic and Institute, post 1945 and in particular to the ideas of industrial and organisational democracy that were to inform one major strand of the Institute's work throughout the first two to three decades.

Then, more or less simultaneously, Mannie Sher asked if I would be interested to join a team of colleagues who had the idea of running daily Social Dreaming events at the Finsbury Square location of the Occupy movement, Tent City. Squatting on cushions, with only candle light, in a makeshift tent, sharing dreams with a ramshackle and constantly shifting population of Anti-Capitalist protestors, seemed a far cry from the relative comfort and familiarity of the consulting room, or even of a Group Relations conference. I found myself beginning to breathe a more radical air, putting me back in touch with a younger self, unexpectedly, by luck rather than design, arriving at the Tavistock Institute in 1959, gradually coming to sense a more profound or authenticated radicalism beneath an apparently middle class, professional skin.

Lastly, and as counterpoint to these occasions, I was starting to feel uneasy at the flurry of publications or web site comments, from within what might be loosely called ‘our field’, on the psycho-social dynamics behind current crises and discontents. However persuasive or suggestive, they often, not always, seemed to come across as somewhat ‘disembodied’ and judgemental, diagnoses from the outside as it were, rather than from within any real internal engagement with the organisational worlds in view.

‘Engagement’ became the handle around which the idea of a paper honouring Eric grew; a vantage point from which to look backwards and forwards at the enterprise in which Eric was to spend almost all his working life, and in whose shadow I have spent most of mine. In the process perhaps to recapture something of the radicalism that might have got lost en route.

The term ‘engagement’ did not come out of the blue. It is taken from the three volume Tavistock Anthology published towards the close of the last century, under the title ‘The Social Engagement of Social Science’ (Trist and Murray 1990-97). This was first coined, as I recall, by Fred Emery in the mid 1960's when the Institute was riven with internal disputes and needing to find a new way of formulating its identity. Emery was to draw specifically on the associations attached to its French equivalent, ‘engage’, linked at the time to the writing of the group of

¹ I am using ‘enterprise’ to refer to “a distinctive practice or series of practices that embody a group's or organisation's implicit concept of the work it does—that define what the social philosopher, Alastair MacIntyre, has termed its “forms of activity”, its conception of the ends and goods involved, its standards of excellence and forms of knowledge” (Armstrong 2005). By Tavistock I am referring to the organizational matrix within which and out of which a particular enterprise, defined in this sense, emerged, crystallized and evolved. The boundaries of this enterprise are not now coincident with any one organizational setting.

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politically committed existentialist philosophers gathered, often themselves in contention, around Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

I think this coinage showed a touch of genius on Emery's part. Not only did it, for a while, serve to keep a now somewhat divisive group together. It also implicitly acknowledged the growing multi-disciplinary composition of the Institute; avoided premature labelling of the field, as for example 'social analysis' (Elliott Jaques' term) or, later, 'systems psychodynamics' (Eric Miller's own, later contribution), and lastly it took the Institute back to its origins, re-establishing a sense of continuity with the past. For it was out of engagement in the theatre of war ('engagement' in the full sense Emery intended) that this enterprise was born and the nucleus of a 'Tavistock group', as it was sometimes referred to, came into association.

What then were the terms of this engagement, the gravitational pull that served to link people together, linked in a way that Eric Trist was later to say foreshadowed the idea of a 'composite work group' sharing and learning each others skills, with leadership rotating, not fixed.? I want to suggest four terms, each of which can be read in the stance different members of the group were to take in the three main problem areas they worked on, in collaboration with military personnel: recruitment and selection (the War Office Selection Boards); treatment and rehabilitation (the two Northfield Experiments, in a military psychiatric hospital) and the resettlement of returning prisoners of war (the Civil Resettlement Units set up at the end of the war in 1945):

1. freedom from prior professional preconceptions, either conceptual or methodological
2. an approach that saw the presenting problem in terms of the wider social field in which it was located and of which they themselves were a part: a citizenry at war and men who were soldiers
3. a focus on the group as the primary vehicle of intervention
4. an implicit belief in human resourcefulness and agency, across or beyond differences of station or class.

