

ATOMIC NERVE WAR AND THE URGE FOR CATASTROPHE

DOOR

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It is curious that, although every day we read of the technical and political implications of the atomic bomb, we never hear anything about the psychological influence of the current campaign of the atom bomb on the human mind. Statesmen and technologists do not know how to deal with this instrument of tremendous destruction and reports and discussions are not from the air. There is no doubt that we are being subjected to a very peculiar attack which, as I will try to explain, may lead to quite paradoxical results.

In the first place the general idea that the fear of tremendous destruction by the atomic bomb will force mankind nearer to a productive plan for peace must be contested. Fear always evokes not peace but defense and attack. When a man is afraid he tries to deal the first blow to his enemy. If fear cannot be conquered by mental processes, by understanding and planning to prevent danger, it is discharged in new and often brutal aggressiveness.

Not only does there exist in man a tremendous fear of destruction. Although this is true, it is an oversimplification. Man possesses a desire for war and destruction as well. The old fighting animal in him has not disappeared. Somewhere in his mind lives an old, archaic and primitive dream-wish of greatness, the delusion that he can destroy all the world and all his enemies with one almighty gesture like the magicians in the fairy tales, or translated into modern terms, bunting an electronic war with one push of a button. People consciously deny this eternal human dream of magic power, but every psychologist knows how deep in man this archaic and magic wish lives. Give him too much power and he will misuse it. Hitler was a good lesson for us.

Men say that the idea of atomic destruction repels them; but inwardly they enjoy its destructive power; we have even read proposals in the "letters to the editor" columns to drop a few atomic bombs on the heads of some of our former allies as soon as possible. The animal lust for destruction, our own lust for power is really satisfied by this new atomic reality.

The inner tension between the old archaic and primitive wishes of power and aggression, and our moral laws of co-operation and love,

manifests itself in the confusion we find everywhere. Every day we read in long newspaper columns on the atom bombs and reports on failures in foreign policy, and there is something in our unconscious life which thrills to these accounts, for the thrill of war is in us. While consciously we abhor the bomb, nevertheless it fulfills the old primitive dream-wish for tremendous destruction. For example, reporters expressed their regret that the result of Bikini was not more tremendous and sensational.

The Urge for Catastrophe

Is there any imminent danger of mankind exterminating itself in a future war? Is there such a thing as a hidden desire for the doom of the world?

Among ants, in the insect world, mass-reactions of this type do exist. When they are forced by great danger, ants surrender to their fate. The same insect-reaction may occur among human beings. If his burden of fear becomes too great, man passively gives himself up to the danger feared. In war and famine, this form of apathy and mass-paralysis is very well known. We have all heard about such fatalistic and suicidal reactions, occurring in the more emotional mass-panics. Examples were reported from the front in Flanders in 1917, from Caporetto, in 1918 when huge armies in chaotic panic surrendered themselves to fear and death. And from the battlefields of World War II come numerous examples of mass-suicide. For example, a report on the taking of Saipan*) describes a Japanese officer cutting off the heads of his kneeling men with his Samurai sword; crowds of soldiers and civilians jumping off the cliffs or wading into the ocean. Others were said to have blown themselves up with grenades after first playing ring games with them. "Three women sat on the rocks leisurely and deliberately combing their long, black hair. Finally they joined hands and walked slowly into the sea." A hundred sailors on the rocks at Marpi Point bowed to the Marines from the cliff-tops, spread a large Japanese flag on the rocks, and then pulled the pins from the grenades that the leader handed out.

We have a tendency to dismiss this "mass hara kiri" with the explanation that it belongs especially to Japanese rites. Yet the same tendencies — although they are more concealed — do exist wherever there are masses of people.

