

HEARING TORTURED NATURE: PROBLEMS OF KNOWLEDGE, POWER AND TRUST IN A WORLD OF FEAR¹

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James M. Glass, *Delusions: Internal Dimensions of Political Life*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Political theorists talk a fair amount about risk-taking and courage. On occasions, one or the other of us actually shows some. In search of a theory of human nature to ground a theory of political association, Jim Glass spent six years paying attention to paranoid schizophrenic patients in a Baltimore hospital and respecting the work of therapists and staff who have responsibility for treating them. Both of these activities involve a remarkable combination of audacity and self-restraint, because they leave behind the security of mastered languages, but preclude sovereign imposition of new terms of discourse. Glass has now written a report and a reflection on what he learned, painstakingly trying to make us listen too, eschewing self-dramatizing brilliance in the commentary, and fighting our inclination to strike poses with regard to such themes. The challenges posed by his materials, his plainness, his thoroughly unromantic openness, and his passion for humane order make the book an important experience.

Inevitably, a review of the book by a political theorist will come down to a critique of Glass's reflections, his claims about the bearings of his work on the enterprise of political theorists engaged in non-antiquarian encounters with such writers as Hobbes and Rousseau. But it is no disparagement of the ingenuity and suggestiveness of these ideas to say that our exchanges with Glass about this aspect of his book are by no means the most important rewards of reading it. Glass provides a model for the move beyond collective solipsism which theorists must always relearn, a study of the sometimes agonizing human work of ordering as a context for elaborating and testing theories of order, and an example. Above all, he shows us

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the importance and difficulty of learning very hard things, the heroic delicacy it requires.

For most of the book, Glass presents himself quite unabashed as a learner. He has been allowed to observe in the hospital and to interview patients willing to spend time with him. He never doubts that the primary work going on in the hospital is between patients and professionals, and he does not presume to criticize the knowledge which informs the participants any more than he dares to question the reality of the sufferings of the one or the authenticity of the therapeutic undertakings of the other. In this book, we are as far removed from fantasies of dementia as human emancipation as we are from facile exposés of mental health as oppressive ideology. Glass is trying to follow after what is going on, softening the models which form his prior expectations about the knowable in order to encompass as much of the new information as possible, before turning to look at the thus distended and reshaped furniture of his own mind.

A schematic account must misrepresent this learning process, but the book itself also embodies compromises. Glass classifies, analyzes, diagrams, abstracts, and evaluates, relying on frameworks which his materials sometimes call into question. But these compromises simply reflect the need to relate findings as clearly as possible to the "consensually valid reality," which represents perhaps the most problematic compromise of all, but which Glass rightly offers as an indispensable baseline for understanding, critique, and reconstruction. In its operations as in its conclusions, Glass's study revolves around the possibilities of mutual trust across boundaries of self-identity. The mutual isolation of self-enclosed and fatally impoverished worlds can only be overcome through modes of relationship which involve a deeply paradoxical double movement of self-denial and self-assertion, a movement which brings something new. Glass finds words for this healing — for sick patients, for corrupted societies, for political theory — in Rousseau's talk of social contract and general will.

He aims at nothing less than helping to broker the inclusion of both the sick and their attendants into the corporation of prime concern to political theorists; and this requires an interpretative appropriation of the isolated languages which constitute their diverse knowledges. It is important to emphasize once again that Glass does not offer himself as a revolutionary critic of the knowledge/power that makes for hospitalization and therapy, at least insofar as it listens and speaks. Earning the three-page laudatory Foreword by the senior psychiatrist and director of residency training at the hospital where Glass observed, is as integral to his design as the confidence of the psychotic and post-psychotic patients who tried to tell him what they knew. Otherwise, the attempt to enrich and transform our consensus on the real by paying attention to the work of therapists would be self-contradictory. But the trust which must be extended is

meant to be a relationship which leaves none of the trusters unchanged, if only because more is now consensually recognized as real and as really interrelated, and such recognitions alter boundaries. The general will is no mere summation of particular wills. Nor can it be a uniform mechanical solidarity homogeneous in its demands and effects, if it is to achieve the kind of collaborative reconciliation in differences and autonomous actions which is intended. And there is no dialectical logic which privileges the theorist to lay down the terms of a transcendent synthesis.

