

THE SOCIAL ATOM AND DEATH

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The gods and immortals which men have cherished for millennia have lost a great deal of the dignity and value which they were supposed to have. Is the idea of immortality entirely a figment of the human mind? I believe that in the future it will become fashionable again and find new attraction for the philosopher and the dreamer. We have been thrown down from the heavens and have a hard time to keep midway between heaven and hell.

You all know that one of the basic concepts which sociometry has developed is that of the social atom. Atom is derived from a Greek word "atomos" which means the smallest thing. The term has been introduced by Democritus into scientific language. He used it to indicate the smallest particles in the physical universe. However, the physicists have no priority on the word; many words introduced by early philosophers describing physical phenomena as gravitation, atom, attraction, saturation, have a poetic-symbolic character; they are metaphors for psycho-social experiences and belong rightly in our social vocabulary, whence they have been taken.

Sociologists have used the term socius in a vague way for a long time. It has never meant anything specific until sociometry discovered and defined it as the social atom. People usually thought of the individual as the center of the social universe, of the family as the next larger unit, then the neighborhood, the village, etc.; from the point of view of surface experience sociologists accepted tacitly a scale starting with the individual and ending with the entire universe. We sociometrists challenged this view. The social atom is the smallest social unit, not the individual.¹ The social atom is simply an individual *and* the people (near or distant) to whom he is emotionally related at the time. We have shown that these configurations function as if they would be one unit. They may not be the same people with whom a person is officially related and who are in turn officially related to him, but they are always people to whom he has a feeling relationship. It is like an *aura* of attractions and rejections, radiating from him and towards him. These social atoms change from time to

¹See "Psychodramatic Shock Therapy," Psychodrama Monograph No. 5, Beacon House, New York, p. 29. From a philogenetic point of view "the individual" appears to be a more recent development than an aggregate of individuals.

time in their membership, but there is a consistency about their structure, the way our bone structure has a certain consistency. I predicted this would be found true of the social atom in 1931 when I first "saw" a psychological geography of a whole community. Jennings' findings confirmed this prediction. An individual has from birth on already a structure of relationships around him, mother, father, grandmother, and so forth. The volume of the social atom is in continuous expansion as we grow up; it is within it that we live most concretely.

I am now coming to the topic which I intended to discuss in this paper: the consistency of these social atoms changes as we get old, especially the ability to replace loss of membership. Although the social atom is changing intermittently as long as we are young and more resourceful, when one individual member goes out of it another individual fulfilling a similar role takes his place. As one friend steps out, the old friend is rapidly replaced by a new one; social repair seems to take place almost automatically. But when an individual fulfilling one function is lost rarely more than one steps in to replace him. It is as if the central individual cannot sustain two or three of the same kind. There is, simultaneously, a continuous pull from millions of other social atoms, equally craving for replacements. The total effect is as if the emotional economy of the social atom is operating in accord with an unconscious postulate—to keep the social atoms in equilibrium, what I have also called their "sociostasis." Thus a certain range of emotional contacts always exists and remains fairly constant. Their frequency of emotional exchange tends towards balance. This is the reason why what I have called the "emotional expansiveness"² of an individual can be measured.

But as we grow older replacements of lost members in significant roles take place with greater difficulty; similar as repairs are more difficult to our physical organism in the course of aging. It is the phenomenon of "social" death, not from the point of view of the body, not in the individual sense of the psyche, not how we die from within but how we die from *without*. A man or woman of sixty may be related to twelve or fifteen individuals, so many women and so many men, of various age levels representing various interests, in such roles and in such counter-roles. Social death throws its shadow upon him long before physical or mental death. An individual may begin to lose in the cohesion of his social atom for various reasons: a) loss of affection, b) replace-

²Who Shall Survive?, p. 73 and 134.

ment by another individual not as well suited, and c) death. The death of an individual member is usually a more permanent loss, the shock coming from it is rarely considered in its full significance. If we happen to survive the ones we love or hate, we die a bit with them as we feel the shadow of death marching from one person of our social atom to another. The people who move in to replace them do not always substitute the lost ones, even the very fact of substitution represents a certain loss. Therefore we feel from childhood on through the networks of our social atom, the meaning of death long before it actually comes with the signs of physical and mental disability. Maybe that we sociometrists will find the predeterminants for social death, a syndrome quite different from the one pointed out by the physician and psychiatrist. We were warming up to the death of the people whom we loved or hated or who loved or hated us. It should be possible to find remedies against the social death shock.

