

## CRITICAL EVALUATION OF RAPOPORT'S PAPER

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**M**Y REACTION to Dr. Anatol Rapoport's paper is primarily one of deep sadness that a person of his talent can fall into such utter despair. His paper is a cry of anguish about the present state of the world. I, for one, share his feelings about the despicable war in Vietnam; and also I do not know any easy solution. He expresses his feelings passionately, and that is justifiable and laudable. However, he couches his despair in terms of a failure of general semantics, and from this I am obliged to dissent. Theoretical issues should be discussed in a mode of clear, calm reasoning, and here Rapoport has shown himself sadly deficient.

Rapoport's paper has many shortcomings, and it would take a reply of equal length to deal with them. I shall here take up only a few.

His paper includes many of the tired clichés of disillusionment. Some of his points are no more than the false negativisms by which disgruntled people attempt to justify their unhappy spirit. He claims that "political democracy" has created "pseudo-participation of populations": but it has also created some genuine participation. And does "political democracy" have any better alternative? Again, he says that "mass literacy" has not liberated populations but has "made them vulnerable to manipulation." Would he prefer "mass illiteracy"? Surely the tendency towards mass literacy is one to be approved.

As a second shortcoming, the paper exhibits a peculiar

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stereotyping of human beings. Rapoport apparently has considerable hostility to a type that he calls, "white middle class Americans." In that rank, he says, "the general semanticist most often finds himself." Those of us who are white cannot help being white, and most of us can hardly help being middle class. Does Rapoport have to be told that the members of the "white middle class" are individuals, and that there is great diversity, especially among those who can be called "general semanticists"? I would hazard the opinion that thinking for oneself is much more common among general semanticists than among the general run of the white middle class.

As a third shortcoming, the paper is full of a loose use of labels for theoretical or philosophical positions. In talking about "pragmatism," "logical positivism," etc., it is important to discriminate the positions carefully, but Rapoport throws the terms about like loaded epithets. There are important differences between the outlook of John Dewey and that of Korzybski.

**M**OST REVEALING is Rapoport's yearning for what he calls "ideology." This usually refers to an *a priori* doctrine, dogmatically held; and it does not fit into the framework of general semantics. The term *ideology* was discussed as follows by Professor Robert E. Lane, of Yale University, in the *American Sociological Review* for October 1966:

If we employ the term "ideology" to mean a comprehensive, passionately believed, self-activating view of society, usually organized as a social movement . . . it makes sense to think of a domain of knowledge distinguishable from a domain of ideology, despite the extent to which they may overlap. Since knowledge and ideology serve somewhat as functional equivalents in orienting a person toward the problems he must face and the policies he must select, the growth of the domain of knowledge causes it to impinge on the domain of ideology. (XXXI, 652.)

General semantics has its "theories," based on deliberate assumptions, but they are not frozen into an "ideology." Rapoport also makes scornful remarks about "the ideologues

of non-ideology," among whom, by implication, he classes the students of general semantics.

As a fourth shortcoming, Rapoport asks that the application of general semantics should provide direct solutions of the great problems of the day. The great problems should concern us deeply as responsible citizens, but general semantics, as a general theory, should not be expected to provide specific solutions. As human beings, we must restructure ourselves for making adequate evaluations, and our particular choices will depend upon our skill and judgment.

In the fifth place, the paper contains shocking distortions of general semantics. Take, for instance, the following sentence: "Along with the healthy skepticism toward abstraction, the general semanticist has acquired the myopic orientation of 'barefoot empiricism.'" Who would suppose from this that "consciousness of abstracting" is one of the most fundamental formulations of general semantics?

As for "barefoot empiricism," this would apply only to an incompetent student of general semantics. Of course science needs an empirical basis before generalizations can be made, but then the generalizations are necessary. Korzybski devoted several chapters of *Science and Sanity* to the importance of the theory of abstraction (pp. 371-451), and he stated forcefully (p. 483) that a principal aim of education is to develop the ability of passing to higher and higher abstractions. One wonders, in fact, whether Rapoport is talking about general semantics at all. Toward the end of his paper he says that our present troubles "cannot be resolved by traditional semantic analysis." This is very true, but general semantics cannot be equated with "traditional semantic analysis."

**I**N THE sixth place, Rapoport presents a tortured argument which supposedly proves the inadequacy of general semantics but which will not stand careful scrutiny. As this is his main point, it must be faced squarely. He claims that the large human conflicts, such as the Vietnam war, are no longer between human beings but are between systems or "super-organisms" that cannot be reached by human communication. He

then, by what is basically a rhetorical device, personifies such a super-organism. The United States becomes a *status belligerens* (a pseudo-Latinism) and in his last pages it even becomes "the beast." The system, he says, has receptors of its own and can act only according to the rules by which it has been programmed. But who, I should like to know, does the programming? Human beings are still in charge. Rapoport has come close to the silly fallacy that computers can "think" independently.

In dealing with such problems, general semantics draws upon the best findings of the social sciences. Sociologists have long known that when individuals gather into groups, special patterns of behavior develop. Gangs and mobs have their own dynamics and the literature about them is enormous. The role of a powerful establishment is constantly being explored by social scientists and they will give us guidance even for dealing with the *status belligerens*. Students of general semantics, as "generalists," will look to the expertise of the sociologists for advice on controlling "the beast"; and Rapoport's melodramatic personifications are not likely to prove helpful.

In dealing with the super-organism, there is another solution, another way out, that Rapoport does not consider. This is the right of revolution. I regret that I may appear subversive, but I do believe that in an extremity, when conventional means have failed, beyond so-called law and order, we have a right to activist rebellion. That is a very unhappy situation, as I well know from the disorders at Columbia University in the spring of 1968; but still human beings can undermine entrenched authority. The super-organism, even the "military-industrial complex," would have to give way before the onslaught of an enlightened populace that has become aroused. Forward to the barricades!

I HAVE LEFT to the end a matter from which we may gain a constructive lesson out of Rapoport's paper. It is important that every student of Korzybski's work should continually examine and re-examine himself about his attitude towards

general semantics. When Rapoport speaks of the "eternal verities" of general semantics, he exhibits an attitude wholly out of harmony with the discipline. Worse still, he speaks of the time when he "embraced the cause of general semantics." General semantics is not a "cause" but a discipline drawing upon the best scientific method for the deep restructuring of human beings to make optimal use of their potentialities.

It would appear that Rapoport adopted general semantics as a shallow verbal veneer. Apparently it never got deeply



into his nervous system, and he has sloughed it off readily when he came face to face with a serious social issue. He reveals an inadequate grasp of a deeply embedded general semantics. Thereby he challenges us to redouble our efforts to show that he is wrong in discarding general semantics. We reject his posture of despair. On his first page he asks the question, "To what extent is general semantics relevant to the problems and dilemmas of our day?" Our own answer is a resounding affirmation of relevance.