The Church and the Dynamics of Social Change
On Changing Societies

Amitai W. Etzioni

Societies were once viewed as natural entities found, like a jungle tribe, in a primal condition and able to change their character from, say, agrarian to industrial without any one man or group of men having planned the change. Recently, we have come to view society as more open to deliberate reconstruction, its processes subject to guidance.

The application of the Keynesian economic theory is widely believed to have provided us with the tools to avoid mass unemployment, deep depressions, and runaway inflation. Over the last 20 years, our collective ambition has risen. We decided to change, by design and in accordance with national guidelines, the relations between races. Similarly, the President committed his administration to the eradication of poverty. Numerous other problems afflict society, and we seek to introduce whatever changes are necessary to reduce crime and drug addiction, to make the highways safe, to remove pollution from air and water, and so forth. But the sad truth is that we do not know how to guide societal changes in the desired directions. So, 10 and 15 years after we initiate programs, many of the problems we set out to solve are still with us.

It has been 14 years since the Supreme Court ruled on school desegregation, yet many of them are not desegregated. While the anti-poverty drive is only a few years old, most observers are much more pessimistic about its chances for success than they were in 1964. The carnage on the highways continues at full speed, and pollution experts inform us that, unless very special new efforts are made, environmental pollution will increase rather than decrease. Obviously, we have not yet acquired the art of societal management.

Other societies are not scoring much better and most do worse. Even those who had a relatively easier task to begin with have experienced difficulties. Thus, comparatively small, socially homogeneous, inward looking Scandinavian countries, with few international commitments, tend to manage their own affairs quite well. In Sweden, though, the housing shortage is monumental; drug abuse is on the rise; and it took twenty-two years to implement a change requiring cars to be driven on the right of the road. Israel, one of the most effectively run societies, set out in 1949 to absorb a number of immigrants equal to the size of its population. It is unclear at this point who will absorb whom, whether Israel will absorb the immigrants or the immigrants impose their Middle Eastern traits on Western, modernized Israel.
Totalitarian societies, though willing to make tremendous economic and human sacrifices to advance the changes that their governments favor, failed to realize their prime goals of abolishing the state, religion, the class structure, or the profit motive. Just 10 and 15 years ago, underdeveloped countries were formulating master plans for their modernization; fewer than one out of ten were implemented even in part.

In short, various societies face significant differences in the complexity of their problems, in their respective capacities to handle them, and in the specific kinds of deficiencies their governing processes show. However, all societies have yet to learn to manage their affairs more effectively, to the extent that they wish to engage in such management.

We must first ask what additional capacities are necessary, and then ask what values an effectively managed society should seek to advance. I hold that it is possible to answer both questions.

Progress in social science in recent years now permits the development of a Keynesian theory of societal processes; that is, a theory of the factors limiting our management capacity, and the conditions permitting improvement of our guiding capacity. I spent the past eight years recording and, to a degree, developing such a theory of societal guidance and outlined its major features in some 700 pages of The Active Society (Free Press, 1968). But having a theory, however valid, is only the first step towards its effective use. It took at least a generation after Keynes published his seminal book for it to become the basis for societal steerage. Hopefully, the lag between theory and application will be shorter in this instance.

A rough indication of the theory draws on an analogy with cybernetics. Used mostly in mechanical and electrical systems, and now biological, cybernetics was originally the study of how to control groups of machines and guide them to work jointly to realize goals favored by the cybernetic overlayer. Four factors are present; the first is a command post of one or more centers that issues signals to the work unit. The second factor is two-way communication; lines carry instructions from the center(s) to the working units and carry information and responses from the units back to the center. While many cybernetic models omit the conception of power, we see it as a main third factor: if the steering units cannot back up their signals with rewards or sanctions, they will frequently be disregarded. The fourth factor is the distinction within the command centers between subunits that absorb and analyze incoming information and those that make decisions, i.e., between knowledge makers and policy makers.

When all these elements are available and functioning effectively, when communication lines are well hooked-up and not overloaded, when information and decision-making units have free access to each other, then we have an effective control system. Some engineers and managers think that a social system, with the White House in positions. Unions are the key.

