
The Potential and the Limits of Socially Organised Humankind

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To an extent, we live with a modern achievement described by the simultaneous presence of widespread individual liberty, economic prosperity and both domestic and international order. This achievement is, however, fragile in the extreme, and its fragility must be recognised. It is vulnerable to destruction and erosion, both from deliberately fostered attacks and from unattended historical evolutionary drift. This vulnerability increases as the philosophical underpinnings of the achievement come to be increasingly forgotten, neglected and misunderstood. In summary, this review is a plea for simultaneous recognition both of the potential for deliberately organised change in institutional order and of the limits that history, human nature, science, technology and resource capacity impose on efforts to move toward the betterment of humankind.

I shall commence with some notes of caution, especially as I examine the contribution that academic–scientific practitioners from my own discipline, political economy or economics, have made, are making and can make to the ongoing problem of social interaction, both within and among nations. This warning will be followed by a more positive discussion that sets out a role for the social scientist and philosopher. Acting within this role, I shall then outline specific steps that can be taken toward ensuring that we can enter the 21st century with hope, without which there can be no creativity. Lastly, I shall attempt to relate this discussion to the historical setting with some projected versions of the future.

Science, understanding and control

It is important initially to emphasise both the potential benefits of scientific discovery and the potential damage that could be caused by misunderstanding and misapplication of what might be alleged to be scientific findings. As someone who is not involved in ‘ordinary science’, it is perhaps incumbent on me to stress the negative here, at least in the sense of issuing a cautionary warning. Many modern scientists, secure in their own achievements involving the genuine discovery of new laws relating to the workings of the physical universe, and observing at first hand the extension of humankind’s mastery as these laws are applied, exhibit a natural proclivity to attribute what seem to be flaws in the structure of social interaction to ‘scientific backwardness’, and to expect improvements from inappropriate extensions of science’s domain into the realm of social control.

Let me be precise. I do not suggest that there is no ‘science’ of economics, nor of human behaviour more generally considered. We have, indeed, made

major progress in the development and testing of falsifiable hypotheses concerning how persons behave under specified sets of constraints, and these hypotheses enable us to make predictions concerning the effects of changes in constraints on human behaviour patterns. The activity of those who derive, test and extend these hypotheses in the human sciences is not different in kind from the activity of their counterparts in the ordinary hard sciences.

A categorical difference emerges, however, from what I can call the public artifactuality of the constraints that we observe in the domain for inquiry in the human sciences. There is no natural order within which we, as human animals, must confine our activities, one with another. We remain, necessarily, in a set of artificially constructed, or historically evolved, ‘zoos’. There exists no natural habitat, no ‘jungle’ to which we can return specimens for scientifically anti-septic observation. Neither the ethnologists nor the anthropologists are of much assistance.

Just as there is no natural order that confines our social interaction, there is no ideal order that is revealed to us transcendently, revealed to us as if it embodies the truth of scientific discovery. The set of constraints that defines the limits on human interaction in society must be chosen from among a sub-infinity of alternatives. There is no external standard – either embodied in ‘Nature’ or transcendently revealed – that would single out one alternative as ‘objectively’ best. If the image of scientific discovery and technological application by experts can be assumed to be characteristic of the perceived role of modern science, the closest analogy in the sociopolitical arena is the totalitarian regime, where an elite separates itself from the others in the society and applies its scientific findings to control and direct human behaviour toward a furtherance of the elite’s own selfselected purposes. As modern history has surely taught us emphatically, all such efforts aimed

at scientific control of human beings tend to fail even to accomplish that which the masters seek.

As soon as one steps outside the mindset of the totalitarian model of social engineering, one cannot avoid recognition that the problems of social organisation in non-totalitarian regimes are vastly more complex, and that the scope for any direct applications of the findings of science in the standard sense remains limited. If there is no expert elite that can legitimately claim to know what, in some objective sense, is the ideal social arrangement and, further, if individuals who participate in social interaction are acknowledged to be the ultimate judges, then even with major advances in our understanding of human behaviour with respect to choice, there remains the problem of securing agreement among those who participate in the complex network of human social interaction. There are important implications if the problem of social organisation is analysed as one of securing agreement on the self-imposed set of constraints within which we engage with one another, from war, to trade, to love. Agreement on the rules by which we shall live, one with another, domestically and internationally, is, of course, informed by scientific inquiry and understanding. However, at base, the problem is not one involving technological application of scientific discoveries, and it seems a mark of folly to treat it as such – that is, as an engineering problem.