With the exception of the second, I am not saying that any of the four would have been explicitly acknowledged at the time. Only that as one goes back to the written accounts and as I was subsequently to hear their echoes post 1959, they seem to spring from the page. I think they were both the source of the innovations members of the group were to introduce, test and experiment with and also of the resistance that on occasion was to stop them in their tracks.

I haven't time to spell this out in detail.² But take, for example, Bion's account of the first Northfield Experiment, written in collaboration with John Rickman in 1943 and later added as a Pre-view to *Experiences in Groups* (Bion 1961). There is no precedent for this, psychiatric, psychoanalytic or otherwise, save perhaps a learned clinical capacity to think under fire. Neither Bion nor Rickman drew on any previous professional experience with groups. The originality of their approach turned rather on the suspension of what was already known. It preceded both theory and method. It owed nothing directly to either.

They read the presenting issue, the presence of neurosis, as embedded in the men's real situation, as soldiers withdrawn from the theatre of war, relating to the men as soldiers who happened to be patients, not patients who happened to be soldiers.³

Bion's whole therapeutic procedure turns around a military analogy: to create an organisational framework in which, through means both indirect and direct, "neurosis can be

² All three of the main war time areas of work are described in the first volume of the Tavistock Antology (Trist and Murray 1990). For a first hand account of Bion's contribution during and immediately following the war, Eric Trist's paper on 'Working with Bion in the 1940's: the group decade' is invaluable (Trist 1985).

³ The other side of this coin is captured in Trist's account of his first meeting with Bion at the War Office Selection Boards in Edinburgh: "There were several officers in the room who looked exactly what they were—psychiatrists in uniform. Bion looked more like a general" (Trist 1985, p6).

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displayed as a danger to the group (the enemy within) and its display be made the common aim of the group”.

But note, what underlies this, to be borne out, Bion claimed, by what was to happen, was an implicit belief in the capacity of the men, simply through being brought into observing and learning from their own experience in and of the group, to rediscover the capacity for cooperation and courage in addressing the challenges they faced. As Bion was to put it in characterising the task of the psychiatrist in such a setting, to become “self respecting men, socially adjusted to the community and therefore willing to accept its responsibilities, whether in peace or war”.

We have become so accustomed over the years to reading Bion’s subsequent account of group mentality in negative terms, with its emphasis on the regressive elements in group behaviour, as to miss the radicalism of this first venture into the field, that is, the way it was directed to draw out the group’s capacity for recovering a sense of internal agency, a capacity which was compromised not only by the group’s own internal dynamics, but also by an organisational collusion, which Bion had noted earlier as “ some sort of equilibrium of insincerity... achieved by patients, doctors and community alike” (Bion 1948, p 81).

And this links to the other aspect of the experiment that it is important to keep in mind, namely its abrupt termination after only six weeks, when Bion and Rickman were both summarily dismissed. The exact reasons remain somewhat obscure and contested. It seems likely though that they were, one way or another, conscious or unconscious, a reaction to the way Bion’s procedure challenged both the medical and the organisational assumptions on which the whole hospital was run; indeed took those assumptions as themselves part of the problem. This cost of engagement, working from within, but from a view of the field that can lead to questioning professional or organisational paradigms and the patterning of authority and power, runs as a thread throughout the life of the Tavistock, both limiting but also challenging its strategy of address.

But this is to put it the wrong way round. For if this was the cost of engagement, it was also to become, not always acknowledged, one of its terms. Curiously perhaps, it is Bion himself, who, however idiosyncratically, states this position, in the address from which I have taken the epigraph to this paper: *Psychiatry at a Time of Crisis*, delivered to the Medical Section of the British Psychological Society, as its Chair in 1948.

At one point, in an admittedly somewhat rambling presentation around the emotional sources of a civilization’s discontents, he comments:

“we also have to bear in mind those organisations which in themselves produce problems for the majority of those living in that organisation. It is possible for a society to be organised in such away that the majority of its members are psychiatrically disinherited” (Bion, 1948, pp84-5).

