

**SOCIETY**

W I T H O U T

**THE FATHER**

A  
CONTRIBUTION  
TO  
SOCIAL  
PSYCHOLOGY

REWORD BY ROBERT BL

EXANDER MITSCHERLICH

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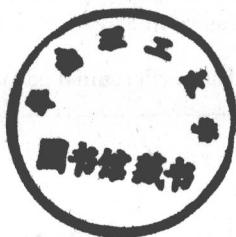
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Alexander Mitscherlich

# Society Without the Father

*A Contribution to Social Psychology*

Translated from the German  
by Eric Mosbacher



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Society Without the Father

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The book would not have been written without long collaboration with my wife, Dr Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen, to whom I therefore wish to dedicate it.

# Foreword: Mitscherlich and His Uncomfortable Thoughts

by Robert Bly

This book is a master book. It is difficult, merciless in its forward drive, a juggernaut of harsh perceptions, fueled by a willingness to look at what is. Its style and language, forged out of the combative thinking of Freud, requires attention and rereading. Difficult prose for uncomfortable ideas—that is Mitscherlich's motto.

I'll restate briefly seven of his unpleasing or unpopular ideas. Number one: The father society has collapsed. It's not so much that the father doesn't talk or pay support or has left the house, but rather that the image of the working, teaching father has faded from the mind. An image that has existed brightly in the mind for thousands of years has faded. It is hard to imagine what that fading could mean. The disappearance of the working, teaching father has happened so abruptly—so unexpectedly from the centuries' viewpoint—and the implications are so immense—that we really turn our heads away, we can't take it in. Because he no longer teaches as he works, we in our rage call him a nuisance, a curse, a survival from archaic times, an enemy or a virus, some persistent strain in the bloodstream. Just as some early Christians rejoiced over the death of the pagan Great Mother, some people hope that the father and the Great Father will both go. Whatever may happen in the future—whether God the Father will survive or not, the image of the working and teaching father in the psyche has already succumbed. Mitscherlich declares that the father as a positive force



in society has fallen, or been exiled. For all practical purposes, he is not.

What happens then? At first glance we see that the missing (interior) psychic father has been replaced by a massive, many-breasted (interior) state mother. But it's more accurate to say that when the father is gone, everyone becomes a sibling. "Mass society, with its demand for work without responsibility, creates a gigantic army of rival, envious siblings," Mitscherlich remarks. The spirit of sibling rivalry soon "turns into envy and 'begging behavior' resembling that of nestlings on the approach of their parents bringing food." Let's call the arrival of the sibling society the second idea. The envy and jealousy brothers and sisters normally feel for one another inside the home become the emotional norm for the whole society.

In the old father-organized society, one knew where Power was. It exhibited and announced itself by cockaded formal dress, men in gold braid and wide epaulets getting out of elaborately decorated carriages at the top of high flights of stairs. The citizens look up. The king is there. If the citizen wants power, he kills the king and takes it. Cromwell got his power that way, so did Mao. But citizens in the sibling society look sideways. The siblings' senses are aware of individuals similar to himself or herself in large numbers all over the globe. Sibling society has its positive side, but on its dark side it wants VCRs, compact disc players, high definition television, expensive tennis shoes, "designer clothes," access to mass communication, fifteen minutes of fame.

The sibling society is only forty or fifty years old, and not yet in full bloom, but already we notice that the committee, a sibling mode, dominates decision making more and more. All members of the English Department have to teach the same theories, etc. This has happened before but there is a new edge to the desired unity now. Responsibility for eccentric decisions is not a quality of sibling society.

Third idea: Once the sibling society is well in place, the citizens may find great difficulty in maintaining distinct viewpoints or rebellious trains of thought. As William Greider points out in *Who Will Tell the American People?*, we no longer find major American newspapers or their reporters who set themselves to defend the

workers or the poor against the rich and powerful. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* stand with the rich and powerful. Reporters like Bob Woodward seemingly cannot maintain their antiestablishment point of view for more than a decade. The Democratic senators and representatives, as well as their colleagues in the Republican party, have their private corporate givers, and in the last years all together carefully concealed the magnitude, even the existence, of S&L problems. Senators and reporters alike avoid asking presidential candidates about serious problems in election years.

