Who am I responsible for?

Tom Osborn (Self and Society Vol 2 No 12, Dec 1974)

(2012): An early article in this collection. It received a lot of attention at the time. Interesting reminder perhaps of Thatcher's dictum 'there is no such thing as society'; and to see it in the light of Cameron's rhetoric about 'The Big Society'. It's start point when I say 'we' is from a position within the 'Growth Movement'. Soon abandoned! Of course much has changed. But much continues. And none of it should be forgotten.

That 'famous dictum' about responsibility is the one clear and stated ideology that the growth movement has.

It's not surprising we refer to it such a lot, and *use* it such a lot, too. We use it like all true ideologies, to justify positions and actions. It's not surprising because patterns of responsibility are prime expressions of a society's interlocking structures, of its total culture. And when a society changes as radically as ours is obviously doing right now, patterns of responsibility will change radically as a part of that change.

Take responsibility for yourself, and don't take it for others - that's the dictum, in one form or another. It embodies an ideology with several bits to it: that the only effective change one can make is in oneself as an individual; that 'society' can only change or be changed through individual change; and that until one has made that individual change, any social action for change that one takes will be ineffective.

However: the growth movement is only one of a number of ways in which people try to bring about change - or take part in change, or relate to change. (I'm stating it variously like this because I don't want to set off any dialogues at this point about whether we *can* change anything, or about the dialectical nature of change, or about organic growth or any of all that. You can't push the river, right; but you can clear channels for its flow, or you can mud it up).

These ways, the ways in which people direct their change energy, form an image for me. The growth movement and political activity are two ways: they are like a couple stuck in an unhappy marriage. There's an exercise for couples in which the two people shout 'Me first', 'Me first' at each other, and that's just how these two activities seem to relate. If you're in politics, you believe that 'society', 'the world', 'the system', or whatever, is the source of personal evils, with the 'ruling class' as its instrument, and there has to be a widespread, politically informed social change first, before any personal change is even worth attempting, because people are formed by the total structure of which they are a part. If you're in to the growth movement, you believe that society is individuals, that individuals make society and so no social change is possible until individuals change, and indeed that individuals are not able, until they themselves have first changed, to act for change at a social level. Of course not everybody takes such an extreme position. But it is a heavy and mutually crippling relationship. As with such couples and the projections that go on between them, the situation gets polarised and most people are at one or other pole: 'Me first', 'Me first'.

A third way of relating to change is like a kind of lover, an 'illicit' lover, one that lives alone and apart from the couple. This is a counter-culture way, it is the alternative society ecological way: the squat, or the self-sufficient survival commune in the country. Cut off from the resources of the couple, but using what is there, and taking real action at a gut level.

And there's a fourth way, the established-society ecological way, the way of academic ecology and its respectable journals and experimental farms and production centres. This I see as a whore in the image a rather fashionable call-girl whore. (Or call-man I suppose. This isn't intended as a male chauvinist image). The whore uses the sicknesses and the fantasies of her society to earn rather fat fees, without herself taking real responsibility. In fact I've come to think of all academics as whores - defining an academic as one who is paid at more than subsistence rates by an educational institution: and especially if he earns private fees on the side! Well, we all have to make a living.

I am a whore myself at times, when I am short of money for my children and part of the mortgage on the house that they live in with my ex-wife. I don't want to criticise the ancient profession too much. Let's say my remarks are intended as process comments rather than criticism.

Of these four ways of relating to change, the dictum belongs to only one. And the fact that there *are* three other ways, all vitally engaged with change but with very different ideologies from that of the dictum, already gives it a context.

It's striking how baldly the dictum is usually stated or used, with no possibility of qualification. Jay Stattman's discussion of responsibility during regression to childhood (Self & Society, July) is one of the rare occasions when an issue of this kind has been explored. Yet the points at which the dictum needs qualifying, examining, given choice-boundaries, seem to me the exact points where we are making everyday, actual decisions about responsibility in our real lives.

