

TOWARD A THEORY OF GUIDED SOCIETAL CHANGE¹

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AMITAI ETZIONI
Columbia University

IF WE OBSERVE A SOCIETY FACED WITH A PROBLEM—POVERTY, RIOTS, UN-safe cars—and formulating a program to deal with it, we can be sure that nine times out of ten the problem will not be solved. If we look again, ten or twenty years later, we shall find that the problem may have been trimmed, redefined, or redistributed, but only infrequently will it have been treated to anyone's satisfaction. Thus, we flatly predict that 15 years from now there will still be massive poverty in the United States (despite the "total war" devoted to its eradication), there will still be outbreaks of violence in the streets during hot summers, and there probably will still be tens of thousands of casualties on the highways each year.

Other societies do not score much better in their systematic attempts to deal with their problems, although the differences in symptom and treatment, we shall see, are not without interest. Nine out of ten underdeveloped countries which as recently as a decade ago optimistically spun master plans for their own development are still underdeveloped.² Even countries which knew a revolution (for example, Bolivia in 1952) or a government oriented toward development and democratization (for example, Bosch's government in the Dominican Republic) did not score much better.³ The Soviet Union's achievements over the last 50 years are impressive, but it has not achieved the goals it set for itself in 1917: to eliminate the state, sharp economic differences and privileges, religion, and maybe the family.⁴ Israel, which set out in 1949 to absorb a massive wave of immigrants, seems instead to be slowly being absorbed by them. In short, the capacity of societies to treat their own problems and to change themselves seems rather limited.

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SOCIETAL CYBERNETICS

Our purpose is to outline the main sociopolitical factors which, as we see it, significantly affect the relative capacity of a society to act. Our effort is not based on a specific study but is a "theoretical effort," attempting to analyze the factors involved by drawing on a large variety of studies conducted by others, on abstract assumptions about what the relations among factors may or may not be, and on distilled common sense. Above all, we draw on an analogue, from cybernetics.⁵

Cybernetics is the study of steering, of the ways groups of machines, of persons, or combinations of machines and persons, are guided to work jointly to realize goals set by the cybernetic overlay. Cybernetics is most highly developed in mechanical and electrical systems, where it consists of (1) one or more centers which issue instructions to the units which do the work, and (2) communication lines which carry the instructions from the center(s) to the working units, and return "feedback" information and responses from the subject units. While many cybernetic models omit power, we see it as a third main factor. If the steering units cannot back up their signals with rewards or sanctions, they will frequently be disregarded. A further subtlety is to distinguish, within the centers, between sub-units which absorb and analyze the incoming information and those which make decisions.

When all these elements are available and functioning effectively—communication lines are well "hooked up;" information and decision-making units speak freely to each other—we have an effective *control* system. Some engineers and managers think that a social system—be it a corporation or a society—can also be run in this manner. As we see it, however, when a cybernetic model is applied to a social unit, it must be taken into account that, for both practical and ethical reasons, the member unit which does the work cannot be coerced to follow "signals" unless they are, at least to some extent, responsive to the member's values and interests. Hence, the downward flow of control signals must be accompanied by an upward flow and a "lateral" (intermember) flow which express what the members wish or are willing to do. We refer to these flows as *consensus-building*, and to the combination of control and consensus-building, the societal cybernetical mechanisms, as social guidance.

THE ELEMENTS OF 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 cybernetical factor at a time, although effective guidance requires their combination.

Knowledge-units. The main guidance mechanism of societies, whether we like it or not, is the state. When we examine the amount of its funds,

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the size of its manpower resources and the extent to which its experts are devoted to the collection and processing of knowledge as compared to other activities, we get an impression of how "knowledgeable" the particular state will be. In looking at contemporary societies, we are immediately struck with one reason they are doing so poorly in their self-management: they spend relatively very little on knowledge and much more on "doing." And, most of the funds that go into the production of knowledge go into natural sciences—the study of the non-social environment. When societies attempt to deal with poverty, riots, and urban problems they often know little about the underlying factors. Blue ribbon commissions appointed to study these factors are composed of prestigious citizens, not experts, and even they can give only a small part of their time. Most social scientists' work, as Herbert Gans recently pointed out, is not policy-oriented and is not readily accessible to key decision-makers.⁶ Few corporations would open an overseas branch on the basis of so little and unsophisticated study as goes into the launching of major national programs of social guidance.

Knowledge that is available must be communicated to the decision-makers. Even in corporations, the planning or R&D unit often has a hard time gaining the ear of the executive board. In society, the sociodistance between the campus, where many of the best experts reside, and Washington, D.C., is often gigantic, with burned-out scientists, academic statesmen and "operators" frequently blocking the passage. Federal agencies which have their own "think-tanks," such as RAND for the Air Force, do better, at least in terms of their particular goals.

Decision-making. The decision-making strategies followed by the "cybernetic" centers, either explicitly or implicitly, affect the quality of the societal efforts. Anglo-Saxon societies are inclined to be "pragmatic," to "muddle through," making one small decision at a time; they abhor long-range and encompassing planning. Their approach works well when the environment is relatively stable and the system is basically sound. Then, minor revisions do quite nicely. But when basic turnabouts are required, something more than "muddling through," they have a hard time.

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

It would be tempting to state that the most effective decision-making strategy is a happy medium. It seems more precise to suggest that the capacity of both pluralistic and totalitarian societies to plan, and hence to make encompassing and anticipatory decisions, rises with improvement in the technology of communication, knowledge storing and retrieval, computation, and research, as has been rapidly occurring since about 1955.

