Consensus and Reforms in the “Great Society”

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One main reason the Great Society never took off was that its programs were not buttressed by a thorough bargaining process with the appropriate interests. While innovative programs can be “sold” to the voters, a consensus among the myriad interest groups and publics that comprise the American polity, such as supported federal aid to education, is vital if they are to survive. To this end, a mechanism that would function outside our relatively ineffectual representative structure, one used successfully in France, is proposed: participatory planning. Existing components of such a plan and others that would be required, such as more sophisticated social data, are outlined.

Many a liberal came to hold President Lyndon B. Johnson in high regard when, soon after coming to office, he pushed through Congress in rapid succession six major new domestic reform bills. But four years later the Great Society still went wrong? What does the failure reveal about the nature of American society and its power structure? And what are some of the conditions under which an encompassing domestic reform may take place?

The favorite liberal explanation for the present lack of momentum is crudely economic and hydraulic: the necessary fuel is burned up else-where, in Vietnam. This leaves unanswered more basic questions. First, why does a society prefer to commit itself to correcting real or imaginary evils in Southeast Asia rather than achieving re-form at home? That is, the deflection liberals use as an explanation itself needs explaining. Second, we must account for the fact that most political observers do not expect that more than a fraction of the estimated $24.5 to $32 billion now spent per year in Vietnam will be available for domestic reforms once the war is finally terminated. Even before the Vietnam escalation other foreign commitments had higher priority than domestic needs, and in the future new so-called “limited wars” may well take first priority. By all signs the failure of the grand reform to take off is not accidental, but endemic. Explanations by New Left theoreticians, not an overpopulated tribe, are even more simplistic than their liberal counterparts. The New Left never expected the Great Society to be more than a hollow rhetoric, a fig leaf to cover the naked interests of the power elite. But this conception fails to explain why the Great Society was launched in the first place. The purpose of political rhetoric and pseudo-activities is to paper over discrepancies between a felt need, an active demand, and the inability or unwillingness of those in power to respond. They suppose to appease some classes or pressure groups, necessary if the existing structure of interests and privileges is to be protected without a frequent resort to force.

But the fact is that no such active demand for many of the new programs was evident; on the contrary, Great Society slogans aroused aspirations and hopes which previously were either dormant or nonexistent. And, most power groups were aligned against most of the specific programs, while few were mobilized in their favor. Federal aid to education evoked the ire of powerful local business elites who seek to maintain their tight control of school boards and that of the Catholic Church. The war on poverty was not championed by the social welfare establishment or do-good liberals (despite one book by Harrington and a few articles by others), let alone by demonstrations or other action by the poor. Business corporations are only now discovering that war on poverty is a new source of profit. The general notion behind the specific programs, that of extensive domestic reforms, focused on helping the Negro and the poor. This directly challenged central beliefs held by conservative elements in the country, which had the following of a majority of press and pressure groups, and about half the politicians and voters. A national poll taken on October 19, 1963 by the American Institute of Public Opinion found that 49 per cent of Americans defined themselves as liberals and 46 per cent as conservatives (the remaining 5 per cent characterized themselves as undecided). A Harris poll (June 26, 1967) reports 35 per cent conservatives, 17 per cent liberals, and 48 per cent middle of the road. Asked which policy they wished Nixon to follow, 24 per cent said “go more to the right”; 21 per cent, “go more to the left”; and 43 per cent “keep to the middle” (AIPO, February 9, 1969). In short, the political launching pad was a shaky one. And even a bad public relations man would have told the rhetoric-makers in Washington that to raise the aspirations of the masses without providing major new achievements would be to invite a serious backlash. Political rhetoric is supposed to serve the power elites by “cooling out” the masses, not by warming up old appetites or whetting new ones.
Aside from being quite unable to account for the rather unique historical constellation of the 1964-1966 period—the post regnum and usually liberal—Congress following the anti-Goldwater landslide—the power-elite conception fails to do justice to the complexity and flexibility of American polity which underlies these and other situations. We must hence digress briefly to present our view of the social bases of politics in the contemporary United States before we can indicate specific factors responsible for the extremely slow pace of domestic reforms (factors other than the Vietnam war and the military-industrial complex) and discuss the conditions under which it may be accelerated. This is of course a subject whose treatment requires at least a voluminous book; here we can only chart the main contours as we see them.

