

Dear Robert,

6/6/88

Your phone message was surprising and very welcome. Very welcome indeed to an old Lewinian like myself. It has been quite distressing over the past thirty odd years to see one teaching department after another, and one journal after another, taken over by Skinnerians and the like. That development closely paralleled the extension of logical positivism that Rorty has traced in philosophy. These developments were not, of course, unconnected.

In 1985, at a Canadian conference at Orillia, in Eric Trist's honour, I tried to go back to the agenda that Lewin set out in 1946-7 and see where we stood today. The only part of that agenda that we have significantly advanced is the democratization of work and that was achieved only because it was outside the control of the universities. I do not think that the National Training Labs or Tavvy with their T-groups have contributed anything of value to Lewin's vision. Eric would certainly disagree with me on that but I remain adamant. I do think that with our tools of participative design workshops, search conferences and the statistical method of hierarchical linkage analysis we have made significant advances, but that is not much to show for thirty odd years. It seems to me that the great hope attached to experimental social psychology has gone down the drain. Lewin was no sooner dead than his American students, with a few notable exceptions, were dropping the P x E formula for the traditional concept of the sufficient conditions of behaviour residing in P. Admittedly Lewin was, until his last paper, in a bind with his subjectivist interpretation of the life space and consequent inability to deal with 'foreign forces', ought forces and the concept of powerfield. Heider was constantly to remind him of this and Mort Deutsch dropped the subjectivist assumption for his critical experiments on cooperation and competition. He was also in conceptual strife with the notion of contemporaneity because he could not shake off the mechanist view of time and the 'specious present'. Izzie Chein cleaned up that problem for us with the concept of overlapping temporal gestalten.

In recent years assistance has come from a rather unexpected source. Jimmy Gibson was with Fritz Heider at Swarthmore in the early thirties but apparently learnt nothing from Fritz's papers on Thing and Medium and perception as an adaptive process. By the late nineteen sixties Gibson and his followers, in particular Shaw, Mace and Turvey began to re- discover field theory Unfortunately this new ecological psychology movement is so desperate to achieve respectability that they are beginning, already, to look like Lewin's American students

It will be of interest to me to see in September what has been kept alive of Lewin's agenda. In the two years Merrelyn and I were at the Uni. of Penn, 1982-4, I picked up practically no trace of Lewin's influence.

My own view is that Lewin's great strength came from his concern with real participative democracy, in work and society, and his philosophical roots in Cassirer's "Substance and Function". Cassirer did a magnificent job in that first study and again in 1945 when he pointed out that the mathematical theory of groups enabled us to understand how humans could perceive universals- i.e. have direct perception of that which we theorize about in science. Cassirer still had fatal flaws in his philosophical position (he was still too caught up in Kant. It just so happens that your own home-grown philosopher, Charles Saunders Peirce, in the mid nineteenth century, had already seen the deep significance of the kinds of concepts that chemistry was developing- serial genetic concepts leading to that great achievement of the periodic table. A kind of construct formation that stood in marked contrast to the traditional, Aristotelian classification of genera. (c.f. Lewin's Aristotelian and Galilean modes of thought.) Cassirer, and Lewin, certainly did not know of Peirce's work including his thorough demolition of Kant's position. It would have been very much to our benefit if they had. The hang-ups in Lewin's theoretical work, to which I referred above, would not have existed. I think we

have no alternative but to go back to the more consistent position that Peirce developed. Much of what Peirce spelt out has been carried forward by George Mead and by Pepper's 'world hypothesis of contextualism. Neither of these provide an adequate base. Mead did not write enough of his thoughts and the compilation of his lecture notes for post-humous publication was too dominated by Charles W. Morris. Morris' subsequent publications on languages gave a thoroughly mechanistic interpretation of Peirce's theory of signs (unfortunately this was carried over to the book by Ackoff and Emery, " On Purposeful Systems." In reworking Ackoff's original draft I just left that chapter aside. I was then unaware of Peirce's work and felt I had nothing to add).

The Pepper contribution on contextualism is more interesting.