When a system violates these rules it is often found to be more responsive to in-system violations than it is to out-system violations. In effective systems, signals from the upward flow from the signals among control and coordination units, and in less effective systems, the opposite is true.

The difference between a complex control system and a simple one cybernetically is one of combination.

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social system, whether that of a corporation or a society, can also be run this way. The government is viewed as the cybernetic overlayer of society. The White House, Congress, State Capitols, and City Halls provide the command positions. Universities, research institutes, government experts, and think tanks are the knowledge makers. The civil service, press, radio, and television are the two-way communication lines.

When a cybernetic model is applied to a social system, then one must take into account—that for both ethical and practical reasons—citizens cannot be coerced to follow "signals" unless those signals are to a significant extent responsive to individual values and interests. If the citizens are forced, the system violates their rights and generates increasing levels of resistance. These become a major reason for the society being unable to manage its affairs effectively, whether in the collectivizing of farms or the abolishing of alcohol. Effective societal cybernetics requires that the downward flow of control signals from the government to the people be accompanied by effective upward flow from the people to the government and by that lateral flow of signals among citizens that expresses their values and needs. We refer to these upward and lateral flows which take the form of votes, letters to congressmen, petitions, and so forth, as "consensus-building." We call the combination of control and consensus-building (the societal cybernetic mechanism) "societal guidance."

The differences between active and passive societies, between those more and those less able to handle their problems, are best studied by examining one cybernetic factor at a time, although effective guidance requires their combination.

An examination of the amount of funds, the size of manpower, and the extent of expertise devoted to the collecting and processing of knowledge—as compared to such other activities as the production of goods and services—gives an impression of how "knowledgeable" is a particular society, government, or federal agency. We are immediately struck with one reason societies often score poorly in self-management: they spend relatively very little on "learning" and much more on "doing." And most of the funds that go into the production of knowledge are earmarked for the natural sciences, for the study of the nonsocial environment.

When societies deal with poverty, riots, and urban problems, they often have little knowledge, and much of that incorrect, about what the underlying factors are. For instance, for more than four decades the American society has followed a highly punitive policy against the users of marijuana. But the assumptions on which this policy is based, that the weed is damaging or that it leads its users to the consumption of other, clearly debilitating drugs, have yet to be demonstrated. Experts now urge the reduction of relief rolls by sending 10,000 mothers to work, leaving their children in day-care centers. Nobody has yet established whether or not the children's resulting psychological problems will create more social costs and human misery than the system tries to remove.

Blue-ribbon commissions are appointed to study other issues, but these
bodies tend to be composed of prestigious citizens, not experts, who can dedicate only a small part of their time to studying the issue at hand. The President's Commission on Civil Disorder completed its work in about seven months. But its members held full-time jobs "on the side," including the mayoralty of New York City and the top position of the United Steel Workers. It's no wonder that only a few days could be devoted to the study of the causes and cures of riots. The situation in the relevant professions is not much better; most social scientists' work is not policy-oriented and not readily accessible to key decision-makers. Prestige and promotions go to those who work on esoteric subjects; applied research is frowned upon. Few corporations would open an overseas branch on the basis of such inadequate and amateurish studies as were conducted before several major national programs were launched. One example is Project Apollo; the key staff work was done over one weekend in the Spring of 1961.

The knowledge that is available to experts must be communicated to societal decision-makers before it can be effectively utilized. Even in corporations, the planning units as well as the research and development units often have a hard time gaining the ear of key executives. In society the social distance between the research centers, where many of the experts work, and Washington is often vast. "Burned-out" scientists, academic statesmen, and "operators" frequently narrow the passage. Those federal agencies that have their own think tanks, such as the Air Force in Rand, tend to do better in terms of their respective goals, which shows the importance of systematic "input" of information and analysis to policy makers. Obvious? Yes. Usually done? Not adequately.