NEITHER POWER-ELITE NOR PLURALISM

The American society seems to us neither as tightly controlled as the power-elite conception implies, nor as free-for-all as the liberal conception of pluralism suggests. The country is not run by any one elite or class. Numerous groupings have a leverage on the central societal processes, and the directions they pull are usually not highly coordinated and often are in partial conflict. Big business and small business, big business and the Administration, the Air Force and the State Department—these do not act like the members of a well-drilled football team. Civic groups (e.g., the League of Women Voters), religious associations (e.g., the Church), and universities (e.g., the Land Grant colleges)—sometimes referred to as public interest groups—have some autonomous bases of power. While the ownership of the mass media is concentrated, the range of viewpoints expressed is much broader than the patterns of ownership would lead one to expect. Not only did the supporters of, let us say, Goldwater and Rockefeller engage in some real fights on the air and in newsprint, but while Senator Eugene McCarthy did not gain "equal time" to answer Johnson's charges on television, he was extended much more time than any theory of monopolization-of-the-media explains. Besides all the talk about the manipulated American citizen, a high percentage of Americans favor world disarmament and a stronger United Nations (about 70 per cent); the enacting of gun controls opposed by the industry (73 per cent); and more government efforts to revitalize city ghettos (57 per cent in November 1967, after the riots). While more than a third of the citizens are ill-informed and frequently do not vote, another sizeable segment—referred to as the "attentive publics" by political scientist Gabriel Almond (1960:138-139)—follows events closely and responds quite actively in political terms, among other ways, by re-channeling their votes, campaign contributions, and voluntary labor. They are not controlled by whoever is in power.

Another major difference between the American polity as we see it, and the power-elite image, is recognition of a plurality of interest groups whose consensus must be won and sustained by anyone who seeks to launch a major new program in the United States. The voters at large do play a real role; they must be counted as one more, rather impressive public interest group. That is, launching new programs usually requires some genuine efforts at mobilization of public opinion support, as well as that of a conglomerate of interest groups. A careful study of such a coalition which was mobilized to bring about federal aid to education is provided by Munger and Fenno (1962).

One of the main reasons why the system is by far not as pluralistic as the liberals have it is that the contesting interest groups differ largely in their power. Small business and big business both have a say, but big business' say on national matters is much bigger. Business and labor unions both exert pressure, but that of the unions cannot counterbalance that of business, when the latter acts in unison. The AMA carries more weight than nurses' associations, and so forth. Political give and take among the various groups hence does not yield the neat compromise which serves as many needs of as many groups as possible (the political equivalent of the greatest happiness of the greatest number), but is tailored to the existing power-differential. No interest group is ignored, but some are heeded less than others.

Second, important segments of the citizenry are more or less locked out of the political process. Weak groups—such as the poor, lower-class ethnic minorities, and farm-hands—are not only underprivileged, but also have little political say-so. This is because they are underorganized and hence cannot mobilize whatever latent power they do have. However, to the extent that these groups have been mobilized over the past decade, the system has made some concessions to their much neglected needs. This fact suggests that the American power elites can neither keep the underprivileged from mobilizing (although they can slow down the process considerably) nor refrain from bargaining with them once they are politically active.

Part of the answer to the question we started with lies right here: the Great Society was launched as a response to the needs of weak but rising segments of the population. If we take the mid-fifties as our base of comparison and the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-1956 as the starting point of the civil rights movement, mobilization...
reached its political peak in 1963-1965, with the 1963 March on Washington and the lobbying for the 1964 civil rights act. Even at this stage the movement was not powerful enough to exert concessions in the strict sense of the term, as, for instance, a major labor union can. As Christopher Lasch (1968) recently pointed out, the American economic-political system, especially in the North, is not founded on exploitation of the ghetto the way the plantation system was founded on that of Negro farm labor. A general strike in the ghetto will not threaten the system. The base of the Negro movement, especially in the North, is more lumpen-proletariat than working class in nature. Still, it did seem wise at that point to national power wielders—who are both anticipatory (of the troubles to come if the movement is ignored) and not immune to the moral force of the civil rights cause—to launch programs aimed directly or indirectly at pacifying the rising discontent. It still was assumed, though quite likely unconsciously, that what in effect are minor accommodations would suffice to achieve the political purpose. In addition to the 1964 civil rights law, which in retrospect we know did not “cost” the elites much, the initiation of the war on poverty finds here its explanation. As the conservative half of the country—voters and politicians—in effect were preventing the initiation of economic programs aimed more directly at Negro-Americans, an indirect way was found to make small concessions to the Negroes, many of whom are the poor. The elites never expected to sacrifice a significant element of their comfort, not to mention affluence, in either drive. And, as the political base of the civil rights movement itself, rather than broadening as the elites expected in 1963-1965, came apart about 1966, even the hand-out of small concessions was scaled down and stretched out.

