The Behavioral Sciences and War and Peace

Can social scientists develop a social and behavioral science of peace?

William Pollin

In the title of his new book, **May Man Prevail** (Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1961. 263 pp. $4.50), Erich Fromm, the noted psychoanalyst and social analyst, captures *the* question of the second half of the 20th century. Awesome energies and technical capabilities have resulted from the accelerating growth of science and industry. Can we avoid using these energies to destroy our cultural or our biological existence? This is the decade when the larger question of the optimal social use of our physical creativity is shouldered aside in urgency by the more elemental issue of survival.

Fromm deals with the question of survival at two different levels, one theoretical, the other specific and applied. At the theoretical level, he is concerned with the general problem of viability of a culture—the determinants of its ability to recognize fundamental changes in its physical or cultural environment and to accommodate appropriately. At the specific, applied level, he critically analyzes present-day American foreign policy—its picture of the world, its basic premises, and its choice of solutions—and then presents his own appraisal of our current world situation and of what needs to be done.

Crucial to the question of survival is what type of change will occur in response to the fundamentally new conditions of our age. History demonstrates two types of change. Violent, catastrophic change is unfortunately the more common. Most societies have been incapable of adapting themselves voluntarily and peacefully to fundamentally new conditions by anticipating the necessary changes. "The history of man is a graveyard of great cultures that came to catastrophic ends because of their incapacity for planned, rational, voluntary reaction to challenge." Sometimes however, nonviolent anticipatory change occurs, exemplified in this century by the British granting independence to India before they were forced to do so.

"What is it that makes a society viable, allowing it to respond to change?" Fromm's answer is given in terms of values and behavioral processes. "A society must above all be able to discriminate its primary values from its secondary values and institutions," and must avoid reifying its secondary institutions. It must be able to see "sanely and realistically what the facts are" in order to recognize alternative solutions to violence. This requires an awareness and avoidance of "certain semi-pathological forms of thinking which govern our behavior." A number of these are discussed briefly, including fanaticism, projection, and paranoid thinking.

Challenge and Response

In specific terms, the fundamentally new conditions we must adjust to today are the existence of thermonuclear weapons and the explosive surge of nationalism and socio-economic expectations in the underdeveloped regions of the world. To survive we must anticipate and effectuate the changes such new conditions demand. The major content of the book is concerned with Fromm's critical analysis of America's response to this challenge and, more specifically, with his critical analysis of our foreign policy and of our relations with the Soviet Union. He believes that our choice of a strategy of deterrence—relying on a balance of mutual terror to avoid war or subjugation—is a basic mistake. It is a strategy which will not work, he feels. In justifying this policy, its proponents have exaggerated the stabilizing potential of mutual deterrence and have underestimated the destructive consequences of thermonuclear war.

Our decision-makers have made this choice because of some fundamental misperceptions of the current world about them. Chief among these is the view that the Soviet Union is a socialistic-revolutionary society intensely dedicated to the spread of its ideology throughout the world. In actuality, says Fromm, the Soviet Union is at the present time a conservative, autocratic, managerial, "have" nation whose protestations of revolutionary, socialistic dogma are empty ritual, forced upon Communist leaders by their need to justify to their masses the exertions demanded from them.

Our present precarious position results not only from misperceptions and wrong decisions, says Fromm, but also from the fact that our entire society has lost meaningful contact with our spiritual and humanistic values. Professions of morality and devotion to freedom have become empty and stylized rather than meaningful, psychological experiences. Our emptiness has been masked by our devotion to secondary forms; thus in evaluating other nations we overemphasize the structural trappings of democracy, trappings such as the secret ballot, and tend to ignore the substance of how much true human freedom and dignity exists.

If his title question is to be answered affirmatively by the stream of history, Fromm believes that drastic changes in American attitudes and policy goals are necessary. We must recognize that the contest between the Soviet Union and ourselves is a socio-economic rather than a military one, and we must give up our reliance on a policy of deterrence. We must agree on universal disarmament and arrive at a *modus vivendi* with the Soviet Union, based on the acceptance of the status quo. We must recognize the power and thrust of the underdeveloped peoples and their insistence on rapid economic development as well as their demands for political independence. Adjustment to this phenomenon requires that we accept their neutralism, aid their economic aspirations, and demonstrate that our system can

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provide their economic needs and freedom as effectively as the autocratic systems of the Soviet Union and China. We must accept the likelihood that, in response to their current needs and aspirations, these new nations will develop a type of democratic socialism rather than a capitalistic system. We must have a "renaissance of the spirit of humanism, of individualism and of America's anti-colonialist tradition."

