
LESS IS MORE: THE MORAL VIRTUE OF POLICY MINIMALISM*

Amitai Etzioni

There are many forces that drive hyper-optimism concerning the governments' ability to redesign and reengineer societal systems in individual societies as well as at the global scale. However, societies and the international community are very resistant to deliberate change. So the hyper-optimism in the sphere of societal engineering leads to squandering of scarce resources, especially moral and political capital, that could be used to generate some change if the goals were properly limited and the efforts much focused. All grand designs aiming at jump from the world as it is to a world as it ought to be (according to the particular designer) are doomed to fail. A minimalist approach is much more realistic than the hyper-optimism of progressive ideologies. Minimalism suggests that once security is established and consolidated one can experiment in forming additional layers of cooperation and institution-building. Attention should be paid to various limited efforts that test new approaches and that may lead to beneficial changes in international relations.

Keywords: *global security, domestic security, minimalism, hyper-optimism, societal engineering, international relations, international community.*

Communism and the liberal democratic ideologies – the domestic and foreign policies of nations as different as Russia and the United States – have one major common failing: they vastly overestimate the capacity of governments to redesign and reengineer societal systems. This is especially true when the driving force of change is mainly a foreign power, when various powers engage in what should be called a long-distance societal engineering. Thus, the capacity to build democracy (or socialism) in other nations, as well as to form new global regimes, turns out to be much more limited than the leading modern ideologies have assumed.

I cannot stress enough that I am not arguing that major societal changes do not occur, but merely that very often these changes are not those willed nor directed by governments or any other elite or power. Thus, Russia today is a rather different society and power than it was 30 years ago, but hardly the one to which the Communist Party aspired at the time. And while no one knows yet how the American attempts to change the Iraqi and Afghan polities will end up, it is safe to assume they will not turn into the kind of regimes President Bush envisioned when he ordered American forces into both countries. The evaluations of the United Nations differ, but no one sees any resemblance between the United Nations we deal with these days and the one its founders envisioned.

There are many forces that drive hyper-optimism. These include the Enlightenment, which held that the rise of science and, more generally, reason, will leave behind the world dominated by tradition and religion, and allow 'man' to design a 'rational' world. Both socialism and liberalism embraced the idea of progress and the ability to vastly

improve – if not to perfect – societies, people, and the world. The spread of education and mass media involved the masses in politics and encouraged those in power to try to legitimate their governance by promising to move their people into ideal future states.

It is ironic that neo-conservative thinkers, who rose because they advanced a much more pessimistic and realistic view of human nature and society, fell prey to the same hyper-optimism. Conservatives have long held a much dimmer view of societal and personal change, in part, of course, because preventing change served the interests of those who embraced their ideologies. Their ideas gained a great deal of following in the United States, after various liberation movements in the 1960s destroyed the old regime. Family relations, minority relations, sexual mores, national bonds, and authority figures from generals to priests, from union leaders to fathers, were all undermined. (It is much easier to undermine regimes than to build new ones.) At the same time, American society experienced a period of liberal optimism, reflected in the ideas that are known as the Great Society, which led to the launching of a large number of government programs, including several that aimed – among other things – at bringing people out of poverty, overcoming racial discrimination and gender differences, reducing inequality, and exporting liberalism to scores of other countries. Neo-conservatism rose in the 1970s as a reaction. Its advocates pointed out that most of these government programs delivered much less than they promised. In the following years, rejection of government ‘interventions’ in societal affairs became very popular, as well as limiting involvement overseas, such as foreign aid.

For reasons that are far from obvious, the same neo-conservatives formed in the 1990s a new hyper-optimistic ideology that led President George W. Bush to hold that the United States government could promote major societal changes overseas that it was unable to successfully promote at home. Followers of this ideology believed the United States could turn nations such as Iraq and Afghanistan into shining capitalistic democracies, despite the fact that these nations had very little educational, cultural, economic, and political foundations for such developments. Bush Administration also assumed that it could pressure nations such as Russia, Iran, and even North Korea to embrace democratic regimes and that peace would prevail on a global scale. Peace was expected to follow because – it was assumed – democracies do not go to war with one another.

The tragic but unavoidable fact is that societies in general, and the international community in particular, are very resistant to deliberate change. Hence, those in power best greatly scale back their ambitions, at home and overseas. To accept that our capacity for societal engineering, especially long distance, is very limited is not a matter of resignation or fatalism. On the contrary, greatly curtailing ambitions and focusing efforts has major salutary consequences for change. The main reason is that hyper-optimism leads to squandering of scarce resources, especially moral and political capital, that could be used to generate some change if the goals were properly limited and the efforts much focused.