What he seems to have in mind is the way in which the specialization and stratification of a society and its organisations can restrict the scope for the development of man’s (sic) political appetite, that is the range of his participation in human affairs and relationships, a “kind of spiritual drift”, he says, “which leads communities into forms of association which are as destructive of the individual as a community without a public health service would be of its physical health” And then, “even if we admit that the individual is a more than willing participant in depriving himself of the full range of personal relationships, we still have to bear in mind the educational system of home and school which has allowed him to progress along a path of progressive limitation, without any awareness that he was in fact doing so.” Jump a paragraph and one reads:

“the value of a group decision in an industrial concern may derive from a restoration to the individuals of a group a part of their inheritance. As a prelude to scientific investigation it is worth speculating on the possibility that the Trade Union movement and now unofficial strikes represents a reaction against psychological disinheritance far more profound than wages or lack of material comforts.”

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I think that this implied link between human well being and social, organisational and political arrangements (Bion's "forms of association) is central to the Tavistock tradition, as I have experienced it. It touches on the two terms that Bion was to say he regretted not having discussed in *Experiences in Groups*, **sovereignty and power**. One might think of much of the later work of the Institute and of the various groups that were to spin off from it or associate themselves with it (The Grubb Institute, for example) as testing Bion's speculations, his working hypothesis about 'spiritual drift' across different sectors of society and in relation to changing social and organisational contexts.

This may seem a step too far, though I don't myself think so. Recently, in a very interesting and relevant book by Richard Sennett on the rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation, I came across a reference to the work of two distinguished economic and social philosophers, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. In the course of advancing what they call a 'capabilities theory', they argue that "our emotional and cognitive capacities are erratically realized in modern society: human beings are capable of doing more than schools, work places, civil organisations and political regimes allow for".(Sennett 2012, p). This would be another way of stating the position.

I first arrived at the Institute just over a decade after its foundation. By this time virtually all the conceptual work that came to underpin the Institute's practice (its forms of knowledge) was already in place: Bion's explorations of **group mentality**, Eric Trist's **socio technical breakthrough**, Fred Emery's introduction of **open system theory**, Ken Rice's development of the concept of **primary task**, Elliott Jaques' and Isabel Menzies' account of **social systems as a defense against anxiety**.(Looking back it is somewhat disconcerting to note how little of this body of conceptual work has changed over the years. One might attribute this to its robustness. But there are surely times when one wonders whether this has not been at the cost of a certain rigidity).

At the outset, however, none of this had been in place. The Institute was defined by its practice and its practice mirrored, I think, the war time terms of engagement: freedom from preconceptions, regard to the wider social field of which staff were themselves a part: a citizenry faced with the challenges of post war reconstruction, a focus on the group as the main vehicle of intervention and a belief in human capacity and agency.

It was the practice rather than the theory that first appealed to me, especially what I took to be, doubtless naively, its broader social and political undertow.

This appeared at its clearest in the circumstance out of which Eric Trist first came to formulate the concept of socio-technical systems. In its origin this "new field of enquiry", as Eric termed it, was not the outcome of a Tavistock driven intervention. It arose out of and was a response to an innovation in work practice spontaneously evolved by a group of miners in a Yorkshire coalfield, which one of the then Institute's Industrial Research Fellows, Ken Bamforth, had got wind of. The two of them obtained permission, from both management and Union to visit. In an interview published later in his life Trist was to recall how

"after going down into the coal mine I came up a different man..... It was the same sort of discovery we had made with Bion in studying leaderless groups. All of the work with therapeutic communities and all of Lewin's work on groups came together in my mind as I was seeing it happening" (Trist, 1980, p151).

Working in a new, more mechanized coal seam, the miners had spontaneously evolved a form of work organisation based on earlier pre-mechanized practices and centred around multi skilled autonomous groups, interchanging roles and shifts with a minimum of supervision.

"Now they had found a way at a higher level of mechanization of recovering the group cohesion and self regulation they had lost and of advancing their power to participate in decisions concerning their work arrangements... Cooperation was everywhere in evidence, personal commitment obvious, absenteeism low, accidents infrequent, productivity high" (Trist 1993).

