AVERTING WORLD WAR III: AN INTERVIEW WITH MORTON DEUTSCH

JANET ALLEN

Box 119, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, U.S.A.

Morton Deutsch holds the Edward Lee Thorndike Chair of Psychology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University where he is the coordinator of the Social and Organizational Psychology Program. He has long been involved in clinical work and in bringing psychology to bear on social and political issues. He has written widely on conflict resolution and he is currently completing a book on distributive justice.

Among the many honors bestowed on Professor Deutsch are the Sociopsychological prize of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Samuel Florman Memorial Award of the New York Society for Clinical Psychologists, and the Kurt Lewin Award as well as the Gordon Allport Prize of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues. He has served as president of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, the Division of Personality and Social Psychology of the American Psychological Association, the New York State Psychological Association, the Eastern Psychological Association, and the International Society of Political Psychology.

The following interview was conducted with Professor Deutsch in his office in New York City on 28 December 1983. In this interview he draws upon his clinical work and his research in intergroup relations, conflict resolution, and distributive justice to discuss dynamics which disturb relations between nations, dynamics which, on a global scale, threaten to lead to an ultimate conflict: nuclear war.

JA: Would you like to start by summarizing your views on the prevention of World War III, which I believe you presented in June in your presidential address to the International Society of Political Psychology?*

MD: Let me give you the background. Like most people, I'm quite upset about the current condition of the world and quite fearful that things may get out of hand and we may drift into a nuclear war which would, obviously, be devastating. I have been concerned with this issue for a long time.* It has impressed me increasingly that the situation has a kind of bizarre or insane quality. There is no rational purpose that either the Soviet Union or the United States has which can justify the excessive danger that their arms race is causing

to themselves, to the other side, and to the world at large. I think that the danger is the most important thing, but the vast amount of resources going into the arms race is also important. The expenditures of the United States and the Soviet Union that are being wasted in the arms race amount to something like over four hundred billion dollars a year. There is something out of proportion, something bizarre about this. It’s important to simply focus on that aspect, to recognize the craziness of what’s going on. I think that we tend to push aside that recognition.

One of the things I wanted to do was simply to make that a focus of my analysis. It seemed to me that the craziness is not a craziness of particular individuals or of leaders or of one side. It’s a craziness which emerges from the process between the two nations. I think that one of the important aspects of the approach I’ve taken, the recognition that the irrationality is not to be located in the individual or in the individual nation but to be located in the relations between the nations. Quite rational individuals can get themselves entrapped in a social process which leads them to engage in very irrational actions. The actions which are leading us toward a nuclear catastrophe are actions by rational individuals, but their actions are quite irrational when one takes a larger perspective. That’s the major emphasis.

What I’ve tried to do is to articulate the features of such an irrational process, essentially drawing on two major sources in my own background and work. I have had a dual career in a sense. I’ve been a researcher in social psychology and much of my research has focused on understanding conflict, understanding what turns a conflict in a constructive or destructive direction. That’s one major source for the kind of thinking that I’ve been involved with. The second source is my work as a clinician. I have a background of training in psychoanalytic work. I’ve done psychotherapy and have worked with married couples, so I have an experience of working with people who have disturbed relations, even though sometimes the individuals themselves are not as irrational as their relations. They are, maybe, perfectly rational outside of their particular relationship but, within the given relationship, they may act in a very self-destructive, mutually destructive way. Both these strands have led to my approach of trying to characterize the social process which is pathological, which leads perfectly rational people into insane actions, to put it more dramatically.

In my research, I did a good deal of experimentation with the “Prisoner’s Dilemma” game which is a very good model of situations which tend to have an entrapping quality.

JA: Could you perhaps explain how the “Prisoner’s Dilemma” works?

