Limits of Social Planning

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As man discovers the power of intelligence to turn nature to his own advantage he cannot long refrain from the attempt to apply that same intelligence to society. Lord Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, written in the dawn of the scientific era, was the application to society of his doctrine that knowledge is power. Even in Plato’s *Republic*, the ancient archetype of utopian thought, the source of the analogies that guided Plato’s exploration of the problems of society was in the practical arts. Those were, in his day, the prime examples of the power of intelligence; and his construction of an ideal state was the application to society of the same kind of intelligent control of materials that was shown in everyday life by shepherds, shoemakers, ship pilots, and builders.

“Government planning” and “planned economy” are commonplace in the language of politics. Unfortunately their use does not always contribute to the illumination of the real issues. This is partly because they have become trigger phrases for the release of strong emotional responses and also because the concept of social planning rests upon unexamined assumptions and is formed by uncritical extrapolations of other areas of human experience. An examination of the idea of social planning might disclose certain inherent limits not easy to discern in the narrow contexts of specific programs for political action. What can be done with human society depends upon and is limited by what society is. If, in spite of all their many differences, societies have a common nature that reflects the nature of man and the conditions of human existence then it is folly to set out upon any program for social change that flouts the conditions that make social change possible.

Societies are not made but grow. They are not organisms but they are organic; they are not living beings but they are composed of beings who live in mutual dependence. A society has no purpose or will of its own but it does provide the necessary conditions for the emergence and exercise of individual purposes and wills. Societies change and can be changed, but a society cannot be fabricated. All social changes in a society are within its own framework, and if changes are to be made in the framework for the future those changes must be made within the framework as it now exists and by means of the resources already in possession.

The nature of society thus imposes limits upon the exercise of intelligent control.
On-going processes may be accelerated or retarded, turned further in this or that direction, and measures may be taken to counter certain tendencies that appear to be emerging. Such social control is exercised by individuals acting together in a common concern, and usually within an institutional framework, in response to the actions of other individuals which appear to threaten the security of the group. Social control is thus an expression of the inherent dynamics of human society; it is not a manipulation of mechanical processes from without. Those who “direct” a society are themselves a part of the social structure, and their own purposes and decisions reflect the tendencies and tensions of their milieu. As practical men they work from narrow perspectives which seldom include an awareness of their own more basic assumptions. When they short-sightedly conduct experiments in social planning without respect for the built-in limits of social action they make failure inevitable and, to the extent that those experiments injure the social fabric, they invite disaster.

The problem of the limits of social action is relatively new. For more than a thousand years the effective limitation upon the exercise of political power in the West was religious. Ecclesiastical authority was respected by secular authority, and even after the state established its independent existence those individuals who exercised political power considered themselves responsible to God for their actions. In contemporary culture the state has taken the place of God, and many if not most of those who worship God worship a God who really does not do anything in the affairs of men. He is a God who belongs only to the inner life; if man wants to change the outer circumstances of his life man must do that for himself. The obvious inability of an individual to control those circumstances leads to that general feeling of impotence which is reflected in the psychoneurotic patterns of our age. It is not surprising, therefore, that so many look with child-like trust to government for the solution of their problems. The promises of office-seekers are the words of the prophets; a candidate for high office becomes a Messiah and the fulfillment of the promises of his party is the eschatological hope of his disciples.

With the decline in influence of religious belief, and its complete destruction in major segments of modern society, the external limits upon government action weaken and disappear. In place of a common respect for a transcendent and ultimate authority the only limitations we now have upon government policies are those exercised by conflicting interest groups and by the vagaries of popular fancy. In their attempts to manipulate these variables politicians have taken over bodily the techniques of the public relations, advertising, and amusement industries.

