

1 QUEST FOR OPTIMAL SOCIETIES

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1/1 SHIFT IN SEARCH FOR THE IDEAL SOCIETY TO OPTIMAL SOCIETIES

Society has long been seen as an eternal moral order, imposed by Nature or God. That view did not encourage people to reach out for social change, but rather pressed for adjustment to existing social organization. Longings for a better life were typically projected in After-life-Paradise.

In the wake of modernity, society came to be seen as a system of negotiated arrangements that can be changed in principle. That view implied the possibility of a Paradise-on-Earth. Since this idea took hold, a lot of thought has been given to possible improvements in society. The last few centuries have witnessed an ever-increasing stream of suggestions for social reform, piece-meal revisions as well as all-embracing blueprints for a radically New Society. Much of that thought has now crystallized in current political ideologies and practices.

Early thought about the Good Society was pre-occupied with the expectation that some Ideal Society can be constructed, which puts an end to all human suffering. This idea was at the basis of several 'Utopic' society-designs, some of which were put into practice in new settlements (communes) or in revolutionary reform. Disappointing results made clear that no society could provide Paradise-on-Earth. It is now generally acknowledged that any social arrangement inevitably involves weak and strong points and can therefore not protect against all human suffering.

Therefore, the quest for the Ideal Society has diverted into a search for the Optimal Society, that is, a societal arrangement that provides the best mix of desired results. In that context, it is now also accepted that there is not one best possible society. In principle at least, different forms of social organization can reach the same optimal level. It is also acknowledged that the effectiveness of social organization is contingent to its environment and hence that no society is optimal forever. Therefore, the focus is now on best possible societies.

Optimal Societies

Social Philosophers dominated the discussion about the Good Society for a long time. The emphasis of these debates was on what is to be considered 'good', that is, what values should be embodied in social organization. Several core values have been proposed: 'religious devotion' by early Christian philosophers, 'political freedom' by liberals and 'social equality' by socialists. Today, 'social cohesion' is stressed 'by communitarians. Utilitarian social philosophers see 'happiness' as the ultimate criterion.

This emphasis on matters of desirability is typically accompanied by a neglect of reality constraints. Philosophers speculate rather than check. They have mostly only a dim understanding of the actual social and psychological effects of their moral medicines. As a result, this rich intellectual tradition has brought us little closer to the identification of optimal societies. Social philosophy did a good job in articulating the differences in view but failed in the subsequent selection of alternatives by neglecting their applicability.

1/2 DEDUCTIVE APPROACH

The modern social sciences are also concerned with the question of the Good Society. Early sociologists such as Comte and Spencer hoped that 'scientific' (rather than mere speculative) social research would discover social 'laws', and that this knowledge would provide the basis for a deductive construction of optimal systems of social organization.

That hope has only been partly realized yet. The Social Sciences certainly did achieve a better understanding of man and society. As such, they allow more educated guesses about compatibility of various end-goals in social policy. Still, the knowledge is largely tentative and imprecise. There is some insight into the functional requisites for psychological and social functioning, but no established body of theory. Thus, there is little basis for a deductive design of better societies. Deductive application of present day social scientific knowledge allows at best a more reasoned evaluation of speculative proposals for social reform.

1/3 INDUCTIVE APPROACH

Still, the modern Social Sciences can contribute to the matter empirically. Modern measurement techniques enable us to make a less subjective and more precise assessment of society performance than Social Philosophers ever could. These techniques open the way for an inductive exploration of optimal patterns of social organization. We can now establish *that* some patterns work better than others do, even though we do not quite understand *why*.

The inductive search for optimal societies involves the following five steps: Firstly, performance criteria must be chosen. This step involves the choice of one or more value priorities. Secondly, these criteria must be operationalized, that is, translated into measurable quantities. Thirdly, the resulting measures must be applied to a set of societies; preferably, a large set of societies, within which subsets of societies in comparable conditions can be discerned. Fourthly, some sort of performance-rank order of societies must be read off. The best score in that rank order denotes a result that is apparently possible in the given conditions. Though that *best realized* result is not necessarily the *best possible* one, it denotes at least an attainable performance level. The fifth and last step is then to identify the characteristics of societies that come closest to that level. That analysis can show that some types of society perform better than others or that different system yield more or less similar results.

These five steps are discussed in more detail in the following parts of this introductory text.

Step one, is the subject of chapter 2. This chapter briefly considers the various criteria for the evaluation of human societies and chooses to focus on the criterion of 'livability'.

Step two, is dealt with in the chapters 3, 4 and 5. Chapter 3 considers the possible indicators of livability and opts for estimating livability of societies by the happiness of its inhabitants. Next, chapter 4 selects acceptable measures of happiness, mostly survey questions. Chapter 5 then checks the validity of average happiness as an indicator of livability.

Step three, is the application of this performance criterion to a large set of societies. The sources of data about happiness in nations are mentioned in chapter 6 of this introductory text. The comparability of the data is discussed in chapter 7.

The steps four and five are only briefly considered in this text. The purpose of this collection is to prepare for these steps, rather than taking them. Still, chapter 8 notes that there are clear difference in average happiness between nations (step 4) and identifies some societal characteristics that seem conducive to happiness (step 5).

1/4 SUMMARY

Utopic dreams about 'The Ideal Society' have led into a search for 'Optimal Societies'. The present state of Social Science does not allow the deductive identification of optimal societies, but we can approach the matter inductively. Inductive identification of optimal societies involves five steps: 1) choice of performance criteria, 2) operationalization of these, 3) application to a set of societies, 4) establishment of a performance rank order, and 5) finding out why some societies perform better than others do. This text considers the usefulness of average happiness as a performance criterion. This collection sets the scene for step 3.

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