In our semi-pluralistic system alliances are important. As the Negro elements of the civil rights movement reacted to the slow pace of 1964-1965 reforms (then at their “peak”) by growing more internally divided and externally militant, alienating many white liberals, the political conformation lost the liberal versus conservative line, and acquired a Negro versus white coloration, although some lingering of white liberal support remained. As these sentiments registered in the 1966 Congressional elections and later in public opinion polls, the political bases for “concessions” to the Negro (and other poor) were undermined. Thus, some Great Society programs—slum clearance, poverty and Aid to Families with Dependent Children—lost ground, while others—which also serve the middle classes—continued to perform at the slow pace that the liberal-conservative compromise and Vietnam war exigencies tolerated. The public seemed to be right behind the politicians: when a national sample of Americans was asked which programs to cut first, anti-poverty and welfare were listed five times more often than medicaid and ten times more than federal aid to education (Harris, January 29, 1968).

The picture of changing coalitions and public sentiments just outlined does not reflect a concentrated capacity of one elite to regularly push through its program in the face of opposition by other power groups, or to manufacture consensus at will, making the “masses” see in its monopolization of power and privilege the best of all worlds (“The American Way of Life,” “peoples’ capitalism”). On the other hand, the relations between those who favor reforms and those opposed are not like the bargaining between a powerful union (say the UAW) and the well-organized automotive industry but rather, at the extreme, like dealings between an oil company and a gasoline pump owner, or between the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union and a small “shop” owner. The very weak groupings (e.g., farm hands) gain few concessions and then usually only when in coalition with others (e.g., Mexican-American associations or the AFL-CIO); the relatively more powerful groups such as white organized workers attain slow paced reforms or not insignificant pay-offs; still a more highly disproportionate part of the total privileges are concentrated in the hands of a relatively few powerful groupings who vie with each other over their distribution. This picture of the American polity leaves open three questions which we cannot explore here: how large is the gap among the have-nots, havesomes, and have-mosts? Is it shrinking or rising? And under what conditions can the gap be substantially reduced? But whatever the answers to these questions, one feature stands out—power is dispersed to such an extent (including, we must repeat, among the various power-“elites”) that new programs cannot be successfully advanced without at least some consensus-building.

THE NEED AND OPPORTUNITY FOR CONSENSUS-BUILDING

It is not accurate to say that everybody must consent, a notion sometimes implied in the concept of “consensus-politics”; but little can be achieved without some measure of mobilization of consensus. Precisely because power is neither monopolized nor dispersed in equal measures among all contenders, but rather is unevenly dis-
tributed, can consensus be had in degrees. Additional measures of consensus provide the political base for more, but not necessarily much more, reform.

Consensus must also be built because, even for relatively powerful groups, bargaining and giving up some controlled resources is preferable, especially in an age of economic abundance and political turmoil, to continual confrontations. In this sense national power wielders are much more like white merchants in a Southern town than like a chapter of a fanatical Birch society or a trigger-happy palace guard.

In addition to their willingness, albeit limited, to buy tranquility and their genuine need to accommodate enough partners to constitute a power majority, the consensus-builders’ task is often facilitated because, to put it first in technical terms, politics is not a zero-sum game. That is, the socio-political system of the United States is not analogous to the pie often alluded to. It is not so constituted that to increase responsiveness to the needs and values of one grouping necessarily requires a reduction of its responsiveness to those of others. Some rather central interests are shared; e.g., while economic growth tends to benefit some groups more than others, under most circumstances none loses when the economy is maintained in higher rather than lower gear. Where the interests of various members of society are not complementary, the efficacy of the consensus-building mechanisms affects the extent to which “creative” alternatives are found (alternatives which are relatively acceptable to all sides concerned) and the amount and level of conflict which takes place before a solution is reached. For example, after a generation-long deadlock, federal aid to education became possible when a formula was found which provided for some “pay-offs” to parochial schools without being unacceptable to the adherents of stringent state-church separation.

A more “creative” consensus-building system might have evolved a formula a few years earlier; but it is always possible to argue that whatever occurred could not have taken place earlier or later. In this instance, it might be said that a deepening financial crisis in church schools and a growing sense of desperation in liberal anticlerical circles were required before both sides were “ripe” for the compromise. One can acknowledge the validity of the notion that processes have to mature and still hold that a more “creative” system would have helped the sides see earlier what was going to happen and therefore to accommodate sooner. There are some significant differences of interest and perspective which are irreconcilable, however effective the machinery; here power differences speak loudest.

Once we realize that at least some consensus mobilization is necessary if significant new domestic reforms are to “take off,” as well as the potential opportunities which exist, in principle, for its pursuance (which is what the preceding discussion sought to establish), we must next explore the specific attributes of the consensus-building mechanisms a nation may command, attributes which affect the amount and quality of consensus that is constructed. We saw the need and the opportunity; we ask next what determines the extent to which the need is met and the opportunity is realized.