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It is as if Trist had stumbled on a self generated Work Group.

It was out of his experience of this innovation, created by the miners themselves, that the whole of socio-technical theory was to evolve, challenging any assumption of inevitability in the way an organisation was structured, leadership, power and authority distributed. However, as often seems to happen in the process of conceptualisation, something of the spirit of Trist's discovery can easily get lost or obscured in the conceptual fine grain; namely the way in which it opened up the possibility of a democratisation of the work place, a route to repairing the experience of alienation at the bottom of the executive chain, or, going back to Bion, of countering a psychological disinheritance that might be as much externally driven as generated from within.

One can trace this theme in most of the later work of Trist, Emery and the colleagues that gathered around them subsequent to their departure from the Institute in the middle 60's, in Europe, Scandinavia, the States and Australia. (The second volume of the Tavistock Anthology is full of examples, most strikingly perhaps in Phil Herbst's extraordinary account of an experiment in creating a more democratic form of work organisation aboard a Norwegian merchant ship). It was later to take on different forms and lead to new modes of engagement across different system levels, partly in response to the difficulties met in seeking to maintain and/or diffuse field experiments ('encapsulation'), partly as a consequence of Trist and Emery's reframing of the social and organisational context from the early 70's on. Over time, however, this strand of work, with its emphasis on structure and design, tended to become split off from a more socio-psychological, psychodynamic focus, both in this country and elsewhere, in my view to the detriment of both. But this was neither inevitable nor evident at the start.

One year after I joined the Institute, Isabel Menzies published her first seminal paper on social systems as a defense against anxiety, based on what she refers to as her 'case study' of the nursing service of a general hospital. In its origins this was to be an action research assignment designed to address a variety of severe problems the hospital was facing in the planning for and training of student nurses. I think the originality and subtlety of Isabel's account of the social defense system, elaborated unconsciously and over time, has tended to draw attention away from what set it off in the first place, namely the sense of alienation and despair being experienced, if not by the nurses as a whole, certainly the newer student recruits. For them the structuring of the defensive system, its minimization of the exercise of discretion and judgement, the way it broke down the nursing task into a series of fragmented jobs, destroying any sense of nursing a 'whole patient,' was experienced as akin to an attack.

"Nurses felt unsettled, indeed almost assaulted by being deprived of the opportunity to be responsible. They felt they were devalued by the social system. They were intuitively aware that the further development of their capacity for responsibility was being inhibited by the work and training situation and they greatly resented this" (Menzies Lyth 1960/1990 p 456).

For these new entrants, as Isabel puts it, "the social defense system at the point of entry is a datum, an aspect of external reality to which they must react and adapt". It is not so much generated from within as imposed from without, not an expression of psychic defenses spontaneously aroused by the nursing task, but something that "had to be incorporated and used more or less as it was found and psychic defenses restructured as necessary to match it...forcing the individual to a maturational level below that achieved before entering the hospital" (Menzies Lyth, op cit p459). As if for the new entrant the implicit message is 'regress or leave'.

We are back to 'spiritual drift', the path of progressive limitation of human capacity. But now, as in Bion's experience at Northfield, located within an historically generated organisational collusion, taken as a given. We are also back to the group. In response to Isabel's analysis a proposal was made for a limited experiment in work organisation whereby a group of nurses would share responsibility for a group of patients, eliminating the fragmentation of the 'task list'

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system, with its echoes of an industrial paradigm. It met with medical and administrative resistance and was turned down.

Of this resistance Isabel simply says “it was quite comprehensible in view of the anxiety and the defense system” One has the sense of something left in the air here. Similarly as regards the research process itself. I referred earlier to the project as an action research assignment. But Isabel was later to describe it as an “initial exploratory survey”. Isabel’s analysis has the form of a diagnostic account, based on interviews with individual nurses and students and she has little to say about just how she worked her analysis through with people at the time. Thinking back, I have found myself recalling Eric Trist’s initial reservations about Isabel’s study, which I think turned on his concern about the risks of over-interpretation and the ways in which it might contribute to ‘stopping things in their tracks’.