The role of the social philosopher

I have suggested above that scientific inquiry into human behaviour, as such, is not different in kind from the activity that describes the working of ‘ordinary’ scientists. Discoveries are made, and these add incrementally to a stock of knowledge that, presumably, will prove helpful in some ultimate improvement in the human condition. For the physical scientist the task, as such, is completed when a discovery is made. The results of inquiry are published, and there is left to the engineer the assignment of translating these results into practical application.

Things seem quite different with the sciences of human behaviour. In non-totalitarian societies, there is no proper role for the ‘social engineer’, for the expert who takes the results of scientific inquiry and applies these results in the furtherance of specific objectives, whether desired by the engineer himself or dictated to him by a master elite. Who, then, is to make use of the findings that emerge from the sciences of human behaviour? Who can assume the task of ‘constitutional design’, the task of setting up or of modifying institutional rules so as to ‘improve’ predicted patterns of results?

There is a subtle, but vitally important, distinction between the social philosopher, who may assume the role of leader in discussions of constitutional design,

and the social engineer. The very word ‘engineer’ implies some more or less direct translation of scientific findings into end objects. Such an inference becomes misleading as applied to the social philosopher, who may make himself fully aware of the scientific laws, but who then takes on the role of persuading others in the body politic to reach agreement on principles of design that will further commonly shared objectives.

In the necessary dialogue on constitutional design, involving the continuing evaluation of the workings of existing rules of social order together with an evaluation of the working properties of potential alternative rules, two distinct elements must be separated. Persons may differ both in their theories as to how institutions work and in their interests, against which the expected workings of institutions are measured.¹ The conceptual separation of these two potential sources of disagreement in matters of social organisation is of basic importance, even if, in reality, a clear distinction between the theory and interest components is rarely present. The principal task of the social philosopher who assumes any leadership role in the discussion is to facilitate the initial distinction between these two elements and to bring the fruits of scientific inquiry to bear on securing a reconciliation of conflicting theories. Beyond this basically scientific task, the philosopher can also assist in facilitating agreement among participants by reducing or dispelling bases for conflicts among identifiable interests.

I do not want to suggest that agreement or consensus on the set of rules within which we interact to generate complex patterns of outcomes (allocations, distributions, scales of value, growth rates and so forth) will somehow emerge spontaneously as if by some invisible hand. The social philosopher must, indeed, engage actively in the whole dialogue, analysis and discussion, and, to the extent that his scientific competence and integrity are acknowledged, others may defer to his authority in considering the alternatives of structural change.² However, the social philosopher cannot assume the arrogance of the social engineer and, ultimately, those changes in the rules that he proposes must be presented as hypotheses, the test for which is the generation of agreement among those who are to act within the chosen structure.³

Liberty, prosperity, peace – and justice

All of the discussion to this point is preliminary to any suggestion or proposal on my part as to specific steps that might be taken, by socially organised groups – from local communities, to nation states, to international organisations, with the purpose of ensuring a ‘better’ 21st century. The precautions were necessary. It would be arrogant folly to parade my

own privately derived preferences for social change under some guise of scientific validity. At best, the suggestions that I advance must be treated as hypotheses about the working properties of certain rules as well as about what persons may consider preferable, hypotheses to be tested in the continuing dialogue in which all persons participate under self-imposed limits of reciprocity and mutuality of respect. The suggestions made below emerge out of my own generalised knowledge of the findings of the human sciences and out of my application of these findings in the context of comparative institutional analysis.

