

## SOCIAL ATMOSPHERE

### I

Imagine the following situation. There is a discussion about whether the authorities in a state (or, for that matter, in any society) may not perform anti-social actions (meaning thereby actions which in one way or another endanger the being or character of the society of which the person who performs them is or is not a member) as much as, if indeed not more than, anybody else. We find that the atmosphere at the discussion is such, whether that discussion is taking place somewhere isolatedly or in a more general way, that people say just what they wish to say and do their best to support their contention by means of arguments. Some people go on to mention various instances of anti-social actions which the authorities in a state may have been performing. Some other people maintain that there is a sense in which those in authority can never be said to perform anti-social actions. Even the people who are rather shy or reserved for one reason or another feel encouraged to express themselves.

Now, imagine that at this discussion, where the atmosphere is that of a free or frank expression of views, encouraging even those who are rather shy or reserved to speak up, there is somehow introduced the consideration that the authorities concerned at the moment do not look with favour at their being made objects of critical comments directly or indirectly. Now, as soon as that happens, the atmosphere is more likely than not to become charged with a certain amount of tension, more or less depending upon the people affected. There is the possibility, however remote, that there are people who would go on discussing things in exactly the same old way. But there would, one supposes, be some people, who would go on saying just what they wish to say, advancing arguments in support of their contention, but who, in order to be able to go on doing all that, would have to bring into play in extra measure another element of

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their nature, the element of fearlessness. And there would, one further supposes, be some people, presumably very many more than of the preceding kind, who would either straightaway cease to express an opinion or express an opinion which can no longer be characterized as free or frank, in which a certain amount of intellectual crookedness has entered.

Now, imagine a further change in this modified atmosphere. The authorities concerned at the moment let it be known in some way that they do not look with disfavour at their being made objects of critical comments directly or indirectly. As a result, there is likely to be some lessening of tension, depending upon the amount of trust which the authorities are able to arouse in their word. In the light of the trust which at least some of the people belonging to the second category mentioned in the previous para may come to have, they would have to bring into play in a less extra measure their element of fearlessness, and consequently they would or rather they would once more be enabled to behave as their former self. Chances are that most of the people, even if not all the people, belonging to the third category mentioned in the same para would continue to play safe and thus behave in the same manner in which they did in the midst on the modified atmosphere.

## 2

Suppose there is a group of people who have met to discuss whether there should be sex education for children at a certain age. For the sake of simplicity, but not contrary to all expectations, let me say that these people can be more or less sharply divided into two camps, which we may simply call conservatives and liberals, the former maintaining that there should not be and the latter maintaining that there should be sex education for children at a certain age. Both the camps feel so strongly about their respective positions that, to ensure a result in their favour by whatever means, they do not hesitate to resort to a great deal of behind the scenes canvassing and manoeuvring before the meeting itself. There are occasions when they even become personal in their approach.

As a result of all this activity, which had been going on prior to the meeting, we find that the atmosphere at the meeting is surcharged with tension. Have the people met to discuss the above-mentioned problem, to find out, for example, whether the children should just be

permitted to bungle through such an important part of their life as sex, as seems to be happening most of the time, or whether one should take the risk of letting them make light of the instruction which they may be given in the field. Or providing them with yet one more of those occasions for amusement? Or have they met, seized of that nerves-shattering tension, to make sure in every way that there would be no opposition to their point of view? As soon as there is a dissenting voice, they take steps to silence or suppress it; they will become extremely unpleasant in their dealings, even to the extent of making fun and shouting, they will try to sidetrack the issue, they will indulge in emotional outbursts and, if nothing else works, they will not hesitate to issue threats.

In the midst of this atmosphere of tension, in which the people do not do what they said was their aim to do but are led to do something different, there may emerge an odd person who is enabled to call up some courage and clarity and who consequently appeals to the people to come back to their work. Chances are that this appeal would further accentuate the tension; people's defence mechanism may come into operation in a rather aggressive way or their emotional commitments may be just too high. Or the appeal may fall on deaf ears; people may apparently listen to it and then, when it is over, just pass on. Or there may be a chance, although in a hundred, that there is a faint response to the appeal; people do not immediately decide to go back to their work, but they may not mind, say, the idea of postponing things in order to take stock of the situation. If that happens, there is already a dent made in the prevailing atmosphere of tension, with the promise of a quieter atmosphere ahead.

### 3

Terrorists, whether they belong to the official side of a state (or, for that matter, of any society) or to the opposing side, with a view to whatever they may subsequently be up to, aim at producing a certain kind of atmosphere, the atmosphere of extreme fear in which people would be led to act or refrain from acting in anticipation of some great harm.