Whether this is so or not, Isabel’s later work, both in nursing units and in residential institutions was based on a quite different approach, in ways that bring one back to thinking through the terms of engagement. In 1990, as a contribution to the first volume of the Tavistock Anthology, she wrote what was to be a summation of the principles underlying her work: ‘A psychoanalytic perspective on social institutions’ (Menzies Lyth 1990, pp463-475). The first thing that strikes one in this paper is the way that Isabel returns to and emphasises the stance of ‘freeing oneself from preconceptions’, the need, as she puts it of “pushing to the backs of one’s mind such conventionally useful things as memory, consciously set objectives and theory; they are not to be directly used for guidance in the field”. This serves at the same time as a mirror of what one is hoping for or seeking to foster in the client.

Secondly and by implication she sees insight and meaning as evolving between consultant and client, that is from the exchanges between them, both ways. Thirdly, she addresses the relation between interpretation and action, the need for the consultant to “stay around” as the client works through, and, I would add, tests interpretation in practice. Fourthly, she notes the way in which action cannot necessarily be contained within either the individual’s or the group’s operational boundary:

“other people and groups need to be involved if understanding and insights are to grow and relevant action to take place. The work must usually range fairly widely throughout the institution. Significant changes in the designated problem area require counterbalancing changes in surrounding areas if they are to be effective and lasting” (Menzies Lyth, op cit, p468).

I will come back to this, to my mind, critical fourth point in a moment. But first I want briefly to comment on the first three.

One dilemma, in our own as in other enterprises, is the way in which advances in the forms of knowledge can get in the way of the practices (the forms of activity) out of which they have emerged. I am not doubting the value of such forms of knowledge (the conceptual frameworks evolved out of earlier pre conceptual work). But, paradoxically, the stronger the attachment to such frameworks the more they can constrain as much as enhance the terms of engagement. Moreover, they may on occasion, as it were, sidestep engagement altogether. This is my reservation about much of the current literature that seeks to interpret psycho social dynamics, either organisational or societal, from the outside and/or on the basis of secondary sources: that without the test of engagement and the action emerging out of engagement they lack a necessary purchase. Not just a necessary purchase though; also a necessary provisionality.

To go back now to the fourth point in Isabel’s paper I drew attention to: that action consequent on interpretative work, or indeed on the more socio-technical approach of Trist and Emery’s early studies, cannot necessarily be contained within the individual or the group’s operational boundary. This was to become, and for myself remains, a continuous dilemma in work within a Tavistock tradition, be it in consultancy or action research. Perhaps the frankest discussion of it is represented not in Isabel’s work but in the writing and practice of Eric Miller. It

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returns one to the theme of resistance, but now in a broader context than just that of socially structured defenses. Eric's central concern, in almost all his work, is with the tension between autonomy and dependence, as this emerges both internally in the life of the individual and/or the group, and externally in the patterning of authority and power in organisational life. From the time of his experiences in India, when, with Ken Rice, he worked with a group of weavers in the jute industry in enabling them to design and introduce a new autonomous mode of work organisation, he was to become keenly alert to and at first, he says, taken aback by the resistance such change could encounter, that is in the way it was seen as questioning or challenging established hierarchical paradigms, familiar assumptions about the distribution of authority and power, with their emphasis on positional prerogative and control. In his later writing he was continually to emphasise that any innovation that sought to tap into and extend the capability and resourcefulness of the work group could not easily be sustained unless there were "also consistent changes, structural and cultural, in the wider system". In perhaps his most extended discussion of this issue, in a paper somewhat misleadingly entitled 'Innovation in a Psychiatric Hospital' (since it ranges over many different areas of work) he notes, for example, how "a group of weavers, or for that matter a group of nurses, cannot extend their authority to manage themselves in their own roles, without consequential changes for managerial roles in the wider system of which they are a part". Similarly, but now at another level of engagement, commenting on his experiences working with rural development agencies in Mexico, he writes,

"my own observation and analysis have led me to the tentative hypothesis that changes will not take root in a community unless they are accompanied and reinforced by changes in the external relations of the community with the wider social, economic and political system" (Miller 1993, pp 224-5).