I suggest that there does exist general agreement on some of the ultimate objectives to be sought in socially organised communities. As individuals, we place a value on liberty, on the freedom to make choices for ourselves over a broadly defined private space. As individuals, we also place a value on the attainability of a sufficiently high level of primary goods and services without undue hardship and suffering. Finally, as individuals, we place a value on the existence and maintenance of peace or order, both within local communities (for example among persons or groups) and within separately organised communities, including nation states. Individual liberty, prosperity, peace – these are universally acclaimed values. But can these values be secured in the complex interaction processes that describe modern sociopolitical arrangements?

The central problem is, of course, that liberty, prosperity and peace are sensed as individualised values, independently of any generalisation to a social context. As an individual, I value my own liberty, my own economic well being, my own peace, and it is only when I am forced to acknowledge that these values cannot differentially or discriminatorily be made available to me, individually, that I shift my attention to the generalisation of these values to all persons involved with me in the institutions of social interaction.

How can social interaction be organised to allow all persons, simultaneously, to enjoy the values of liberty, prosperity and peace? What are the limits that political equality, economic reciprocity and mutuality of respect impose on the attainment of any or all of these values?

Historical experience offers empirical evidence demonstrating the necessary complementarity between individual liberty and economic prosperity. Experiments in which liberties have been suppressed under centralised political direction allegedly aimed at expanding economic product, whether enjoyed by the exploited or the exploiters, are now acknowledged to have failed, universally so. Institutional reform now taking place, on what is literally a worldwide scale, is based on the developing recognition of this complementarity between individual liberty and economic prosperity.

There is an analogous complementarity between peace on the one hand and both prosperity and

liberty on the other. Resources are wasted in negative-sum conflicts among persons, groups and nation states, and individuals find themselves deprived of liberties when their energies are coercively mobilised in the furtherance of communitarian objectives in social conflicts.

The great scientific discovery of the 18th century, out of which political economy (economics) emerged as an independent academic discipline, embodies the recognition that the complementary values of liberty, prosperity and peace can be attained. It is not surprising that my 18th and early 19th century counterparts were so enthusiastic in their advocacy of market organisation. So long as the state provides and maintains the appropriate structural constraints (the 'laws and institutions', the rules of the game), individuals, as economic actors, can be left alone to pursue their privately determined purposes, and in so doing enjoy the values of liberty, prosperity and peace in reciprocal and mutual respect, one for another. The role of the state is critically important in maintaining and enforcing the rules that define the limits of the economic game, but the role is also minimal in that there is no place for detailed politicised intervention in the liberties of persons and groups to enter into voluntary exchanges. Policy reforms are to be concentrated exclusively on the rules, the structural framework, the constitution broadly defined.

This ideal of the great classical economists was never fully realised. There was a failure to understand the separation between political attention to structure, attention that is both necessary and appropriate, and political intervention into the socioeconomic game itself. As a result, states have rarely, if ever, offered a satisfactorily supportive structure for the economy – most notably as regards the monetary unit. Also, as we know all too well, states failed everywhere to limit political manipulation to structure alone.

Why did the vision of classical political economy fail to capture the imagination of more than a few generations of intellectual leaders? Why did social philosophers from the middle of the 19th century forward lose interest in the classical teachings? Why did the socialist century emerge, and with the active support of social philosophers?

These questions admit of relatively easy answers once we recognise that my earlier listing of the universally desired objectives or values as liberty, prosperity and peace is not complete. The listing omits justice, which is also a value, in both Aristotelian senses: commutative justice, an attribute of a system of rules; and distributive justice, an attribute of patterns of distributive outcomes that are generated in an economy. The vision of classical political economists of a regime that meets the norm of equal liberty implies nothing directly about access to primary goods, which depends upon the distribution of endowments and talents among participants.