Imagine the following situation. The authorities in a state, in order, say, to keep their crumbling personal positions intact, declare

conditions of emergency. They leave people in no doubt that anyone as much as expressing a flutter of dissent would be dealt with in the severest possible manner. They deploy army and police and all the other paramilitary forces which they may have at their disposal all over the place in order to let people see that they mean business; they even raise new battalions of toughs with a view to forcing people into submission. No news and views are allowed to be made public except those which are of a harmless nature or which are favourable to the authorities. The long arm of power reaches out for suspects, even those who are remotely so, in all sorts of incredible ways and punishes them in ways which will leave all but the hardest and the maddest completely nerveless. In order to make the atmosphere as frightening as possible, the authorities do not even hesitate to harass the innocents.

Now, imagine the following situation. There are people who are on the opposing side in a state, people who are of the view that the existing authorities are using the various resources of the state for the fulfilment of their personal ends, and who, as a consequence, have it as their aim to remove these authorities. In pursuance of this aim, they declare that all those in authority, unless they leave or mend their ways on their own right away, stand to be forcibly removed or liquidated or brought to some grievous harm; and also all those who connive with these authorities stand to suffer in equal measure. And after this, on the assumption that the people on the opposing side mean what they say, one can expect a spate of what have come to be called terrorist activities; there would be kidnappings, killings, lootings and burnings and so on. In order to make up for their meagre resources compared to those of the authorities and also to gain the psychological advantage of causing a scare among people of being caught unawares, these people may adopt guerilla tactics. In the course of time they may even be able to collect enough resources indigenously or otherwise to meet the might of the authorities more or less face to face, at least in localized combats.

Needless to say, the atmosphere of terror would be compounded so very, very much more, if both those on the official side and those on the opposing side in a state did their utmost towards producing such an atmosphere. It would be an atmosphere in which people at large would be constantly, or more or less constantly, and rather intensely apprehensive about what they should do or refrain from doing.

## 4

It has been said that the atmosphere in a social setting like home or school, as a part of the atmosphere in general, in which children grow up and are educated, makes a great contribution towards their being or personality. And, as a result, it is considered an important part of their upbringing and education that they are provided with the right kind of atmosphere.

Will they, for example, grow up in an atmosphere in which women and even men, in the midst of whom they live, constantly pry into other people's private life and affairs and weave sensational stories around them which they then go on to narrate to all and sundry with almost sensual fun? Will they, again as an example, be educated in an atmosphere in which the people who are responsible for their education show no intellectual concern for what has been going on around them, who never miss an opportunity to talk shop and who are in the forefront of every move and struggle, justified or unjustified and whatever be their character, which are aimed at serving their personal interests?

Or else: will they, for example, grow up in an atmosphere in which the people who are responsible for their upbringing, be they parents or somebody else, find time to be with them and have patience to answer their unending queries about the world which they are beginning to discover, and have joy in bringing them into contact with the objects of nature, like flowers and animals, which they are likely to be so very fond of? Will they, again as an example, be educated in an atmosphere in which the people who are responsible for their education never flag in their devotion to their work, are always upright in their thought and action and full of concern for the well - being of those for whose education they are responsible?

There, I suppose, will be no denying the fact that these different kinds of atmospheres, and likewise other kinds of atmospheres, in which the children grow up and are educated may often have some impact, sometimes a great deal and sometimes not very much, upon the being or personality of these children. But, such is human nature, there may be children who escape this influence altogether or are subject to it only minimally; and there may even be children who are given to an adverse

reaction. Even children, we find, may not manifest uniform receptivity to what is presented to them; they may even have it in them to respond to it in their own different ways.

## 5

The atmosphere of a social setting may be one of its important ingredients. It is, or consists in, the general feel, general emotive experience, which it offers of itself, as being, for example, relaxed or tense, friendly or hostile, warm or cool, exhilarating or depressing, encouraging or discouraging, spiritual or physical, academic or non-academic and so on. This general feel or emotive experience which a social setting offers of itself, it offers, it would seem, through the varied expressions of the people who are there in that setting, for example, their facial expressions, their words, their actions and even physical objects which they may appropriately use as expressing themselves, like perhaps a display of black to mark a mournful state.

One may seek to produce a certain atmosphere in a social setting, and one may try to do so for a certain purpose. Thus, for example, one may seek to produce an atmosphere of terror in a social setting, and one may try to do so with a view to forcing people to conform or submit or just lie low. One may succeed in producing the atmosphere in a social setting which one is seeking to do, or one may not succeed in doing so; or one may succeed in doing so only more or less. Likewise one may succeed in producing the effect which one is trying to produce through the production of such and such an atmosphere, or one may not succeed in doing so; or one may succeed in doing so only more or less.