Latent Suicidal Thoughts of the Masses

In all unorganized mass-action and mass-thinking, there is something destructive, something masochistic — a hidden drive towards defeat and

*) Reported by Lindsay in *Tribune*, London, August 1944.

doom. In general, in every sudden mass-action, such as in panics, riots, lynching parties, primitive instincts begin to dominate; primitive aggression and destruction are preferred to civilized judgment. The individual within the mass at war wants not only victory; he also wants to suppress certain disagreeable feelings which his burden of civilization has created in him. He chooses heroism and aggression not because he is aware of the higher cultural aims he must defend, but because he wants to escape the dissatisfaction of a civilization which frustrates him. That is why becoming a warrior holds such appeal.

It is as if the masses love and fear war at the same time. They like panic and explosion, because these explosions fortify certain heroic and ecstatic herd-feelings which people still possess.

Man in fear does not like freedom. In men and among masses of people there exists a submissiveness which reaches much deeper than is generally supposed. Great national differences, of course, do exist; but the basic tendency to yield is universal in our culture. We have seen many examples recently of how submissive and cowardly masses of people may become in different dictatorial countries. There was no rebellion in Germany against Hitler's criminal tyranny.

The tendency to mass-suicide is obvious in many forms of collective ecstasy. The ancient Greeks described in Miletus a mass epidemic of the so-called contagious satyr delusion. Young girls became involved in all kinds of ecstatic and orgiastic movements which ended in epileptic convulsions and suicide.

Again, in the Middle Ages, suicidal tendencies were very prevalent as a widespread mode of thought. About the year 1,000 A. D. people all over the world awaited in terror the arrival of the Antichrist. This resulted in all forms of self-torment, flagellation, and suicide. And it was also at this time that the most horrible aggressive excesses and persecutions of witches and Jews took place — just as in our civilized period.

The Children's Crusades afford the best example of mass-delusion and mass-possessedness. During the Crusades, when the knights of Christendom were flocking to Palestine to save the Holy Land from the infidels, there was also a curious parallel phenomenon. Bands of ragged youngsters marched through town after town declaring that they too were on their way to the Holy Wars. And wherever they appeared, children, infused with their hysteria and ecstasy, ran to join them. The story goes that they accumulated an army in this strange manner, boarded a ship — and were never again heard of.

Here the religious ideal was mostly a pretence and a justification for mass-orgiastic behavior, for mass-regression, and for releasing urges towards aggression and destruction. Behind all this lay the tremendous

urge for selfdestruction, which arose out of ununderstood feelings of guilt. The religious ecstasy was discharged in chaos and self-destruction.

In nineteenth century Russia there were several peculiar sects, e.g. the Skopts, whose special aim was suicide. All forms of rebellious ideas and hidden religious fears stimulated this suicidal behavior.

Suicide is known, too, as a symptom of puberty.*) Epidemics of suicide have been reported, for example, in boarding schools as a means of escape from or revenge upon parents or teachers. This theme has been dealt with in fiction. In the novel *Hatter's Castle* the little girl hangs herself to avoid confronting her father with what she considers her own failure.

After the Germans invaded Western Europe in 1940, something like an epidemic of suicide took place. Particularly hyper-intellectual types (not only the threatened Jews) were unable to defend themselves against the contagious delusion of the world's doom. When all of living is possible only on the basis of fear and compulsion — thus they thought — suicide is our last freedom.

In cultures known to history, these suicidal epidemics crop up from time to time as abnormal expressions. But among many primitive peoples suicide is a normal expression of an accepted cultural pattern. In certain Polynesian groups, a standard method of punishing someone who has wronged one, is to destroy oneself. In other societies, suicide is so common a behavior that a tribal member who breaks a taboo, may not even have to kill himself. He merely goes off by himself and dies, as if automatically. In such cultures the suicidal tendency becomes strong when the failure of aggression and attack fortifies feelings of guilt. Primitives believe that their failure is caused by a magic punishing power. Fear of the unknown and mysterious punisher forces a passive surrender to the mighty, a surrender to death.

