

Covid and Social Engineering

WE CANNOT DEAL WITH COVID-19 IF WE DO NOT LEARN FROM HISTORICAL SOCIAL ENGINEERING FAILURES

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Anyone who has studied political history knows very well that some of the most disastrous social policies have been implemented in pursuit of seemingly noble and humane ideals.

Those who control the vast economic, police, and regulatory powers of the modern State must temper their reforming ambitions with an awareness of the limits of top-down, technocratic social interventions. Failing to do so may produce disastrous, dystopic results.

The Russian economy was brought to its knees by centralised planners who aimed to honour the motto, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”.

American city planners in the 1950s and 1960s produced suburban ghettos plagued by drug addiction and crime with their well-intentioned but hopelessly misguided interventions designed to create happier and more progressive communities.

After the United States and other allied forces overthrew Sadaam Hussein’s dictatorial regime in Iraq, the US administration was determined to implant a new political regime resting on principles of democracy and inclusion.

This was a classic case of social engineering: an effort to impose a Western-style democracy willy-nilly upon a population that was accustomed to brutal autocratic rule. Iraq quickly fell apart, with its democratic credentials discredited by the partisan and self-aggrandizing behaviour of its new government.

These are just a few illustrations of the many perverse and unintended consequences of ambitious attempts to engineer desirable social outcomes from the top down. Utopian (and ultimately, dystopian) experiments in social engineering offer valuable lessons for policymakers confronted with complex social problems. Above all, they counsel restraint, humility, and moderation.

A moderate social reformer must avoid two very harmful attitudes: first, that of the self-serving cynic, who exploits the political power and prestige of the State to advance his own career, no matter the cost to society; and second, that of the naive idealist, who, blind to the unintended consequences of social engineering, believes that progress is the outcome of technocratic interventions that treat human beings as passive subjects or cogs in a machine.

A self-serving cynic or a somewhat less cynical pragmatist might content themselves with a comfortable State salary and benefits, keep-



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ing the ship of State afloat, and avoiding political scandal.

But a political idealist carries in their heart the conviction that their position empowers them to undertake large and ambitious social reforms. Indeed, they may even see their political career as a calling to ensure that citizens live flourishing and happy lives, and are protected from every conceivable evil, from “misinformation” to sickness, unemployment, and death. Political idealists frequently believe they can engineer optimal social outcomes by pulling

the right institutional and cultural levers and manipulating citizens with the right incentives.

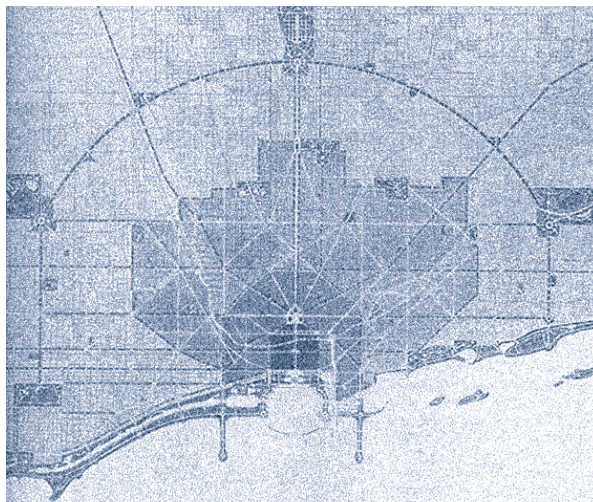
The naive idealist longs to control the apparatus of the State, and apply it to advance noble ends, like justice, equality of opportunity, economic prosperity, security, and universal welfare, viewing these aspirations as technical problems that can be solved through a prudent use of bureaucracy and public administration.

But the history of large-scale societal interventions tells a different story: it is often the most idealistic and well-meaning individuals who leave the greatest devastation in their wake.

This does not mean there is no place for idealism in politics. There are forms of idealism that are suitably tempered by pragmatism and a humble realisation of the complexity of social reality and the limits of one's power to change it for the better. For example, Martin Luther King bravely advocated for the civil and human rights of African Americans, exercising the power of faith and moral suasion rather than the power of technocracy and political coercion.

The moderate idealist pursues social progress without ever losing sight of the extraordinary complexity of social reality and the dependence of social outcomes upon forces that escape his control, including the free initiatives and responses of a wide range of individuals and groups. The social engineer, on the other hand, aims to gain unilateral leverage over history and over social outcomes, to master the fate of his society and bend the lives of citizens into shape, with or without their consent.