The distributional experiments of the present 'socialist century', many residues of which remain in

the early 1990s, long after the socialist god has been declared dead, were and are charged with elevated moral purpose, that of furthering distributional norms as measured by enhanced equality. However, these experiments have been generally characterised by an apparent incongruity between declared purpose and observed results, an incongruity that can and must be subjected to the scrutiny of scientific analysis. The failures of the explicitly totalitarian experiments in achieving distributive justice are now widely acknowledged. What is not yet generally realised are the threats that are inherent in the ordinary mechanisms of majoritarian democratic politics. The traditional perception of democratic politics has been characterised by an implicit acceptance of the post-Hegelian romantic image or model of politics and the state, based on the surprisingly unchallenged presumption that persons who assume roles as political agents shed all individualised interests and behave both benevolently and omnisciently in their assigned public duties.

The incongruity between the justice driven moral purpose and the realities of interest motivated constituents and agents has produced results that surely could have been predicted with more careful scientific scrutiny. When the political dynamics that describe modern democracy comes into force, it is not surprising that efforts to redress economic results toward enhanced distributional equality should have become the cover for interest driven efforts to gain distributional advantage. Under the aegis of welfare state redistributionism, the interest driven politics of modern democracy has given us the 'churning state',⁴ which does, indeed, involve redistribution, but which is, to a large extent, unrelated to 'legitimate' welfare state objectives, and which has more or less openly been transformed into a negative-sum game among competing interest groups.

Whether or not the redistributive activity of the modern state, constrained only within majoritarian electoral limits, 'improves' at all upon the non-disturbed patterns that might be generated by the market remains an open issue, and one that cries out for both analytical and empirical research.⁵ We do know that the redistributive game that we observe in the churning state motivates a very substantial wastage of valued production due to the investment in rent seeking by competing groups seeking to curry political favours. And this wastage appears to be growing exponentially as we enter the last decade of the 20th century, at least in my own country, the USA.

I do not advocate quiescence before the very real issues of distributive justice, and I surely do not claim ethical legitimacy for the distributional patterns that the historically evolved distribution of premarket endowments, together with the workings of the market itself, might generate. I should, none the less, argue that, pragmatically considered, these patterns may well be preferred, on agreed criteria of equality, to those that are being generated in the rent seeking

politics of the churning state, as presently observed. However, such politics is not the only institutional route toward the attainment of distributional norms. Once again, it becomes necessary to hold fast to the distinction between potential reform in the structure of an economic order and activity that is allowed to take place within that structure. There are prospects for building redistributive elements into constitutional regimes, elements that can be effectively insulated from the machinations of interest group politics.

The demands of justice require, first of all, constitutional articulation and implementation of the rule of law, which itself embodies the principle of equality before the law. This basic precept must be extended to insure that all 'play by the same rules', that differentiation or discrimination in political treatment is strictly out of bounds. Second, the demands of justice require that, upon entry into the 'game' itself, players face opportunities that are equalised to the extent that is institutionally feasible. I have often suggested that this principle implies equal access to and state financing of education at all levels. Beyond these constitutionally implemented steps, some rectification in the intergenerational transmission of asset accumulation may be dictated, again to be secured only by constitutional procedures rather than through ordinary politics.

If we use the analytical and empirical results of the social sciences to evaluate the prospects of politics realistically rather than romantically, we have good reasons to think that, beyond these limits of constitutional justice, the siren songs of the churning state masquerading behind welfare state arguments should be resisted. Submission to the false prophets of welfare state expansion promises only the further sacrifice of liberty, prosperity and, possibly, domestic peace – without substantial gains, if any at all, toward the agreed upon norms of justice.

In a single review I cannot describe in detail the political economy that would be both institutionally feasible and normatively preferred by citizens at the turn of the 21st century. I have suggested that, building on the insights of the great classical economists of the 18th century, appropriately modernised for the technology, resources, human capacities and scientific advances that describe the late 20th century, we can secure a socioeconomic-political order that would allow individual liberty, economic prosperity, peace and justice to be achieved. This order is possible only if political activity is largely confined to structural reform and if politicised intrusions into the privately chosen lives of persons are severely limited by effective constitutional prohibitions.

This emphasis on the limits to collective activity should not, of course, be taken to imply that individuals, as members of organised political units, may not share common objectives that can be best secured through collectively organised effort. There is a legitimate range of action for the 'productive state',⁶ but

this action must remain within the limits defined by the evaluations of individuals. In the appropriately derived classical liberal conception, there is no place for or meaning to such terms as national purpose, social interest or social welfare, unless, of course, we define these terms by genuine agreement among interacting persons.