These same feelings of guilt exist in our own society, especially during and after a war. One who feels his own responsibility for the evil in himself, and for all the evil in the world, feels essentially guilty. This intense feeling of guilt may explain the many unexpected cases of suicide we could experience among Nazi soldiers after the occupation of innocent, peaceful countries. I lived that time in occupied Holland and could describe such reactions in my war report.***) Among his democratic enemies, many a soldier suddenly became aware of his guilt.

Mass-suicide, however, is more than a passive surrender to fate

*) Meerloo, *Zelfmoord en de mensch.* Hilversum, 1936.

**) Meerloo, *Total War and the Human Mind.* New York, 1945. *Aftermath of Peace.* New York, 1946.

because of a guilt reaction; it is also a primitive, mystical means of escaping into the mystery of death, in order to find a new and better life. To accept death, destroys the evil and vindicates the righteous. A nation full of guilt feelings, full of unsolved aggression, escapes collapse only by exploding into war. "But if the war fails to keep up its furious pace and thus provide this outlet, the citizens are left with an insoluble problem. They are in the same position as the neurotic whose personality is split beyond the hope of effective action, action related to the realities of his environment. They are totally unstable, and they are lost in the primitive confusion in which, at the ultimate point of pressure and degeneration, life and death become one. In neurotic exaltation the sufferer dies to escape death." **)

The same neurotic trends and patterns exist to some degree in all men: projection of fear, introjection of guilt, and ensuing self-punishment. And war activates these hidden primitive patterns which every man possesses. The same suicidal tendencies develop even further in the postwar world: neurosis, suicide, alcoholism, morphinism, the craving for a new war — in short, the postwar hang-over.

The resulting guilt-feelings are tremendous. One explosion of the atom bomb killed one hundred thousand people. There is an aftermath of this explosion. Even though people may not realize it, hidden guilt feelings about mass killing on this scale are intense. For here our conscious imagination stops. A hundred people burned in a hotel fire shocks us; but a hundred thousand is beyond our imagination.

The paradoxical reaction to these guilt-feelings may be suicidal surrender to a new war, to death. These mental reactions are fortified by the world in which we live — a world full of unknown future dangers. "Does the potential enemy have atom bombs?" we ask ourselves. "Can their rockets reach us? Are they preparing for war?"

Dangerous mass-infection of these hidden emotions is spreading. All these questions and rumors keep our attitudes on a primitive level. Hitler's War of Nerves brought about the same reaction. It is the unknown danger which is weakening us — and that is why we prefer the known danger, a new war. We cannot escape the vicious circle. "Two fighting armies form one suicidal mass." (Barbusse).

The Postwar Hang-over

It is very unfortunate that in the recent postwar world atomic fear and its implications for the human mind have been mixed with other forms of fear. Vague, ill-defined fear and anxiety normally occur after

**) Lindsay, Loc. Cit.

every war. This is, of course, due in part to long years of real fear and suffering such as we find in the countries that were occupied by the enemy. However, for the most part, these vague anxieties stem from hidden feelings of guilt, especially in the victorious conquerors. When a warrior has been compelled to loosen his moral bonds, and for several years has had to travel around the world hating, revenging and slaughtering, it is only natural for him to bear some sort of guilt on his return. The defeated enemy has to pay for his foolhardiness but we come and celebrate victory. This hidden guilt reaction to war is found as a fixed pattern in the culture of primitive tribes. The homecoming warrior cleansed himself from his guilt as a killer by performing various cathartic rites. For instance, he abstained from food a couple of days and offered sacrifices to the Gods of War. In our society we are less certain of our feelings of guilt. However, we find them buried in the war-neuroses of veterans and civilians; other forms of guilt feelings are converted into war memorials, etc. •

Today, a most complicated and confusing combination of postwar feelings exists among people in our postwar world:

1. There is the vague and hidden fear that springs from general feelings of guilt after all the killing and destruction at the battlefronts. This is especially prevalent in countries that did not themselves suffer in the war. From this factor stems a danger that the victor will be too soft toward a criminal enemy, who has to be punished.