In the popular mind the distinction between fact and fancy reaches but little beyond the immediate moment and neighborhood. Politicians’ promises are not judged by their feasibility or by their relevance to economic and social realities. Popular judgment finds its standards within the promise-making act itself rather than in the meaning and implications of what is promised. Charm of personality skilfully exercised in calculated performances, cleverly constructed alliterative or nostalgic slogans, and appeals to cupidity and prejudice meet the standards by which voters judge the merits of the promise of a fairyland future where dreams come true. As in the storybooks, those delights are promised in return for making a wish, with only this difference: that in the polling place the wish is made with a
pencil mark or by pulling a lever. Government is no longer under God but is God, incarnate in a president or a senator or in whatever politician establishes an emotional tie with the voter; or the government is the Devil who has temporarily displaced the true God, the God who shows his presence in the person of the Great Challenger.

The difficulty, of course, is that the government is neither God nor Devil. A government is not a real agent but a social construct. Many political fallacies are consequences of bad metaphysics; they rest upon profound misconceptions of how a government exists. Of all the fallacies that have infected man's political experiments the deification of government is one of the more dangerous. When government was a matter of personal rule, ascription of divinity to the ruler was a way of thinking that is at least understandable in psychological terms. But the modern mass man does not have a mythology to give plausibility to his faith. Government is another magic machine that will do things for him if he pushes the right buttons. Quite innocently his attitudes toward government parallel much of primitive man's ritual practice.

II

To act by plan is to attempt to influence events in ways intended to achieve certain goals decided upon beforehand. In social planning the events that must be influenced are human choices and actions, and we may distinguish two principal procedures: control and persuasion. The one sets up goals to be achieved and attempts to compel the actions necessary for their fulfillment; the other tries to lead men to appreciate the values of the ends sought and to co-operate in their realization. One is coercive planning; the other is voluntary planning.

The significant difference between coercive and voluntary planning is the location of the boundary of the plan itself. A voluntary plan identifies the ends desired and the methods proposed to be followed in order to attain those ends; but implementation lies outside the plan. The function of a voluntary plan is to serve as a guide to those who desire to correlate their choices effectively with the choices of others. A coercive plan, on the contrary, includes its implementation as a part of itself. To put a coercive plan into effect is to remove responsibility for decision from those who come within the scope of its operation. Whenever a society attempts to cross the boundary between these two it proposes to use coercion to threaten the very values that justify the use of coercion in human society, and unless the violation of this boundary is restricted to the needs of a temporary emergency a society will lose its human character. Voluntary planning is one of the higher expressions of what is distinctive in man's nature; coercive planning is a threat to man's existence as man.

Although coercion is an essential condition of the existence of human society it is properly exercised only in support of those conditions that are recognized or supposed to be indispensable to the existence of a particular society. What may be considered a desirable end to achieve is another matter, and the use of coercion for the attainment of various social improvements is not only inappropriate but dangerous. It is dangerous because the price it exacts is an encroachment upon freedom.

From such a perspective, for example, the crucial question about a compulsory social security system is whether such a program is necessary for the continued ex-
istence of our society, so that without it the social system would either disintegrate or undergo disastrous changes, or whether a system of social security is simply recognized as contributing to the realization of a desirable end. Thus it is quite evident that many who agree that the goals of social security are desirable may still question the propriety of achieving those goals by coercion. In the case of taxes levied for the public necessity, on the other hand, this question does not arise; no one seriously intends that we could operate government by voluntary contributions.

We may designate as a law of social planning that the broader is the scope of a program the greater is the temptation to make it coercive. A limited plan may operate without interfering seriously with other activities. But as its scope enlarges, or as other limited plans are added, there are inevitable conflicts with other interests which lead to increased difficulty in securing voluntary co-operation. Those least inclined to co-operate because of such conflicts are often the very ones who have the skills and experience and resources needed to insure the success of the plan.

The application of intelligence to human society operates under very different conditions from those required for the intelligent manipulation of the materials found in nature. Even the control of animals for human benefit is far removed in its requirements from what is necessary for the control of men and women. Many political and economic proposals ignore these differences and reflect a preoccupation with the barnyard and field; devices to influence men in their choices are modeled after the whip and the carrot. Some psychologists, purporting to undertake serious scientific studies of human behavior, have found inspiration in the performance of rats in mazes or in the controlled modification of the neuro-glau-

dular reflexes of dogs. The sober fact is that if men are to be handled effectively as animals they must first be animalized. This is the ultimate objection to coercive planning, that men for their own supposed improvement are deprived of their distinctively human function, the function of making their own decisions in the light of an acknowledged personal responsibility.