My suggestions apply directly to the internal structure of a national economy, but the same principles lend themselves to ready extension to the increasingly interdependent international community of states. Interest driven politicisation of voluntary exchanges between citizens and associations of separate states reduces the economic well being and the liberty of all members of the international nexus. Further, constitutional sanctions against politicised interferences should apply equally to both domestic and international markets.

After socialism – what?

I have referred above to the end of the socialist century, and to the death of the socialist god. These statements are based on my reading of the history of this century. The romantic faith in the state and in politics that emerged and blossomed in the late 19th century and the 20th century no longer exists and, once lost, such faith does not seem likely to reappear. In the preceding section, I have tried to outline the features of the ‘good society’ that could emerge in our post-Hegelian epoch. However, as I stated before, this normative structure is advanced only as a set of hypotheses, the test for which becomes generalised agreement on the changes that are therein implied.

There are two complementary elements in the argument, both of which are necessary for consensus to emerge. There must first be some convergence of opinion on the relative inefficacy of politics (including the bureaucracy) as it is observed to work. The romantic blinders must come off; persons must learn to view ordinary politics as it is, not as it might be if all actors were saints. Public choice, the new subdiscipline with which I have been associated, has done much to dispel the romance here, although direct observation of programme failures of the agencies of the overreaching modern state has perhaps been of much greater significance than any scientific demonstration.

However, this shedding of the romantic image is not sufficient unto itself. It must be accompanied by an understanding and appreciation of what Adam Smith called the simple system of natural liberty, by a generalised willingness to leave things alone, to let the economy work in its own way, outside politicised interference. I am by no means convinced that this second element for constructing the ‘good society’ is present. We seem, instead, to be left with a generalised public scepticism about the efficacy of ordinary politics to accomplish much of anything, but, at the same time, we seem publicly unwilling to allow the forces

of voluntary agreement and association to work themselves out. We have, indeed, lost faith in the socialist god; but we are a long way from regaining any faith in the *laissez faire* principle of the classical economists.

The combination of attitudes on the part of the citizenry, at least in the USA, lends itself to exploitation by those interest groups that have their own ready made agenda for state action designed to yield these groups differentially high rents or profits. Building on the public’s unwillingness to act on principle in support of market solutions to apparent problems, whether real or imagined, these interest groups secure arbitrary restrictions on voluntary exchanges, and in the process secure rents for their members while reducing both the liberties and the economic well being of other members of the economic nexus, both domestically and internationally.

A protectionist–mercantilist regime described by particularised and quite arbitrary politicised interventions into the workings of markets, both domestic and international, seems to represent a much greater threat to the achievement of the social order outlined above than any regime embodying socialist inspired direction, planning and control. In two centuries, we have apparently come full circle. The selfsame institutional barriers that Adam Smith sought to demolish are everywhere resurging, as if from the depths of history. And the same arguments are heard in the land, both in support and in opposition. It must seem, therefore, to those of you outside economics that any scientific impact of the discipline matters little, if at all, on how we order our affairs, how we construct the rules within which we carry on our lives, one with another, in social interaction.

That this experience could repeat itself demonstrates the public artifactuality of the structure of social interaction, the feature I noted above to be that which distinguished the human and the non-human sciences. As this experience indicates, this feature has implications for the didactic role of the scientist. For the physicist, there is no requirement to repeat the arguments that long ago convinced his peers concerning the validity of a particular theorem. For the political economist, the arguments that Adam Smith once advanced were compelling, but we have allowed the artifactual structure to be shifted. Our task begins anew.

Adam Smith occupies the place that he does among our intellectual heroes because he was the first to demonstrate that politicised interference with voluntary market exchanges reduces both economic well being and individual liberties. However, Smith himself remained naive in that he felt that, once the generalised harm of protectionist–mercantilist measures came to be understood, governments would act, as if on principle, to eliminate all such restrictions. We now know that governments, as they operate, will do no such thing. They will act only in response to constituency interests, a response that is, in itself,

desirable. But in the dynamics induced by the particular constraints that exist, the interplay of interests insures that patterns of protectionist restriction will emerge.

