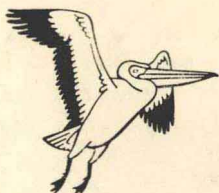


A PELICAN BOOK

W. J. H. SPROTT

Human Groups

A study of how men and women
behave in the family, the village,
the crowd, and many other
forms of association



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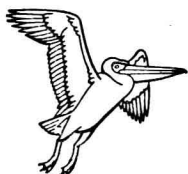
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EDITORIAL FOREWORD

SOCIAL psychology today differs from the Social Psychology of the earlier decades of this century in two main respects. Firstly, its theoretical content is based on scientific evidence gained by planned observations either in field studies or through experiment. Secondly, it is more immediately concerned with the smaller and simpler face-to-face groups than with more complex organizations such as 'a nation' or 'society at large'.

Some of the classics of the old social psychology, such as Le Bon's *The Crowd*, McDougall's *The Group Mind*, and Ginsberg's *Psychology of Society*, may still be read with profit; but they do not tell us much that we did not know before or which we could not have known before if we had thought about the subject as much as had the authors of these works. These works were guides to systematic reflection. Their abiding value lies in their contribution to the analysis of some of the basic concepts required for the description and the ordering of the facts.

This volume is full of interesting factual material, but it also carries over to the new social psychology and applies to the study of small groups; this tradition of conceptual analysis. Indeed, the book opens with the discussion of one concept which is central to any kind of social psychology – the concept of a 'social group' and its distinction from a 'logical class' – a distinction simple enough to see and to state, but not so easy to apply in particular cases.

It was the Cambridge philosopher McTaggart who liked to illustrate the concept of a logical class by reference to 'red-haired archdeacons'. The class of red-haired archdeacons is just the plurality of individuals who both are red-haired and exercise archdiaconal functions. They do not form a social group, face-to-face or otherwise. They do not interact with each other in any context more than they interact with bald headed archdeacons or red-haired archbishops. So, too, with 'the Smiths'. The Smiths constitute a logical class the members of which have little or no fellow feeling for each other and do not interact with each other more than they interact with the Browns. But we must be careful. This is more doubtfully the case with the Campbells, the McDonalds, and the McGregors. And what about 'the pedestrians'?

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Are they a mere logical class or a social group? If they are not a class conscious social group they may at any moment become one if motorists provoke them beyond the limits of their endurance. And if anyone thinks the question is of 'merely academic interest' he should take the cases of 'the People', 'the Workers', 'the Proletariat', 'the Bourgeoisie', and 'the Capitalists'. It is a bone of contention whether the capitalists are as innocent a plurality as the red-haired archdeacons or a genuine social entity interacting and cooperating in overt or clandestine ways to achieve some common purpose. So, too, are 'the workers' a self-conscious integrated group cooperating in the pursuit of worker-goals, or are they a simple logical class wishfully thought of by reformers as a genuine social group, or are they perhaps a logical class in process or becoming a real social group?

Such questions are illuminated in this volume by the new approach through the empirical study of small human groups. Its author has made observations of his own in the field, some of which are here recorded, which illustrate not only how social psychology has changed but also how the ideologies and the techniques of reformers and revolutionaries have been changed by the understanding of the psychology of small groups. Early revolutionaries and reformers thought in terms of 'humanity', 'the workers', and 'the people'. The new reformers are more concerned with the power that resides in the small communities of side streets and alleys. These powers can be observed producing their effects in Bethnal Green, in any American university campus, and in the 'Wards' of the Peoples' Republic of China.

22 May 1958

C. A. MACE

CHAPTER 1

DEFINING THE FIELD

THIS book is about human groups, and in particular about what sociologists call 'Primary' groups, that is to say, groups which consist of people in face-to-face relationship.

A group, in the social psychological sense, is a plurality of persons who interact with one another in a given context more than they interact with anyone else. The basic notion is relatively exclusive interaction in a certain context. You would say that the people working in a factory form a group because, in the context of their occupation, they interact with one another more than they interact with other people, so far as their occupation goes. Within the factory, men or women co-operating in a special job form a group – a sub-group with respect to the factory as a whole – for the same reason. A village may be said to form a group in this sense because there is more interaction between its inhabitants than there is between them and people living in the next village. A nation may be called a group because the members of the nation interact with one another more than they interact with the members of the nation across the frontier.