I'm going to do an analysis of these boundary points and of their connection with their wider context: i.e. the wider social context within which the dictum, and the growth movement activity which gives rise to it, exist.

In the first place, what *about* children? How old is a child? When does a child become a grown-up? What responsibilities should we take for a child of two, of five, of fourteen? What responsibilities does an individual take for himself or herself, and when? In many societies it is possible to give rather clear answers to this question. In Jomo Kenyatta's beautiful book, *Facing Mount Kenya*, he describes rather precisely what responsibilities, in the traditional tribal culture of the Gikuyu, were taken at what age. And this process went on throughout life. In our society it isn't clear at all.

Secondly: there are some instances where on the face of it we seem obviously to be responsible for what happens to someone else. If I shoot an ordinary person, or knife him, in, say, the stomach, he may well die. And I am responsible. But if I shoot a fakir, or a yogi, with all that power over his bodily functions to close the wound, what then? So don't we all have the potential for this kind of total control? Can't we all become able to *take responsibility* for our bleeding, or for the escape of our gastric juices into the peritoneal cavity? In which case, if I shoot you, and you die, why can't I say: you should take responsibility for yourself? And at what stage in the development of this degree of control or physical responsibility or whatever it might be called, at what stage could I begin to perhaps be justified in saying just that?

This may sound ridiculous. But isn't it rather like a third example of these boundary points that I'm analysing? People who are in a process of change often tell (and probably every reader of this journal has had this kind of experience) how their new way of relating hurts someone they were close to. And they are often told in response, in accordance with the dictum, that it is the other person's

responsibility, that he is hurting himself. In the words of the gestalt therapy 'prayer', *'you are not in this world to meet his expectations'*.. and gestalt therapy probably provides the most uncompromising form of the dictum and its ideology.

But let's face it, if I change and someone else doesn't, then they do expect what was happening before, and if the change hurts, then I have to take responsibility for inflicting a hurt. The other person has not yet learnt that kind of power and my new behaviour is a knife blade. In that respect, I am mature and the other person is still a child. So my attitude may be a matter of *strategy*, but it is still, in part, my responsibility and I have to make choices about it - just as every therapist and group leader has to make choices of strategy, and *does* make such choices, even when this is denied.

All this is in the interaction between two individuals. But there are other boundary points, perhaps even more important, to do with the interaction within a group, or between a group and its wider social context. The reason I say they're perhaps more important is that although it is just about possible to discuss the kind of things I've raised so far in an encounter group, or at any rate it's within the range of thought that is connected with encounter learning; when it comes to the process of the group as a whole this is pretty much taboo and is usually suppressed on the ground that it's an avoidance of an individual hang-up (it is of course the primary material of T-groups); and as for the social context within which the group exists, this as a live dynamic that can be worked with seems to be totally outside the perception of nearly everyone I meet in the growth movement.

To take next, then, a whole set of situations which involve a meaning of the word responsibility which is common in everyday use outside an encounter group but is never used inside one. There's a matter of responsibility whenever a practical job has to be done. Who is responsible for that resource? Who is responsible for paying? This is all to do with the organisation of work. And the only kind of 'work' that is recognised in an encounter group is the work of an individual on his own growth.

The work of setting up the group, of finding the space (and the cushions that will be beaten) of paying for the gas and electricity, the work of providing the food, all this is not part of the 'work' of the group. Decisions as to number of participants, how much people will pay and what will happen to the money, dates, times of starting and finishing, all these *management* decisions are separated from the group. The responsibility for them is not taken by the group as a whole, but is retained by the leader, or the leadership of the growth centre or whatever.

As for the organisation of the main resource of the group, which is time, this is done by each individual taking or not taking time, according to his own personal decision; and according to the norms of the encounter way of working, heavily supported by the leader and the other group members. The structure of the decision-making about working time in the group is that individuals decide separately. The *management* of time done by separate individuals relating separately to the central authority of the group leader is the traditionally accepted way of working in encounter.