DECLINE OF CONGRESS AS THE CONSENSUS-MAKER

In complex societies consensus obviously cannot be formed in a large-scale town meeting; the suggestion, fashionable among utopian wings of the New Left, of restoring policy-making to the local level—where consensus presumably grows naturally—disregards the fact that many modern problems are national or inter-local in nature and that on the local level the concentration of power and privileges is much more accentuated than on the national level (Trippet, 1967). The expectation that people can more easily be mobilized for local than national participation does not hold for more than a minority of communities. It is true for Berkeley and Scarsdale but not the average American town, city block, or village. Most progress achieved in this country over the last two generations has been due to increased federal guidance; this includes most of the limited progress in civil rights, social security, and medicare. One of the interesting paradoxes of the American polity is that social groupings which are too weak to gain concessions locally are often strong enough to gain some national support for their demands, as if their national power is greater than the total of their local parts. (This would hold for civil rights groups in the South, for example.) This national magnifying effect is produced because on the national level such a group can use its strengths in some regions to support action in others, form a coalition with other groups, and draw the attention of the public-at-large to its cause.

Consensus-building in modern “mass” democracies is expected to take place via the representational structure, in particular within the national legislature, with the populous ratifying or disapproving of actions taken at election time. This rather naive conception of democratic politics has already been corrected by the notion that between elections the legislature “clears” major new acts with private and public interest groups as well as with national opinion-leaders, such as Walter Lippman and Bayard Rustin. Recently, though, growing attention has been paid to the fact that the legislatures are rapidly losing their capacity to act as the national center of consensus-building (MacKintosh, 1962; Crossman in Bag-
Among the reasons given is the rapid growth of the volume of administrative activities which require attention and the meager parallel growth in the membership and facilities (e.g., staff, computers) of the legislatures. In similarly short supply is the rapid rise in the specialized knowledge required to oversee most matters; government agencies and interest groups employ hundreds of experts; Congress has few expert members and retains few on its staff. These deficiencies could be reduced relatively readily. But the fact that legislatures tend to be territorially based while modern interests tend to appear in the form of national slices, poses a more serious difficulty, one which is steadily growing. (This is particularly true in the United States, where the local roots of legislatures are strong and national party loyalties are weak.) As long as consensus was required only among the people (or elites) of Virginia, New York, and Massachusetts, the United States Congress was quite effective. But when the significant groupings are labor, the professions, business and ethnic minorities—all organized on a national basis—territorial representation becomes a major barrier to, rather than a pool of, effective consensus-building.

It is hence no surprise to observe that, to a degree, parliamentary consensus-building is being replaced; increasingly, interest groups and the public turn their attention to the executive branches and deal directly with them; in this way—as agencies becomes semi-representatives of interest groups—national consensus-building becomes an inter-agency, intra-executive process. This is most evident in the Departments of Labor, Commerce, Agriculture, and agencies such as NASA (the aerospace industry), NSF (the natural science establishment), and most “regulatory” agencies. Doctors find their way in Public Health Service, teachers in the U.S. Office of Education, and social workers in the Welfare Administration. Political weakness in this system is reflected and magnified not by lack of a senator on your side but by not having an agency which specializes in and fights for your particular area of interest (e.g., civil rights)—or by having one which is a weak partner in the federal executive give and take (e.g., the poor and the OEO). There probably always was a special relationship between some federal agencies and some interest groups; what is new, and what makes this arrangement more and more problematic, is the sharp rise in the amount of “business” the government conducts and the social activities it affects. Hence, lack of influence here has become much more consequential.

This extra-parliamentary intra-executive arrangement entails a decline in encompassing oversight, which relates “deals” between any two agencies or groups to the larger national picture and to the needs of the weaker groups. This is a consideration that the national legislature was supposed to look after. Provision of such encompassing oversight, originally a function of the national legislature, has been to a degree absorbed by the White House. The same holds for whatever coordination there is among the various executive branches, as well as those efforts which are being made on the behalf of the weaker groups and the public, from meat inspection to car safety.

The changing nature of government answers in part the question we started with; it helps to explain the lack of consensus. Not only are the differences of power, interests and viewpoints sharp, but also machinery to exact whatever “creative” alternatives can be found within the confines of the system is defective, lagging both in the loads it is capable of handling and the quality of the processing. While Congress’ grip on the job is loosening, the White House has only partly picked it up and is not constituted to carry the entire load by itself.

