

## Chapter 2

# CRITERIA FOR THE EVALUATION OF HUMAN SOCIETIES

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**Intro** As noted in chapter 1, there is a long-standing discussion on the criteria for 'goodness' of human societies. Let me simplify that complicated discussion somewhat by introducing the analogy of evaluating the quality of houses. Both societies and houses are things people live in. The quality of a house is typically assessed by means of multiple criteria. Some of these also apply to societies.

In the first place a house must be constructional 'solid'. We do not want a house that is about to collapse, though we can live with the idea that no building exists forever. Constructional solidity of houses is analogous to *stability* of societies. Social instability is generally deemed undesirable. It accepted at best temporary, if necessary for transition to a new stable order.

A second evident criterion for the evaluation of houses is its 'facilities'. A good house provides not only basic shelter against rain and wind, but also luxury matters such as spacious rooms, running water and central heating. Facilities of houses are analogous to the *affluence* of societies. Societies that provide their members with many goods and services of good quality are typically considered better than societies that provide poor provisions. This criterion is also referred to as the 'productivity'.

Houses are also judged by 'aesthetically' and 'symbolic' qualities. Everybody prefers a nice house to a dull one. Tastes differ however: one prefers what another would reject. Likewise, houses differ in the degree to which they give expression to a preferred lifestyle: a primitive country cottage may link up better with a withdrawn nature-oriented lifestyle than a prestigious modern mansion in town. Here again tastes are different and dependent on cultural context. Esthetical and symbolic qualities of houses are analogous to what I will call below *ideal-expression* of societies. It is generally agreed that social organization must in some way emphasize central values, though there is typically disagreement about which values and how these should be emphasized.

Last but not least, a house must be 'habitable'; that is, it must fit human habitation needs, which involve for example shelter, comfort and privacy. That quality is not

automatically implied in the above criteria: a glass-house may be solid, well equipped and very beautiful, but fails to provide privacy and is therefore unfit for human dwelling. Habitability of houses is analogous to *livability* of societies. No society can be called 'good' if humans cannot flourish in it.

Let's now consider these criteria in more detail:

## **2/1 STABILITY**

Social Darwinism has brought the stability criterion to the attention. The success of societies is seen as analogous to the success of species. Success is then continuation through time, spread (conquest) over a great and varied territory, reproduction and timely adjustment to changing environment. This criterion figures (often implicitly) in historical accounts of the rise and decline of civilizations. Surviving ones are seen as the best. This view invites a specification of characteristics that contribute to system survival, such as concentration of political power and a mobilizing belief system.

There is clearly some sense in this criterion. It is unwise to advocate a society that is doomed to perish. Yet survival of the social system may be at the cost of the ecological environment and may involve poor living for its members. Societal stability may also involve stagnation or even degeneration. Often it results of severe oppression by a ruling class. So this criterion cannot be the only one, but at best a preliminary condition.

## **2/2 AFFLUENCE**

Currently the success of nations is typically measured by the amount of goods and services they produce. Though mostly used for market products, the criterion is also extended to non-market services, such as family-support for the aged on the basis of inter-generation reciprocity. Society is seen as a social machinery for the production of goods for consumption, and evaluated by the quantity, quality and variety of its products. In this perspective one can also consider the product-innovations that societies produce over a long period: not only technical inventions of new goods, but also cultural innovations in arts and ideas, as well as new forms of social organization. The productivity of societies is obviously linked to its survival chances, but it is not quite the same.

It is commonly recognized that every society must produce at least a minimum of goods, services and ideas. If productivity drops below some minimum level, its members pine away or desert. On the other hand, it is also agreed that productivity may rise at the

expense of the environment and that the social costs of high production may surpass the rewards. Another evident objection is that products can be superfluous or even harmful. Through the ages ascetics have pleaded for a more sober society. In the 1970's, this view manifested in the zero-growth movement, which debauched in the present day green-movement. So productivity cannot serve as the core criterion for livability either. Only a minimal level of it is required.