The essential points of this whole process seem to me to be, first, that there is a separation of management responsibility from human responsibility at every level from the menial tasks of maintaining the environment to the sophisticated tasks of the growth work itself. And I want to say right now that the separation of management responsibilities from human responsibilities is precisely what *alienation* is about.

Second, that this separation is maintained both by the leadership and by the participants. The group leader and the growth centre leadership essentially *retain* the role of taking responsibility for management; and the participants essentially *give up* that role to the leaders.

Third, that this situation is supported and reinforced by the ideology of the dictum 'Take responsibility for yourself'.

And fourth, that no alternative way of working is ever countenanced or even perceived as a possibility; nor do those who so heavily support the established way of working have any awareness of the connections between this structure and the structures that they are dissatisfied with, if expressly only at a personal level, in the real world outside the group.

There is, for example, in fact no mechanism whatever by which participants in an encounter group as normally organised could have any say in how many should be in their group. On two occasions when I have complained that a group was too large (on one of them there was a maximum number stated in the brochure which the group exceeded by four people), my complaint was received at the level of a personal hang-up, a problem of my own on which I ought to 'work'. It just wasn't possible to engage on it at the level of administration, even when talking to the administrating person outside the group.

It's as if the encounter movement has taken over the old dodge of the Freudian psychoanalyst, who could at will put down any comment from his patient that was inconvenient by labelling it resistance. In the same way, the new therapy leader (or the participant who supports the new established leadership) can invoke that stuff about taking responsibility for yourself.

If there are twenty people in a gestalt workshop which starts at ten on Saturday morning, stops early that evening, and finishes at 3 on Sunday afternoon, then it's clear that not everyone will have time to work, and there'll be no time to work twice.

I was a participant in such a workshop (let me say at once that I myself did a full and useful piece of work) and in fact four people didn't work in the centre at all, some people worked only very momentarily, nobody followed up what they did by a second time in the centre, and by Sunday morning people did not get into working through their here-and-now reaction to what was going on but through a queue organised by people claiming their place in advance with the leader.

Now of course I know that some people grow by watching others work, and some by not working that time; and I know and strongly believe that people do need to take the responsibility as individuals to claim what they want. But anyone who believes that the behaviour of individuals is not affected by the climate of the social organism that they are a part of is a bit of a blind fool. And when a resource, of which time is one of the most essential, is short, then the climate tends to become competitive. And what I am complaining about in this growth movement situation is that two issues which are so vitally important in the whole change process that's going on in our society, namely competitiveness and leadership, are not worked on as group issues, but only as individual hang-ups.

There's no work on collective relating. There's not even any clear awareness of the ways in which the old anti-collective structures, i.e. those which maintain existing leadership patterns and dependencies, those which make for competition

and then give to the leader the role of resolving competitiveness, those in fact which altogether *prevent* the taking of responsibilities at many levels: there's no clear awareness of the ways in which the old anti-collective structures are being repeated in the growth movement.

Another structural example is the way the May Convention was organised, particularly in the setting up of an elite group of experts who were financed for a private residential conference by the people who just attended as passive listeners in the evening.

This connects with the last boundary point I want to look at. The dictum needs qualifying most crucially, I think, when it is related to the social context within which a group, or groups in general (I am talking about learning groups in the growth movement) exist. The dictum says 'Take responsibility for yourself'; and Fritz Perls, in, again, its most uncompromising form in gestalt therapy, says 'Maturing is the transcendence from environmental support to self-support.' (Gestalt Therapy Verbatim, Bantam edition, p.30).

Now, the way the words 'environmental support' are used is rather special. In the context of therapy, they are used in a psychological sense. A more everyday use of the term would bring to mind things like shelter, warmth, the provision of food and water, the disposal of waste, the maintenance of living spaces, good air, and so on. That a consideration of how these kinds of environmental support exist is regarded as unnecessary, that it's just ignored, this is significant. What it signifies is that these kinds of environmental support are taken for granted by people who go to gestalt therapy groups, or for that matter any growth movement group. In the work of the group they are taken for granted and excluded from that work.

