A History of Behaviorists for Social Action

This chronicle records the events that led to the formation of Behaviorists for Social Action (BFSA). Its purpose is to give a factual account of our origins — from these beginnings, our efforts will determine the future of BFSA.

Even though BFSA was recently established, an accurate description of its beginnings must go back a few years. This narrative will start at the MABA convention in 1976 and will bring us to date, closing with plans for MABA 1978.

MABA 1976

For this convention, three graduate students at Western Michigan University organized a symposium entitled "Radical Political Behaviorism." They explained the title in the following way: "Radical" meant that the group was in favor of planning, "political" indicated an emphasis on systems that govern people, and "behaviorism" represented a Skinnerian approach.

Each of these students presented a paper at the symposium, each dealing with an analysis of the contingencies which control systems of production. Harry Kent began with an analysis of the contingencies operating in the U.S. economic system, a profit maximization system. Marie Greening proposed an alternative system based upon a Skinnerian science of ethics. To illustrate her point, she described a working model of the proposed system on a micro-economic scale (a food co-operative). Elizabeth de la Ossa spoke of the U.S. economic system as it has affected Third World countries, and explained some current oppressive applications of behavior analysis in these countries. The presentations were not merely a translation into behavioral jargon of traditional radical views and economic issues. Rather, they attempted to identify the immediate extrinsic consequences, the reinforcements and punishments, controlling owner and worker, rich and poor.

The discussants were Drs. Richard Malott and James Holland; both were generally supportive, in somewhat different directions. Malott, of W.M.U., opened the discussion with constructive comments which directly addressed radical behaviorism. Holland, of the U. of Pittsburgh, provided an elaboration, including specific examples, of issues raised in the presentations. His talk clearly illustrated some of the strategies used by those who control reinforcement to maintain and increase their control.

The audience was an important part of the symposium. It was the best attended invited symposium at MABA 1976, drawing approximately sixty-five people. The topics covered generated active participation, and the chairperson, Anne Friedman, led the audience in a lively discussion. Toward the end of the symposium, a major concern was to determine where to go from this point. Another meeting, to be held in 1977, was suggested by Dr. Malott, and approved by those present. Several people then began to organize a mailing list, gathering names and addresses from those in attendance. Thus began the exchange of information which has led toward a unified effort of behaviorists interested in broadening their analysis to include economic, political, and social phenomena.

Meanwhile, out West, a group of "Marxist operant conditioners", composed of professors and students, had been organizing for several years, mainly at California State University at Sacramento.

The initial discussions and activities of the present Sacramento group had begun in 1970. These discussions were followed by Joe Morrow's paper on "Designing Cooperative Behavior Among Nation States" presented at the World Affairs Institute in Washington in 1971, and a year later at the WPA his paper "Operant Theory and the Question of Class, State and Transition." Helene Burgess, analyzing the substance of the then current "counter-culture" movement in the U.S. criticized the essentially reformist character of that movement in her 1971 WPA paper (with Ken Lloyd) "Experimental Communities: A Problem in Maintenance," and shortly thereafter at the World Order Workshop in Oregon drove home the distinction between reform and real political change from a radical political and behavioral perspective in her paper "Radical System Change versus Incremental Reform." Bob Jensen, meanwhile, had analyzed the profession of clinical psychology from a political and behavioral outlook and presented the results of that analysis at the 1st (and only) Radical Psychiatry Conference in Berkeley in 1972.

In September of 1973 Helene and Bob joined Joe at California State University, Sacramento, and following three years of on-campus and off-campus political activities and continuing discussions of the relationship between operant behavioral theory and radical political theory came to the idea that there must be others in the United States who had developed similar thinking. Thus, Bob Jensen drafted the initial letter for the Sacramento group which was sent to Jim Holland, Fred Skinner, Frank Epling, Fred Marcuse, and others.

