4. The Nature of Totality

4.1 Totality and the Individual

The conflict between totalist and pluralistic worldviews, which integrates transcendence and immanence, purity and impurity, truth and untruth, is not only determined by external causes. Indeed, its emergence, as well as the reason for its occasionally remarkable endurance, is, to a large extent, determined by the workings of the human mind. The tension between internal structures and experienced external reality is, in itself, consistently present, but with varying degrees in every individual, starting from childhood and often intensifying during adulthood. Bruce E. Wexler’s writings on neurobiological imperatives – and the dramatic impact they can have on the formation of ideology and of ideological thinking – were of great use in this regard.

One of the fundamental arguments Wexler makes, mirroring research in the field, is the fact that, on a psychological level, established cognitive structures tend to resist change. The adult brain experiences a lessening of the chemical mechanisms of neural growth and learning which are, otherwise, extremely active in childhood. This, in turn, suggests a diminished capacity of the adult mind to change the internal structures it has come to create over time. The formation of solid neurocognitive structures is, in essence, a time consuming process. For instance, this is exemplified by the role of play in human cognitive development, important due to its highly varied nature and “primarily cognitive and essentially social” activities:

Through hours and hours, weeks and weeks, and years and years of play extending into adulthood, if not throughout the life-span, and often involving repetition of the same or highly similar activities, society provides rules that affect development and that create lasting neurocognitive structures.

The milieu in which the development process takes place is influenced by various factors, such as the development of the frontal lobe, language, imitation and internalization. Crucially, Wexler points to a convergence in the description of such processes in various scientific approaches, and to “the conclusion that through these processes, what was first external and interpersonal becomes internal structure.” In this respect:

Adolescence and young adulthood are occupied with the dual tasks of integrating internal structures derived from multiple sources into a functionally coherent whole, and articulating a personal ideology that leads to a niche in the general social matrix that is consistent with the internal structures.

At the same time, even as adults are actively modifying their milieu through the creation of new structures, activities and organizations, they are doing so by expressing an

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247 Ibid., 135.
248 Ibid., 136.
249 Ibid., 136-137.

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inner world which has already been formed. Thus, altering the environment in accordance with established, internal structures rather accepting external reality becomes the norm. In effect, for the rest of an individual’s adult life, the environment is made to conform to structures which have already been established in increasingly inflexible inner world. Moreover, the effort to achieve a concordance between the internal world and the external world has an impact of human society as a whole, with superiors imposing their view on followers or dependents. In turn, this leads to individuals typically associating with other like-minded individuals in networks, an important factor, since it offers “mutual confirmation of perceptions and valuations of events that have been questioned by contradictory articulations from other sources.”

The internal structures select sensory input that is consistent with them, leading to “exaggerated sense of agreement between the internal and external worlds”, whilst also “limiting further alteration of brain structure by environmental input.” Thus, achieving concordance between internal and external worlds is pleasurable, whereas dissonance is unpleasant and a source of tension. Indeed, the fundamental phrase, forming the guiding line throughout Wexler’s work and the myriad of examples he provides in support, is the argument that “concordance between internal structure and external reality is a fundamental human neurobiological imperative.”

Due to the importance of this neurobiological imperative, it can be deduced that individuals who are more deeply committed than others to the principle of concordance, depending on the situation, may fight, kill or sacrifice in the name of an ultimate principle which defines their value hierarchy. Thus, the struggle between differences in religious, ideological or cultural attachments manifests itself as a way “to control the opportunity to create external structures that fit with their internal structures and to prevent others from filling their environments with structures and stimulation that conflict with their internal structures.”

This is connected to the particular psychological changes brought about by reaching adulthood, when established internal structures begin to gradually resist change. Individuals then become increasingly selective in associating themselves with similarly principled individuals, whereas contradictions of these principles are usually met with distress and hostility by their response mechanism, since the sensory input does not match their internal neurocognitive structures. They tend to resist any contradictions of their ideal, internal model of reality and the intrusion of foreign elements into their environment through several ways, ranging from denying the existence of the contradictions, exclusion, readjustment of the contradiction within the established mental model of reality, to violent responses which include the conquest, debasement or destruction of the symbols associated with the contradiction or, finally, eliminating the source of the contradiction. As Wexler argues:

With continued contact between foreign cultures, these mechanisms proved insufficient to manage the distress caused by undeniable differences in behavior and beliefs, and each culture made efforts to get members of the other to act in ways that were consistent with the roles and qualities assigned them by the belief systems of the perceivers. Not infrequently, these attempts were followed by efforts to eliminate the continuously offensive perception of difference through the seemingly