## 2/3 IDEAL-EXPRESSION

Another class of criteria is in the degree to which societies realize or manifest certain values. Early writings on the Good Society emphasize individual lifestyle values such as 'bravery', 'modesty' and 'religious devotion'. In this view, a society is better the more it emphasizes such values and the more its members actually live accordingly. Present day discussion focuses more on the ideal social organization. For example, nations are judged by the degree to which they provide 'political freedom', respect 'civil rights' and realize 'social equality'.

In this class there are as many criteria as there are political ideologies. Though innumerable in principle, the actual variation in values endorsed is limited. Present day world-society witnesses a growing ideological consensus around Humanist values (Naroll 1984:ch.2). There is in fact a strong movement to canonize such values as 'Universal Human Rights'.

Still, there are a lot of problems in this approach: problems of degree (e.g. how much freedom is desirable) and problems of compatibility (e.g.. what to choose if freedom interferes with equality). It is also unclear to what extent these matters are to be considered as end-values, which need no further justification, or as instrumental values, that depend in last resort on their contribution to a higher level criterion. So the use of Humanist values for the evaluation of societies involves inevitably an arbitrary and somewhat ethnocentric choice.

## 2/4 LIVABILITY

Last but not least, the criterion of 'habitability' of societies. Societies are man made mutual arrangements for living. Societies in which people enjoy a good life are to be judged better than societies where living is poor.

The livability of a society is *the degree to which its provisions and requirements fit with the needs and capacities of its members*. For example: a society is not livable if it does not provide good institutional arrangements for 'safety': e.g. if it lacks a working legal system. A society is also unlivable if it requires behaviors of its members for tasks they cannot perform well: i.e. if a society requires 'autonomy', while its socialization practices produce dependent persons. In such societies people feel chronically anxious and incapable, which is clearly not living 'well'.

Human needs and capacities are to a great extent given by nature. Socialization typically modifies and cultivates parts of our innate possibilities. There are thus limits to human adaptability, which societies cannot ignore. Where bio-physiological needs are concerned this is rather evident. Any society must provide 'food' and 'shelter'. The existence of bio-psychological needs is less obvious, but no less true. Societies must also

provide a sense of 'security', 'identity' and 'meaning'.

To some extent societies can mould their members to their conditions. A society that provides little security can socialize to psychological hardiness and therefore be still reasonably livable for its members. Such compensation through socialization is not an automatic however; unsafe societies tend to breed vulnerable people.

Social evolution does not guarantee that all societies are highly livable. Extremely unlivable societies probably tend to extinction, either because their members die out, or because they desert. However, societies that provide only poor livability have not always less survival chances. Low livability can instigate wars of conquest, or mobilize economic effort. Badly livable societies can therefore become dominant.

The criterion of livability overlaps to some extent with the earlier mentioned criteria of goodness of societies. Livability of a society requires at least some continuity of the system, a minimum of productivity and some congruence of ideal and reality. Yet, a society can be unlivable in spite of high performance on these criteria. Repressive societies are typically quite stable, but not very livable. Highly productive societies can wear their members out in the propagation of the wrong things. Realization of highly tuned social ideals may be asking too much of human adaptability.

As yet, the criterion of livability is not very prominent in the discussion on the Good Society. One of the reasons for its relative neglect is probably that livability was long not sufficiently measurable to allow the assessment of differences between societies and for monitoring change through time. This situation has changed however; during the last decades several indicators of livability have been developed, mostly referred to as indices for 'quality-of-life'. We can now fairly well distinguish between more and less livable societies, and assess progress and decline in that respect. It is time to exploit these new opportunities.

For that reason this book focuses on the livability criterion. In that context the next chapter will consider the possible measures of societal livability.

## **2/5 SUMMARY**

Some common criteria for the evaluation of human societies are: 1) their stability over time, 2) their productivity in goods and services, 3) the degree to which they realize particular ideals, and 4) their livability. This book focuses on the latter criterion. Livability is defined as the degree to which the provisions and requirements of a society fit with its members needs and capacities.

REFERENCES

Naroll, R., *The moral order*, London, U.K., 1982, Sage .

*This text was first published as chapter 2 of the book 'Happiness in nations' by Ruut Veenhoven, RISBO series: Studies in socio-cultural transformation nr 2, Erasmus University, 1992, Rotterdam, Netherlands ISBN 90-72597-46-X, pp. 12-16*