Scarcity is a term used by economists to denote a situation when wants exceed the availability of the resources needed to satisfy these wants, a near-universal condition. I suggest that those who seek to advance societal change face a similar condition. A change needs to be promoted through educational means, moral suasion, incentives, and the coercive powers of the state, all of which burn up resources. Given that the resources needed to promote change are limited and substantially short of those which full implementation requires, agents of change face near-universal scarcity. This is

well-known as far as economic resources are concerned, but also holds for moral and political capital.

Moral capital is the capacity to persuade. Moral authorities, such as religious and public leaders, have a limited capacity to win the support of their followers for particular lines of action. Taking on one particular moral issue inevitably means that there will be other issues that will not be engaged or only will be on a lower level. Political capital is the ability to garner the support of individual legislators, voters, and various factions (such as lobbies and interest groups). It, too, is chronically short of what is needed by those who seek to promote change. I stress this point because those who believe in grand progress often imply that if a power or a government just put its mind to it, just 'really' wanted it, it could promote the desired changes. (In the year I served in the White House, about every two weeks or so some civic or corporate leader came to beseech the President to make a speech calling for whatever changes that leader favored. These leaders firmly believed that if the President just convinced the people of what must be done, the rest would follow. Roosevelt's 'fireside chats' were often mentioned as supporting this hopeful vision. Sadly, these notions are not merely illusions but diminish that which can be done.)

The more severe the scarcity, the more crucial self-restraint and careful selection of goals and means becomes, and the greater the damage caused in situations in which such focusing is neglected or obscured, because such neglect tends to cause a squandering of resources, moral and political capital included. The tragic fact is that the moral and political capital needed for advancing societal change in general, and on the international level in particular, is in very short supply; scarcity is very high. As I see it, a major implication of this high level of scarcity is that the ethics of triage, applied in medical emergencies and natural disasters, must be applied to attempts to advance societal engineering. Many worthy goals cannot be served and must be abandoned; some goals will be advanced even if help is not granted and hence should be let be, even if they could benefit from some additional resources; few, carefully selected goals – especially those in which small investments can have relatively high multiplier effects – should be granted most of the preliminary attention. Once these are advanced, resources may be turned elsewhere.

I cannot stress enough that such a minimalist approach, while much more realistic than the hyper-optimism of progressive ideologies, it is not amoral. On the contrary, not engaging in triage is immoral because it causes major human suffering to linger beyond what is necessary, for one squanders resources due to a scattergun approach.

Security First

As I tried to show previously (in *Security First: For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy* [Etzioni 2001]), both on the domestic and international fronts, providing basic security should be granted the highest priority. By 'basic security', I mean conditions under which people can feel secure in their lives – free in both public spaces and in their homes, free to go to work and to let their children go to school, and to exercise their other rights, such as attending religious and political events – but not an environment in which they are completely risk-free. One reason for this difference is that a risk-free environment is not needed for the exercise of other rights. Secondly, reducing risk to very low levels tends to involve a high violation of many other rights, especially privacy. And thirdly, a risk-free society is unattainable. None of these difficulties are faced

when one seeks merely to establish basic security. It was restored in major American cities after violence reached high levels in the 1970s, in Moscow after violence reached high levels in the 1990s, and in several major Iraqi cities after 2004–2006.

One reason I hold that security (broadly understood to include freedom from torture, maiming, and starvation, not just freedom from being killed) must be ranked as the most urgent need, is that serving all other needs is contingent on advancing this one, while securing life is not contingent on the others. It seems all too simple to state that dead people cannot work, take care of their families, vote, or exercise their rights, yet it bears repeating because the extensive implications of this observation are often ignored: when basic security is not provided, all other lines of activity are undermined – but not vice versa. (This statement refers, of course, only to true threats to life, not to the politics of fear.) The supreme standing of security is also supported by the finding that when basic security is provided, the public support for non-security (*e.g.*, civil and political) rights increases, but not the other way around. This stands in contrast to the assumption that ‘regime change’ (*i.e.* forced democratization, including the introduction of the institutional arrangements required for the implementation of civil and political rights) is essential for turning nations into peaceful members of the international community – that is, for global and domestic security. Only democracies, this argument holds, do not wage war with other democracies.¹ However, recent experience shows that democratization is not a guarantee for security,² and that it is extremely difficult to forcefully democratize nations.³

Implications for Public Policy

On the domestic front, the preceding analysis favors the kind of policies introduced in New York City when it faced high levels of violent crime. These policies involved reactivating various communities to enforce their norms against those who violated them by treating minor transgressions as if they were serious offenses. (The core idea behind these policies is often associated with the term ‘broken windows’. It was championed by George Kelling and James Q. Wilson in 1982 in the *Atlantic Monthly* [Kelling and Wilson 1982; Kelling 1996]). While this policy is not free from criticism (Etzioni 2007: 44), it has been widely credited with achieving its desired results: restoring basic security and opening the door to greater promotion of other rights aside from the protection of life (Harcourt 2001). The same might be said about community policing, although it too is far from free from criticism.