By deferring to "consensually validated reality" in his own discourse, accordingly, Glass also hopes to transform the consensus which exists, without presuming to dictate to it. As Sigurd Burckhardt once showed in an incomparable set of essays on Shakespeare,² this mystery is enacted by every poem. Shakespeare's plays of madmen, lovers and kings anticipate much of the matter and design of Glass's encounter with delusions. As working political theorists, however, we are bound to consider very carefully whether Glass's adaptations of Rousseau's contract provide a figure we can actively use, precisely because of the earnestness and mundaneness of its ironies, in contrast to Shakespeare's magisterial and ultimately magical weddings, where we can only be astonished spectators. Glass presumes that our present consensus is too narrowly entrapped within a design he identifies with one of Shakespeare's greatest rivals as master of our language, Thomas Hobbes. He thinks that he can show that all the knowledge and power achievable within the world which Hobbes built cannot engineer a way around the terror-stricken flight from death to self-destruction, and he hopes that he can show it to that world.

Glass begins with hospitalized patients diagnosed as suffering from the paranoid form of schizophrenia, a mental disorder distinguished above all by the delusions which dominate the cognitive and emotional life of the sufferers, and under whose sway they tend to be unable to perform material life-preserving tasks (including the instrumental use of language) or to secure the most elemental emotional sustenance from interactions with others. The ego is experienced as disrupted or forcibly diminished by alien forces, predominantly hostile in intent; and the desperate encounter with these forces absorbs virtually all energies. Notwithstanding intermittent themes of triumphant elation, the vital principle of schizophrenic delusion is fear. Unlike schizophrenics suffering from hebephrenic, catatonic or autistic forms of the disorder, however, paranoid schizophrenics express themselves in coherent language; and they may be treated, as in the hospital where almost all of this work was done, by means of various "talk"-therapies. Glass can thus build on protocols of interviews carried on over an extended period with a small number of such patients, as well as on excerpts from hospital documents prepared by therapists, nurses, and other staff.

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What Glass is trying to learn from the patients is the structure of the "state of nature," the world as known by an ego under ultimate threat and without support from others or from what others have made and done. Since the contents of the patients' messages are full of desperate responses to the states they experience as well as the most bizarre symbolizations of what they find, the interpreter must decode as well as listen. There is no "natural language" to convey primal inner truths directly, and if there were, we would have no ear for it. Nevertheless, Glass maintains that delusions comprise integral structures of knowledge each of which systematizes an inner discourse, constitutes an identity, and orients a pattern of expressive actions (including speeches and silences). To comprehend these structures, he draws on hermeneutic guidelines from the psychoanalytical literature on psychosis, before attempting to correlate the findings with models derived from the literature of political theory. The detail of this work and its substantiation at the instance of protocol texts make up the powerful bulk of the book and cannot be effectively conveyed in brief, especially since an outline of the former by itself might sound doctrinaire or arbitrary. A review cannot do much more than to point at the experience of the work and to comment briefly on it, from the reviewer's point of view.

Constitutive of the inner realities which these psychotics know is a characteristic polarization between states of utmost victimization and the most absolute powers, both simultaneously centered in the subjects of the delusion. They are the most abject and terrified victims and also the most sovereign controllers of events. The inner terror and the inner tyranny coexist and are interdependent in this reality, as in the tyrannical stage in the decline of Plato's *Republic*. Glass emphasizes the extent to which these intricate, all-absorbing designs provide a life-form which shelters the ego from total extinction; but he also insists that the work which produces and elaborates them cannot be itself redemptive. It is the most perfectly alienated labor, in Marx's sense, producing a reality whose domination crushes the producer. Yet to deal with these patients without recognizing that what they are saying makes sense in this reality, to assault their delusions by denouncing them as mere illusions, is to deny them the desperate orders they have constructed and the identities they are furiously salvaging. To the extent that such critiques can be apprehended at all by those they are supposed to enlighten, they cast the patients into total all-destroying chaos.