Fromm's appraisal of the current scene and his recommendations for dealing with it constitute a cogent statement of one side of a debate that has continued since the beginning of the atomic era—the debate as to whether deterrence or disarmament is our best hope for peace and freedom. Extensive and scholarly evaluations of both points of view are currently available (see *Daedalus* **89**, No. 4); brief comment here would not be useful. Beyond this issue, many of Fromm's conclusions will evoke considerable controversy and disagreement; conclusions such as his portrayal of the Soviet Union's goal as one of maintaining the status quo, in view of their pressure on Berlin; and his judgment concerning the lack of sincerity in our desire to make a start toward disarmament, in the face of the current administration's serious efforts during the abortive nuclear test-ban negotiations. Nonetheless, this provocative statement of a point of view considerably at variance with the present American picture of the world situation and of how it can best be met is stimulating and valuable.

Psychology's Proper Role?

A more serious issue is raised by the manner in which Fromm employs psychiatric and sociological concepts. He points out that psychopathological processes influence and distort both our preception of the international scene and our reactions thereto. How shall we cope with these? Here Fromm, in a sense, abdicates his own position of the need for basic change. His response is that we must "avoid" these pitfalls, "break through the thought barrier." This is falling back upon exhortation and good intentions as the fundamental solution to our problem; necessary components, perhaps, of the eventual solution but historically proven to be insufficient in themselves. The psychoanalyst can not overcome a patient's use of projection and paranoid mechanisms by describing their presence to him and then exhorting him to discontinue their use. There is less reason to believe that a similar application of psychoanalytic concepts to an entire nation, or to one's adversaries in a political debate, is valid or can be of much help. Such use of the psychological approach to world problems endangers the essential contribution which behavioral and social science must make if we are to achieve any basic solution to the problem of peace. It suggests that significant answers are currently available instead of emphasizing the work that needs to be done. In the absence of valid criteria for determining how and where psychopathology influences international tensions, this use subjects the behavioral scientist to the accusation that he is employing his professional sophistication in an unscientific way to buttress his own personal political point of view.

What is required at present is not the indiscriminate application of global psychological theories to international relationships but instead a detailed program of investigation and research into the sources of and the alternatives to war, investigation and research of a magnitude commensurate with the overwhelming threat that war constitutes.

War is the result of a sequence of decisions made by national leaders. Each such decision is the result of a complex interaction of three types of factors: external objective factors such as the geography, tactics, economics, national attitudes and goals pertinent to any conflict situations; group dynamic factors characterizing the interactions of the contending groups within a nation's decision-making apparatus, which are propounding alternative points of view; and personality factors characterizing the key individuals in the decision-making structure responsible for the final decision. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that, despite our overwhelming concern with the danger of war, this decision-making process has never been subjected to direct empirical study. A particular, specialized type of human behavior—exemplified by the deliberations of our National Security Counsel over Cuba, or by Nehru's 13 years of wrestling with the problem of Goa—constitutes the key phenomenon in this problem of survival. Such behavior is the only means whereby the many objective forces which play a role in international affairs become integrated and converted into events. And yet we have no first-hand knowledge of the possible laws and regularities of such behavior.

But significant beginnings have been made. Useful work has been done in studying such problems as the relationship between personality variables and foreign policy attitudes; the structuring and changing of attitudes; and the structure and interaction of certain segments of the government decision-making apparatus. Multidisciplinary centers for the study of peace and war have recently been established in a number of universities, and a new journal, the *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* which is devoted to such research, has appeared. A substantial effort at defining specific researchable questions, numbering in the hundreds, has been accomplished by a series of task groups working under the auspices of the Institute for International Order. Yet the relative meagerness of the present effort is astounding in view of the urgency of the problem. No comprehensive study of the extent of the research effort currently mounted in this area is available, but best current estimates indicate that in the entire nation there are less than 100 individuals working full time at projects which might be thought of as aimed at the development of a social and behavioral science of peace.

Basic Problem—Man

In the past, man's basic problems were concerned with the complexities of his physical environment. To survive and flourish, it was necessary for him to learn how to deal with the elements, to provide adequate food and water supplies, to master the challenges of distance and communication, and to acquire sources of energy beyond those available through the use of his own musculo-skeletal system. It is clear that in our time, the focus of *the basic problem* has changed from the external to the internal environment. Our primary need is no longer one of coping with the physical universe; it is now instead a question of learning, and of learning rapidly, how to cope with ourselves, with each other, and in particular with intergroup and international conflicts. This is the fundamentally new condition in response to which we must hope that we will be capable of rational anticipatory change. Our need is for a new Manhattan project devoted not to the development of a weapon but, instead, to the development of a new body of knowledge of intergroup relationships and conflict resolution, so that we can preserve freedom in peace.