With regard to foreign policy, one must take into account that it is implemented in an environment that is often especially taxing, and hence ranking rights is particularly necessary in this realm. I have already stated that the primacy of the right to life implies that basic security must be provided before democratization and a general promotion of human rights can take off, in direct opposition to the forced regime change hypothesis. (President Barack Obama articulated this position when he stated: ‘To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist’.)

With regard to the promotion of various security goals, the primacy of life clearly indicates that deproliferation and the prevention of the spread of WMDs should trump all other considerations, as these weapons are means through which the lives of very large numbers of people can be annihilated and through which they are currently threatened. This may seem obvious, but on numerous occasions this issue has not been given

first priority; for instance, in dealing with Russia, for years promotion of democracy and human rights was given priority over accelerating the implementation of the Cooperative Threat Reduction Initiative, which seeks to enhance the safeguarding of nuclear weapons and fissile materials (Chesluk 2004: 250–274).

Also, the primacy of life favors policies that seek to stop genocides, civil wars, pandemics, and mass starvation. One cannot rely on the primacy of life as the leading normative principle to guide and legitimate the foreign policy of a nation – or the policies of a group of nations or international institutions – if the lives to be protected are only of the citizens of a particular nation. Even a modicum of consistency, a major foundation of robust ethical judgments, requires that all lives be respected. True, it is beyond the reach of current human capacity to stop all killing, maiming, torture, and starvation. However, it is not impossible to stop them when they occur on a large scale. (Those who may argue that the definition of ‘large’ scale is a subjective concept may note that the United Nations has developed a fairly clear set of definitions that allow one to determine whether or not a genocide is occurring [Etzioni 2007: 15–19].)

The high regard for life also urges that the promotion of democracy and human rights by the people of one country for the sake of those living under some other regime should be limited to non-lethal means, such as education and cultural exchanges. Military intervention for these goals is not in line with the stated principle.

One may ask whether the high priority accorded to security, broadly understood, implies that organizations devoted to other purposes – say, Doctors Without Borders – should seek to change their charter or turn over their resources to organizations dedicated to security. Arguably, in some abstract world, all organizations dedicated to the common good would follow the same overarching set of priorities. However, given that these organizations have different funding sources, political structures, and even legal foundations, they cannot and should not all focus on security. However, these organizations could best engage in triage within their own realm of service. For instance, Doctors Without Borders might focus more on saving lives than on, say, repairing cleft palates, or those who provide food might concentrate on curbing starvation before providing diet supplements to prevent malnutrition. Such ranking examples may at first seem heartless; their normativity stands out only when one recognizes that there are not enough resources to cover all the numerous purposes that deserve to be promoted; hence avoiding triage results in offending values that at least the promoters of human rights hold in high regard.

Stage Two

There is some merit in asking – once basic security is achieved – what the next layer of goals ought to be. Even once security is established, one still must engage in policy triage to avoid squandering what good one can achieve. The main difference between this stage and the first one is that there is much more room here for variation on the domestic, national level and for experimentation and piecing together on the transnational level. This statement requires some elaboration.

In 1990, American intellectuals were engaged in a grand optimistic triumphalism following the collapse of the communist regime in the USSR. The parade was led by Francis Fukuyama, who argued that all nations were about to reach a state of democratic capitalism, the end state of history. As he saw it, there was not only one end state but all nations were and ought to rush toward it. (Hence the neo-conservative idea that the United States should give nations who are still ‘in history’ a helping hand and, if

need be, a push or kick, to help them reach the end state.) However, we have since learned that: (a) different nations envision different end states as well as different pathways; for instance, compare the Chinese to the Indian journey; (b) nations that moved or seemed to move toward an American kind of democracy have changed course, including Russia and several nations in Latin America; (c) the United States and its allies are unable to turn nations – especially in the Muslim world – into democracies (unless the term is so diluted that it becomes meaningless); (d) most importantly, as long as these nations do not attack one another, do not support terrorism, do not build WMDs, and do not commit genocides at home – that is, violate the security needs of their people and of the world – change is best left largely to their own people. Others may provide ideas, cultural engagement, trade, tourism, and technological means (for instance, access to the Internet) – all non-lethal – but there is no ability to use force to change regimes from Burma to Saudi Arabia, from Venezuela and Cuba to Libya.