This letter explained their objectives of doing a behavioral analysis of Marxism-Leninism and bringing Marxism-Leninism to behavioral psychologists, and expressed the hope that these goals were also of interest to him and to others he might know. Holland's reply was one of the more positive, and he included names of behaviorists who might be likely to join a group in working toward fundamental social change.

As a result of Holland's information, regular communications between the CSUS contingent and the community at Western began. These letters reflected the real pleasure found in recognizing mutual goals, and soon, definite plans were arranged for a meeting.

Thus, representatives from the West and the Midwest met at MABA 1977, joining those who had returned for the proposed meeting of Radical Political Behaviorists. Thirty-two people from all over the country appeared at this meeting. In fact, it was somewhat of an historic event, with Leonard Krasner attending as an historian — as he noted — and not as a Marxist.

MABA 1977

The purpose of the meeting, as listed in the MABA program, was to continue the behavioral analysis of U.S. political economy, to set assignments for the following convention, and to discuss ways by which interested people could communicate during the year about their work. The three-hour meeting, however, revolved around the discussion of the objectives, potential activities, and internal organization of the group.

The Western contingent presented for discussion a statement of goals and activities. The goal they proposed was to promote socialism by two different means: 1) through a
theoretical integration of the science of individual behavior and the science that studies the behavior of people in an economic class (i.e., political economy, based on the writings of Marx and Lenin in particular) and, 2) by organizing functions supportive and consistent with that analysis. Some of the principles of a Marxist-Leninist analysis were stated, as well as a list of theoretical and practical tasks appropriate to the proposed objective. Suggestions and criticisms of the proposal were solicited.

By the end of the meeting, an organization called Radical Political Behaviorists emerged from the debate concerning fundamental issues. Some of the people solidly supported the objectives of the proposal; others embraced the behavioral interests of the group, yet were not fully knowledgeable or committed to a Marxist approach. In order to properly represent everyone's interests, both a member and an affiliate status were formed. There were nine members and twenty-two affiliates of the thirty-two present at the end. A steering committee of seven elected members was approved.

The newly formed group then embraced two tasks - the publication of a quarterly newsletter, and the preparation of a symposium for MABA 1978. The CSUS group offered their resources to coordinate the newsletter, while the Western Michigan group volunteered to arrange the MABA presentation. Members and affiliates would empower the work force to accomplish these tasks.

A few months after MABA, in August, 1977, five steering committee members met in Sacramento, along with several members. They spent a week studying issues of concern to the organization. It became clear that RPB could be more likely to be more successful in working for social change and in organizing other socially oriented behaviorists, if it would initiate a broader-based organization. This organization would include people committed to a scientific analysis of behavior, and committed to the use of this science to help the majority of people and to prevent oppression and injustice, regardless of their specific political approach. From this idea came the decision to contact other behaviorists to find out if they would be interested in working together for progressive social action. Since different approaches to progressive social change would be represented, a democratic, open-membership structure was suggested in order to facilitate functioning.

The workers who met in Sacramento drafted and distributed a letter describing the purpose of such an organization. The recipients were asked to be founding members of Behaviorists for Social Action. Sixty letters were sent, and forty-nine were returned. Two expressed their support for the ideals of the organization, but did not join; three requested subscriptions to the newsletter, but declined membership; forty-four became members. They signed a widely distributed letter which solicited additional membership and which described the main goal of the organization - to encourage theoretical behavior analysis and practical action related to solving pressing social problems.

This recruitment letter has generated considerable support. Recipients' responses to the letter have yielded to date (Jan. 1978) 130 memberships and nine subscription-only non-members. The Behavioral Newsletter willingly reproduced the whole text last December. BFSA is now an international organization whose membership includes students and professionals from the applied, experimental, and theoretical areas of behavior analysis.

The first official meeting of BFSA is scheduled for MABA 1978, our organization being among the Special Interest Groups within MABA. The purpose of this meeting is to determine by membership vote the structure and specific objectives of BFSA. Position papers regarding structure and objectives are called for. They will be published in this newsletter prior to our first meeting in May so that all members can offer proposals and review incoming ideas.

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