I believe that the people who engage in these kinds of group do *not* take responsibility for themselves. In their total social context, they are highly dependent on environmental support. Their position in the total social organism is one in which their basic needs are provided. They are largely protected from a direct encounter with the physical environment, an encounter which is a battle or an agreement for most people in our society and even more in the world as a whole.

Encounter, therapy, sensitivity training, Arica training and all the other trainings are *middle class* activities: that's often been said - without however, always a clear understanding of what it means. It doesn't only mean that mainly 'middle class' people go to groups. It means that in the total social organism, those who grapple with the environment by actually doing the physical work, don't go to groups. They provide environmental support for the people who do go to groups, who don't do this work.

It's the actual physical work of reversing entropy in our surroundings that I'm referring to, the work that makes all food growing, sheltering, servicing and production possible, the work that is the organisation of the environment and on which all organisation in the social sense ultimately depends.

This work (I'm using a traditional Marxist analysis here) is done by the working class. And it's not done by the working class just for itself. Part of that work, a great part, is done for the owning class and for the managing classes, to which the 'middle class' belongs and which provides the participants and the leaders of learning groups. Teachers, social workers, etcetera, are in the middle class because they service people on behalf of the owners and managers. And in any view of our total global society, this is certainly even more true. So what it means, to say that the growth movement is a middle class movement, is that it's

a movement which depends heavily on environmental support, and whose members, therefore, do not take responsibility for themselves. (Q.E.D!)

Once again we see this separation. Previously, it was the separation of management responsibility from human responsibility. Now it is the separation of practical life-support responsibility from 'psychological', or we could say emotional, responsibility. We see the truly amazing picture of people who are trying desperately to achieve responsibility for themselves, independence from environmental support, at a psychological level: while totally ignoring the extent to which they are taken responsibility for, and the extent to which they depend on, environmental support, at a practical level.

I find it amazing, because it's amazing to me that such well-read and intelligent people as growth movement people usually are, and what's more people who are so influenced by non-Western ideas of the continuity of all things: it's amazing that they can maintain this separation between the psychological and the practical, and the parallel separation between the individual and the societal, in the rigid way that they do. It amazes me that anyone can imagine a human individual as an isolated system. Yet this is exactly what the growth movement approaches do. I have in mind the image of a pianist who develops a fantastically flexible pair of hands isolated on the end of his wrists, and then wonders how it is he has back-ache.

The aim of the participants in a group is a peculiar kind of perfection, to become the perfect person, the perfect individual. For instance, they want to achieve free-flowing, unblocked energy. Much of the work in groups is concerned with energy, and some systems of therapy (such as the fine neo-Reichian and Bioenergetic ones) centre on energy. But they deal, as do all the by now traditional growth movement groups, entirely with the individual as an isolated energy system. There's no work on the blockages in the surrounding social organism. There's no work on the connections between the social blockages and the individual blockages. This is crazy.

It is crazy not just in the sense of a nice turn of phrase. It's crazy in the sense of being neurotic. Fritz Perls, expanding on his statement about environmental support, says 'The neurotic, instead of mobilising his own resources, puts all his energy into manipulating the environment for support'. (Gestalt Therapy Verbatim p. 141). (- an own-goal, one might think, in the terms of my analysis!)

I seriously contend that the blindness in the growth movement to group process and to social context is neurotic. It is a manipulation for maintaining an environmental class-support. It is a defensive strategy. It's a strategy in defence of some vested interests: not primarily economic but rather psychological vested interests, though those are connected. It is maintaining the old structures by *separating off* whatever is not-individual, and ignoring what goes on there and how that connects with what goes on *within* the individual. It is maintaining the old psychological structures even in the individual by maintaining the old practical structures outside him.

(note written in 2011 - this aspect of therapeutic approaches has somewhat changed. Parallel process, and the connection between social and individual processes and structures, is now often brought in).