On the international front, minimalism suggests that once security is established and consolidated – as it seems among the European nations that are members of the European Union – one can experiment in forming additional layers of cooperation and institution-building. Even here, trying to push too far, too fast has proven to be detrimental. The EU is greatly stressed because it tried both to greatly expand its membership and – at the same time – to ‘deepen’ (to move from a large unanimous decision-making mode to a much more majoritarian one, which entails a considerable loss of sovereignty for the member nations). It remains to be seen if this most advanced experiment in building a layer of transnational institutions on top of the existing national ones can be much advanced. Other regional bodies are in a much more preliminary stage.

All grand designs that aim to jump from the world as it is to a world as it ought to be (according to the particular designer) are doomed to fail. Although one can argue quite persuasively about the merits of a world government, it distracts from what can be done. And those who believe that some kind of reform of the United Nations – or agreement among the major powers – will lead to a new world order are hyper-optimistic and the unwitting enemies of change.

Instead, in stage two mind should be paid to various limited efforts that test new approaches and that, if gradually pieced together, may lead to beneficial changes in international relations. Some of these steps are institutional, such as the development of the WTO, World Bank, IMF (all of which require updating to counter future near-global financial crises of the kind that racked the world in 2008–2009), ICANN, and even ICC. Others entail the formation of transnational civic bodies, such as the thousands of new and expanding INGOs that have arisen since 1990. Still others involve informal networks of civil servants dealing with the same issues – say, environmental protection – in various countries. Additional promotion of a shared global language is another step that could provide a tool for whatever global order is evolving. (English is, in effect, the only candidate for such a language; whether or not this is the best language to serve in this role or whether it is ‘just’ for it to occupy this status is a different question.) The same holds for the development of transnational technological means of communication and the free movement of people. Each of these factors on its own have less ‘legs’ than its visionary champions hope for, but together they can and do move us toward new possibilities. Meanwhile, it is essential that these developments do not distract the powers that be and the people of the world from focusing on basics: ensuring that, at the very least, no massive killing, raping, torture, starvation, or pandemic will take place.

NOTES

* The paper is an English version of the contribution to the edited volume (in Russian) for the Yaroslavl Political Forum (*Демократия и модернизация: к дискуссии о вызовах XXI века*, под редакцией В. Л. Иноземцева, Москва: Издательство «Европа», 2010. С. 249–266). © Centre for Post-Industrial Studies (Moscow).

¹ For more readings that support the ‘Democracies don’t fight Democracies’ premise, see Rummel 1999: 10; Mintz and Geva 1993: 484–503; Polachek 2002: 295–309.

² A strong argument against the ‘Democracies don’t Fight Democracies’ argument can be found in Schwartz and Skinner 1999. Also see Zakaria 2003 and Kaplan 2000.

³ There is much evidence from many parts of the world that ... in fact, such ‘reforms’ as the installation ... of ‘multi-party democracy’ actually exacerbate or even create ethnic, religious, or tribal differences, which then create unrest... (Rengger 1997: 63)

REFERENCES

- Chesluk, B.
2004. Community Policing in New York City. *Cultural Anthropology* 19(2): 250–274.
- Etzioni, A.
2007. *Security First: For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Harcourt, B. E.
2001. *Illusion of Order: the False Promises of Broken Windows Policing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kaplan, R. D.
2000. *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War*. New York: Random House.
- Kelling, G.
1996. *Fixing Broken Windows*. New York: Free Press.
- Kelling, G., and Wilson, J. Q.
1982. Broken Windows. *Atlantic Monthly* 249(3): 29–38.
- Mintz, A., and Geva, N.
1993. Why don't Democracies Fight Each Other? *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 37(3) (September): 484–503.
- Polachek, S. W.
2002. Why Democracies Cooperate More and Fight Less: The Relationship Between International Trade and Cooperation. *Review of International Economics* 5(3): 295–309.
- Rengger, N. J.
1997. Towards a Culture of Democracy? Democratic Theory and Democratization in Eastern and Central Europe. In Pridham, G., Herring, E., and Sanford, G. (eds.), *Building Democracy? The International Dimension of Democratization in Eastern Europe*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Rummel, R. J.
1999. Democracies don't Fight Democracies. *Peace Magazine* 15(3): 10–15.
- Schwartz, Th., and Skinner, K. K.
1999. The Myth of Democratic Pacifism. *Hoover Digest* 2: 98–103.
- Zakaria, F.
2003. *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.