We have to put in the phrase 'in a given context' because, with respect to the smaller groups with which we shall be most concerned, a man may be a member of several groups. He operates as a member of his factory group when at work, as a member of his family group when he is at home, and as a member of his football team when he is playing football, or attending a meeting of the team.

This way of grouping people is, of course, not the only possible way, nor is it the only way which is of use to the sociologist and social psychologist. People can be grouped according to height or hair-colour, or any other physical characteristic, but such purely logical groupings are of little value because they tell us nothing more about the members of such categories. On the other hand people may be grouped according to occupation, sex, age, or

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social class, and such groupings may be important for various purposes; the sociologist may want to know about the number of women in employment, the relative numbers of the sexes, or the age-group structure of any society, while to say that a person belongs to a certain social class will tell us something about his way of life, his prestige, and his chances in life. In a large-scale society such as a modern nation, these groupings are not psychological groups in our sense. The miners of England do not interact with one another more than they interact with non-miners; the miners of the Durham coalfield do not interact with the miners of South Wales at all. Of course, the miners of a given pit form a group, but one which marks them off from those who work in a neighbouring pit. Adolescents do not form a group in our psychological sense, but in a village or in an urban environment there may well be psychological groups of adolescents. The members of the lower middle class do not form a psychological group, but if their interests are threatened in any locality they may form groups to protect themselves. Similarly women do not form a psychological group in the country at large, but women of like interest may form a Women's Institute in a rural area.

The criterion of relatively exclusive interaction in a given context has been chosen as the principal feature of psychological groups because it is quite clear that interaction is basic to the existence of groups; without some kind of interaction there could be no groups in our sense at all. Furthermore, when one looks about one, it is clear that interaction is not, as it were, evenly spread. If we could take a bird's-eye view of the globe from a great height we should see people, assuming we could distinguish them, moving about in relation to each other within confined areas with just a few moving across the edges into the next-door compartment. If we then came down closer to one of these areas, we should see them, again, moving about in relatively confined areas. Closer still we should see further coagulations, meeting and dispersing and joining up again into new formations. From a purely objective point of view such exclusive interacting pluralities would be obvious enough.

This objective criterion of interaction, however, is not the only one which social psychologists have picked upon as marking out

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one group from another. M. Smith¹, for example, defines a social group as 'A unit consisting of a plural number of organisms (agents) who have collective perception of their unity and who have the power to act, or are acting, in a unitary manner towards the environment'. In this definition the consciousness of the group as a group is the keynote. The members of a group, in our sense, are aware of their membership. This is certainly of great significance, as we shall see, but interaction must occur before the concept expressed by the word 'we' can be generated.

Again, in somewhat formal and distressing language, Morton Deutsch² defines a group as existing 'to the extent that the individuals comprising it are pursuing promotively interdependent goals', while according to the Freudian conception of the group 'two or more people constitute a psychological group if they have set up the same model-object (the leader) or ideals in their super-ego, or both, and consequently have identified with one another.'³

While not subscribing to Freud's account of the nature of groups, as expounded in his *Group Psychology*, we must accept his view that in all groups there is a moral element, there are standards or 'norms' of conduct incumbent upon its members to obey. We must, too, accept Deutsch's insistence on the fact that groups, in our sense, have purposes which are collectively pursued. Such purposes may be the furtherance of some interest, the solution of a task, even quite a small one, or the purpose of sheer survival. What these standards will be will vary from group to group, partly in terms of their past histories and vicissitudes, partly in terms of the particular task to be done, partly in terms of the dangers, if any, that threaten them from within or from without.

Thus we must think of groups as dynamic entities, and not as mere collections of people, haphazardly thrown together. Of course the urgency of their collective purposiveness will vary from situation to situation. The purposive unity of a village or a town may lie dormant for a considerable time, and it may affect individual villagers and citizens to different degrees, but it may be aroused in time of danger or when something that affects the unit as a whole presents itself. The threat of destruction from the air may lead to collective action, or to collective inaction if it is

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thought that nothing of a useful nature can be accomplished. The hopes of a drainage scheme or the death of the Rector may lead to collective action or shared distress. But whether the members of a group are overtly engaged in the pursuit of a goal or not, their interactions are in part controlled by the standards of conduct current in the group.