To return to our original question, one main reason the Great Society never took off was that its programs were not buttressed by a thorough bargaining process with the appropriate interests, nor by a wide public education campaign. The bills were pushed through Congress by what has been variously described as “clever” or “high-handed” manipulation. Congressmen were promised “pay-offs” or threatened with the loss of patronage, but even they—let alone their constituents—were not committed. Most interest groups were not consulted, nor was their support mobilized. Hence, Congress was bent to block the programs as soon as possible. The opportunity came soon enough; the 1966 elections reduced the number of liberal Congressmen and the war costs provided a ready excuse. Congress reduced the appropriations (for lower class programs), slowed down additional commitments (for middle class programs), and restructured the programs to make them more acceptable to the power wielders. At the same time, the much reduced Great Society drive brought it closer in line with what the majority of the public, to judge by public opinion polls, was prepared to accept (we must recall here that no systematic effort to build public support for the program had been undertaken).

Least popular were various poverty and civil rights programs. Public opinion polls suggest that more than half of the country was not convinced of the justification of these programs. Important parts of the country still believe that most persons on welfare are able-bodied malingerers. No systematic effort was made to acquaint the citizenry with the fact that most welfare recipients are children, mothers, and the aged.\(^a\) On the other hand, federal aid to educa-

\(^a\)According to H.E.W. figures, in 1967 the more than two million persons receiving public assistance...
tion, which includes “pay-offs” to the middle class, especially aid to higher education, is more popular. In a poll of May 9, 1965, “improving public education” ranked highest—although not very high since it was mentioned by less than half of the respondents (45 per cent). Helping the poor, reducing racial discrimination, and slum clearance received much less support—a politically weak third or less favored the programs mentioned.4 Regarding new and more far-reaching programs aimed at erasing the under class, only 19 per cent favored a guaranteed minimum annual income, while 67 per cent opposed it. On the other hand, medical insurance for the elderly (of all classes) was favored by 63 per cent and opposed by 28 per cent.

True, it is difficult to gain a reliable picture from the polls, for the views and sentiments expressed change from month to month and with the way the questions are asked. In particular it makes a difference if citizens are asked to consider the merit of each program on its own, or to place it among others. Thus, asked if they favor aid to the city slums, a majority of Americans answer “yes,” but when asked to rank such aid among programs on which the nation ought to spend money, they rank it low. To the extent that generalizations can be made at all, the majority of those polled give first priority to the war in Vietnam. Thus they are either influenced to accept, or support on their own, the down-grading of the Great Society. “If you had to choose one direction or the other to go in, which would you favor—more emphasis on the war or more emphasis on rebuilding city ghettos?” asked the Harris poll of January 24, 1968. 52 per cent said war, 30 per cent said ghettos, with 18 per cent “not sure.” General acceptance of the Great Society conception, when not presented as an alternative to war costs, is far from enthusiastic; it is actually lower than for many of the specific programs involved. In December 1966 only 32 per cent of a national sample of Americans had a “favorable opinion of the Johnson Administration’s program, The Great Society”: 44 per cent were unfavorable, and a high 24 per cent had “no opinion” (AIPO).5

are mostly women and individuals 65 years or older, 700,000 are totally blind or disabled. Almost 4 million are children whose parents cannot support them, 1,250,000 are the parents of those children. About 1,100,000 are their mothers; approximately 160,000 are their fathers. Of these 60,000 are able-bodied. Cf. Income Maintenance Programs, Washington, D.C.: U.S.G.P.O. 1968, p. 457.

4Note that when respondents are asked about their likes or dislikes of one program at a time, support is significantly higher, but politically much less meaningful because in the end the citizen has one vote and he must reach an overall evaluation of all programs.

A second sign of lack of “processing” may be seen in the inclusion of features within the programs which, whatever their sociological merits, were almost certain to boomerang politically. The poverty program was a good example. It is a fine idea to invite the poor to actively participate in making decisions concerning the use of public funds granted to launch programs aimed to help them; but there are some inherent difficulties in determining which poor will speak for the poor. Only 3.5 per cent of the eligible voters participated in 1967 elections for board of directors of fourteen community corporations which carry out anti-poverty programs in New York City. National figures were lower. Many of those elected are highly self-oriented or extremely partisan in terms of sub-sections of the poor, e.g., the Black Nationalists. But these difficulties are not unsolvable.