The positive use of coercion in the furtherance of some social plan, as distinguished from its negative use in maintaining the conditions upon which a society depends for its existence, faces a serious dilemma. If a coercive plan is to work, those who are to be coerced must be given their orders. This requires that those who give the orders be able either to predict or control the future. In either case men must live under the orders of their rulers. Men in a free society may have to submit to limits of action in order to protect their freedom, but a free man lives by no rule but his own; his own by self-imposition or by voluntary agreement with others.

III

COMMENT IS OFTEN made upon the difference in effectiveness between the operation of our own society during war and in time of peace. Our industrial and military systems reached levels of production and power far beyond what had seemed at the outset to be credible possibilities. The suggestion that equivalent results might be obtained in peacetime leaves out of account the conditions that made such results possible. First of all, there was a strictly limited and unanimously desired objective, military victory over the enemy. No serious thought was given to what lay beyond the horizon of victory;
to have considered such a question would have endangered the unity of effort of our people. As long as war lasted, the end desired was seen with a terrible clarity and desired with a strength willing to accept any sacrifice. When that end was attained there was nothing left to give meaning to further effort except the return with all possible speed to "normal" life.

The second condition was the acceptance of whatever regimentation of manpower was needed to achieve the end in view. Most able-bodied men of military age, and many women, were directly under military discipline, and men were deferred only in order to perform certain specific functions judged necessary and to which they were in effect assigned. The customary freedom of the civilian population was sharply curtailed, with severe limitations upon travel, commerce, choice of food and in other areas in which choice had been normally sovereign. To fight a total war against totalitarian states we assumed for the duration the pattern of a totalitarian society. That this was done voluntarily by a free people for the sake of a very specific goal for which there was no tolerable alternative only underscores the absurdity of any proposal to imitate in peacetime the industrial and social efficiency of wartime.

What, then, are the limits of social planning? We cannot, of course, spell them out in detail for specific cases that might arise; that would bring us close to a plan for planning. But we can consider what is involved in principle and see what may be a serious logical conflict between the postulates of planning and the nature of society.

A plan has two aspects: a goal to be achieved and the means by which the goal is to be achieved. To have a goal is not enough; a plan does not exist until means for reaching that goal have been devised. Nor is it enough merely to be in possession of instruments that may be used to influence events; until the use of such instruments is organized in terms of a goal there is no plan. Without the means to reach a goal, social "planning" is nothing more than an expression of good intentions. Without a specific goal to be achieved, the use of government power can be only a series of improvisations.

There is still another condition that must be met if social planning is to take place, and this is crucial; its presence or absence marks the difference between the possibility and the impossibility of carrying out a plan when the end is clear and the means are available. This crucial condition is that the instruments by which the end is to be secured shall be either under control or largely predictable in their actions. Consequently there are special difficulties in social planning not present in scientific technologies founded upon the physical sciences.

Most social planning includes some proposals for physical changes. New buildings have to be constructed, roads built, rivers dammed, harbors dredged, machinery designed and built. Such matters are superbly handled in our own society. But it is quite different when a social plan requires control of human material. Either such planning will be severely limited in scope, with respect both to the range of activities and interests it affects and the number of people involved, or else it will have to depend upon coercion. If this judgment is correct then men in a free society are well advised to suspect a hidden threat of coercion in any large scale social planning that may be proposed.

In so far as social planning includes the use of human instruments either co-
ercion or persuasion is needed for its implementation. Coercion rests on threat implicit or explicit, and psychological manipulation may be extensively used to make the threats effective. Persuasion may have an emotional basis or a rational basis, or rest on a mixture of emotional and rational factors; in any case, persuasion requires the acceptance by those who co-operate of the belief that their co-operation will be to their own best interest. A social plan which rests on coercion for its operation, however, requires an authoritarian control, and its effectiveness is obtained at the expense of the personal freedom of those who are used in its service. Any social planning that is to be tolerable in a society of free men must rest on persuasion.