MD: Well, a mathematician, Tucker, invented the game. He characterized it first as a situation in which a district attorney had two suspects for a crime. He knew that both suspects probably had been involved, and he wanted to get a confession out of them. He put them in separate cells and gave each of them the following offer:

If you confess and the other person doesn’t, you’ll get off with a very light sentence and the other person will get the book thrown at him. If you both

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confess, you will both get somewhat heavy sentences. Of course, if neither one of you confesses, then it will be hard for me to prove my case. You have to realize that I’m going to make the same offer to the other person. I’m going to tell him that, if he confesses and you don’t, he’s going to get off practically scot free and you’re going to get the book thrown at you.

Well, it’s a situation which leads participants to be suspicious of one another and leads them, typically, to engage in behavior which is self-defeating. They both confess and they both lose where they could have kept silent and might both have gained.

That’s an analogue for an arms race. If you disarm and I arm, in a sense I’m much better off and you’re much worse off. If we both arm, we’re both badly off, but not as badly as when one is disarmed and the other armed. If we both disarm, we both would be better off. But, since I have the temptation to arm if you’re disarmed, I may well choose to exploit your disarming. You, realizing that I may choose to exploit your disarming, may be fearful of disarming and fearful of coming to any agreement. You can only come to an agreement when there is some basis for mutual trust.

This “Prisoner’s Dilemma” is a very interesting situation. In a sense it provides a basis for contradicting one of the oldest theories of social organization, that if people tend to follow their own rational self-interest, social well-being will be maximized. Here it is clear that, while it may be in my best interest to arm when you disarm, if I follow that line and you also follow that line, we’ll both end up in a situation where we are both armed and we’re worse off than we could be if we both disarmed. Early in my research career I did a lot of work with that situation. It became clear to me that, when interdependent people are in a situation when security is at stake they will get trapped into pursuing their own interest, either because they are trying to exploit the other or because they are afraid they are going to be exploited. They do it out of either fear or greed. That process tends to be mutually destructive because the other will also do it in response to your actions of fear or greed. This will occur unless they have a basis for developing some social order, some mutual trust, either as a result of their relations to one another or of their being involved in the community or in a superstructure where there are other parties whom they can trust, even if they can’t trust one another. The only way out is to try to change the nature of the situation so that mutual values become emphasized, so that your security as well as my security becomes of value for both of us. That’s a crucial element in the international situation. There is no international society which provides a framework for mutual trust, even when the relations between the two parties are not amiable. There could be trust because of this larger framework. There are no sufficiently strong third parties who could provide that basis in the relations between the superpowers. It’s a difficult situation. I think that the only way out is through recognition that the self-centered pursuit of one’s own security without the security of the other is inherently self-defeating.

There are many things at the international level that could be done. Lately, some people in the Senate, Sam Nunn and others, have recognized that there really ought to be collaborative efforts between the militaries of the United States
and the Soviet Union to reduce the possibility of accidental nuclear war. There are many things that exist in the systems of the United States and the Soviet Union which are quite vulnerable to the possibility of accident. When I say "quite", I don’t mean that the odds are high but, given the dangers, the odds are much too high. Given the fact that we have to live with this for an extended period of time, even a small possibility is much too great a risk. There are many things that could be done to reduce the risks through mutual collaborative efforts.

This gets to my next point. To some extent, the basic problem is that the definition of the relationships between the two parties has been a zero-sum competitive relationship where the interests of the superpowers are such that they’re completely antagonistic to one another. That promotes a variety of competitive processes.

JA: Can you say more about that? That’s not entirely clear to me.

MD: If I see that if you gain anything, I will lose and if I gain, you will lose, then I’m oriented toward increasing my gains or increasing your losses. That orientation produces quite a number of consequences, in terms of attitudes, perceptions, and communication. Over the years, I’ve done a lot of research in this area of the effects of cooperation and competition upon social interaction. What I do in the paper that you mentioned is to bring to bear some of the results of that research.

JA: Can you summarize some of that research which you have brought to bear on this topic?

