

KAZIMIERZ DABROWSKI'S THEORY OF POSITIVE
DISINTEGRATION AND THE AMERICAN
HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

(T.E. Weckowicz)

IT MAY WELL be that the reasons underlying the lack of broad acceptance of the theory of positive disintegration by what Weckowicz calls the American Humanistic psychology are

related to profound philosophical dichotomies based on Dabrowski's European background and attitudes. It might be useful, however, to focus a bit more attention on several factors, far less esoteric than Lockean versus Leibnizian or Manichaeian versus Irenaean dichotomies, which might help explain the situation. These can be classified in thoroughly pragmatic and American terms such as availability, complexity, austerity, and applicability.

First, let us look at the question of availability. It is indeed difficult to become well-known in the circles of American psychology without active publication in mainstream or at least fairly well-distributed journals and without participation in at least some of the important meetings of academic and clinical psychologists. An examination of the Dabrowskian output, as revealed in the bibliography of one of his later publications (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977), shows a number of books published in the English language from 1964 to 1977, a large number of papers published in Polish over many years, but essentially no American publications by Dabrowski himself since a 1937 monograph. Though there certainly are notable exceptions, without the development of an audience through scholarly literature, books alone seldom create wide recognition.

Dabrowski did not choose to appear at many conferences in North America to help spread his ideas. He was over 60 when he became a visiting professor at the University of Alberta, but he was still in vigorous good health and traveled actively between Europe and North America for over a decade after that time. Some part of his reluctance may have been because he was not especially comfortable speaking in English before large groups. This is unfortunate because his speech, though heavily accented, was thoroughly charming.

A second factor that may have hindered acceptance of the theory is its complexity. One can state, using great oversimplification, the basics of Freud, or Kohlberg, or Piaget in several paragraphs; but it is not so simple to do so for Dabrowski. As a colleague said to me recently, "you just can't 'do' Dabrowski in 10 minutes in an introductory psychology class." And, as a consequence, he has been, in many instances, completely passed over. His name was not to be found in a quick scan of the indices of half a dozen recent basic texts. And, if he is studied in, for example, a graduate counseling seminar, the result may be extremely rewarding, but the route is through a sea of terminology: third factor, subject-object in oneself, inner dynamisms, autopsychotherapy, overexcitabilities, inner psychic milieu, levels, and hierarchies.

Another characteristic that surely influences the acceptance of the theory of positive disintegration is the perceived austerity of the ideal it projects. Descriptions of Level IV and Level V are sometimes so rarefied as to be incomprehensible to many of us. An illustration of this is the case of laughter (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). At Level III laughter "becomes less frequent and, most often, (is) replaced by smile" (p. 92); at Level IV "instead of laughter, there is a smile with very subtle traits, removed from laughter and actual laughing" (p. 94); and the Level V smile "is both existential and transcendental . . . full of awareness and compassion for human sorrow" (p. 95). I recall a somewhat heated conversation on this subject with Dr. Dabrowski a number of years ago. He spoke of the extreme rarity of Level V individuals but, yes, certainly, Christ was one of these and therefore, of course, no, he did not laugh. I suspect that most of us would not especially wish to strive for, or wish for our clients, or even consider as an ideal a level that paints the picture of a Christ who could never actually laugh out loud!

Yet another factor that may have hindered the acceptance of Dabrowskian theory is applicability. We may understand them imperfectly, we may apply them carelessly, but we at least feel able to put some of the ideas of a Rogers or a Maslow into practice, even in our daily lives, but it has perhaps been difficult to apply some of the concepts of positive disintegration to actual situations. Work published in the past several years with its intellectual roots in Dabrowski's theory may be spelling the end to this inapplicability. Piechowski (1986) described a number of empirical studies (published in several American journals) that are derivative, sometimes by several steps, of ideas from the theory of positive disintegration. Piechowski and his colleagues are developing measures of overexcitabilities that identify potentially gifted

individuals and then, as he says, "when gifted people, or their parents, are introduced to these concepts there is often an instant recognition and reaction of relief. It helps to find out that someone else studied and made sense of a manner of feeling and acting that is often at odds" (p. 191), with the rest of the world. Perhaps helping parents, teachers, and counselors to understand the gifted, and helping the gifted to understand themselves, will be one of the early applications of Dabrowski's theories that will in turn lead to its wider acceptance.



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