In the old father-organized society the citizens simply looked up at the men at the top of the high stairs and opposed them with an outrage that was partly fueled by anger at one's own father and his power. But when the father is absent, or an unknown quantity, or a pitiful object, and the mother holds the power inside the single-parent home, then how does the citizen fuel his or her political anger? How can the anger be accurately focused? It's possible that our whole Western tradition of fiery outrage will fade. We notice that political cross-dressers like Reagan already escape all serious censure.

Fourth idea: Sons and daughters now experience a double fatherlessness. The father who has nothing to teach results in the first fatherlessness, and the unresponsive presidents and senators amount to the second fatherlessness. The disappearance of the working and teaching father—which I'll call the first fatherlessness—happened forty or fifty years ago. No one willed it. Industrial circumstances took the father to a place where his sons and daughters could no longer watch him minute by minute, or hour by hour, as he fumbled incompetently with hoes, bolts, saws, shed doors, plows, wagons. His incompetence left holes or gaps where the sons and daughters could do better. In 1900 about 90 percent of American men were self-employed, most on farms, which meant they dealt with objects in full view of their children. Now 50 percent of men work either for the government or for the Fortune 500 corporations. As when a photograph in an album fades, as when a reflection on the water fades, dissipated by a slight wind, as when a name of a person once loved fades from the memory and cannot be recalled, so young women and young men look inside their souls now and see a remote father, an ascended father, a rejecting father,



an indifferent father, an unknown father, a desperate father, even a thoughtful, caring father, but they do not see that old image—four million years old—of the father who fumbles and works with things before their eyes, and then stops and teaches them how to hold a nail or a calf. That is fatherlessness in the private realm.

But people also experience fatherlessness in the public realm. When the siblings elect leaders, they do not, at least so far, choose a father-like figure who will tell them to postpone immediate pleasure for long-term goals, who says, "You won't be able to do that yet," but they hire someone like Reagan, who tells them they can have everything. As I understand Mitscherlich, our sibling society chooses leaders, encouragers of consumption, men like Reagan and Bush, who lie about what is possible and add one trillion to the deficit. The homeless are unfathered—they literally have no house—the single mothers are unfathered, money shifts away from the children, who are already suffering the first fatherlessness; under Reagan and Bush all forms of fatherlessness deepened. We know that 49 percent of the divorced fathers never see their children again after the divorce; that is horrendous; and we could say that 92 percent of the senators and representatives never "see" their citizens again after the election. This is double fatherlessness.

Fifth idea: In the fatherless society, the children—particularly the sons—have holes in their psyche that fill with demons. Suspicion of the father is a natural part of human life. But Mitscherlich says that if the sons do not have constant association with their fathers in a human way, if they do not see the father when he is working, failing, laughing, complaining, pleased, weeping, hurting, stupid, fooled, then a hole develops in the son's psyche. It doesn't remain empty long but soon fills with demons. We know that in peasant societies, by contrast, everything, even sexuality, is acted out in front of everyone; but in our culture of the absent father, the hole fills soon with hostile suspicions—the father is truly evil, he loves no one, he cares only for himself, he is pitiful, he is a fascist, he's completely incompetent, like all older men he is corrupt, he is selfish, he only wants to control, he wants me to die in war, he takes bribes, he is a Nazi. Suspiciousness is invading women as well. Mary Daly in *Beyond God the Father* says, "Men are an ontological evil in the universe."

When such demons invade the son's or daughter's psyche, then the sons and daughters feel virtuous if they tear down buildings that "the fathers" have built, and they feel virtuous if they destroy respect for Freud or Melville, or deconstruct great literature and all codes of limitation. They feel virtuous if they replace old meaning with a masterful emptiness. All culture connected with the father becomes evil. That mood began to show itself during the sixties, impelled by the genuine errors old men made in engaging the Vietnam War, and the mood extended itself to attacks on all codes that limited pleasure. Difficult study was not to be endured. I think by 1970 only one college in the United States still had the foreign language requirement for graduation.