The moderate idealist views people as rational and consenting



adults, who may or may not cooperate with his proposals. The social engineer views people as experimental subjects, to be integrated into his project forthwith, or, in the event they do not accept his beneficence, “re-educated” to give them a proper taste of “progress.”

A good example of the disastrous consequences of social engineering is the American city planning movement which dominated many large American cities such as Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago in the 1950s and 60s. City planners tended to view the inherently complicated and unpredictable patterns of architectural, economic, and social development in large cities as symptomatic of a disorder that needed to be “tidied up” by experts.

When confronted with the beneficial outcomes of relatively unplanned, bottom-up urban development, they viewed them as inexplicable anomalies because they could not be reconciled with the prevailing wisdom of architects and city planners of the time, namely that centralized city planning was the only way to bring order and progress to a large

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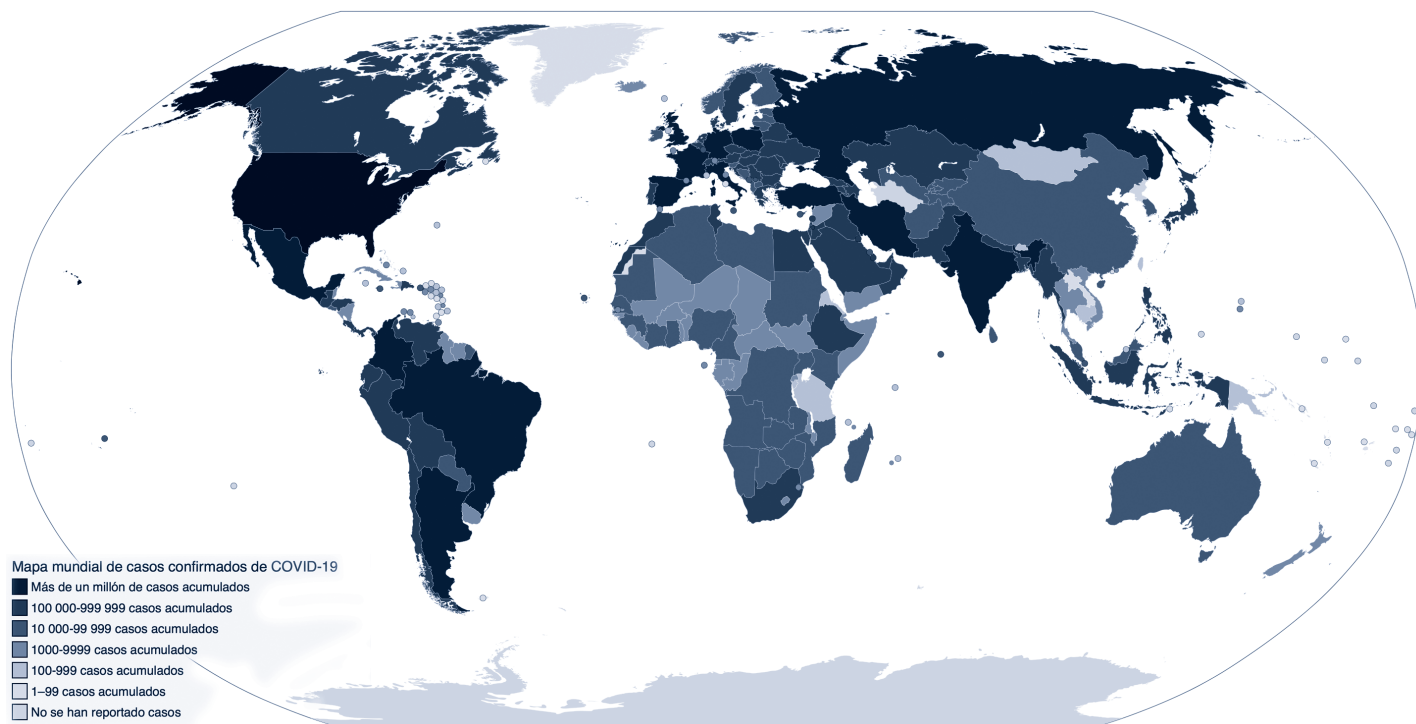
city. The paradigm of centralized planning and governance was so engrained in the minds of city planners that it took them a long time to recognize its catastrophic consequences: in particular, the creation of slum neighbourhoods and centers of delinquency on a scale that was scarcely imaginable before the city planners got to work.

