Fred Emery

Afterword

My first reaction to Eric Trist's proposal for a three-volume anthology of the Tavistock work was quite cold. I was not interested in another voluminous institutional history gathering dust in neglected corners of university libraries. I was much more interested, personally, in continuing in the Tavistock tradition of engaging with the workface. As far as the earlier Tavistock publications were concerned I felt that I had them under my belt and that they belonged to the past.

Before Volume I went to press, I was of a very different mind. As Trist's health faltered during the preparation of Volume III, I was more than happy to offer my assistance with the editorial task. This change of mind, which was brought about by renewed acquaintance with those earlier documents and seeing them anew with the benefit of hindsight, prompted two questions that remain as challenging as ever as the third, and last, volume goes to press:

- Why do so many of these papers, many dating back to the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, remain of "continuing interest" (Vol. I: xi)?
- How did the Tavistock Institute maintain such "group creativeness" (Vol. I: 28) for more than two decades?

The puzzle leading to the first question is that in a field that is accumulating knowledge the early contributions are usually absorbed by later advances and, apart from a few classics, simply forgotten. The working scientist is concerned with keeping abreast of the field by reading current publications and reports. The papers brought together in these volumes have retained their interest value because, unfortunately, the social sciences have proven little able to accumulate knowledge. The social sciences have been dominated by academic research and the requirements for academic recognition of both the disciplines and the practitioners. That research has been unrelentingly in-grown. To gain academic respectability for the disciplines, it has been necessary to mold them in the guises of the physical sciences. At the same time, the social sciences have had to be careful in their theorizing not to trespass on, nor challenge, the traditional wisdoms embodied in the humanities.

To gain promotion and professional standing social science researchers have had to get publication in professionally controlled, peer-reviewed journals. This has meant addressing matters that are currently viewed as important by the profession and addressing them in ways that will impress their peers by their scholarship and sophistication. History is ignored, not because it has been

absorbed but because it is no guide to present facts and, worse, it would suggest a lack of proper appreciation of some current fad. In academia, it has nearly always been quite unimportant as to whether the matters have social significance or the methods have practical relevance. Trist's account of the emergence of the Tavistock-related Institute of Operational Research is precisely about people trying to avoid the consequences of being academicized (Vol. I: 17).

By contrast, the Tavistock papers emerged from a context of multidisciplinary project teams committed to the social engagement of the social sciences. There was a mutual commitment, enforced by peer review, to the aim of doing socially relevant science and to the transparency of methods for the benefit of non social scientist clients. Accordingly, the papers, for the most part, dealt with real issues in their own terms. (We were not perfect. We brought to our multidisciplinary projects many of the concepts and methods that we had each absorbed in our own disciplinary educations.) As realistic studies in a welter of unreal and turgid studies, they have remained as welcome as a breath of fresh air in a deep cave.

The negative views expressed above are not peculiar to myself. In 1959 there appeared a massive, multivolume series entitled *Psychology: Study of a Science*. This was supposed to be a monument to the achievements of the science of psychology. Sigmund Koch was the editor of the series. Two years later he published his own deep and depressed concerns: "Psychology has been far more concerned with being a science than with courageous and self-determining confrontation of its historical subject matter" (1961:624) and "has constructed a language that renders (this) virtually impossible" (p. 631). It was almost 20 years further on that Paul Kline, professor of psychometics, reached even more pessimistic conclusions but diagnosed the same basic fault: "academic psychology . . . is not concerned with what appear to non-psychologists to be the most important or interesting aspects of being human" (1988:11).

The Tavistock Institute was founded to forge a different, more practical, path for social scientists without deviating from the aim of advancing the competence of the social sciences. There was never a lack of friends and allies from within academia but there was persistent institutional hostility. It is due to the default of the academic social sciences that the Tavistock contributions have retained their relevance.

It is much more difficult to address the second question about group creativity. Trist noted that the drift into a typical managerial hierarchy stifled creativity and led to the revolt and split in the Tavistock Institute in 1961 (as it had done in the Tavistock Clinic in the early 1930s [Vol. I: 2]). Few social scientists would disagree with his observation that a democratic framework is required by a research institute for sustained creativity. I think, however, that there are a couple of matters that ought to be noted in these closing remarks. The most innovative move of the reconstituted Institute (the Human Resources Centre)