There is also much sense in the sociological arguments about the value of mobilizing the poor for political action to countervail other interest groups, and the psychological proposition that such activation serves to help the poor overcome their feelings of inadequacy. But if we turn the same social-scientific lenses on the power structure, it is difficult to see why one would expect city-hall and local business elites and their allies to tolerate the loss of patronage and control involved and to welcome those who seek to organize the poor—further weakening those in power. It might be possible to make such a policy stick in a few cities, especially in those a Democratic administration is not adverse to offending or even undermining, but as a national approach, it clearly lacked political support. This does not mean that these features of the program must be dropped, but rather that some very intensive educational campaigning is necessary to gain wide public demand for it, and probably that some compensatory “pay-offs” should be offered to the local elites. As neither was done, it is no surprise that Congress required local public officials to acquire control of 1,050 community action agencies, a process now under way. More militant action groups are being phased out. Funds for poverty have not increased significantly, remaining below the $2 billion mark since the inception of the program. Contrast this development with the fate of federal aid to education, which appeals to a much more broadly established and active need and—after thirty years of bargaining—has been structured to provide “pay-offs” for slums (under class), for higher education (mainly middle class), and for public and private schools, parochial included. Funds for this program more than doubled, from $2.3 billion allotted in fiscal year 1966 to $4.5 in fiscal year 1968. This is not to suggest that federal aid to education is either popular or well funded; it merely does better on both counts than the anti-poverty drive. In short, consensus-building

5This poll does not allow one to determine how many felt he went too fast or too slow.
seems a prerequisite to gaining both the breadth of base and the specific structure of a program required if the program is to survive in the existing system. But as we saw, by and large, the machinery to build consensus is falling behind, while the "loads" which must be processed are rising.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Probably it would be best to restore—or build up—the capacity of Congress to form consensus. Increasing Congress’ facilities would be relatively easy, but changing the bases of representation from local and state to national ones (which could be achieved by changing the electoral procedures to proportional representation so that senators would be elected the way the President is now) seems to be a reform which is not feasible politically. (Nor can we be sure that it would have the desired effects and no undesirable effects of its own; reapportionment was expected to increase the power of the liberal forces but had little or no such effect.) Without such a shift, there seems no way to rapidly reduce the extent to which Congress overrepresents conservative elements in society and to make it more responsive to the modern elements, which are nationally arrayed.

As we must proceed with the assumption that fundamental reforms of the Congress are highly unlikely, we must be willing to consider mechanisms which can develop outside the representative structure. In this a development which took place in postwar France (where the legislature was and is particularly weak) and the European Economic Community (where it is even weaker) is of special interest as a kind of societal adaptation to the serious, possibly chronic lag in the capacity of national legislatures to produce consensus (Bauchet, 1958; Hackett and Hackett, 1963:119-130; Crozier, 1964:213-314). The mechanism, which may be best called participatory planning, is already being introduced in Britain (Hagen and White, 1966) and some of its elements seem available in the United States.

Until recently, the notion of planning was widely considered antithetical to the politics of consensus-building. Plans were to be designed by economists, engineers, and other specialists, and were to seek the most rational routes possible. Typically planners considered their task completed once the blueprint was charted. It was the task of politicians to either set the goals of the plan before it was formulated (i.e., reach an a priori consensus) or to legitimize it after it was formed. These views are still widely held among city-planners and master-planners of underdeveloped economies. Among industrialized nations, planning has been associated with non-democratic governments, held to command the power to impose the plans and to ignore the building of consensus. In the United States, major new mass programs such as the war on poverty and compensatory education for slum children were initiated with minimal planning and with little more than perfunctory consultations about the features of the programs with either representatives of the target populations or of interest groups which might undermine the programs. The programs were initiated largely as if approval by Congress, a presidential speech, and some intra-agency planning would suffice to provide the necessary political base. As we see it, much more planning was needed, especially planning of the participatory kind. The French experiment suggests one way this may be achieved within a democratic context.

France’s economic reconstruction, which is not less “miraculous” than the German one, was guided by a succession of four-year plans generated by the Commissariat au Plan set up in 1946. While the plans deal chiefly with economic policy, they were extended over the years to cover some social issues, including housing, manpower planning, and support of science, education, and welfare. The Commission itself is composed of experts and civil servants. Its director is a high-level official with ready access to de Gaulle. The unique feature of the Commission, which makes it much more than another executive body, is that by law it must gain the approval of its plans by the Economic and Social Council, whose 160 members include almost exclusively representatives of various interest groups. The Commission’s work is assisted by specialized standing committees, set up by industry, of which there were seventeen for the first three plans and twenty-two for the fourth one completed in 1965. Of the 3,100 members of these committees working on the fourth plan, 47 per cent were civil servants or independent experts appointed by the government, while the rest were representatives of industries, unions, and farm groups. In addition, as the plans are being formed, numerous informal consultations and communications between the Commission staff and the sides to be affected are carried on. Extensive surveys of the production projections of various industries and consumers’ purchasing intentions are also conducted. Thus, the French plans are formulated in an open and institutionalized give and take with the interest groups, i.e., those who could block them later. In the process, abstract and utopian notions of experts and administrators are adjusted. In addition, as interest groups face each other as well as government pressure they modify their perspectives, often toward greater support of the plan.