MD: Well, the effect of a competitive win–lose orientation is to interfere with communication. It tends either to abort communication or to produce misleading communication where you try to intimidate the other rather than giving full, accurate information. As a result of either aborting communication or misleading communication, you resort to indirect methods, "espionage", to get your information. The consequences are that there is often very poor information about what the other is like. For example, I think that both the United States and the Soviet Union tend to communicate through "moves". The United States is building the MX Missile quite openly despite the fact that it doesn’t have any clear military value. The Scowcroft Commission, in effect, indicated that the MX probably has negative military value. At best, they’re sitting ducks, and they are potential first-strike weapons, which increases insecurity. It’s not being built because of its military value, but because it’s meant to send a message. It’s meant to communicate "to resolve" to the Soviet Union. It’s meant to say to the Soviet Union, “Unless you cut back on your big land-based missiles, we’ll build our big land-based missiles.” Communicating by "moves" like this is a very poor form of communication because the other may not have the same framework of assumptions. The other may perceive your move in a quite different way than you perceive it, particularly within a competitive context.

The general tendency of competition is to reduce or interfere with communication, and this tends to lead to communication by moves, a very poor and dangerous communication process.

JA: What effect does that distortion of communication have, do you think?

MD: Because of the breakdown in communication, there is little ability to really notice and to understand changes in the other. There is a kind of autistic hostility that is maintained. Because one no longer has much direct contact with the reality of the other, one’s attitudes are maintained by one’s images rather than by the experience of the other. That’s characteristic in many of these processes.

I would not want to say that the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union is one of autistic hostility only. I think that both sides give one another plenty of basis for believing that the other is truly hostile and is out to do them in. That’s the characteristic of a competitive interaction. It stimulates the view that conflict can only be solved by one side defeating the other. That leads to entrenchment of one’s own power and reduction of the other person’s power as the major objectives. And so the conflict now starts to shift from the particular issues which may have originated it to a conflict over power, over who’s going to be able to dominate whom. The process that results then, as I said, gives each side plenty of reason to believe the other is trying to be hostile. If I’m trying to reduce your power or enhance my power in relation to you, I’m going to appear to you as rather hostile. Both sides in a competitive conflict do that and that’s what both the United States and the Soviet Union have been doing in relation to one another — they’ve been trying to gain advantages.

JA: And this is a kind of self-fulfilling prophesy?

MD: Right.

JA: I would be interested in your saying more about the importance of a third party. You said that you do marital therapy and there is a third party there. You mentioned earlier the importance of a third party in resolving conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States, and you noted the relative absence of a strong third party in those conflicts.

MD: I think that a third party can often be very helpful. Alternatively, the existence of a community within which conflict takes place can serve to moderate conflict, to keep it within boundaries and to develop fair rules for regulating conflict. The lack of such a third party makes it more difficult. There is a certain arrogance about both the United States and the Soviet Union with regard to taking advice from others. So, as I said, one of the unfortunate aspects of our reality is that the third world, so to speak, has not been a really constructive third party that could help to develop more rational relations between these two out-
of-control superpowers. The third world has been caught up in the conflict between the superpowers and has been seduced one way or the other. The lack of a third power is a serious handicap. It means that people within each superpower or within each block of nations have to be very active in trying to bring about internal change, helping each side to see the nature of the process that's governing the relationship between the superpowers.

JA: Do you have any ideas about who or what might constitute an appropriate third party?

MD: In the international sphere?

JA: Yes.

MD: All of the Nobel Prize winners, or the leading statesmen of some of the relatively neutral nations. It's quite a difficult thing. At one time, the United Nations might have played that role but it has lost credibility because of the way very minor partisan political interests have tended to dominate both the United Nations General Assembly and the Security Council. The Secretary General's office has not grown sufficiently powerful to function that way. I am not very clear as to the likelihood that we will have any strong third parties. I have thought that Western Europe could, in fact, play a more active role as a third party, but it would have to become stronger itself. It would have to become stronger from a military point of view and, also, it needs to be less dependent upon the United States. So long as it is in the position of being a military satellite of the United States, it is not in a position to play an independent role.

JA: You were talking a minute ago about communication and how the United States and the Soviet Union now communicate via "moves", and you used the MX Missile as an example. Can you comment further on the role of interpretation and misinterpretation in all of this communication?