The presence of standards of conduct is an essential feature of group interaction because interaction itself cannot go on for long without mutually accepted standards emerging. Standards have two aspects; they are frameworks of expectation and measures of esteem. If two people interact with one another, each has to adapt his response to the other, and so to behave that he can foresee what the other will do in response to his response. Theoretically speaking, each of the interacting parties has an enormous repertoire of behaviour, any one item of which he can call on at will, but it is obvious that if the behaviour of each were entirely random, they could never be said to *inter-act*. So it comes about that A will behave in a certain way calculated to elicit a certain range of responses from B, and B will, if he wishes the interaction to continue, respond to fit in with A's expectation more or less and to prompt A to respond in an appropriate fashion . . . and so on.

Of course, if you consider two people who belong to any culture – a system of standards accepted by the wide community of which they are members – meeting for the first time, it is perfectly true that they will be equipped already with expectations about each other. They will have learnt to deal with strangers, according to the rules of their larger group; that among other things is what 'manners' are for. Their initial contact, if they have been adequately trained, will be smooth enough; they will not have to develop standards of their own for the purposes of superficial or temporary interchange. If, however, they go on meeting, and form a group of two, each will have to respect the 'little ways' of the other; they will have common interests, in the arts, in sport, in financial enterprises or in anything else. Gradually mutual customs peculiar to themselves will be accepted by each, and form a set of mutually harboured expectations which form the standards of their interacting, over and above what one would

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call the 'common rules of politeness'. In addition, action in accordance with these standards will be regarded as 'right', and unexpected action, where an expectation is present, is something which has to be explained – it is somehow inappropriate and threatens the harmonious existence of the group. The significance of a framework of expectations can be seen when we reflect on the sentence: 'I can't get on with him, you never know how to take him', or 'you never know what he will do next'.

If standards of conduct, forming a framework of expectations, are required for the persistence of a 'friendship', it is clear that larger groups cannot do without them. There the situation is far more complicated. In a group of four, A has expectations about B, C, and D, and each of these has expectations about A, and each has to shape his conduct so as to fit in with the expectations of the others, and to elicit responses which will fit in with the expectations of all. The point is that they cannot keep together if each person behaves at random with respect to the others.

All this sounds very complicated, and of course complex mechanisms are at work, but in experience it is not complicated at all. What happens is that, without the participants noticing it, a set of customs becomes established which are regarded as 'right' within the context in which the group operates, and they are felt by each member as being in some sense outside himself. He does not think: 'I must do so and so because of B's expectation, C's expectation, and D's expectation'; he thinks, if he thinks about the matter at all: 'I must do so and so because it is *our* way of behaving'; or, 'because, if I do not, I shall let the group down', or 'because, if I do not, I shall get black looks'. The group, if it has been in being for a time, assumes a kind of independent existence in the minds of its members, and the rules are ascribed to it.

This is a somewhat sketchy account of the origination of norms of conduct in groups, as emerging from the prerequisites of persistent interaction, and more will be said about the matter later. It is also true that groups vary in the 'tightness' of their standards; some are more 'free and easy' than others, and some members may be tolerated by a group even though they behave, from the point of view of the group, very 'oddly'. All that is necessary at this stage is to realize that every group has some

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standards characteristic of it, and that it could not continue to exist unless this were so.

This point about groups having to have standards, and spontaneously generating them in the course of the interacting which is the basis of their existing at all, is important from another point of view. Because members of groups conceive of the standards of their groups as outside of them individually, because they can be put into words and communicated to a stranger or to a new member, and because they can be a matter of reflection and discussion, one easily gets the idea that they really do come somehow or other from outside. The individual may have intentions of his own which conflict with the standards of his group and he feels 'coerced'. The standards may, indeed, arouse such reverence that their origin is attributed to some supernatural being. This, of course, does not happen in the case of the smaller groups with which we shall be mainly concerned, but it does happen in the larger inclusive groups of which we are all members. When group standards are thought of as something apart from the interacting of the group members, we tend to think of them as somehow 'imposed' upon them. This gives rise to the notion that man is naturally unsocial, and that law-givers or moralists must come along and rescue him from his nasty brutish ways. This is nonsense. The generation of, and acceptance of, standards which regulate conduct and preclude randomness is, as we have already said, a prerequisite of social intercourse. The having of standards springs out of social intercourse; it is not imposed from outside upon it.

