

LA « GRANDE SOCIÉTÉ » SELON FRIEDRICH HAYEK :*The permanent limitations of our factual knowledge*

The constructivist approach¹ leads to false conclusions because man's actions are largely successful, not merely in the primitive stage but perhaps even more so in civilization, because they are adapted both to the particular facts which he knows and to a great many other facts he does not and cannot know. And this adaptation to the general circumstances that surround him is brought about by his observance of rules which he has not designed and often does not even know explicitly, although he is able to honour them in action. Or, to put this differently, our adaptation to our environment does not consist only, and perhaps not even chiefly, in an insight into the relations between cause and effect, but also in our actions being governed by rules adapted to the kind of world in which we live, that is, to circumstances which we are not aware of and which yet determine the pattern of our successful actions.

Complete rationality of action in the Cartesian sense demands complete knowledge of all the relevant facts. A designer or engineer needs all the data and full power to control or manipulate them if he is to organize the material objects to produce the intended result. But the success of action in society depends on more particular facts than anyone can possibly know. And our whole civilization in consequence rests, and must rest, on our *believing* much that we cannot *know* to be true in the Cartesian sense.

What we must ask the reader to keep constantly in mind throughout this book, then, is the fact of the necessary and irremediable ignorance on everyone's part of most of the particular facts which determine the actions of all the several members of human society. This may at first seem to be a fact so obvious and incontestable as hardly to deserve mention, and still less to require proof. Yet the result of not constantly stressing it is that it is only too readily forgotten. This is so mainly because it is a very inconvenient fact which makes both our attempts to explain and our attempts to influence intelligently the processes of society very much more difficult, and which places severe limits on what we can say or do about them. There exists therefore a great temptation, as a first approximation, to begin with the assumption that we know everything needed for full explanation or control. This provisional assumption is often treated as something of little consequence which can later be dropped without much effect on the conclusions. Yet this necessary ignorance of most of the particulars which enter the order of a Great Society is the source of the central problem of all social order and the false assumption by which it is provisionally put aside is mostly never explicitly abandoned but merely conveniently forgotten. The argument then proceeds as if that ignorance did not matter.

The fact of our irremediable ignorance of most of the particular facts which determine the processes of society is, however, the reason why most social institutions have taken the form they actually have. To talk about a society about which either the observer or any of its members knows all the particular facts is to talk about something wholly different from anything which has ever existed - a society in which most of what we find in our society would

¹ En particulier l'approche socialiste selon Hayek (ma note).

not and could not exist and which, if it ever occurred, would possess properties we cannot even imagine.

I have discussed the importance of our necessary ignorance of the concrete facts at some length in an earlier book and will emphasize its central importance here mainly by stating it at the head of the whole exposition. But there are several points which require re-statement or elaboration. In the first instance, the incurable ignorance of everyone which I am speaking is the ignorance of particular facts which are or will become known to somebody and thereby affect the whole structure of society. This structure of human activities constantly adapts itself, and functions through adapting itself, to millions of facts which in their entirety are not known to anybody. The significance of this process is most obvious and was at first stressed in the economic field. As it has been said, 'the economic life of a non-socialist society consists of millions of relations or flows between individual firms and households. We can establish certain theorems about them, but we can never observe all.'² The insight into the significance of our institutional ignorance in the economic sphere, and into the methods by which we have learnt to overcome this obstacle, was in fact the starting point for those ideas which in the present book are systematically applied to a much wider field. It will be one of our chief contentions that most of the rules of conduct which govern our actions, and most of the institutions which arise out of this regularity, are adaptations to the impossibility of anyone taking conscious account of all the particular facts which enter into the order of society. We shall see, in particular, that the possibility of justice rests on this necessary limitation of our factual knowledge, and that insight into the nature of justice is therefore denied to all those constructivists who habitually argue on the assumption of omniscience.

Another consequence of this basic fact which must be stressed here is that only in the small groups of primitive society can collaboration between the members rest largely on the circumstance that at anyone moment they will know more or less the same particular circumstances. Some wise men may be better at interpreting the immediately perceived circumstances or at remembering things in remote places unknown to the others. But the concrete events which the individuals encounter in their daily pursuits will be very much the same for all, and they will act together because the events they know and the objectives at which they aim are more or less the same.

The situation is wholly different in the Great³ or Open Society where millions of men interact and where civilization as we know it has developed. Economics has long stressed the 'division of *labour*' which such a situation involves. But it has laid much less stress on the fragmentation of *knowledge*, on the fact that each member of society can have only a small fraction of the knowledge possessed by all, and that each is therefore ignorant of most of the facts on which the working of society rests. Yet it is the utilization of much more knowledge than anyone can

² J. A. Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis* (New York, 1954), p. 241.

³ The expression 'the Great Society', which we shall frequently use in the same sense in which we shall use Sir Karl Popper's term 'the Open Society', was, of course, already familiar in the eighteenth century (see for example Richard Cumberland, *A Treatise on the Law of Nature* (London, 1727), ch1 8 section 9, as well as Adam Smith and Rousseau) and in modern times was revived by Graham Wallas when he used it as the title for one of his books (*The Great Society* (London and New York, 1920)). It has probably not lost its suitability by its use as a political slogan by a recent American administration.

possess, and therefore the fact that each moves within a coherent structure most of whose determinants are unknown to him, that constitutes the distinctive feature of all advanced civilizations.

In civilized society it is indeed not so much the greater knowledge that the individual can acquire, as the greater benefit he receives from the knowledge possessed by others, which is the cause of his ability to pursue an infinitely wider range of ends than merely the satisfaction of his most pressing physical needs. Indeed, a 'civilized' individual may be very ignorant, more ignorant than many a savage, and yet greatly benefit from the civilization in which he lives.

The characteristic error of the constructivist rationalists in this respect is that they tend to base their argument on what has been called the *synoptic delusion*, that is, on the fiction that all the relevant facts are known to some one mind, and that it is possible to construct from this knowledge of the particulars a desirable social order. Sometimes the delusion is expressed with a touching naivete by the enthusiasts for a deliberately planned society, as when one of them dreams of the development of 'the art of simultaneous thinking: the ability to deal with a multitude of related phenomena at the same time, and of composing in a single picture both the qualitative and the quantitative attributes of these phenomena.'⁴ They seem completely unaware that this dream simply assumes away the central problem which any effort towards the understanding or shaping of the order of society raises: our incapacity to assemble as a surveyable whole all the data which enter into the social order. Yet all those who are fascinated by the beautiful plans which result from such an approach because they are 'so orderly, so visible, so easy to understand'⁵, are the victims of the synoptic delusion and forget that these plans owe their seeming clarity to the planner's disregard of all the facts he does not know.

Friedrich Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty (Droit, législation et liberté)*, 1973, T. 1, p.11-15.

⁴ Lewis Mumford in his introduction to F. Mackenzie (ed), *Planned Society* (New York, 1937), p. vii: 'We have still to develop what Patrick Geddes used sometimes to call the art of simultaneous thinking: the ability to deal with a multitude of related phenomena at the same time, and of composing, in a single picture, both the qualitative and the quantitative attributes of these phenomena.'

⁵ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York, 1961).