MD: Well, I think misinterpretation and misunderstanding play a role, but I would not stress that so much. In a sense, the correct perception of the other is still basically a misinterpretation. The fact that the United States and the Soviet Union correctly perceive one another as to do one another in is, at a deeper level, a false interpretation in the sense that there is lack of understanding that those correct interpretations are derivatives of self-fulfilling prophecies. What is needed is to go beyond the level of what the actual relationship is to examine how it is that the relationship takes this form. What's keeping it at the level of the mutual hostility that is correctly perceived? I would say that is probably one of the more important and special emphases in my approach. I don't think that one would make a lot of headway trying to convince people, either in the United States or in the Soviet Union, that the other side has not taken actions which are detrimental to their interests, has not shown hostility, has not expressed things that justify the belief that the other is hostile. That's not the issue. The issue is what creates that kind of relationship. For example, a husband and wife who are in a very difficult, troubled relationship are both right to think that the other is injurious to them and is acting in a difficult, hostile, belligerent, provocative manner. They are both right; that's what's actually happening. The question is understanding the nature of the process which is leading them both to engage in this kind of behavior, taking a problem-solving attitude rather than a blaming attitude toward that kind of behavior. It is important to recognize that, yes, one of the problems in the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union is that they're hostile toward one another, that they're engaging in behavior that is difficult, troublesome, provocative — both of them. The Soviet Press and the American Press, the Soviet leaders and the American leaders, really say terrible things about one another. It's a reality, not an illusion. So I wouldn't emphasize misperception so much as some people do. I do, however, believe that there are misperceptions, particularly in the area of security. I think, as I said, that the MX Missile could be seen by the United States in a way that's completely different from the way it will be perceived by the Soviet Union. And this inability to put one's self in the shoes of the other and to respond to one's action toward the other from the other's framework makes for a very faulty communication, for misunderstanding, and it is very dangerous in a nuclear age.

Given, again, the scope of the issues and the scope of the dangers, it's fantastically absurd that the leaders of the American government and the leaders of the Soviet government really have had very little experience in the other's country. Reagan, Weinberger, even Schultz know little about the Soviet Union. That's been true of each American administration. I'm not just blaming the current one, but that it is. It's also been true of the Soviet leaders. They really have little direct knowledge of the United States. My experience is that leaders of both governments don't have direct contact with the scholars that are knowledgeable. Here in the United States, they get very little real input from the experts on the Soviet Union. In talking with Soviet counterparts in, say, the Institute of Canadian and U.S. Studies of the Soviet Academy, it seems that they too have very little input to the Soviet leadership in terms of their knowledge of the United States. You've got a real lack of background in the leaders' understanding. Their ability to put themselves into the shoes of the other side and thus interpret a gesture in a way which will lead to effective communication is a very poor one.

JA: Can we move to the issue of distributive justice? Perhaps you could say something about your work in that area and its relevance to this international issue?

MD: Conflict and justice are very intimately intertwined. The lack of justice or the sense of injustice very frequently lead to conflict and, unless a conflict is resolved in a way which leads the parties to feel that it is a just resolution, the settlement is not likely to be a stable one. It's likely to be an imposed one, and it's likely to break down. My sense is that behind the Soviet-U.S. conflict there is really a set of images
that have to do with a different sense of what is just. The United States has always had an image of itself as being very special, as having some right to preeminence on a moral basis, that the United States was the land of opportunity, the land of freedom, the land that people from all over viewed as a place to come to. And then there was a special time, particularly after World War II, when the United States was a preeminent power economically and militarily. So it has an image that its just position in the world is a preeminent position. It sees the claim of another superpower, like the Soviet Union, to be an equal as a kind of violation of something very special and unique about the United States. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, essentially has been trying to overcome what it feels is an unjust inferiority. And it, too, has a kind of sense of mission, of being a potential leader of the world. In any case, the Soviet Union's image of itself as being unjustly second and unjustly inferior, along with the need to establish its equality, has been in conflict with the image of the United States as being special and preeminent. I think that those are the hidden undercurrents of the image of conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States feels threatened by the loss of preeminence and the Soviet Union feels beleaguered by the inability to be accepted as an equal. That's part of how the issue of justice enters into the conflict. I think that those are background issues as a deeper, subconscious level rather than necessarily conscious thoughts.