How exactly does one produce an atmosphere in a social setting which one would like to produce? Thus, for example, suppose we wish to establish an institute of research into non-violent methods of action, and in view of this would like this institute itself to embody an atmosphere of non-violence. How exactly do we enable this institute to come to have this kind of atmosphere? There can be no denying the fact, I think, that what the people who are there in that institute say or think or do is of vital importance for the purpose. People there all the time, being all too willing to sit together and to try to understand and appreciate what they are saying and to try to settle their differences, if any, through a mutual exchange

of views, and to respect each other even if the differences are not settled, all this can do so very much in determining the non-violent atmosphere of the place. But besides there being some such determinant that I may call the spiritual or intellectual determinant of the desired atmosphere, there would also seem to be what I may call the physical determinant. Thus the design of the building in which the institute is located, the use of nature in the form of trees and plants and flowers and water and even animals as a part of the physical establishment of the institute and the lay out of various things do not seem to be of inconsiderable importance for the purpose. Is it not in this sense that some old places of worship, even in the absence of any actual use, are said to have an atmosphere of serenity?

## 6

What exactly do I mean by a social setting, like a body of people, large or small, discussing whether the authorities in a state may not perform anti-social actions as much as, if indeed not more than, anybody else or whether there should be sex education for children at a certain age? Let me mention one or two other examples of a social setting, namely lovers in a rather secluded place suddenly finding themselves surrounded by a band of hoodlums bent upon mischiefmaking, or a person or group of persons obstructing another person or group of persons from indulging, say, in some act of destruction.

A social setting, in the sense in which I understand that term, is, in the first place, the name of some particular or concrete situation or circumstance or state of affairs. And, in the second place, it is the name of that particular or concrete situation or circumstance or state of affairs in which two or more persons, directly or indirectly, are in some way engaged or occupied in relation to one another. One may designate a social setting as a social situation also. And one may define a situation in general, and not merely a social situation, as a concatenation of facts or events, as two or more facts or events in some way related with one another. A situation or concatenation of facts or events may be fortunate or unfortunate, dangerous or not dangerous, difficult or not difficult, having far reaching consequences or not having far reaching consequences, rewarding or not rewarding, harmless or not harmless, confidence-giving or not confidence-giving, heartening or disheartening, encouraging or discouraging and so on.

Does every social setting have an atmosphere as one of its ingredients? That is, does every situation in which two or more persons, directly or indirectly, are in some way engaged or occupied in relation to one another, offer a general feel or a general emotive experience of itself? There can be little doubt that there are some social settings which have an atmosphere which is quite unmistakable. People are engrossed in some serious discussion, and then the place acquires a remarkably solemn atmosphere. The chief of an establishment is busy harassing people working with or under him, and then the place acquires an atmosphere of torment and suffocation and sometimes even of grumbling and protest. People work together having respect for and faith in one another, and then the place acquires an atmosphere of frankness and affability. And so on. But what about the following social settings? People are travelling together in some way, and then, in order simply to while away their time, they start chatting with one another. People meet or join at a somewhat formal or ceremonial party and they move among themselves enquiring who they are and where they work and how they feel where they work, and they feast themselves and one another with what is available there. One would be hard put to saying what atmosphere, if any, these social settings have.

## 7

A social setting may have many ingredients. Essentially speaking, it has two or more persons who, directly or indirectly, are in some way engaged or occupied in relation to one another. But it may also have some other ingredients which are not essential to it but which are there, say, for the purpose of creating or accentuating an atmosphere in a social setting. Thus, for example, in order to be able to have a discussion in a relaxed atmosphere, one thinks it fit to meet in the midst of nature or in a place where one can feel oneself at ease, so that this social setting of discussion would have as its ingredients not merely human beings who have met to discuss but also the sky and the trees and the slabs of stone upon which they sit or recline. Or, in order to be able to rule in an atmosphere of fear for the ruled, one may think it fit to make oneself as secluded as possible, so that this social setting of rule through fear would have as its ingredients not only human beings who rule and who are ruled but also the various barriers which have been erected between them.

Atmosphere, when it is an ingredient of a social setting, is not like many of its other ingredients, an ingredient along with those other



ingredients. It is not like this that in a social setting there is this human being and that human being and this tree and this slab of stone and then alongside these some atmosphere. What kind of ingredient of a social setting in that case is atmosphere? I have defined atmosphere of a social setting as the general feel, the general emotive experience, which this setting offers of itself. That would mean that, in the first place, the atmosphere of a social setting is what this setting presents itself as, as a whole, and, in the second place, it is what this setting presents itself as, as a whole, in emotive terms. The atmosphere of a social setting is a kind of spiritual all-pervasive presence. As I have said before, it would seem, it manifests itself through the varied expressions of the people who are there in that setting, like their facial expressions, their words and their actions, and even through the various physical objects which may be there in that setting.

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