It is in this respect that Eric came to view his work as necessarily carrying a political undertone, experienced initially as a cost of engagement, but then transformed into one of its terms.

The dilemma, as I have experienced it in my own work, especially in recent years, is that the level of one's engagement can set limits to its scope. In work with individual clients (in executive coaching or role analysis) or with particular work groups or teams, it may become clear that the presenting issues touch on wider structural and/ or dynamic aspects than either consultant or client can directly address/act on. One may think of the client as bringing the 'whole system' or the 'system in the mind' into the engagement, but in external reality it is still out there, not directly part of the encounter.

For a number of years I have worked in one-to-one role consultation with a consultant from a team within a large Mental Health Trust. Sometimes it seems as if all that we are doing between us is to enable her to contain and work over the manifold frustrations, disjunctions and conflicts experienced by and imposed on her from the wider management boundary: constantly shifting targets, specifications, reorganisations, both structural and locational etc, continually constraining, circumscribing and at times compromising the integrity of her work group, indeed infecting it. After one such session and out of the blue she received a gift of an old book, written early last century, with the title 'Autistic, undisciplined thinking in medicine and how to overcome it'. "Somehow", she wrote, "it seemed to connect to our conversation, the absurd complaint, the plans that didn't take account of the patient". It is the 'overcome' bit that is difficult though, given the terms of our engagement, the limits it poses on what can be directly addressed.

What has made me particularly alert to this dilemma lately but now by way of contrast is the sense of excitement, anxiety and terror aroused by a quite unexpected opportunity that my own Service (Tavistock Consulting) were offered two years ago, from outside and to be funded from outside. This was to propose and collaboratively design a system wide action research programme within a national prison service on 'improving relationships in prison' and across the board at every level; staff-prisoner, staff-staff, staff management and management-headquarters,

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to be hosted initially by the Governor of a women's establishment. Working with a team of consultants and researchers this project, with all its hesitations, delays, compromises, resistances, detachments and attachments (a significant theme we were to identify within this particular population) brought me vividly back in touch with a mode of work sometimes lost sight of in later years. Including, incidentally, the dynamic advantages of working with a consultant group, something that Isabel Menzies was to refer to as "an old Tavistock principle, that it takes a group to work with a group" (Menzies Lyth, op cit, p 470). Perhaps we need to be bolder or more ambitious in seeking out rather than waiting for such **whole system engagements**.

But then, here's a rub. For, moving away from this particular example, it is no longer always so clear what meaning to attach to this term, the 'whole system'. This point has been extensively argued in recent years from within our field and elsewhere. To cite from a recent paper by James Krantz:

"Now we are in the midst of further organizational transformation, characterized by digitization and globalization. New images of social organization with different rules, grammars, rituals and practises are reshaping the projective landscape of organizations just as they did in the post war era. As these notions shift, the complex connections between individual and context inevitably lead to questions about how systems psychodynamic thinking can remain vital and relevant" (Krantz 2010, p 196).

The implicit assumption is that the forms of activity and the forms of knowledge that have come to shape a Tavistock related practice may no longer have the same purchase in a very different world from that in which they evolved. A world where, as Krantz suggests, networks rather than group and inter group relations are "increasingly forming the basis for connection", "computer mediated relationships are displacing face to face interactions". Where work roles are becoming less determinate, short term contracts replacing longer term commitments, organizations increasingly de layering, outsourcing functions to other firms or other places. Where short term objectives are over riding longer term goals and 'transactions', as George Soros has suggested, replace 'relationships' in people's dealings with each other (Soros 1998).

Taking this for the moment as read, there is, nonetheless, something disquieting in the insistence with which these questions are being asked, as against being met and engaged with in practice, the voice from the field. Moreover, they seem to overlook one whole later strand within the broader Tavistock enterprise, which itself foreshadowed many, if not all, of the contextual changes now in view; namely **the socio-ecological perspective which forms the basis of the third volume of the Tavistock Anthology**. This is not an easy volume to read and the conceptual apparatus can get in the way. But it is extraordinarily ambitious, not just conceptually but in the scope and focus of the engagements it set in train, **for example Fred and Marilyn Emery's development of search conferences, within or across organisational domains, as methods of "future oriented social learning", involving participants across the spectrum of status and level**.