There will be no escape from the protectionist-mercantilist regime that now threatens to be characteristic of this century's turn so long as we allow the ordinary politics of majoritarian democracy to operate in the absence of adequate constitutional constraints. We have learned to understand interest group politics. What is required is that we look to principles that can be incorporated in constitutional structure, principles that dictate the imposition of constraints that will prevent the intrusions of ordinary politics into market exchange. Acceptance of the arguments for, and active support for, the constitutional-structural reforms implementing these principles may, but need not, require some conversion to a new morality of public interest. Individuals and representatives of specialised producer groups can be led to support generalised constitutional constraints in their own interest. So long as a person, as a specialised producer, knows that a constitutional prohibition against protection for his own industry will also be extended to all industries, he will recognise that his own interests will be served, not harmed, by such constraints. The protectionist-mercantilist thrust is necessarily fueled by the expectations that some interest groups can secure discriminatory advantage at the expense of others. If this expectation is removed, the protectionist-mercantilist regime must collapse.

The 21st century need not be ushered in by a cacophony of voices shouting for agricultural subsidies, textile tariffs, voluntary agreement on automobile imports, taxicab licensing, rent control laws, minimum wage regulations, retaliatory antidumping measures and the myriad of other all too familiar modern variants of the mercantilist economic order. Depoliticised economic order is within the realm of the politically-constitutionally possible, whether accomplished within one nation state or within and among the whole community of nation states.

The potential and the limits

In concluding this review, I return to my somewhat grandiose title, 'The potential and the limits of socially organised humankind'. Let us clear the intellectual air by an early acknowledgment that without the benefits of social-legal-political organisation, very few of us could be here today. We could not exist; the physical world would support only a tiny fraction of its population if we were forced to live in the almost unimaginable state of Hobbesian anarchy, or even under the tribal organisation that described most of human history. We live now by the graces of those persons and forces that designed, constructed, maintained and secured the institutions of order within which we live, work and play.

A threshold was crossed in the 18th century when we learned how the rule of law, stability of private property and the withdrawal of political interference with private choices could unleash the entrepreneurial energies that are latent within each of us. The modern age was born. Humankind seemed near to the realisation of its socially organised potential, only to have this future threatened, and in part forestalled, by the emergence of the socialist vision, a vision that has now been shown to be grounded in romance rather than scientific understanding. The central flaw in the socialist vision is its failure to recognise the limits of socialised organisation. There can be no escape from the feasibility that is defined by natural and human constraints. If these constraints are ignored in well intentioned but misguided efforts to realise more than we can socially achieve, then irrevocable harm may be imposed on all persons in the international social nexus.

Recognising the limits in order to avoid such harm is as important as recognising the potential that may be achieved within those limits. The organised politics of the nation states, and the association of these states, one with another, must be kept within the boundaries of the potential and the possible. As we enter soon the 21st century, the prevention of politicised overreaching is perhaps our most obvious priority. The state as Leviathan described much of this century; we shall destroy all of our dreams if this 'monster's' growth is not limited, and its productive potential marshalled to guarantee the framework of order within which individuals can, indeed, pursue that which their own potential make them capable of realising.

Acknowledgment

A somewhat different version of this review was initially presented as a lecture at the Nobel Laureates' Forum held in Nagoya, Japan during November 1988 and sponsored by the Yomiuri Shimbun, Tokyo. The version here published was presented at the Nobel Laureates' Symposium held in Lindau, Germany during July 1989.

I am indebted to my colleague, Viktor Vanberg, for helpful suggestions.

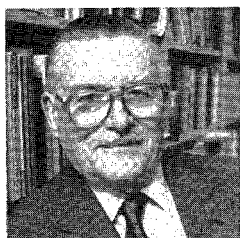
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The manuscript was received 18 August 1989.



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