Some of the reasons for the abysmal failure of centralized, top-down city planning are eloquently documented by the grassroots journalist and campaigner Jane Jacobs. Of particular note is her observation that city planners fail to respect the accumulated wisdom and ways of getting along that ordinary citizens had developed over many generations.

City planners tended to view busy streets and zones with residential and commercial land inter-meshed as overcrowded slums; but they failed to ask those inhabiting such “slums” what they wanted or what they thought of their own living arrangements. City planners assumed that city life was harsh and unhealthy for residents of old buildings with high population densities; but they failed to notice the ways in which these apparently chaotic social structures constituted a delicate social ecology inhabited by thriving and dynamic communities.

This blindness to the facts on the ground proved disastrous: city planners ended up tearing apart local communities and disembedding them from the customs and institutions that nourished them, in well-intentioned but utterly misguided efforts to improve their lives based on “expert wisdom.”

Jacobs, a journalist-activist who fought long and hard against city planners in several cities, vividly



describes the consequences of these misguided interventions:

There is a wistful myth that if only we had enough money to spend...we could wipe out all our slums in ten years, reverse decay in the great, dull, gray belts that were yesterday's and day-before-yesterday's suburbs, anchor the wandering middle class and its wandering tax money, and perhaps even solve the traffic problem. But look what we have built with the first several billions: Low-income projects that become worse centers of delinquency, vandalism and general social hopelessness than the slums they were supposed to replace. Middle-income housing projects which are truly marvels of dullness and regimentation, sealed against any buoyancy or vitality of city life

[...] That such wonders may be accomplished, people who get marked with the planners' hex signs are pushed about, expropriated, and uprooted much as if they were the subjects of a conquering power. Thousands upon thousands of small businesses are destroyed, and their proprietors are ruined, with hardly a gesture at compensation. Whole communities are torn apart and sown to the winds, with a reaping of cynicism, resentment and despair that must be heard and seen to be believed". Jacobs, J. (1992), pp. 4-5.

The failures of American city planners are not to be put down to some technical error, but a fundamental problem with the whole notion that one can unilaterally introduce order into a human society from a single fulcrum, whether

an economic Guru, a city-planning committee, a democratic assembly, or a public health committee. The limits of social engineering can shed valuable light on the current public health crisis. A question worth asking is: what sort of policy response to the current pandemic is warranted by a moderate, grounded idealism, and what sort of response falls prey to the neurotic delusions of the social engineer?

When Covid-19 began to spread globally after it was first discovered in Wuhan, China, governments and their scientific advisors were uncertain how best to contain the disease, since the dynamics of the disease and the susceptibility of populations to it were not yet well understood.

Some governments, such as Sweden's showed a relatively high level of tolerance for the disease, hoping they could protect those most at

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risk while the wider, low-risk population adapted to Covid-19.

The UK took a similarly tolerant approach, but did a U-turn early in the pandemic, imposing severe social and economic restrictions when a high-profile study emerged from Imperial College claiming that up to half a million British citizens could die if expected transmission rates were not cut.

The majority of Western countries have opted for a mix of social distancing, mask use, and societal lockdowns to bring the virus under control. But their efforts have met with extremely limited success, judging by the relatively high number of hospitalisations and deaths associated with Covid-19 across most of Europe and North America. Why might this be?

Once a highly infectious virus is endemic in a population, it is notoriously difficult to control. Its transmission may be delayed or slowed down, but in the absence of a safe and reliable vaccine, infections inevitably multiply until a sufficient number of persons are exposed to the virus to confer some measure of herd immunity upon the population in question. The heart of the problem is that the only way to stop an infectious disease from transmitting across a

population is by cutting the chain of transmission. But if the disease is already rampant in the population, isolating a few individuals or just one part of society will not be enough to bring the disease under control. Once a disease is endemic in the population, the only way to significantly reduce its rate of transmission is to change the way people interact with their family, friends, and colleagues.

But social interaction is notoriously complex and multifaceted, and not easily controlled or regulated in a centralised way. It occurs in such a wide variety of situations, many largely hidden from public view, that any attempt to regulate it is immediately confronted with the fact that it has a life of its own, which will tend to assert itself, if not in public, than in semipublic and private domains.

Another reason social life is so difficult to rigorously control is that it is not a luxury, but a basic necessity, something that defines who we are and who we aspire to be. A human life cut off from family and friends is, for most people, a life hardly worth living. People build up rituals and customs over many generations in order to meet their social needs and build up supportive communities.