The approach has a distinctly conservative bias in that the representation and leverage of interest groups reflects the existing power and privilege constellation and tends to conserve it. There are
who developed participatory-planning in France. Some of the same Frenchmen (especially Monnet) based on a very similar system, introduced by in effect has no legislature (the European Parliament given to implementation than those produced by the plan's guidelines, and imposing losses on those who disregard them. Thus, this planning is not coercive; few government decrees are issued as to what products are to be manufactured by any given factory. However, the plan does not rely only on consensus built in the formulation period. It rewards and punishes to generate adequate—though far from complete—compliance. (Much of the French monetary credit is allocated in line with state guidance, which has a much more active banking role, in terms of allocation of credits among sectors of the economy, than the federal government in the United States.)

A comparison with the defunct United States guidelines for price and wage increases is helpful here. In early 1964 the U.S. government urged that an approximately 3.2 per cent annual increase in wages and prices (which supposedly was paralleled by a 3.2 per cent increase in productivity) was appropriate. Soon so many industries and unions had violated the guidelines that they were quietly dropped. The guidelines were originally drawn up by economists and civil servants with little informal and no formal consultation with industries or unions; and no sanctions or rewards were attached.

The French approach is far from perfect. It must be stressed that French planners do not have to be elected or re-elected and hence there is a tendency to exclude the needs of those parts of the public which are not organized in interest groups. It is difficult enough to square the plan with the various represented interests and with the values which the government seeks to promote. Second, despite the extension of the plan to cover some social issues, it still is primarily concerned with economic problems. It is difficult to anticipate whether participatory planning could be fully applied to social planning, with religious groupings, teacher associations, social workers' organizations, etc., being fully represented. Still, the approach seems to produce plans which are relatively more realistic, politically supported, and given to implementation than those produced by other approaches. The success of the EEC, which in effect has no legislature (the European Parliament has practically no legislative power) is largely based on a very similar system, introduced by some of the same Frenchmen (especially Monnet) who developed participatory-planning in France. Recently the British government, after a detailed study of the French system, introduced its own version, the National Economic Development Council.

The United States already commands some components of such a system and is trying out others, while still others are under consideration. The Council of Economic Advisors conducts informal consultations with interest groups and with federal agencies which have their own "constituencies," but here the process is not institutionalized and systematic. Hence, the interest groups do not feel bound by the "plans" which emerge, nor must they confront each other in the existing system. And, as a rule, when Mr. X or Y is asked to speak, let us say, for big business, such informal consultation does not require him in turn to consult, let us say, with the National Association of Manufacturers; and hence its support is not necessarily won. This is true even if a Roger Blough or Henry Ford II comes to endorse, for example, the Job Corps. One deeper reason why interest groups' representation is not openly institutionalized in the United States is our reluctance to admit to the inevitability of "lobbying"; most citizens and much of the press still consider interest groups an aberration of democracy (viewed in electoral terms). The Europeans are less purist on this matter, and more pragmatic. As interest groups are very unlikely to go away, it may well be better to allow them to act openly than to encourage their natural tendency to operate behind closed doors. Actually, it may be said that one way to curb their influence is to channel the give and take with such groups into a semi-official body such as the "planning" agency provides.

Federal use of sanctions and rewards are by no means unknown, but have been applied so far mainly in areas where compliance is most difficult to expect and consensus concerning the policies which are being implemented is minimal. Even here they have not been without success; the federal curbing of agricultural production is a well-known case in point. More recently, laws were enacted which require the use of federal funds to reward school systems which desegregate, funds which are withheld from those which do not. Here the emotions confronted are very intense and are backed by elaborate rationalizations. And, so far, federal inducements have been relatively small. If in the future federal aid to education (or to other programs) were substantially increased and were applied in less sensitive areas, much more effect could be expected. In general, the capacity to guide depends on the capacity of the government to generate pay-offs; the French system, as we have indicated, benefits from an extensive government control of credit and banking. Here a typical cycle exists: the less the government does, the fewer pay-offs it generates, and the less it can use them to reward...
those who support its programs. Hence, it also follows that once these programs break out of their present "sub-take-off" level, considerable "acceleration," much marshalling of new support on their side, can be expected. It should be noted in passing that with this approach we need a stronger federal government, not a weaker one, or at least one whose capacities match its obligations and commitments.