It is probable that the minute shocks coming from social death experience paves the way to premature aging, old sickness and physical death. Old people should learn not to give in to this curse, they should find friends, someone to love again. They should first try to restore the youth of their social atom. It is probably easier to treat the social atom disorders by sociatric devices than to treat their physical and mental complaints. The idea that love and spontaneity is for the young only, that old people should prepare themselves for death, is an antiquated cruelty. A new breath of hope should come to geriatrics, the science of old age, from the recognition that we do not live only within ourselves, but that there is a "without" of the self which is highly structured, and responsive to growth and decay. Death is a live function, it has a social reality. The death of one person is connected with the death of many others. The people towards whose death you are sensitive and who are sensitive towards yours make up the last social atom you have. We are all surrounded continuously by people with whom we die. Physical death is something negative, we don't experience it, the other fellow does, the fellow who is a member of our social atom. Social death is a *positive* force. Death is among us, like birth. Just as the infant—to an extent—pushes himself into birth, we push ourselves into death, *and each other*, often prematurely. As the s (spontaneity) factor operates throughout pregnancy towards birth, it warms up the sparks of fear in the social atoms and pushes its members towards death. We see how birth progresses during pregnancy, from conception on. Similarly we see how

death progresses, from its conceptions in the social atom, the first people whom we have experienced as dying, and the little shocks we received from it. When we will know more about the processes going on in the social atom of individuals we may invent means of repairing its disorders. Maybe a new profession will develop in time, the sociatrists, who among other matters will treat socio-atomic disorders.

I recall the case of twelve individuals who were sensitive for each other's death expectancy and so infected each other. They belonged to the same profession, they were all physicians, and their respective social atoms crossed and overlapped each other's. One pioneered with a coronary thrombosis. Five of the group succumbed to the same ailment, the other six of the group lived in fear of it. At this writing two of them have died from it, three have recovered from an actual attack, the balance of the group are increasingly worried, the first thing they read in the newspapers are the death notices and they are frequently going for physical check ups. We sociometrists are aware that more important than printed matter are the psychosocial networks. News travels through them, but also death news. If you don't have a coronary thrombosis, or any other physical or mental ailment which appeals to you because it has appealed to your socio-atomic associates, you may pass without a mental attack of it. But another may be sensitized by such news and hasten the onset of such an attack if, of course, there are some somatic conditions inviting it. I had an opportunity to put on the psychodrama stage people who were chained to one another by mutual love and death fears. Some of the individuals knew one another only through a link but they had high regard for each other. To their surprise they found out during their work on the stage that what happened to one meant a great deal to the other. The work out on the stage seemed to bring them relief, a sort of death catharsis. Mirroring each other's death awareness awakened their sense of humor. Another case concerns eight air pilots. The subject was the ninth. As he was enacting on the stage shocks from death experience a scene suddenly occurred to him which he had felt more keenly than the death of his grandfather and of a younger brother: with eight other candidates for air service, he was undergoing a physical checkup. They were all accepted except himself, he did not pass. He saw them there for the first time in the examination room. Before he left they arranged to keep in touch with each other. He wrote them and they wrote back, but after a while, from every one of them in succession his own letters returned,

stamped "Missing in action." These new and rather incidental members of his social atom were apparently dead. As he was re-enacting the situation on the stage he said: "There but by the grace of God, so I."

The eight men were not quite dead yet, they were beckoning him to follow. The life of men extends beyond their physical death through their social atoms. A man dies when his social atom dies. Physical and individual death are not the end of life, they can be viewed as functions of an older unit, of the socio-atomic processes³ in which they are both embedded.

³The following formulation of the socio-atomic process fifteen years ago has been fully corroborated by research in social microscopy. "They are a study of the *inner* structures of groups and can be compared with studies concerning the nuclear nature of the atom or the physiological structure of the cell." See "Group Method and Group Psychotherapy," Sociometry Monograph, No. 5, page 102, Beacon House, New York, 1931.

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