

# *Fred Emery*

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## Epilogue

### Orillia: Searching for the Emerging Agenda

In 1985 the city of Orillia, 100 miles north of Toronto, was the site of a three-day conference to explore the future courses of a continuing engagement of the social sciences with the important practical affairs of mankind. The occasion was supported by a Canadian government department, Labour Canada, and brought together an international group of social scientists to honor, in a practical way, the lifetime that Emeritus Professor Eric Trist had devoted to pursuing this engagement. The conference was designed to be in the search mode (sort of), but Eric Trist was asked for his recollections of the historic 1949 Gerrards Cross (U.K.) meeting between Lewin's group from the University of Michigan's Research Center for Group Dynamics and the Tavistock Institute, and Fred Emery was asked to outline some of his thoughts (see the next two sections of this essay).

Present at that two-week meeting in 1949 were several other like-minded scientists from Europe and the United States. The meeting was held in order to set an international agenda for the social engagement of social science in the world emerging from World War II. It was the forerunner of Orillia. Unfortunately, although Eric Trist could not know this when he gave his recollections on the first night at Orillia, it was a forerunner in more ways than one. The difference this time was that it was not "scientific detachment" that was under the gun but "scientific action research," from those wanting less constrained forms of social engagement. They stressed the need for more feeling and free-wheeling imagination.

Not surprisingly, no agreement could be reached at Orillia about a future agenda for scientific action research.

## The Last Time Around, 1949—Eric Trist

We held the conference at an old inn in Gerrards Cross near London in 1949. It was a setting of great beauty. The people were largely from the United States—mainly in group dynamics—and ourselves, the Tavistock group. We also had some very distinguished guests from Europe, particularly from France, and one from Czechoslovakia who was very important to us as he had suffered under Stalin and we had arranged for him to come to Britain.

This was the age when group dynamics first came into social science. At the conference we had this mixture. We had very different backgrounds but we all knew the work of Kurt Lewin, who had recently died in the United States. (The conference had originally been arranged for 1947 when he was to come to England.) Lewin was very excited by many of the things the Tavistock was doing and about developments among British psychoanalysts as they became interested in field theory and were attracted to exploring the social scene.

If that visit had come off in 1947, I think things would have happened between him and the Tavistock group. We had come out of the war with a background in socio-clinical psychiatry, social science and operational action research projects in the British Army. The Americans had done a lot of work on food habits and other subjects at the Commission for Community Relations in New York, out of which had come the term “action research” just after the war. Everything seemed right for the two groups to get together and to establish a trans-Atlantic bridge. We wanted a European connection, too, with people who wished to do something in the real world that involved groups—then a very new idea.

So we thought that even after Lewin’s death we would still have a meeting and it was arranged at Gerrards Cross. But the key person, the integrator, was dead and that was really why this meeting did not spark the kind of relations we had hoped for between our organizations on both side of the Atlantic.

By that time Lewin’s main pupils had separated into two branches, one had gone to set up the Research Center for Group Dynamics at Ann Arbor, which was the group that came over, and the other, the psychological ecologists, had gone to Lawrence, Kansas. We didn’t know enough about the split or we might have invited the other group. We didn’t know, even though we had had visits from them, that we and the Ann Arbor people were going to go on separate roads. We discovered this when we met at the conference.

It was an intense meeting lasting two weeks. Beulah and I planned it. There was no work in the afternoons. After lunch everybody had to play a game (cricket, tennis or golf) or ride a bike. Everybody had to do something and not work all the time. One of the Americans, Jack French, was very good at cricket and took on the local club. Work resumed after tea. Some of our best meetings occurred after this break.

What transpired was that our crowd in the UK were headed in the direction of taking up projects in the real world. We were already set and had started with a lot of confusion and much anguish. The Europeans, too, were also set in that direction, but the American group had now located themselves in a university. The Tavistock was not a university, it was an independent action research organization. In those days it was very, very hard getting anything going in the real world from a university setting in Britain. But in America, you could do it and they had plenty of scope if they wanted to. But we found that they had begun to turn in the direction of academic research on propositions dealing with group theory. The expositions that they gave of the concepts were extremely interesting but were going somewhere else. I could hardly recognize Lewin's field theory as I had come to understand it.

So what I think I should say to *us* is that I hope the fissure is bridged between the action researchers and people whose minds are largely set toward academic production. I have nothing against that, *per se*, but it is academic production which is taking the social sciences away from the commitment to, in Fred's famous phrase, the important practical affairs of mankind; taking us away from that important directive correlation. At Gerrards Cross we, in the U.K. wanted to get on with things which were of practical interest. The Michigan group had gone into methodology and concept development, testing these out under careful conditions. That was their direction. This was what we discovered during the conference.

I think we probably learned more from them than they did from us. We learned a lot from their conceptualizations, but they did not learn from us the commitment to go into the society—as Lewin himself had been doing in his time. We were moving into the society and they were moving away from it. We continued to publish together the journal *Human Relations*, which we had founded with Lewin, but we had discovered that we were different kinds of people.

I know most of the people in this room and I don't detect any signs of anyone wanting to uproot the connections between the social sciences and social reality. So I am very hopeful that we will do something here which we did not do in our meeting with the Michigan group. Let us be different from what we were 36 years ago.