JA: Your work on distributive justice deals with rewards and their distribution. Can you say something about that?

MD: Let me just say that my work on that was not in the context of the prevention of World War III, but I think that there is a relationship. There are different ideologies about how rewards should be distributed. Let me just clarify that issue in relation to the Soviet Union. Presumably, the Soviet Union has a different ideology about how people should be rewarded than the United States. The emphasis there is more upon group rewards and its ideal is an egalitarian distribution of wealth. In the United States, the emphasis is on the individual and its ideal is individual achievement; it's a meritocratic ideology. Neither system lives up to its ideology, and I think that if one looked at both systems carefully one would see that both use a variety of reward systems. They both have more similarities, from that point of view, than crucial differences. I don't think that those ideological differences are what's really involved in the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, although that's often put forth as the basis of the conflict. We are clearly able to go along with nations who have different ideologies than us. Nations that have similar ideologies often have very strong conflict, like the Soviet Union and China.

I have been involved in research on distributive justice for the last five years. What I have been attempting to do is to develop some insight about the typical effects of different distributive systems and to develop some insights into the conditions which lead to preference for one or another distributive system. In my work in the area of conflict, I developed what I call "Deutsch's Crude Hypothesis", which seems to be applicable to understanding a good deal about distributive justice as well. In the area of conflict, the principle which is a good, heuristic, summarizing, integrating principle, even though it has some flaws, essentially says that the typical effects of a given type of social relation tend to induce that type. The typical effects of a cooperative relation tend to induce cooperation. The typical effects of competition tend to induce competition. Since a cooperative relation tends to be a relatively constructive way of dealing with conflict, and you want to have a constructive process of conflict resolution, you want to create the conditions which foster a cooperative process of conflict resolution. On the other hand, if you wanted to foster a destructive process, you'd want to create the typical effects of a competitive process and induce a competitive process of dealing with conflict, entailing a win-lose definition of conflict. As I said earlier, under these conditions, communication is aborted, there are hostile attitudes toward one another, and there is an orientation toward enhancing power of one's self versus the other.

One can take the notion and apply it to distributive justice. The typical effect of, say, a meritocratic distributive system involves the notion that people should be rewarded in terms of their relative contributions. You have to make comparisons, measure, evaluate people against one another, separate the people from their performance and look at their performance as a kind of abstraction. So there are a variety of social/psychological kinds of processes and modes of thinking that are associated with that kind of distributive system. Applying my crude law, you can induce a preference for such a system by inducing any of those processes. If you emphasize the abstract nature of the people involved (for example, not relating people as unique, full individuals, but only to their abstract quality of workers), if you emphasize comparison, competition, measurement, and a variety of things of this sort, you end up with a preference for this sort of system. On the other hand, an egalitarian system generally doesn't have these comparisons.

In a book that I'm working on now, I say that the essential aspect of egalitarianism is not necessarily treating people exactly the same but is, instead, the avoidance of invidious distinction in the treatment of people. It may be that you would treat people in terms of their individual characteristics rather than treating them homogeneously. If you start analyzing the thought processes involved in egalitarianism, you see that it implies that people involved are perceived at unique, non-comparable individuals. There's a tendency toward a more global, intuitive approach rather than an analytic approach. Any of these sorts of things will tend to elicit an egalitarian value system, an emphasis on uniqueness in individuals, the wholeness of individuals, and on solidarity relations. So that's what my work in distributive justice has been primarily concerned with. It has been aimed, first of all, at characterizing the effect of different systems and then showing how that crude law can be applied to predict the development of the systems.

JA: That work sounds particularly interesting to me. Are you planning to bring it more directly to bear on the issue of a potential World War III?
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MD: I don't really see it as central to that issue. I think that it has a bearing on it in the sense that I believe that certain kinds of distributive values are more conducive to cooperative relations than other distributive values, and that cooperative relations are more conducive to peace than competitive relations. It's only in that general sense. As I said, I think that the ideology issue has been very much overemphasized in the conflict.