Pepper's first formulation of his concept of conceptualism dates from around 1934. This was after the first volumes of the Collected Works of Peirce started to come from Harvard Press and at a time when Pepper was wrap in the work that Tolman and Egon Brunswick were doing together in the same university, UCLA. Both of the latter were philosophically oriented and both were strongly oriented against the subjectivism of the empiricists and the mechanistic approach of Clark Hull. There was obviously synergism in this trio and at this time, the depth of the Depression, the emergence of Hitler and Roosevelt, a time when conventional thinking had little support .

Pepper brilliantly displayed the magnitude of the challenge that Peirce and his contextualist philosophy posed for the traditional alternatives. It posed the challenge at the fundamental level of the basic categories of each philosophy. The puzzling features of Pepper's contribution are that, a) he has never once, to my knowledge, referred to Peirce as the source of contextualism. He clearly dismisses William James' concept of pragmatism as puerile but does not direct his readers to his source, b) he chooses as the root metaphor of contextualism the ' purposeful act". The purposeful act necessarily presumes an organism that can make choices but, in itself, the concept does not specify the kind of environment that makes choice possible or may require the making of choices. If, as an intellectual tour de force, one allows for the existence of purposive organisms then the rest can be handled as an exercise in mechanistic interaction or modeled in a formistic fashion. (In parts of OPS it is clear that Ackoff and I were guilty of just that). Peirce was insistent that such phenomena had to be understood as transactional events not interactional events: as Thirds not Seconds He was just as clear that conversation was the metaphor ,par excellence , of transactional events. This should have been clear to Pepper but was not obviously not, and never in his later writings, including his attempts to formulate a new world hypothesis, was it to become clear. It appears that he had his moment of vision and that vision was dominated by Tolman's efforts to prove to the Hullians that humans should be taken as purposive organisms, not reactive rats. There was no doubt but that that was an advance. It was only a part of what Peirce had contributed.

Going back to Peirce was not an easy matter when the major source of his writings were the volumes of the Collected Works produced by his alma mater, Harvard University. Those volumes were a shocking, and highly expensive, treatment of a major thinker. They proceeded from the assumption that he was a great thinker but was unsystematic. They clipped cut and repasted to give his writings the sort of order they expected of him. The end result was quite awful. I spent lashings of time trying to re-create the order that Peirce had followed. Then a beautiful thing happened. Max Frisch, as general editor had the Indiana University Press producing a new edition in strict chronological order. The first three volumes are out.

Those volumes cover the critical period when the young Peirce had a window open in the canopy of conventional ideas. It was a window that had been blown open by not only the chemists in creating a post-phlogiston science and Faraday creating a field theory of Electro-magnetism but also by the winds of change that blew in Darwin and the Communist Manifesto. For a young man who was

already able to wrangle with his father, the foremost mathematician in the U.S., this was a considerable challenge to think deeply and think clearly about the basic categories within which we ordered our knowledge. It was a good reason for look for new categories in the emerging sciences. (I am referring here only to the opportunities offered to Charles Peirce not to the qualities that led him to seize the opportunity).

Now I must go back to the number one question.

Why should we go back to an obscure, obtuse American who was philosophising in the last half of the last century? I would not suggest this if it were possible to identify anyone in the time between us, in 1988, and Peirce, who had a similar grasp of the fundamentals. I would welcome any suggestions. One thing I am convinced about is that the social sciences will not get on a productive course until they get the fundamentals straight. If we fail in this we will continue to spin like a top - using up people, resoures and popular goodwill whilst erratically moving but getting nowhere.

That my dear Richard must be a real earful.

Probably all bulldust, but it is my reading of the map I have. I have checked out the maps produced by Whitehead, Wittgenstein, Bergson et al and have the feeling that we seem to have spent a century in retreat from reality. We are like the kids who were glued to the ever changing views in the kaleidoscope. We twist the knobs and press the buttons of the scientific method to produce an unending flow of technological innovation; we understand less and less of what we are about; and we casually observe the passing of what would have to be one of the bloodiest centuries that mankind has ever inflicted on itself. Unlike the 14th and 17th centuries, the other very bloody centuries, we have not had visitations of the Plague, but I am not sure that science will move fast enough to conquer Aids.

Roll on September. We might draw great hope from each other.

yours sincerely,