Finally, the "Full Opportunity and Social Accounting Act" may provide another necessary component. If Congress will enact the bill, the hearings on which have recently been completed, a new federal instrument will be set up to provide annual measures of the condition of various social sectors, such as health, crime control, and education, which in turn would provide a much sounder information base for formulation of social analyses and formation of domestic policies. Today, much of the most basic information necessary for rational action is lacking. For instance, there are several theories as to why poor children underperform in schools. Some theories stress lack of motivation to achieve, some stress inhibitive environment, others stress the middle class nature of the school, and still others the lack of future jobs toward which education may lead for members of minority groups, which constitute a high and rising part of the poor. Which theories (or what mix) apply, we do not know. Similarly, various types of programs to deal with drug addiction have been launched, while others are "taboo." The objective basis for this selection is unclear, since we know very little about the relative merits of the full spectrum of treatment modalities. Furthermore, we know little about the effects of the drugs themselves. Legalizing marijuana, for instance, has not been considered although the drug seems to have no ill effects in the short run, and the effects of long-run use are unknown.

Even the basic information decision-makers use is often highly unreliable. For instance, reports of the percentage of individuals born in a given year who finish high school vary sharply according to the data used, that of the U.S. Board of the Census or the U.S. Office of Education. For instance, for 1900-1904 the figures are respectively 28.5 per cent or 16.8 per cent; for 1910-1914—40.6 per cent or 29.0 per cent. Take your choice. Nor are contemporary statistics necessarily free from substantial error; take, for instance, crime statistics. We do not know to what extent the much discussed "crime wave" is the result of improved record keeping and reporting and to what extent the result of new criminality.

More is at stake than difficulties imposed on sensible policy making; lack of knowledge imposes strains on consensus-making as well. When programs based on faulty information fail to produce the expected results, powerful ammuni-

tion is provided to those who oppose them but who have found it difficult to do so openly on the basis of their interests. Even supporters lose heart when their pet projects repeatedly fail, as compensatory education is reported to have failed. Also, mobilization of public support is hampered when almost nothing can be positively stated, and this year's great new promising drives become next year's discards.

The new tool for collection and analysis of information on social affairs has yet to be created. If created, it must be grafted to some body capable of evolving social policy. In this respect, in the United States some favor a Council of Social Advisors, like the Council of Economic Advisors, while others favor extending that to include social advisors.

Out of all these and other components a national participatory-planning body may gradually emerge. Such a body would not radically transform our society; as we see it, nothing will do this in the foreseeable future. It may, however, mobilize broader and deeper support for programs initiated. Admittedly these programs would at most be reform plans which will not violate basic precepts and interests of the major power groups; such a body, however, could "squeeze" out of the system more creative alternatives than are now being brought forward. This may yield more than the typical radical would expect; Britain and the United States evolved from agricultural into industrial societies, and from robber-baron to welfare capitalism through the accumulation of such "minor" gradual reforms. In any event, as we see it, the choice is between more and less gradual changes, for the road to rapid, encompassing transformation is firmly blocked.

Next to improved capacity to build political support for domestic programs, the reformer's main hope lies in changes in the distribution of the power. Here much will depend on the extent to which efforts to politically mobilize weaker and underprivileged groupings will succeed, thus decreasing the existing power imbalance. Here the history of the American labor movement and of ethnic minorities now in the middle class offers a limited analogue. Over the last two generations, these groupings both increased their share of the U.S. economy and political power, and gained in status as well. Neither is anywhere near as powerful as business groups or WASPS, but on the other hand neither feels the difference which still exists as alienating enough to cause it to seek revolutionary changes. (They may well be lulled by a false sense of comfort, or by material abundance purchased at the cost of alienation of the souls—but this is a question we must defer for another occasion.) Enhanced consensus-building capacities or even an effective participatory-planning program or mechanism, armed with new social knowledge, cannot compensate
for sharp power differences. These will be reduced only if the "lower third" will mobilize much more extensively than it has. (Despite a widely held impression to the contrary, most Negro-Americans have not as yet been actively involved in the civil rights movement, not to mention farm-hands in labor unions, or the poor in any political action.) Second, coalitions will have to be renewed between under-class organizations and those reform-minded middle class and working class groups, which existed to a degree up to 1966. Meanwhile, some not insignificant achievements can be made by more effective government, including increased opportunities for participation on the national level. New social programs cannot be generated in a political vacuum, based on clever manipulation of legislatures and the mass media. These may suffice for initiation, not for sustained and broad implementation. If anyone doubted this, the slow motion of the Great Society provided convincing evidence.

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Comment

French Trends Toward “Consociational Plannocracy” As a Remedy for America’s Social Ills?

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In attempting to explain the relative failure of the Great Society programs Etzioni concentrates primarily on the lack of consensus and support-mobilization in American society. This is probably a correct interpretation, but it is, at the same time, not exactly a new perspective. That little can be done in American society concerning major structural changes engineered by men unless there is massive popular support has been pointed out before and attributed to the “compromising central tendencies” of the policymaking process, the two-party system, and the highly decentralized political structure.

In fact, concerning the “causes” of the demise of the Great Society effort, we have a richer picture supplied by Moynihan (1968). According-