Glass sees such a destructive course prefigured in Hobbes' radical disjunction between rationally authorized discourse and all other speech, which is likened to hallucinatory spooks and spectres and traced to a madness which can be overridden but not cured. Corresponding to this methodological fallacy in Hobbes, according to Glass, and similarly grounded in a rationalist absolutism which is not without its own traces of

delusion, is the supposition that the state of nature which Hobbes delineates can ever give rise to the reciprocity requisite to social combination. The human qualities are too defective; the postulated capacity for calculation cannot enable individuals to break through their terrified self-absorption. In a stunning chapter, Glass offers the story of Jenny's "delusional habitat" as an inner view of the state of nature according to Hobbes. Jenny knows the world to be just such a place as Hobbes described, with all action driven by the dual logics of despair and domination. Far from seeing human reciprocity as a necessary way out, she is driven and bound to this horrible place by her greater terror of empathy. A reality resembling Hobbes' state of nature is the result of a catastrophic regression from human capabilities. A world in which sociality were possible would not look like this. In Jenny's world, the only logical law of nature is to seek death, and that is the vision enlivening her imagination and the goal informing her calculating cunning. Hobbes' world turns his own maxims upside down.

Glass epitomizes his repeated explorations of the possibilities for therapy in a chapter which is the counterpoise to the story of Jenny, an account of his interviews with Frank, a post-psychotic inhabitant of a "transition house." Tracing the stages of Frank's decline into schizophrenia and the successive modes of knowledge which mediated his return to consensual reality, Glass first marks the privatization of language and the regression from sociality — an extraordinary account of a literal return to isolation in the woods — and then the corresponding reopening to possibilities of dialogue and empathic understanding. The take-off to recovery depended on a largely unexplained prior shift into a life-form like the state of nature projected in Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, a reawakening of the compassion which Rousseau ascribes to pre-socialized man. Glass has been pointing towards such a shift in his earlier discussions of therapy, and he has explained its possibility through the mediation of a gradually built-up therapeutic consensus, but in Frank's story the therapist does not appear. Frank reports that he brought himself to the point where he could cautiously and conditionally reorient himself to the "psychological contract" underlying communications and consensually valid reality. The story moves, according to Glass, from nature towards community. But the move is not complete. Glass finds that Frank, as well as other post-psychotic patients, cannot satisfy their yearnings for empathic understanding in the reality they encounter upon their return from delusion. They have at most a cool and wary trust. Like Rousseau himself, they find themselves as "solitary sojourners" able to function and communicate in noncommittal ways but unable to be fulfilled in the consensus.

Although he suggests that such individuals may have been originally marked out for psychosis by a special sensitivity to Hobbesian derangements in consensually valid reality,³ Glass does not make the blunder of casting

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them in the role of judges, prophets or saviors. They signal the defects in the "contract" on offer in our society in a language which should be able to move us if we have opened ourselves to their stories and expanded our understanding to encompass the integrity of the schizophrenic experience and the continuities between their struggles and our own. For Glass, this expanded language is the responsibility of the political theorist. The psychotherapist works to reconnect the symbols constituting delusional realities with the tortured web of emotions of which they are the projection, in order to entice the patient into collaboration on a most interesting task, thereby providing a resocializing experience. Glass would similarly have political theorists confront our consensus with the truths hidden behind the general phenomenon of psychosis and its treatment, to come into contact with the comparable snarls and deprivations in our collective emotional lives and ultimately to a more humane and complete general will, a broader reality and a deeper trust.

Glass has earned an attentive hearing and some reflective silence. Instead of abstract disputes about the suitability of the parallel between therapist and theorist or the methodological choices between theories of human nature and different theoretical configurations as the basis of political theory, the subsequent steps towards critical dialogue should perhaps consist of comparably concrete inquiries into different dimensions of human ordering activities. Perhaps a choice between Hobbes and Rousseau is too restrictive. Perhaps there is still something to be learned from Montesquieu and Schiller as well. But for the moment, the most important thing is that Glass has given us vital lessons in talking about something we dare not forget.

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Notes

1. For John Bingham and Tony Cohn.
2. Sigurd Burckhardt, *Shakespearean Meanings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).
3. Glass' eagerness to make this point occasions the only serious case of forced interpretation encountered in the text. Quoting a scholarly paper written by Frank in the early phase of his move towards delusion, he misunderstands the following sentence as a denunciation of possessive individualism: "It has been noticed by many people that the rigid grammar of Indoeuropean languages has grown up with a world view, and corresponds to the idea that the world is made up of *property laden things which act*" (p. 193). As his next sentence, citing Plato as a "spectacular case of someone discovering a noun" makes clear, Frank was quite in command of a coherent argument about the primacy of the substantive in the languages he was considering and far from an attack on subjectivism.