The decision-making strategies employed by the "cybernetic centers" affect the quality of the societal efforts more than is realized. Anglo-Saxon societies are inclined to be pragmatic, to muddle through, making one small decision at a time, they abhor long-run encompassing planning. The approach is quite effective when the environment is relatively stable and the system basically sound; minor revisions do quite nicely then. But when basic turnabouts are required, something more than tokenism, they have a harder time adapting. A typical case in point is in the manner in which the war in Vietnam was escalated, small step by small step, following neither a "dove" nor a "hawk" policy and it seems, without genuine attempts at basic change of policy.

Totalitarian societies often err in the opposite direction. They assume a greater capacity to control the society from one center, over more matters, and for a longer period of time than they are actually capable of. They therefore overplan and often launch major projects, "Great Leaps," only to be forced to scale them down or recast them at tremendous economic and human cost.

It would be tempting to state that the most effective decision-making strategy is a happy medium between democratic underplanning and totalitarian overplanning. It seems more precise to suggest that the capacity of both democratic and totalitarian societies to make encompassing and anticipatory decisions is rising with the improvements that have been occurring rapidly since storing and gaining too effectively control, we than dem...
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rapidly since about 1955 in the technology of communication, knowledge storing and retrieval, computation, and research. That is, we are rapidly gaining tools of societal guidance not available before. While no society can effectively manage the many matters that totalitarian states attempt to control, we have the capacity for more societal policy-making and guidance than democracies have assumed feasible.

In addition, each society, to some degree, has the decision-making pattern it deserves. Decision-making strategies are not chosen in a vacuum but partially reflect the political structure of the society. Democratic societies tend to muddle through because there is no powerful central authority, even in the presidency, that can impose a master plan, even if this were desirable. The policies formulated are the outcome of the pushing and pulling of a large variety of interest groups, civic groups, political parties, and varying trends in public opinion. Under these circumstances, straight sailing seems difficult, zig-zagging is the natural course. Totalitarian societies are more able to follow one course but also much more likely to run rough-shod over the feelings and interests of most of their constituencies. A "middling" policy-making, one more encompassing and "deeper" than democratic decision-making but also much more humane than totalitarian decision-making requires not only new technologies of communication and control but also must be in the proper power constellation in society.

All societies may be viewed as compositions of groupings (social, regional, ethnic) differing in their share of societal assets and power. In our society, obviously, farmhands, white and black Southerners, and Spanish-Americans are among those who tend to have a share of power disproportionate to their numbers. The distribution of power in any one society significantly affects its capacity to treat its problems and to change its structure and course, if necessary. It is useful to consider the distribution of power from two viewpoints: between the members of the society and the government (the cybernetic overlay), and among the members of the society.

The government and, more broadly, the state may overpower the society. This occurs when the state-bureaucracies checkmate most other power centers, as in contemporary Egypt, or, more commonly do so in conjunction with some other organization, such as China did with its Communist Party. On the other hand, the state may be overpowered by, and made as fragmented as, the society. This occurred in highly feudalistic societies such as ninth-century France and continues to occur in contemporary tribal societies such as Nigeria.

When the state is overpowering, societal guidance tends to be unresponsive to most members' needs and values, as in Stalin's Russia; when it is overpowered, the major societal cybernetic overlay is knocked out and the society drifts, as in many underdeveloped countries. Only a tene balance between society and state, each one guarding its autonomy, is able to sustain a relatively responsive and active societal guidance. Democracy itself requires such a power constellation: state power to limit conflicts among member-groupings (such as classes and races) to nonviolent give-and-take, and to
prevent the overpowering of some member grouping(s) by others; autonomous power of the citizens to maintain the capacity to change the government; that is, to remove those who guide the state if they cease to be responsive to the plurality of the citizens. Democracy, it follows, is more fully realized when the power differences among the member groupings are fewer. As the needs of one member do not have a superior claim over those of any other, the only way to assure that a society will be responsive to the membership-at-large is to give all members as similar a grip on its guidance mechanisms as is feasible. This means that not only the right to vote, but the socioeconomic and educational prerequisites for its effective use must be extended to all citizens before a democracy is fully operational.

