

CRITICAL THINKING AND PUBLIC AUTHORITY: STATE OF THE INQUIRY

WILLIAM M. BATKAY

The Interdisciplinary Symposium on Critical Thinking and Authority which I was asked to chair at last October's conference, *Critical Thinking: Focus on Social and Cultural Inquiry*, discussed some of the very questions that are at the heart of a major transformation in world politics—the revolutionary social and political upheaval now underway in much of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. A brief review of the symposium's responses to these questions—What is authority? How is legitimate authority to be constituted? When is dissent against and disobedience to authority permissible? Are there—should there be—gender-based differences in authority?—may help to place the critical thinking enterprise more firmly in the "real" world of contemporary political life.

The four papers in the symposium were written by social scientists from Fairleigh Dickinson University. Judith Waters, a psychologist, introduced the topic of the symposium by noting a paradox in contemporary America: disrespect for authority has reached crisis proportions—in education, social relations, and politics; at the same time, broad segments of the mass public, including many of our students, have abdicated their decision-making and critical thinking responsibilities. Foregoing their own ego autonomy, they search instead, often in computer data bases, for the "right" answers to increasingly complex political and moral issues.

The result, according to Waters, is a behavioral dialectic dubbed by one French scholar "deference and defiance." The central problem, then, as Waters sees it, is for social scientists to delimit the circumstances under which deference to experts or "defiant" reliance on one's own authority is the most appropriate or desirable response.

In the second paper, Jean Mechanic presented a philosophical

analysis of the nature of authority and the conditions for its legitimate use, attempting to establish a rational basis for the conferring of authority on someone or something beyond the individual ego. She classifies authority into two types: *epistemic* authority derives from superior knowledge, judgment, skill or competence; *deontic* authority, in contrast, derives from the position or performance of those exercising it. Legitimacy is axiomatic to both types, "illegitimate authority" being as oxymoronic for Mechanic as, say, "square circle."

In the case of deontic authority, however, the sources of legitimacy have been difficult to pin down logically—some have thought that it derives from the consent of those subject to it (as in traditional Western democratic theory), whereas others have grounded it in some overarching principle, such as the need to protect the vulnerable (e.g., children) or the degree of good attained or evil prevented.

The third paper, by political scientist Morris Rothblatt, noted that, regardless of the sources or degree of their legitimacy, civil authorities universally feel the urge to restrict dissent and disobedience. Only rarely and recently, as in the U.S. since the 1960's, has legal toleration for written, spoken, or behavioral dissent become normative. Neither in the U.S. nor in other democracies has the mass public shown much inclination to tolerate dissent and disobedience, especially from disliked or despised groups.

On the other hand, argues Rothblatt, elite groups such as lawyers, and highly educated people, regardless of political ideology, typically display much higher levels of tolerance for dissenting views and behavior. As more Americans have acquired some higher education in recent years (including, one supposes, those political science "grinds" so

enamored of law school!), toleration for dissent and disobedience has grown noticeably in American society. Not surprisingly, perhaps, so has disrespect for authority—to the chagrin of many conservatives and the delight of many liberals. However, this trade-off between freedom and disrespect is an apparently inescapable core problem in the dialectics of modern democratic society, as the East European and Soviet elites and mass publics are just now, painfully, discovering.

On the evidence from the papers discussed so far, authority and its rationalizations clearly have philosophical, educational, and social status dimensions. But do they also have a gender component? Indeed they do, argues anthropologist Benjamin Drew in the final symposium paper. Authority, especially in public life, has in most societies been a male prerogative, variously rationalized and justified. Where women have exercised power, this has generally been informal or restricted to the domestic or private sphere.

This pattern is undergoing challenge in Third World societies not, as we might suppose, through the dissemination of egalitarian norms or critical thinking skills, but through female participation in the generation of wealth through cash crop farming, marketing activities, or the monopolistic production of a culturally necessary commodity. In modern technological societies such as ours, the drive to achieve or maintain a middle-class life-style has enticed—or forced—a majority of married women into the work-place as second wage-earners. This, Drew submits, has in turn produced not only the immediately desired outcome, namely, greater purchasing power for women and their families, but also new respect, power and genuine authority for women outside the home, as well.

