

Self & Society

“We are all more simply human than otherwise.” Harry Stack Sullivan

By Carlton Cornett



Harry Stack Sullivan (1892-1949) was a gifted, gay psychoanalytic innovator. He was one of the founders of the World Health Organization (WHO). His work on the interface between individual and interpersonal dynamics challenged some of the most basic beliefs of his world. If we will allow it, his ideas still challenge much of what we consider bedrock knowledge. For instance, what is insanity? There are a variety of ways to define that term: psychological, legal, medical, etc. Most people I know tend to think that these professional definitions fully describe insanity. And yet, each of these definitions rests on a more fundamental definition that I believe few of us consider — the societal definition.

Laws are constructed by individuals at a specific moment in a specific society, within an historical cultural context. Psychological and medical constructs are the result of specific individuals and groups shaping knowledge into a societally-acceptable language. The societal definition is perhaps the most simple of the definitions, for it seeks basically only to separate Me/Us from Other/Them. Those who depart from what We do (or, more importantly, what We believe We do) for what are assumed to be psychological reasons are, to one degree or another, insane. So far this probably seems like one of those philosophical meanderings that sounds all fine and good, but has no practical use. Yet, at this point in our national life, it is a challenge to some of our basic contradictions. For instance, We may define an individual serial murderer as insane, but what about an assassin trained by the CIA to kill foreign leaders who pose a threat to our national security? We assert that a suicide bomber is insane, but what about the crew that launches a missile killing thousands? Indeed, what if there was an attempt to define killing during wartime as insane? Our society would simply not tolerate it.

However, every instance of taking a human life, no matter the context, involves the same basic psychological dynamic. Its key is to ignore Sullivan's One Genus Postulate quoted at the top of this article and to degrade another human being to the point that s/he seems different from us, less valuable, someone with whom we cannot empathize (Other). The Nazis used the term *untermenschen* (subhuman) for their victims. If we convince ourselves that another person or group of people is inferior to us it is much easier to view them as dis-

posable. We may then deliberately take a life or lives. Were the Nazis fundamentally different from us as human beings — or is there a Nazi in each of us? I believe the latter and the test of each individual and each society is to define that part of us as insane — never to be acted-out.

All of this brings me to why I believe that we must think about the nature of insanity. We help shape it. Whether we know anything about law, psychology, or medicine, we shape our society's view of insanity. Since September 11, 2001, I believe that we have been in a very dangerous mindset. We have used terms like terrorist, madman, evil, criminal, etc. to describe individuals and groups of people. Our government has focused our fear on these people, all the while degrading them to the point that they become almost like vermin in our minds. Recently, Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, described the systematic torture of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers as “inhuman,” “sadistic,” and “cruel.” The acts and the soldiers committing them are now Other (i.e. “inhuman”) but what he probably does not realize is that, with his disavowal of the humanity of these soldiers he is perpetuating the fundamental problem that led to their actions. In the final analysis, the ability and willingness to torture is a symptom of the insanity of believing that one human being can be superior to another — a symptom of the insanity of believing that killing is a sane approach to a problem.

I would be wildly hypocritical or disingenuous to write as one who is beyond this form of insanity. I must accept my responsibility for it because as Harry Stack Sullivan also rightly maintained “There is nothing human that is alien to me.” Is it not logical that a man who was treated as Other by large segments of society came to observe and articulate this idea? Is it not time that those of us in this society who know how it feels to be treated as inferior — less than others — describe this mindset as a serious form of insanity? Is it not time to work toward a definition of any killing as inherently insane? How different a society and world we would have if the world's only “super power” began the search for sane solutions to problems.

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