The special features of the war on poverty can illustrate the effect of power relations on societal guidance. The 89th Congress was unusually liberal, due to the anti-Goldwater landslide of 1964, which elected Democrats and liberals where traditionally Republicans and conservatives were chosen. This, plus heavy pressure from the President, made for passage through Congress of an anti-poverty bill. Its implementation was to rely heavily on 1,050 Community Action boards, set up to be recipients of anti-poverty funds and to manage their programs with “maximum feasible participation of the poor.” Leaving aside the question of whether this was a wise approach from the viewpoint of the needs of the poor, it surely did not fit the existing power structure, because it bypassed city hall and the established welfare agencies. In 1966 a fair number of liberals were defeated, fewer than three per cent of the eligible poor voted in elections held to staff the Community Action boards, and by the end of 1967 the anti-poverty program was being structured to bring it under the control of local authorities. Similar points could be made with reference to bussing of school children, attempts to control smoking, or help for the farmhands. A social program needs political backing; if this cannot be marshalled, the program will sooner or later be modified or blocked.

The power relations among the groupings that make up a society shift over a period of time, due to a large variety of processes, including technological changes, the spread of education, and a rise in the level of self-organization of some previously less organized groups, for instance, the Negro Americans. As power relations change, new programs become feasible and old ones are undermined. In other cases, new coalitions are formed; for instance, federal aid to education was initiated when a way was found to answer some of the needs of both public and parochial schools.

Fortunately, societal guidance is not only propelled by power but also by genuine moral commitments of the citizens. People are motivated not only by self-interest but also by their conceptions of national pride, social justice, and freedom. Thus, American subscription to foreign aid, the United Nations, or civil rights can be explained, at best, only in part by the power of the advocates of these positions, which also appeal to values such as humanity, peace, and justice. These are values many citizens hold.

There is less than full agreement among the people of any country with regard to their values or to the ways they believe those can be advanced. Nor
are such positions unchangeable. A program's chances of success are greater, assuming a given level of power backing, if it is more in line with the values of the majority of the citizens. The idea that the United States might participate in World War I and Two was at first (in 1914 and 1939, respectively) quite unpopular with many citizens; by 1917 and 1941, though, a clear majority favored involvement. This contrasts with the war in Vietnam, which was not preceded by such a consensus-building drive nor, indeed, a declaration of war.

Assuming a society developed more effective cybernetic systems—better knowledge, more effective decision-making, higher degree of power balancing for its programs, and more consensus to endorse them—which values would it promote and what kind of society would it be?

Social philosophers have tried, at least since the days of Plato's academy and the biblical prophets, to answer these questions and to depict the Good Society. The resulting utopias make appealing reading but frequently leave the reader with an acute sense of frustration and deep irrelevancy; they obviously cannot be realized.

The utopias also assume that the philosopher or social scientist can speak for man, can divine or establish what his values and needs are, and can put them in the form of an ordered platform. As I see it, such a task is presumptuous in the extreme (the philosopher plays king, if not God) and the program unlikely to succeed.

The values a society effectively manages will have to be those its citizens seek to advance. A Keynesian theory of societal processes informs the citizenry where to turn to get more of the values, more fully, more rapidly realized. It does not tell them what their values ought to be. Actually, society won't discover what its deeper wishes are until its members become more active in pursuing its goals and in providing opportunities for true and full participation to all its citizens.

What develops, if you wish, is "procedural." We point to ways in which man may be more in command of societal processes and less subject to their blinding frustrations; we do not spell out precisely where he will guide the processes once he is more fully in command. That is entailed in the traditional conception of democracy, which is still the best way for citizens to choose their government and make it realize their values.

True, an active society will advance several key values, without which it cannot be active; it will have the broad participation of as many citizens as possible in its political life. This, in turn, requires a free and informed citizenry and at least a measure of economic well being so that the struggle for survival will not absorb all their energies. Such a society will promote other key values of its own; broad, effective participation in politics will advance social justice. But all this put together provides only a rather "basic" utopia; the rest will have to be filled in by the members acting jointly to make society more responsive to their needs and values.