Within a considerable range of possibility the limits of social planning are conditional; their location in a given society depends upon the significance of personal freedom for that society. Those who value personal freedom and are determined to protect it must insist that the line be drawn at the point where the coercive manipulation of persons becomes necessary. The use of physical materials in industry and by government may be controlled in terms of long-range objectives provided the human participation necessary to such enterprises is secured as a result of the personal choices of those persons themselves. Their participation needs to be voluntary, chosen by them for the sake of their own personal ends. In a free society co-operation has to be elicited; it cannot be compelled. We control in terms of cause and effect relations; we elicit in terms of means-to-end relations. If means-to-end relations are to be used in such a way that the person is respected, the end must be one that provides him the opportunity to fulfill his own personal values.

There is a special hazard to personal freedom in a democratic society. The broader the popular base of political control the more likely it is that control will be exercised without an adequate appreciation of the values of freedom. Freedom tends to be sacrificed for security; the untaught and undisciplined popular mind cannot accept the self-denial that must be exercised in the struggle for long-range goals; it is simply unaware of most of the significant possibilities and unable to hold a straight path toward the few it does see. The maintenance of freedom in a democratic society requires a constantly broadening mastery of techniques and a deepening appreciation of values.

IV

As Henry Hazlitt recently commented, the government planning advocated by many disciples of J. K. Galbraith, and even many more modest plans for accelerating the economic growth, actually pose the question "whether each of us should be free to make his own plans, or whether all of us should be forced to work or consume according to some Master Plan drawn up for us by some group of supposed supermen." Professor Galbraith's distinction between the "public sector" and the "private sector" of the economy Mr. Hazlitt characterizes as a "neat semantic trick." What Galbraith calls the "private sector" we may more accurately term the voluntary sector, and what is called the "public sector" is actually the coercive sector. By substituting the coercive sector for the voluntary sector we reach the welfare state, "the great fiction by which everybody tries to live at the expense of everybody else." This, Mr. Hazlitt says, "is not only a fiction; it is bound to be a failure. . .for the energetic and able lose their incentive to produce more
than the average, and the slothful and unskilled lose their incentive to improve their condition.  

But the seeds of destruction in a planned economy lie even deeper than this. It is conceivable that new forms of individual incentive might be devised; indeed this has been the case in military and academic life alike, two areas as different as two areas could be. The deeper fault is to be found in the contradiction between what is required of people and the conditions under which a person can work effectively at any creative task. Human intelligence cannot function effectively under coercion. The motives that contribute to original thinking and stir men’s ingenuities in coping with the problems they face are many and varied. Men may be spurred by ambition, pride, lust or love, and even by hunger and pain; and such drives often seem so merciless in their demands that men feel themselves forced. But whatever may be the necessities that show themselves in motivation and need, no man can accomplish anything truly original unless he is free to tackle his problems and to deal with them in his own way. It is true we never have an absolute freedom in this, but the degree to which original accomplishment is possible is the degree to which the action leading to it is not coerced but under the control of the agent himself. It is true that great art, in which human creativity shines brightest of all, is work done under the limits of form; but those limits are self-imposed, and the greatest art is that in which traditional limits are broken apart and made into new forms by the genius of an individual.

Effective social leadership is closer to art than to technology. It is never a matter merely of charting a course and controlling the conditions that will carry through to fulfillment the purpose envisaged at the outset. Effective social leadership is an ability to grasp, with some clarity and understanding, the actual tenor of present events, to identify those limited areas in which choice and decision can be exercised, to discern the possible alternatives that are open to action, and to select an alternative under the guidance of a sound scheme of human values.

A free society is frustrating and obnoxious to three kinds of people: to those who find the meaning of life in trying to make other people over to their own specifications; to those who give to efficiency and economy places of priority among the values of life; and to those who, consciously or unconsciously, have so low an opinion of themselves that they feel themselves threatened by the existence of social, economic, and intellectual differences. A free society is the only tolerable way of life for those who respect the freedom of others as their own, who value persons above things, and who find their values not by hiding themselves in the herd but in the cultivation of a private existence in which the basic relations to people and to things alike are personal.