Mitscherlich, as an analyst, often treated young German men. One man knew his father only as an "uncle" who appeared at times and mysteriously disappeared again. In his dreams, old men appeared as skulls who wanted to kill him. Mitscherlich remarks, "In the unconscious even a 'dead' father remains dangerous.... What concerns us here is the hallucinatory picture of the world that had been worked up by the patient, the total unreliability, alienness and dangerous nature of men and things." The "dangerous nature of men and things...." We notice this attitude prevalent not only in the increasing "demonization" of men in popular culture, but also in the minimalist novels such as those of Jay McInerney, where all emotional response is turned down, partly to deny the explosions the demons may cause if genuine human emotions are faced and released.

Sixth idea: Serious regression is taking place. The numbers of mass men or mass women, once thought to be diminished under the pressure of enlightenment, has now enlarged so as to include almost every person on the planet. As Robert Lowell remarked, "A savage servility slides by on grease." Mitscherlich remarks that primitive behavior turning up in the so-called civilized person is noticeable also in "regressions at group level, all the way from primitivization of ideas in disciplined bodies down to the formation of gangs and the increasing narrowing of horizons to selfish group interests." In 1991 Bush could harness the nation's aggressive tendencies in two weeks, and the sibling society, including PBS and CNN and Congress, offered no brakes. Television producers, acting purely for

money, encourage the demonic and put no curb on desires to see bodies blown apart or women tortured and raped; the level of literary culture declines; fewer and fewer people can find the energy to stand up for old disciplines in language, syntax, dance, figurative art. We know that instinctual desire for pleasure among addicts becomes terroristic, and the desire for "rightness" can become terroristic as well. The One in Us Who Guides, caught between these two primitive forces, grows weaker every year; and the whole society roars down the road with, as William Carlos Williams said, "no one to drive the car."

We have as fathers underdeveloped boys more and more rather than adult men and addicted fourteen-year-old girls as mothers, in school children incapable of homework. This slide toward savagery needs to be seen as serious regression.

Seventh idea: The absence of the father has caused many boys to be stuck at the pre-Oedipal stage. Mitscherlich remarks that trying to bring up children without a close relationship to the father will obviously have just as disastrous consequences as trying to bring up children without a close relationship to the mother. Forty years ago analysts studied sons who were damaged by Oedipal conflict; in the last forty years analysts find themselves with clients who have not even reached the Oedipal stage. One could say they are not anal, oral, or genital, but pre-anal, pre-oral, and pre-genital.

In the absence of the father ambivalent feelings toward the father—anger and gratitude, for example—fade away and devolve into a numbness. Mitscherlich remarks that the fatherless (and increasingly motherless) child grows up into an adult with no loved teacher, "exercises anonymous functions and is guided by anonymous functions." Under these circumstances it is difficult if not impossible to learn renunciation, which, Mitscherlich believes, can only be learned in the presence of a person who loves you. The practice of accepting renunciation of immediate pleasure for the sake of a goal to be achieved later, which was still characteristic of the struggles of the proletariat to obtain its social rights, is no longer viable.

What does the pre-Oedipal son look like? Mitscherlich remarks, "The striking inaccessibility of many young people, their provocative manners, their indifference to the values of their elders,

the loneliness that they try to stifle by a hectic pursuit of experience—in short, the severity and the protraction of the crisis of adolescence—are dismissed as psychopathological phenomena laid at the door of youth, who are blamed for everything.” Mitscherlich believes we have to look at social conditions for this, rather than blaming youth. “The outside world is experienced only in the form of direct stimuli to instinctual wishes searching for satisfaction, but no contact with the complicated signaling system of cultural symbols has been established.” A culture involves a “signaling system” that calls young people into adulthood. Bad education means the signaling system is not learned.

Two distinct types of pre-Oedipal sons develop. The first type is characterized by passive lingering in an inarticulate fantasy world. The second is characterized by ruthless aggression under pressure of which the world is imagined as a jungle. Mitscherlich remarks, “Both types of abandoned individuals are parasitical and unproductive.” Both forms of regression “arise at the point where cultural ties break down, and admit the individual not to a state of nature of the kind imagined by Rousseau but to a state of instinctual chaos.”

The effective disappearance of the father then, encouraged in some quarters, leads to chaos and regression in society, which will deepen in the years ahead.