2. There is the feeling of guilt for having unleashed the tremendous destructive power of the atom bomb. People feel that is is beyond the pale of the normal laws of war. This is probably why there was such a huge interest in John Hersey's book on Hiroshima, where 100.000 died as a result of one bomb.

3. There is the very fear aroused by the terrific power of the mysterious atom bomb. This is also the fear of our own destructive tendencies, the fear of our own primitive wish to kill thousands and thousands with a single omnipotent gesture.

4. There is the very real fear that the United Nations will fail to prevent a new war, and that, should war come, future enemies will avenge themselves by retaliating in a like manner.

To picture a future atomic war by no means pictures something mythical. All men feel something of the terror of this unleashed threat. I have no doubt that the bomb will be used unless we are able to build a powerful international anti-war apparatus. Of course, such a new world law will have its own difficulties and risks. But there is no alternative.

Atomic Suicide.

The mysterious secret of atomic power excites archaic feelings among men. To imagine the future use of atomic power arouses primitive fear, fear we cannot cope with. People abhor the bomb, yet at the same time it fulfills their primitive wish for tremendous destruction. Even with such immense technical power in his hands, man feels himself incapable of coping with the fate that awaits him. He does not know how to deal with the danger because unconsciously it attracts and fascinates him.

So strong is the suicidal tendency in us that we can easily turn our technological tools and toys against ourselves. The atomic bomb means either a world government, or world suicide. Another global war with atomic missiles — and our over-technical world will be doomed!

However, we must realize the great danger which lies in this world-wide vague fear. For this fear will operate among us just as the strange fear of magic operates in primitive societies. Ununderstood fear paralyzes the human mind, hypnotizes it, makes it passive. In this paralyzed stupor man conjures up the evil he fears; it leads him to surrender passively to fate. Inwardly he is already prepared to accept death and destruction.

The great danger for the future lies in the fact that our burden of guilt and fear may undermine our mature thinking. It is this hidden fear which motivates the newspapers to publish daily articles on the coming catastrophe; and, in fearing, they unconsciously accept the destruction of the future. Now already the public climate is working itself around to the point where it will be impossible to enlist reason and intelligence in dealing with the real problems of this world. In this way people are talking themselves more and more into war. Read the newspapers to be aware of this combustible irresponsibility.

Let us be realistic! There is no adequate defense against the atom bomb. It creates limitless destruction in the target area. The only counter-action is to use the same weapon; and that means mutual suicide. One bomb only, properly placed — as in Hiroshima — is all that is required to paralyze an entire metropolis. Only a relatively small amount of material and equipment, smuggled somewhere into an enemy country, is needed to make such a bomb. And the next atomic war will last until the last man awaits death from exposure to the deadly X-rays. At the end all the world will be reduced to radioactive rubble. It would mean the destruction of everything.

Atomic warfare is not a war of careful strategy. The greatest and the simplest developed country is the less vulnerable. The conqueror is just as much endangered as the loser. But already the weapon is

capitalizing upon the ignorance and the fear of the masses, paralyzing their imagination in a magic way.

There is another side to this problem: and that is the infectious example of Germany's self-destruction. For, what one fights against infects one's own soul. Even after this war we are still not rid of unconsciously accepted Nazi attitudes.

Under the ascetic megalomaniac, Schicklgruber, Germany committed suicide in an orgy of brutality and criminal ecstasy. More than nine million civilians were cold-bloodedly killed in concentration camps and behind the fronts. Too many victims were sacrificed on the altar of madness. Not only the guilt feelings of the Germans, but the guilt feelings of the whole world are unwillingly aroused by these tremendous mass murders. And it is this widespread feeling of guilt that arouses the hidden wish for self-destruction. The idea of death fascinated the Germans. The stimulation of their instinctual and animal-drives prepared them to accept their own death. Their pessimistic fatalism asked for a final upheaval before the „Goetterdaemmerung.“ Nordic mythology is deeply imbued with the idea of pessimistic surrender to fate, and this laid a fertile groundwork among the Germans for the tendency to suicide which spread so easily among them. They were inwardly prepared; if they failed in life, the solution lay in death. Here was more fatalism than heroism, more passivity than activity. Even though defeat be inevitable, they must die for Germany. "Und Deutschland soll leben, wenn wir auch sterben werden!" — is written on their graves!