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For example, every society has points of encounter, be they homes, bars, restaurants, or terraces, in which people gather, eat and drink, converse, dance, and spend time with each other. Most workplaces have social rituals attached to them, such as coffeetime or lunch with one's colleagues.

Many leisure activities, such as sport, art, music, cinema, and shopping, have a strong social component to them. Families gather in order to maintain a strong family bond and in order to make sure young and old alike are properly cared for.

Social interaction is part of who we are as human beings. It may vary in its manifestations across different societies and cultures, but it is a constant and essential component of human life. Keeping this in mind, a highly infectious disease that transmits asymptotically presents us with a serious challenge: what does one do if something absolutely essential to human life - social interaction - is precisely the channel through which a lethal virus may transmit across a population?

There are obviously many different strategies one could embrace for tackling this problem. But our observations concerning the dangers of social engineering suggest that an attitude of humility and restraint is especially important. The fact is, human beings and social life are not like puppets that one can readily manipulate with laws and regulations.

Social life is inseparable from who we are. It cannot be turned on and off like a tap. If a disease spreads through social interaction, an overly aggressive intervention designed to reduce social interaction risks producing unintended harms such as poverty, loneliness,

depressions, domestic abuse, and lowered levels of immunity associated with social isolation and depression.

Indeed, we are already seeing many of these effects from a number of recent public health interventions such as lockdowns and business closures. Ironically, the long-term harms of aggressive, population-wide restrictions on social life may be substantially worse than their public health benefits. The political idealists who thought they could keep Covid under control through aggressive social interventions may go down in the history books as social engineers who, however well-intentioned, wreaked havoc and despair in their societies, following in the footsteps of other social engineers, such as the American city planners, the Russian communists, and the enthusiastic architects of Iraq's new democratic regime.

The dangers of social engineering do not necessarily entail that *all* ambitious social policies are misguided or destructive. Nonetheless, history offers up a litany of failed attempts to engineer desirable so-

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cial outcomes, and these failures should be required reading for high-level policymakers. Seeing how our predecessors, acting in the name of progress and science, have inflicted far-reaching damage on generations of citizens, should induce in power-holders a sense of humility and restraint, and temper unrealistic expectations about the power of large-scale interventions to bring about a better society or to solve immensely complex social problems.

What does this humility and restraint entail in the context of an epidemic such as Covid-19? Does it mean we should just do nothing, and let nature take its course? Certainly not—passivity or inaction in the face of an epidemic would not be responsible. However, if we must manage an epidemic, then we should be very sparing in our interventions, undertaking the most modest, scientifically grounded, and targeted interventions available at this time, and avoiding highly systematic and ambitious interventions that are likely to carry far-reaching unintended consequences difficult to correct or control.

In light of the complexity of a virus that transmits through social life, and is apparently infectious even in asymptomatic individuals, the most prudent approach at this time would be to abandon dangerously disruptive policies that paralyze the social life of individuals who run low risks of suffering serious or debilitating disease from exposure to SARS-CoV-2, and turn our attention to policies that we know, with a high degree of certainty, can limit the harms of Covid-19 without attacking other aspects of people's physical and mental health. Such policies include the expansion of healthcare capacity; improvements in quarantine protocols and healthcare training and resources in elderly care homes, and more effective public education campaigns targeted at vulnerable populations and their close contacts.

Modest interventions like these do not generate much spectacle, do not tank the national economy, and do not require the erection of a police state. But modesty and restraint, unfortunately, are not the hallmark of politics as we know it ●

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PARA SABER MÁS: Jacobs, Jane (1992), *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Vintage Book, Nueva York.

FOTO: Página 7: La estatua de Saddam Hussein se derrumba en la Plaza Firdos de Bagdad el 9 de abril de 2003. Esta imagen es obra de algún funcionario de las Fuerzas Armadas de los Estados Unidos o del Departamento de Defensa, tomada por empleados de éstas durante su servicio oficial. Por ello, es un trabajo del gobierno federal de los Estados Unidos, y ha sido liberada al dominio público, (Creative Commons). Página 8: English: Daniel Burnham's 1909 plan for Chicago, IL, USA. Fuente: J. Crocker Author: Daniel Burnham, (Creative Commons). Página 9: Mapa mundial de países y territorios que registran casos de enfermedad COVID-19 [11/12/2020], (Creative Commons).
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