(continued on page 6)

HERMAN WIGODSKY: "YOU WANT TO DO WHAT TO ME?"

LECTURE SERIES REPORT BY ARNOLD KOROTKIN

The need to examine our nation's health care system is an acute issue. In 1989, Americans spent over \$600 billion for health care, which represents approximately 12% of our country's Gross National Product. These costs represent a continuing pattern of escalating expenditures which have outpaced inflation in recent years, exacerbated by the following problems:

- 37 million Americans are without any type of health care insurance;
- there is a critical shortage of nurses;
- modern medical technology and various medical 'miracles' come at a high price;
- the AIDS crisis strains the limits of current health care resources;
- our country's aging population is faced with increasing medical problems.

As an initial step toward examining the nature of the health care system, Dr. Herman Wigodsky, Clinical Professor at the University of Texas spoke on Thursday, December 14, 1989 as part of the lecture series sponsored by the Institute for Critical Thinking. The session was entitled "You Want to Do *What* to Me?"

The focus of Dr. Wigodsky's presentation was the education of individuals preparing for careers in the medical profession. He suggested that medical schools in reality are primarily trade schools where one learns a craft and obtains the tools of the trade. However, in the course of this educational process little is done to challenge the students as people. Dr. Wigodsky further contended that once in the profession, grants turn researchers into "private entrepreneurs," further detaching the practitioner from the patient and de-personalizing the nature of medical care.

In order to reverse the current state of medical education and to produce a 'new breed' of medical practitioner, Dr. Wigodsky suggested that students preparing for the medical professions should, in their undergraduate studies:

- be provided with a background in philosophy and an understanding of health care ethics;
- have an understanding of the social structure of the health care system and appreciate the relationships between the medical system and other institutions, i.e., political, social and economic;

- have a sense of compassion as well as knowledge and understanding of how people interact;
- acquire an historical perspective regarding the evolution of the medical profession and health care system as we know it today.

Then, medical students and professionals need to take responsibility for their actions and ask the question "What am I doing and to whom?" so as not to violate their patients' rights.

It is essential that professional and pre-professional medical education begin to seriously address the issues raised by Dr. Wigodsky. A critical examination of current educational approaches is a keystone to the transformation of our health care delivery system. This examination will hopefully generate a 'new breed' of multi-dimensional medical practitioners who have not only mastered the tools of their trade, but who are also equipped to address the social, political and economic issues they and their patients face on a daily basis.

Arnold Korotkin is an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Sociology at MSC.

PUBLIC AUTHORITY (from page 5)

So where does all this leave the budding critical thinker? On the one hand, obviously, the process of critical thinking itself generated the questions raised in the symposium and made possible the formulation of the answers summarized here. On the other hand, neither the process nor the outcomes of critical thinking as such seem, on the evidence presented in these papers, to have played a particularly noticeable role in either the development or the transformation of actual authority relations in contemporary societies. Rather, impersonal and global societal processes are largely responsible for outcomes, both more and less positive,

that are beyond the scope of deliberate and rational human control.

If that is the case, then the chief contribution of critical thinking in the social sciences may be to sharpen our perception of and appreciation for these processes; critical thinking is not in itself likely to facilitate or retard the processes in any tangible fashion. But as the political events unfolding in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have demonstrated, we, academics and citizens alike, may find in this ample cause for satisfaction.

William Batkay is Chair of the Department of Political Science at MSC.

To the Editor:

I want you to know how energizing Dr. Herman Wigodsky's lecture was for me. It was astonishing to hear an M.D. speak of allowing patients autonomy and treating them with beneficence and justice. I immediately generalized and applied those concepts to my own profession. The end of the semester at hand, a time of summing-up, his remarks led me to reconsider how much autonomy I had allowed my students — or encouraged them to develop. And, in reviewing the semester's work, I considered whether I had used processes that were beneficent and whether I had treated *all* my students justly. I found myself squirming a little.

Celia Martyn, Department of English