The suicidal tendencies of our former enemies still endanger the world. In their graves they exercise a more fatal fascination than when they were actually attacking us.

Are we to accept the challenge of technology and fight to the last being on earth? Forel wrote of the ants: "If the two adversaries are approximately equal in strength, they exterminate each other without any definite result." Are we, like the insects, bound to our mechanical instincts?

Self-destruction

We have spoken of the masses passively surrendering to their fate, of their hidden urge for destruction. What are the manifold psychological equivalents of this deathinstinct?

Self-destruction is the final expression of power. It is the last way of maintaining a feeling of being valuable and potent. Think in this connection of all the ways in which spontaneity is blocked in this world, of how growth and expression are hindered; think of all the threatening and bullying and bossing, the innumerable ways in which people exploit

each other and push each other around. Think of all the suicides as reactions to an unfavorable environment, of all the prejudices, of inter-racial aggressions, of lynchings. Think of all the aggressive and destructive reformisms, the riots, the street fights, the high rates of criminalities, people's wildness, their eagerness to dominate. And remember the value we place upon satirical humor; how familiar we are with fatalistic ways of thinking. All these are other manifestations — psychological equivalents — of the aggressive and destructive instinct, the death-instinct. The more life's vital impulses are thwarted, the more are self-destructive tendencies uncovered.

In the war which has just been finished, unconscious tendencies to death were repeatedly revealed. In the face of the imminent threat of death, the victims passively waited for the great destruction, as if they had been hypnotized by their fate. Many underground and resistance workers in Nazi-occupied countries clearly surrendered to death, at is were. They became reckless in spite of all warnings. To them the enemy had become an ambivalent father figure, and for waging war against him they had to be destroyed by his hands. Even more incredible was the passiveness of those who had to escape because they knew that death was near. It was as if terror and death held an attraction for them.

Can We Cope with the Urge for Catastrophe?

Man in our modern world is suffering from deep shock. He is constantly on the alert, continually waiting for an approaching catastrophe; he even wishes the catastrophe would come so that his fearful expectationh might be ended. His existence is shattered — and philosophers may write philosophies on existence as justification for their fatalism. The resulting complex state of mind resembles that of the ancient period when people waited for the world's doom because of an undefined magic spell and mysterious fear based on some general anxiety with which the world of those days was infected. In the Middle Ages this kind of mood spread along with the pandemics of the epoch (Black Death, Plague, etc.). Now we find this form of apocalyptic vision, mostly in Europe, but in a more rationalized form. "The old continent is finished, we are on the decline," is often heard, uttered in a tone of cynicism and fatalism.

It may have been this complex of feelings that moved the late H. G. Wells to write as a kind of literary testament, "Mind at the End of its Tether," in which he despairs of the human animal, unadapted as he is to the fate that surrounds him. Wells points out that there is an organic relation between man's tools and man's fate. The atom bomb means

either a world government or world suicide. It is dangerous for us to put too much confidence in our technical apparatus, our intelligence and our complex social structure. The forces of destruction in man may be more powerful than we think. The postwar chaos in Europe has shown us how easy it is to break society down with war, famine and disease, how easy it is to go from slaughter to more and more slaughter. So strong is the suicidal tendency in man and in masses of people that he can easily use his technological tools and toys against himself. Given a third or fourth war with atomic toys and our over-technical world will be doomed.