JA: You've outlined how this thinking has grown out of your past work. Do you have any idea where you expect it to go in the future? Could you speculate?

MD: I'll give you a question that interests me. I don't know if I can answer it but I'd like to get more of an understanding of it. It seems clear to me from the research that egalitarian principles work very well in small groups and in some relatively special communities, like the kibbutzim. They do not seem to have characterized any society from after the hunting-gathering societies to the present. The so-called socialist or communist societies are not very egalitarian. The issue is: What is it about size? By my crude law, you would expect size to work against egalitarianism. But the question is: Are there any ways of overcoming the inherent problems of size that tend to undermine the positive values of egalitarianism? I don't know. It seems to me to be a very difficult problem. When you have very little direct personal contact with others, they tend to be impersonal others and one does not relate to them in the way that one relates to others who are more personal. One doesn't necessarily take their interests into account in the same way that one takes into account the interests of people to whom one is personally related. We obviously live in a world which is large in size. The inability to take into account the interests of others who are remote really makes egalitarianism and certain kinds of cooperation more difficult. How do we overcome those barriers? Small is beautiful but small is not enough because we live in a large world. We are in an interdependent world. We can't simply be in small, isolated communities which are each internally cooperative. When I was in Israel and visiting the kibbutzim I admired a lot of things about them but I was also quite aware of the fact that in their high school they were not studying Arabic. There wasn't a sense of "the other" outside the kibbutzim as being similar to those inside the kibbutzim.

JA: One step toward addressing that issue of size might be your suggestion of a panel of experts — I think that you said Nobel Prize winners, leading statesmen, and so on — along with better communication between the scholars of the United States and the Soviet Union. You can't make the world smaller but facilitating communication seems to have a similar effect.

MD: Yes, communication is important. It's just that even within the United States, apart from the problems of hostility with another superpower, there are problems of really relating to people who are not close to one. The attitudes that exist toward welfare cheating, for example, represent an issue which has been blown up disproportionately. It really has to do with the fact that there's no sense of these people as human beings in the way that you relate to other human beings you are closely tied to. They are abstractions. They are abstract cheats, not individuals who are struggling to survive in a difficult world. I think that it's a crucial problem. I wish that more people were working on it. I wish some people were.

JA: Well, this has been very good. Do you have anything else you'd like to say in closing?

MD: I guess that I would just repeat that I believe the most valuable potential contribution in this area lies in changing the focus from the adversary or from one's attitudes toward the adversary to the relationship that exists between the interacting parties. Get out of the blaming orientation by taking an appropriate point of view, a vantage point that gives you some distance and enables you to see how your part, as well as the other part, contributes to the interacting system. The solution is not simply to change the other. It is not simply that the other has to become less a focus of evil. It's the interacting system that has to be changed. That's the major and, I think, somewhat unique idea that I have tried to offer. I think that most people, at the political level, make attributions which are other-oriented and don't make attributions which are system-oriented.

JA: So it's an examination of the relationship or the process rather than the individuals involved in it?

MD: Yes. It's not that you can or want to disregard individuals. Individuals, both in their behavior and in terms of their internal needs, may be contributing to the fostering of that process. But, above all, it's the process that has to be looked at.

JA: One last point: you just mentioned the importance of distance, of removing yourself from the tangle of conflict. How important is distance and the objectivity which, I presume, distance provides?

MD: I think that it's very central to it. I think that only taking yourself out of the craziness enables you to recognize how crazy it is, to really recognize how crazy it is. I think that, from time to time, some of the people involved mouth an awareness of the craziness, but they don't really fully experience how crazy it is. We are involved in something that's utterly crazy, and you only see that if you get back a little and say, "What is this all about? What makes this nonsense? What is worth all the dangers? Is there anything in our conflict, anything of real substance, that merits the potential destruction of the world, that merits all these hundreds and hundreds of billions of dollars a year going down the drain?"