Another aspect of this strategy is the use of words. Words like liberating, oppressive, alienation, manipulate, exploit, are often used in the growth movement, and sometimes the context in which they're used makes it clear that they are so used for their revolutionary associations, as if to justify the

revolutionary nature of what goes on in groups. But these words in their political context have very clear class (i.e. social power) and economic meanings. These meanings are virtually never brought in with the use of these words, which are used exclusively for their psychological meaning. Again there's that separation of the societal from the individual. It's really ironical to hear the word 'alienation' used in a manifestly alienated way by someone who is using it to describe a feeling of depressed separation in an individual and has separated off this meaning from its societal meaning of having no ownership in what you create.

It's a particularly insidious strategy because in appearance it is one of liberation and radical change towards an alternative way of life. And in fact within the individual, and within groups of individuals who use each other for the mutual individual environmental support that they do not get from the environment outside groups, it *is* liberating. No doubt some participants take this liberation out with them. But I do not think this is any thanks to the growth movement.

We only have to look at its structures to see how un-liberating it is in any wider sense. I've already shown how its management structures simply reproduce the established-society structures. What needs more emphasis is how it perpetuates the old-style dependencies. The group leader or therapist is a skilled expert. He knows; and is paid handsomely for his knowledge. The group leader is the one in the group who has gone furthest on the road to becoming a perfect person. And very many people who take part in groups want, as their new first ambition, to become group leaders. (It makes sense, it's about the only way you can live that way in the real world!). The group leader is the person in the group with most influence, the most imitated, the most fallen in love with, everybody's new daddy (or mummy); pushing or permitting, with the group following; forbidding with the group refraining - altogether an example for life ... inside the context of the group.

The appearance of liberation within the confines of a social space, whether within a bounded group or within an individual, with no liberation outside that space, is what repressive tolerance and repressive desublimation are about, as expounded in detail by Herbert Marcuse *(A Critique Of Pure Tolerance)* and by Reimut Reiche *(Sexuality and Working Class Struggle)*.

And the growth movement, as it is at present, is reactionary. In the wider social context, it is repressive. I'm sure of that. It's the repeating of the old structures, it's the mental separations, it's the absence of a consciousness of these processes and the absence of an engagement in working at them, these are the things that make me sure.

So what? Even if that is true, and even if we can arrive at a definition of 'social growth', so what? I mean what do we do about it? Do we give up running or taking part in groups?

Here is what I believe.

I believe I am not only responsible for myself. Whenever I live with others (and don't just spend time in a learning group with them - maybe even then), I am responsible for certain tasks, for children, for old people, and for those who are used to a certain way I behave. Of course I don't mean I am just responsible *for* them. But I have choices to make and I have to learn how to make those choices. It's no solution to just dump my responsibility for everything but myself.

It really isn't possible to be totally self-supporting - I mean totally without environmental support. If you are a hermit, or a self-sufficiency freak like

Thoreau, you are playing a role within a larger social organism. That kind of life without the existence of the larger social organism just doesn't make any sense. We don't only have to learn how to be self-supporting. We have to learn how to receive support. We have to learn how to support each other.

The ways in which people support each other change. They change in acceptability and they change in relevance - relevance to the ecological possibilities around us and which, I believe, we perceive and construct into some sort of pattern or number of potential patterns, unclearly formulated but hazily present and providing the energy for change when they do not fit with the patterns that are formed by the existing structures around us. I believe it is silly to aim at total self-support.

What we have to do is be sensitive to the kinds of 'environmental support' (ie by one person of another) which are no longer relevant and to break through the internal structures which hold us to these constricting dependencies; and also to be sensitive to what kinds of mutual support, mutual aid (Kropotkin), mutual commitment, mutual expectations, (what expectations *do* we want to live up to, for and with each other?): what kinds *are* relevant and creative in the world as it is now around us.

I don't believe that the growth movement, as it is at present, is a very good place for this learning. It is a good place to learn how to grab what you want - and that's a fine thing to learn but not enough.