As it is, each society, to some degree, has the decision-making it deserves.

⁶ "Where Sociologists have Failed," Editorial in *Trans-Action*, 4 (Oct., 1967), p. 2.

Decision-making strategies are not chosen in a vacuum but reflect the political structure of the society. Pluralistic societies tend toward muddling through because no central authority—not even the presidency—can impose a set of centrally-made decisions. The decisions reached are affected significantly by the pulling and pushing of a large variety of interest groups. No consistent direction seems possible; zig-zagging is the natural course. Totalitarian societies are more able to travel a straight track, but also tend to run roughshod over the feelings and interests of most of their members.

The conditions under which a “middling” pattern of decision-making may evolve, more encompassing and “deep” than democratic decision-making, and less inhumane than totalitarian decision-making, depend not only on the availability of new technologies but also on the proper power configuration.

Power. All societies may be viewed as compositions of groupings (by class, ethnic group, region) that differ in their share of societal assets and power. The distribution of power to any one community significantly affects its capacity to treat its problems and to change, if necessary. It is useful to consider the distribution of power from two viewpoints: (1) between the members of the society and the state; (2) among the members of the society.

The state may overpower the society; this occurs either when the state bureaucracies themselves checkmate all other power centers (especially in “pure” military regimes), or—more commonly—in conjunction with some other organization (the Party, the Church) or certain social groupings (such as the landed aristocracy). Or, the state may be weak, overpowered by the society, and fragmented along the same lines as the society. This has occurred in highly feudal societies (e.g., fifth century Europe or ninth century France) and in contemporary tribal societies such as Nigeria (at least up to the time of the recent civil war). When the state is overpowering, societal guidance tends to be unresponsive to most members’ needs and values; when it is overpowered, the major agencies for planning and action and union are knocked out. Only a balanced tension between society and state, each one guarding its autonomy, allows the operation of relatively responsive and active societal guidance. Democracy itself requires such a power distribution: the power of the state to limit conflicts among members to non-violent confrontations and to prevent the overpowering of some members by others; and the autonomous power of the members, to sustain the political give-and-take and to replace those who guide the state if they cease to be responsive to the plurality of the members. Thus, the closer the distribution of power among the members approximates equality the more fully is democracy realized. As the needs of no one group of members are superior to those of others, the only way to make a society responsive to the membership is to give every group an equal hand in guidance. The Scandinavian countries are more democratic than most societies, precisely because they are relatively less inegalitarian.⁷

⁷ Studies which offer evidence relevant to the three preceding points include:

MOBILIZATION AND SOCIETAL CHANGE

The distribution of assets and power in most societies is highly inegalitarian. Consequently some members are able to slant the societal efforts in directions desirable to them. This basic fact is at the root of many societal problems. There is much we could do to eradicate poverty, desegregate, and establish a just and stable peace, but that would cost those who are more powerful part of their worldly goods and—even more important—some of their power.

A society better able to treat its problems thus requires some reduction of power differences. This can be achieved by mobilization of the weaker and underprivileged collectivities. That is the way the working classes made their way into Western societies, and the way Negro-Americans are trying now. The question may be asked: are not those groupings which “hog” the “goodies” and power also those which prevent—by their influence over education, television, jobs, police forces, and so forth—the mobilization of the weaker collectivities? Does not the power to be at the top include the power to keep others at the bottom?

Our answer is that while those at the top do have disproportionate political resources and skills, they cannot prevent the mobilization of the weak for several reasons: (a) processes which they cannot stop if the needs of the economy are to be served (e.g., the spread of education) are assisting the mobilization of the weak; (b) those at the top subscribe to democratic values and make some concessions because of these commitments; and (c) most important, each grouping is free to choose—within the limits of its societal station—how to use whatever resources and skills it commands. Will it be drinking, interpersonal violence, and search for consumer goods, or political organization and action? The transformation which Negro-Americans are now undergoing illustrates both the possibilities and the limits of such self-mobilization. One thing is sure: unless society’s guidance mechanism proves responsive to its black members, the transformation of Negro-Americans will not be accomplished. They will not acquire their share of the power, and their problems will not be solved.

There is much more that needs to be said on the subject. (It takes us over

James W. Prothro and C. M. Grigg, “Fundamental Principles of Democracy: Bases of Agreement and Disagreement,” *Journal of Politics*, 22 (May, 1960), pp. 276–294, where evidence is presented that agreement on “fundamentals” does not exist in the United States on many issues. See also Herbert McClosky, “Consensus and Ideology in American Politics,” in Joseph R. Fiszman, *The American Political Arena*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1966), pp. 39–70, and Herbert McClosky, Paul J. Hoffmann, and Rosemary O’Hara, “Issue Conflict and Consensus Among Party Leaders and Followers,” *American Political Science Review*, 54 (June, 1960), pp. 406–427. For data on the homogeneity of social characteristics and values among American elite groups, see James N. Rosenau, “Consensus-Building in the American National Community: Hypotheses and Supporting Data,” *Journal of Politics*, 24 (Nov., 1962), pp. 639–661; Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes, “Constituency and Influence on Congress,” *American Political Science Review*, 57 (March, 1963), pp. 45–56.

seven hundred pages to indicate our viewpoint in *The Active Society*.)⁸ The details are less important than the over-all perspective: society viewed not as a pre-ordained, natural, or rigid structure, but subject to self-directed change by its members, for its members. The social sciences, especially the study of societal guidance, can contribute much to the growth of an active orientation of the society toward itself.

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