

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 can 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.

Contemporary Afghanistan, for example, is a society visited by frequent violence, highly unequal relations between the genders and ages, 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 shoulder the work to improve society and prefer to enjoy the benefits without having to make too much effort themselves. At other times, people may do things that

impose harm on the group—take others' property, pollute, cheat, lie, or steal. 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. Social theorists make intriguing 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—how do we coordinate everyone in a society to want to move toward the same altruistic goals?

As an example, take politics in the US. If we assume that politicians want the best for the United States but we can't agree on what "the best" is, it is safe to assume that Republicans and Democrats will differ in their views of what's best and how to achieve whatever the goal (outcome) should be. One thing is "for sure:" 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 (the structural component, or what's good for the society in which we all must live), but they may also care about their own reelection (the individual component, or what is good for the individual politician). If they care more about self than society 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. Ants coordinate their activities to obtain food, deal with garbage, and dispose of their dead. 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. Ants suffer a death rate of 6% per hour when they hunt for food.

Human societies are less ordered than those of the social insects. But 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.

Societies are not always 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 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

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violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.

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 the concept has to be explained 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.

But they may also limit freedom and 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 community such as that of the ants. Thus 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 own personal activities and to cooperate with others? 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.