

I

THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL ORDER

Social order is a core theoretical issue in the social sciences. The problem arises because human beings are both individual and social. If we were each living alone on a private planet, we could do whatever we wanted and would never have to worry about anyone else. Or, if each of us were attached to one group mind, we would have no individual impulses and urges. But we are both. Every individual inhabits a separate physical body and thus each has his or her own experiences, information, feelings, and ambitions. Yet we are not completely independent. Stories of people living in isolation—neglected children, prisoners in solitary confinement—tell us that we need social contact to be physically and emotionally healthy and simply to stay alive.

For social order to arise and be maintained, two separate problems must be overcome. People must be able to coordinate their actions and they must cooperate to attain common goals.

Coordination requires that people develop stable expectations about others' behavior. When driving, for example, it is helpful to know whether others are likely to approach you on the right or the left side of the road. If you and I agree to a date Friday at 8:00 P.M., we presume that we are referring to the same time zone and calendar and that we will each be at the same place at the specified time. If you and I agree to a phone call Monday at 12:00 and you're in London and I'm in Los Angeles, coordination is more difficult. If you call at noon London time but I'm expecting a call at noon Los Angeles time, then I will likely miss you. I will be asleep.

We can have stable expectations and still not much social order, however. Contemporary Afghanistan, for example, is a society visited by frequent interethnic violence, highly unequal relations between the genders and age grades, and a meager standard of living. Yet Afghan society also exhibits high predictability. Because most Afghans expect to be living under these conditions, they act according to their expectations and

therefore are able to carry on. But life is hard. It is predictable but not what we would call orderly. Something else is required for social order to be maintained. If people are to live together, they must not only be able to coordinate their activities but also to interact productively—to do things that help rather than hurt others. Thus highly ordered societies have a remarkable capacity to sustain *cooperation*.

Cooperation entails people working together for the same end. Talent aside, a basketball team with high average assists and rebounds will be more successful than one in which players concentrate their efforts on individual scoring. People who care most about their own personal statistics and making the pros are unlikely to be good team players. As a result, the team will be less successful than it could be.

The challenge is that behaving cooperatively may impose costs on the individual. Everyone thinks it's a good idea to spend money on education, but nobody wants to pay more property taxes. We appreciate National Public Radio, but many of us change stations when it's fund-raising time. In many situations, then, the interests of the individual and the group are at odds. Sometimes individuals fail to contribute to the group—they don't volunteer at the local school, don't donate money to National Public Radio, and don't give to people when help is needed. They hope that others will work to improve the community but would prefer to enjoy the benefits without having to make too much effort themselves.¹ At other times, people may do things that impose harm on the group—take others' property, pollute, or cheat. They do what they want regardless of the effects of their actions on others. If order is to be maintained, these tendencies must be overcome.

The question is: How can societies promote high levels of coordination and cooperation? The answer depends, in part, on assumptions about human nature. As you will see, social theorists make very different assumptions about individual motivation. If we assume that people are largely altruistic—inclined to work for the same end—then the principal obstacle to social order is coordination. In the example above, people want to have that trans-Atlantic phone call but may be confused about the time difference between London and Los Angeles. In American politics, if we assume that politicians want the best for the United States, but that Republicans and Democrats differ in their views of the appropriate role of government in the economy, then legislative gridlock is a likely outcome. If we assume that people are largely self-interested, then cooperation is problematic as well. Republicans and Democrats may not only have different views of the issues, but they may also care about their own re-election. If so, then

1. This syndrome has come to be known in social science as the free-rider problem (Olson 1965).

they are not likely to make hard decisions that are unpopular with their constituents.