One of the unanticipated benefits of working on this lecture has been the experience of returning to this text, in particular to its penultimate chapter, originally written for Human Relations in 1986, by Howard Perlmutter and Eric Trist, on Paradigms for Societal Transition (Perlmutter and Trist 1997, pp650-674). This ranges across the whole social field, micro to macro, from the individual to the nation state. In a very different contextual setting, it seems to recapture something of the breadth of the earlier socio-psychological days represented in the Anthology's first volume, when the Institute and the Clinic were still in double harness and John Bowlby's work on family dynamics, or Elizabeth Bott's research into family networks, or Douglas Woodhouse's developments in Marital Therapy, or Donald Winnicott's 'thoughts on the meaning of the word democracy' or Henry Dick's 'notes on the Russian national character', could all naturally find a place within an emerging body of work. Reading it now reminded me, quite painfully, less of what we owe to our predecessors, more of what we may still have to learn from their boldness.

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I just want to pick up one thread from this perspective that I happened to chance upon one evening, after a somewhat dispiriting session of Social Dreaming at Tent City. This concerns what Trist and Emery describe as a series of defensive or maladaptive responses to the organisational and societal challenges presented by turbulent environments (Emery and Trist 1972, pp57-67). These are:

- **superficiality** or lack of depth: that is denial of the deeper human roots that bind social fields together and, on a personal level, a denial of psychic reality;
- **segmentation**, in which sub goals become goals in their own right pursued independently of any over riding purpose; and
- **dissociation**, a reduction in the willingness to coordinate one's behaviour with others or to allow one's actions to be regulated by the behaviour of others.

I may be breaking my previous caution about the risks of speculation here. But I have found this line of thinking evocative in trying to get a handle on what seems most disturbing and most challenging within the wider social field in which all our engagements are currently framed, echoing and resonating with elements within the dream material colleagues and myself have been privileged to share. To return to my starting point, might this perhaps be the 21st century's version of 'spiritual drift', now leading communities into forms of dissociation, a withdrawal of social bonds, no less destructive of human capacities, in which an unconsciously sensed psychological disinheritance (denial of the deeper human roots of well being) is dealt with through projection into others, third world operatives, young rioters, benefit claimants, the casualties of institutional and societal 'defensiveness'.⁴ To meet that challenge we are going to need to evolve new forms of engagement, not only cross institutional but cross societal too.

When Eric Miller first had the idea that led to the founding of OPUS, he was himself moving in this direction. He saw it, though, through a consultant's lens, as a way of "formulating a role of 'consultant' in relation to society as client". I am not convinced that the 'consultant lens' is the appropriate way to frame such an engagement. For there is no way in which one can stand apart from one's own societal dynamic; it infects oneself no less than the organisationally structured defense system, Isabel identified, infected the nurses. One needs to find and/or to make a different mode of what James Krantz refers to as 'collaborative conversation'.

In Part 2 of Emery and Trist's *Towards a Social Ecology*, Trist draws a distinction between what he terms a project and a programme. He argues that, in a Type 4 or 'turbulent' environment,

"collaborative research must be developed at the programmatic rather than the project level. Projects relate the research worker to specific rather than generic problems. These are experienced as the client's rather than his, whereas a generic or meta-problem is experienced as his also: it belongs to both as members of the wider society which it permeates, (imparting) an existential quality to the work undertaken".

This recalls to Trist the "type of work in which (I) participated during World War II, in which we experienced those with whom we worked as travellers on a common journey, rather than as clients who had requested our professional help" (Emery and Trist, op cit, p114).

Which takes us right back to the beginning. Through what new kinds of engagement, of doing and thinking, alongside not apart from others, can we now meet the particular challenge of our times, as our forbears met the challenge of theirs?

⁴ One vein in the dream material presented at Tent City suggests how a protest movement may itself be infected by the host culture it seeks to stand over and against, withdrawing and retreating from any real engagement or connection across different social fields.

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