We might ask several questions. Is Mitscherlich nostalgic for the nineteenth century father? Is all this an appeal for his return? Definitely not. The tyrant German father led to psychic disasters, including Nazism, to which Mitscherlich has addressed himself in his life and his work; but industrial fatherlessness leads to a new sort of disaster, which is the subject of this book. Distinctions between German and American fathering need to be looked into. German sons today are aware of the corruption their fathers experienced during the Nazi era, and they tend to be more distrustful of older men than we are. Having formed the U.S. by leaving the “fatherlands,” Americans have always been more mischievous, less mythological, more turned toward freedom, more liable to go down the river with Huck Finn, more ready to try life without family than the Europeans. We might also ask how we can reconcile Mitscherlich’s fatherlessness with Alice Miller’s insis-

tence that tremendous physical and sexual abuse still continues in the German family. If we read both Mitscherlich and Alice Miller we will get a rounded feeling for the truth of the matter. Mitscherlich perhaps overstates how thorough the father revolution has been; yet we also know that the father who no longer enjoys visible power in public life may redouble his efforts to dominate inside his house. Sexual abuse particularly tends to be associated with felt impotence.

I hope I have saddened the reader sufficiently in this introduction. This book stares at the societal difficulties fatherlessness leads us into, particularly the difficulties in developing people strong enough to resist mass tyranny. It is good for the Jungians to bring forward stories and divinities that encourage men and women in the second half of life to see the great possibilities open to them. It is also good to follow the Freudians as they descend into the gritty facts of early family life and the damage we sustain there. Mitscherlich's greatness is that he has experienced the bitter defeats to soul that happen in industrial countries, and he turns a steady gaze on stories that are not romantic. In the absence of the teaching father, men have lost ground. For some the loss seems virtually beyond repair. The anonymous quality of their lives, the lack of joy, the openness to despair, isolation, and self-destruction is desperate. It takes the courage to grieve to be able to look at this situation clearly. The book makes us understand that we may have to grieve also for the staggering damage that this regression in the absence of the father still may cause to the culture that we all love and from which we receive much of our psychic nourishment. Mitscherlich's own analytical work concentrated primarily on fathers and sons, but we know by extension that daughters have suffered from the lack of father teaching, and from experiencing their own father merely as temperament, remoteness, or irritability. They too find demons in the absent place; when the father becomes absent they find the world terrifying. To describe the damage from industrial fatherlessness to daughters is a task all of us need to take up.

Alexander Mitscherlich was born in Germany in 1908. During his twenties, he participated in the left-wing anti-Nazi movement and in 1932 displayed in a bookstore window a pamphlet called "Adolf Hitler—Germany's Doom". As soon as the Nazis came to power, his house was ransacked and the library confiscated. He



entered Switzerland as an exile; then in 1937, when he returned to Germany to arrange for legal defense of the leader of his left-wing group, he was arrested. He spent eight months in the Nuremberg prison; and after his release he was required to report to the gestapo twice a day for the remainder of the war. During those years he completed medical school and became a neurologist on the staff of the university clinic at Heidelberg.

His wartime conduct was so exemplary that the Americans chose him as a minister in the first German government serving during the Occupation. Later, German medical societies chose him to head the German Medical Commission to the American Military Tribunal dealing with medical war crimes at Nuremberg. His first book (written with Dr. Fred Mielke, his fellow Commission member), *The Doctors of Infamy: The Story of the Nazi Medical Crimes* (published in the U.S. in 1949), resulted from that experience. "Only he who traces the disaster back to its historical motivation can find his way through the overwhelming array of horrendous facts," he and his collaborator wrote. During this period, Mitscherlich went through the rigorous psychoanalytic training and became a key figure in the reestablishment of German psychoanalysis. He published *Society Without the Father* in Germany in 1963. Four years later he and his wife, the analyst Margarete Mitscherlich, wrote *The Inability to Mourn*, in which the two authors concentrate on the German citizen's "forgetfulness" of the Nazi era. Mitscherlich later became professor at the University of Frankfurt and Director of the Sigmund Freud Institute there. At the time of his death in 1982 he was widely recognized as one of the greatest contemporary writers and thinkers. *Society Without the Father* was published in Germany in 1963 and published in English translation in 1969 by Tavistock Publications in London and by Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich in this country. It is an honor to welcome the first American paperback edition of this intense, difficult, and courageous book.

August, 1992



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