Societies vary in their levels of coordination and cooperation and, therefore, in their levels of social order. The highest known levels of social order on the planet are found among the social insects—ants, wasps, and bees.² Ants manage to coordinate their activities to obtain food, deal with garbage, and dispose of their dead (Johnson 2001). They also behave in self-sacrificing ways. The worker caste—females subservient to the needs of their mother—are content to surrender their own reproduction in order to raise sisters and brothers. Not only do worker ants give up the prospect of having their own offspring, but they also risk their lives on behalf of the colony. Just leaving the nest to search for food is to choose danger over safety. Some ant species have been observed to suffer a death rate of 6 percent per hour when they hunt for food. Virtual suicide is the fate of workers of *Cataglyphis bicolor*, a scavenger of dead insects and other arthropods in the North African desert (Hölldobler and Wilson 1994). Ant societies appear to be superorganisms that can attain vast geographic and numerical scope: one European supercolony of an Argentine species of ants extends for at least six thousand kilometers and consists of millions of nests comprising billions of workers (Giraud, Pedersen, and Keller 2002).³

Human societies are less ordered than those of the social insects. Yet even here there is wide variation. Sometimes human groups can attain relatively high levels of social order—even under difficult circumstances. This was amply demonstrated in New York City after the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001. The city did not fall into chaos. Instead, New Yorkers listened to the news for information and instructions and went to work. In the midst of scenes of devastation unprecedented in American history, volunteers flooded the Ground Zero site in lower Manhattan offering their help, restaurants gave away food to rescuers and victims, and celebrities raised funds for the victims in telethons.

Societies may not always be so resilient, however. Thomas Hobbes provides a famous description of social disorder in *Leviathan*, written in 1651 in the midst of the gory English Civil War:

There is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain:
and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the

2. As poet Alexander Pope put it in *An Essay on Man* (Pope [1733–34] 1994, 65), much can be gained if we “Learn each small people’s genius, policies, / The ant’s republic, and the realm of bees.”

3. The leading explanation of this high level of social cooperation among these insects is genetic relatedness (Dawkins 1989). This explanation, however, does not account for the most important variations in social order found among human societies.

commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short (see pp. 93–94).⁴

The degree of disorder that we observe at home and around the world is not as extreme as that depicted in Hobbes's colorful prose. Edward Banfield (1958), for example, describes a southern Italian village, Montegrano, circa 1950, in which there is relatively little social order. Although the village has inadequate schools, bad medical facilities, and poor roads—conditions that harm everyone—the residents do not cooperate politically to pressure the various government agencies that conceivably might remedy these problems. Underlying this inability to cooperate is an utter lack of public-spiritedness. Indeed, the very idea of public-spiritedness is so incomprehensible in Montegrano that Banfield has to explain the meaning of the concept to a local teacher. Not only is public-spiritedness unknown in this village, but there is a pervasive desire to keep others from getting ahead.

Societies with high levels of social order are able to cope with challenges like those faced in Montegrano. They are better able to provide education, control crime, reduce war, limit terrorism, improve public health, address global warming, and so forth.

They may also limit freedom. More order is not necessarily better. As appealing as it is to have low crime rates, very high levels of social order may impose great costs on individuals. None of us would be likely to choose to live in an ant-like community. Thus in this book we make no claims about the level of order that is desirable. Rather, we focus on explanations of how social order is actually achieved.

Under what conditions are people able both to coordinate their activities and to cooperate? Through what mechanisms is social order achieved? Theories of social order explain how order is produced and maintained and why some groups, towns, and societies have more order than others. These theories do so by focusing on one or both of the problems—coordination and cooperation—described previously. In the next section we describe

4. Much the same story emerges from descriptions of the civil war in Yugoslavia in 1991. Although each of the former Yugoslav republics had a dominant ethnic group, substantial minority populations also resided in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Once the central government disintegrated, many people became insecure. If members of a Serb family living in Croatia were attacked, would the Croat police protect them? Would the Serbian police protect Croats in the same situation? After the collapse of central authority, the demand for security led to the rise of warlords, newfound celebrities of the Balkans, who engaged in prolonged and bloody campaigns of ethnic cleansing (Ignatieff 1993).

what theory is and identify its components. We then turn to the five most important theoretical solutions that have been proposed for the problem of social order—individuals, hierarchies, markets, groups, and networks. Each solution seeks to explain social order. The solutions differ depending on the conditions that are identified as causing social order and on the mechanisms by which this order is produced.

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