To say that all systems of morality spring out of social intercourse may, indeed, be going too far, but not so much 'too far' as might at first appear. Systems of morality involve two things: the obligation to control one's conduct in some way or other, both positively and negatively, and the obligation to do this particular kind of thing, and refrain from doing other particular kinds of things. The first element, the having of rules at all, springs from the necessities of persistent social intercourse. The second element, what the rules shall be, springs partly from social intercourse, and partly from reflection. Certain rules, such as the obligation to keep hostility by any members of a group down to

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a minimum, are required for the very existence of groups. Other rules which go beyond the mere survival of groups, and which may even prejudice their interests, derive from reflection. But the moral teacher, it must be remembered, does not teach in a vacuum. He can assume the idea of obligation as already there in the minds of his audience; what he sets out to do is to modify the content of the standards that have emerged out of the very nature of persistent living together.

This matter has been dealt with at some length because we shall come later to deal with experimental work on the pressure of group standards, and it is well to recognize at the outset that the having of standards and the sense of some kind of obligation to act up to them is part of the very nature of social, as distinct from 'feral', man.

We must now return to our groups. They are marked out in terms of differential social intercourse; their members have a consciousness of membership, which may, indeed, persist even when intercourse with co-members has ceased, as with an Englishman living abroad; they are purposive, though their purposes differ from one group to another, and they have standards of conduct in some ways common to many, in some ways peculiar to each.

In our examples of groups we have ignored the dimension of size; we have merely considered interaction. Now size is of great importance to us because by means of it we shall exclude a whole domain of groups from our consideration.

In the various attempts to classify groups, a distinction is made between 'primary' and 'secondary' groups, and between groups whose members are directly related, and groups whose members are indirectly related. There is an obvious difference between a nation and a Women's Institute or a school, or a discussion group. There is also a difference between a metropolis and a village. It is this difference to which the words 'secondary' or 'indirectly related', and 'primary' or 'directly related' refer.

The term 'primary group' was first used by Charles S. Cooley in 1909, when he wrote:

By primary groups I mean those characterized by intimate face-to-face association and co-operation. They are primary in several senses,

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but chiefly in that they are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual. The result of intimate association . . . is a certain fusion of individualities in a common whole, so that one's very self, for many purposes at least, is the common life and purpose of the group. Perhaps the simplest way of describing this wholeness is by saying that it is a 'we'; it involves the sort of sympathy and mutual identification for which 'we' is the natural expression.⁴

A primary group, therefore, is relatively small, and members of it can all have face-to-face contact with other members. This cannot be said of a nation or of a city or of a Trade Union or of a Professional Association. The unity of these 'secondary' or 'indirectly related' groups is mediated by symbolic means: a nation is a nation because its natives believe it to be a nation. A city is an agglomeration of houses with a fairly obvious visible boundary, but its unity as a secondary group lies in the fact that the citizens believe that they belong to Manchester, Birmingham, or London, while a conurbation, though also a built-up area with visible boundaries, is not a group in our sense because the people who live within it do not believe themselves to belong to it; they believe themselves to live in Walsall, Dudley, or Salford. Of course, the members of a face-to-face group, as we have seen, are conscious of its existence, and believe themselves to belong to it, but in addition to that, they are aware of the presence of the other members, which makes a great deal of difference. The 'secondary' group is, in a sense, purely a figment of the imagination. The reality is to be found in face-to-face interaction and long-distance communication.

Unity is further given to the secondary groups by language, by what we might call the 'chain-reaction' of social interaction throughout the group, and by unity of administration.

While it is true that a common language is not necessary for the existence of a nation-group – Switzerland bears witness to that – there must be some poly-linguistic communication possible for the idea of nationhood to become implanted in the minds of the nationals.

By the 'chain-reaction' is meant the social interaction which spreads throughout the nation by the agency of transport. It would be perfectly possible for a self-supporting community to