The change process is sometimes blocked within an individual and sometimes within a larger social organism such as a group, an organisation, or a nation. I believe that a block in one area or set of structures produces a limit to change in others. But essentially, change has to go on in all areas. I believe the idea of change proceeding fully in one area first is basically wrong.

I believe it is one of the skills of the 'change therapist' to recognise where at any time the limiting constraint is located and where attention is needed. Is it an individual or individuals whose internal structure is preventing change? Or is it the systemic structures of a social organism that are preventing change? That means we all have to develop this skill, because anyone who is part of a change process also has to be a change therapist. Or, to turn this around, no-one should be. The therapist who is a skilled expert acting on others is reproducing the old structures. But therapeutic skills exist.

I believe we need to do some social re-integration. We have to own the disowned parts of ourselves that we project on to other parts of our social organism. The married couple, the lover and the call girl (from my images earlier) who all want to change, have to re-own the vital parts of themselves that they have projected on to others.

Curiously, the concepts and some of the method already exist, I believe, within the growth movement for doing this. The language I've just been using is the language of gestalt therapy. It needs applying. We need to re-own our social projections. We need to take social responsibility for ourselves. We need a fully perceptive awareness of what is going on around us.

There's a lot of work around on awareness in the various kinds of group in the growth movement: on awareness, consciousness, of ourselves as an individual organism. It needs to be extended to an awareness of our existence in the social organism - the group, the family, the organisation, the class, the nation - and to what is our relationship with others in those social organisms. Max Wertheimer,

one of the original gestalt psychologists (as distinct from therapists), wrote a book called Productive Thinking. In some chapters of that book he describes very clearly how social learning works by extending a view of oneself to a view of oneself as part of a social gestalt.

I don't believe that growth learning groups as they mostly are at present are any use for social growth. They are too institutionalised, their old-world time and space structures are becoming more bureaucratic, their paid experts are becoming more expert and more separate from ordinary people, and the groups as ever are separate from the practical realities on which they depend.

I believe a good kind of learning group would be organised by the people in it getting together and setting it up. They would explore what they were after. They would use their skills with each other. (After all, there are a lot of people around with growth skills nowadays). If they wanted the special skills of particular people outside the group, they could hire them, telling them what they wanted them for.

Another good kind of learning group would be a real life group which went ahead and worked that way sometimes, facing its reality and its own hangups as a group and as individuals. A good kind of group leader would be someone with skills who happened to be around (growing food or mending houses or making songs or writing or doing a job nearby) at the time when the group happened to need his kind of skills.

What I'm trying to do is to imagine a group with new-world structures.

I believe that what we're doing at the moment is actually preventing these things from happening, so I'm not at all convinced that we should go on doing groups meanwhile. But since there's no doubt that we are going to, then I believe groups should work on these issues. There are various ways this work can be done. Gestalt methods I've already mentioned. Role play and psycho- and socio-drama are other related methods. Another way is that groups can take much more responsibility for their own administration and their practical life together. This soon leads in to confrontations and regressions. (You don't do the washing up because you want Mummy to do it). And simply an awareness of what's going on at the levels of group process and social context makes a start.

'Take responsibility for yourself' is an ideology which is too much like the economic message of Adam Smith in his *Wealth Of Nations*. He argued for an 'obvious and simple system of natural liberty'. 'Give me that which I want, and you shall have that which you want.' 'We address ourselves not to the humanity of traders but to their self-love.' 'Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interests his own way. . ' And for why? The sentence continues '.. and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with those of any other man, or order of men.'

Adam Smith was the first man to clearly formulate the doctrine of laissez-faire, an ideology which was a strategy in support of market competition and capitalist expansion. The growth movement is a product of the culture which comes from that market competition and that capitalist expansion. If it is also to be a radical force in that culture, then we have to understand in what way the similarities between these two ideologies are not a coincidence. And we have to be very clear about what ideology we really want.

(note in 2011 - and develop the structures which make that possible - in that chasm between the free market and state control - see other articles - esp Design And Politics in the section Structures And Exercises).