Why is this danger greater than we think? Because most of us are now aware that we are in the midst of an atomic war of nerves. Day by day our minds are becoming paralyzed as the thought of an atomic war in the near future becomes more familiar to us. All over the world a climate of hysteria is being whipped up. Fear and speculation about the unknown have always had a stirring influence on the human mind. They make people not only increasingly suspicious and anxious but also more willing to surrender to the danger they fear. One of the secrets of fear is the very fact that it fascinates us and tempts us into confusing and paradoxical reactions. In psychology we call it passive surrender to the thing feared. In practice we see that people enjoyed the big show at Bikini.

It is for these reasons that so great a danger lies in this world-wide fear, for it may work as primitive fear did in the ancient world. Too great a fear paralyzes the human mind, hypnotizes it, as it were, makes it passive, ready to surrender. It ends in suicidal reactions in a world carried away by the sweep of its dark emotions.

The urge for catastrophe does not have to take the form of longing for a fatal shock; it may be in the form of a deep craving for a momentous change in one's life, a desire to be transported to a higher and better existence. Every personal experience of death may be the door to a revival — a catharsis and a purification. This is what happens in shock therapy — the patient is permitted partially to die and to revive again. And this is effective with many mental patients.

However — and this is the imminent danger — behind most expectations of catastrophe lurks the primitive thought that the end of the world is approaching, that the world is doomed and the apocalypse is on the way.

And man, caught by this dangerous delusion, leans passively and unknowingly towards downfall and destruction.

Once before, around the year 1000, the masses awaited the great doom, and then mystical ecstasy and aggressive chaos reigned in Europe. Today we are at the same point. The notion of catastrophe leads men

to self-destruction and delusion. The suicidal urge has mankind in its grip. Even the mind is participating in the killing and destruction when it condones a sneering and cynical attitude. People are unable to behave because they sincerely admire and venerate something; they kill their emotions and worship mechanical idols.

This is the need of our times: we have to die and to be revived again. We have gone through death, for the recent war was a tremendous dying. Who has inner strength to revive us? Who will revive the revelation of a new, spiritual challenge?

Mankind's urge for catastrophe, and the suicidal tendencies of the masses, are the great hindrances to such a revival. Statesmen and psychologists must acknowledge these drives in the character of all people and direct their attention to combating them. Otherwise the world will continue to wait resignedly and acquiescently for what it fears and abhors at the same time.

Psychology and the Atomic Bomb

Men are still able to use their common sense to conquer fear. Destruction is not the only thing which moves human beings. Intelligence and common sense are still able to build a positive world, not *against* an atomic war, but *for* peace, which is always a positive construction. We are able, when faith and reason are permitted to do so, to handle the problems of bettering and perfecting governmental techniques and inter-governmental relations. What we are witnessing in the atomic nerve-war is the collapse of intelligence and conscience both — a collapse of such dimensions that we have lost the sight of reality.

The future danger lies, not so much in the atom bomb, but in the fact that our burden of guilt and fear may undermine our mature thinking about it. It is this fear within us that votes for more and better armaments, that pleads for more and better bombs, — until the explosion comes. Then hell breaks loose. One of the most destructive elements in the world today is the daily suggestion by cynicists, fatalists and rumor-mongers that the coming catastrophe is inevitable. This is a negative suggestion arousing and reinforcing a primitive and magic fear, with which the human being cannot cope.

A new world can be built only by people who are able to see these facts clearly and to think about them without sensational pessimism or fear. Only such people will be able to prevent the human race from committing a final act of self-destruction. Freedom from fear was one of Roosevelt's 4 freedoms. Freedom from primitive and atomic fear will become one of our principal aims for the mental hygiene of the future.

The world wants positive, constructive suggestions! Psychologists

must agitate not against the use of atomic power, but against the war of nerves, of magic fear and rumor that has already to some extent made us blind and has paralyzed our mature thinking.

Psychology too must deal with the atomic problem. To minimize the mental implications of terror and threat is to misunderstand the human being. The human being is a latent criminal. He likes the tremendous atomic destruction — we have to realize that — especially when he is blinded by a daily war of nerves. But man can also become the genius who is able to build a better world as soon as his civilized habits have the opportunity to work for the future.