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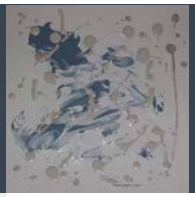

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EDITORIAL BOARDS

In Defense of Useless Economics

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Abstract: Although the assertion that economics should be as relevant as possible to real-world problems is uncontroversial when it comes to applied work, it is less persuasive when extended to economic theory. This paper contends that economic theorists ought to be exempt from the demand for immediate practical relevance for two reasons. First, research that appears useless in the short run can prove highly valuable in the long run. Second, the ultimate aim of economic theory is to help create a coherent picture of the world we inhabit, a goal independent of direct applicability. Moreover, because the activities of theorists and applied economists differ in important ways, economic theory and applied economics should retain their relative autonomy.

Keywords: Role of economics; Relevance of economics; Theory and policy; Theory and policy; Economic method; Applied economics

JEL: A11, A13, B41

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Adam Smith (1967, pp. 22-23), it is not practical considerations what marks the beginning of a science but an excitement of 'wonder' at something new or uncommon.[1] Although in general his observation is probably correct, the science, of which he is generally considered to be the founding-father, seems to be an exception. It has been usually dissatisfaction with the world around them that led people to study social phenomena; and they have done so expecting to find remedies to social problems, particularly, to that of poverty (Senior 1831; Hayek 1933; Stigler 1959; Robbins 1963; Blaug 2002; Bowles 2006). Indeed, Smith himself held the view that the "first object of Political Economy is to provide subsistence for the people" (Smith 2008, p. 395). This focus on practical issues is only natural, since for a long time a potential subject-matter for a science—something which could possibly excite purely theoretical interest (or 'wonder')—did not seem to exist at all.[2]

It was long believed that all social problems were caused by the ignorance or perhaps moral failures on the part of rulers. The *art* of Political Economy was then to provide instructions to the government that would be instrumental in ensuring prosperity of the nations; ruling a nation was thus considered analogous to the management of a household.[3] Nevertheless, the failures of social reformers revealed that there were some social 'laws' (or a 'natural order') at least to

some extent independent of human will (Mises 1996; Hayek 1933). This finding, together with the conviction of non-supernatural origin of the social 'laws' (Schumpeter 1954), opened the door to the science of Political Economy, which was to study these 'laws.'

It is not to say that with the emergence of the science of Political Economy the practical branch of it began to decline: quite the opposite. Instead of disinterested enquiry of the workings of the 'invisible hand' the theoretical study continued to be pursued above all (but not exclusively) to supplement the basis for practical decisions (Keynes 1999, p. 26; Marshall 1982, p. 2ff).[4] Economists desired to discover the laws of production and distribution of wealth to be able to make a use of them or perhaps even to control them—quite in line with Comte's dictum 'savoir pour prévior, prévoir pour pouvoir'.[5] As the result, the border between the pure and applied science remained blurred. Some economists wanted to separate the two by giving the name 'economics' to the pure science (Keynes 1999, p. 179fn); yet, the attempt was unsuccessful.

The demand for the practical relevance of economics remained high until today, without recognizing that the theoretical part need not (or perhaps even must not) be pursued with immediate applications in sight (Hayek 1933). Thus for instance Bowles (2006) claims that economics has always been about changing the way the world works and himself continues the tradition; for Varian (1994)—although he admits that "one could argue a reasonable case for economic theory on purely aesthetic grounds"—is economics primarily a 'policy science' analogous to engineering or medicine; Klein (1999) asks, whether economists are "led to promote ends of human betterment"; and according to Šťastný (2010) the failure of economists to be socially useful at least as garbagemen should be a source of embarrassment. There is only a handful of economists, who do not consider 'uselessness' (that is, inapplicability to practical problems) of economic theories a vice (Rubinstein (2007) would be an example at case).

Why is this the case? One explanation is that practically minded individuals tend to self-select into economics, while those who are more theoretically or philosophically inclined—unaware that economics can also pursue purely theoretical questions—gravitate toward disciplines such as mathematics, philosophy, biology, or physics. In addition, the broader academic trend over the past several decades has favored a shift from non-applied topics to more practical ones.[6]

First of all, there is no doubt that individuals disappointed with worldly affairs often seek refuge in the idealized world of pure theory (Romero and Klein 2007) provide an extensive list of various motives for escapism; however, this holds equally for economists as well as other scientists: for instance, English mathematician G. H. Hardy's turn to pure mathematics was presumably partly the result of his disgust that mathematics was applied in the warfare (G. H. Hardy 1992). In spite of the fact that the discoveries in natural sciences are often ill-applied, we do not observe, I believe, a massive shift towards non-applied issues. In fact, in line with my own claim, the contrary seems to be the case: as early as in the 1950s, Karl Popper complained about young overspecialized physicist, who ignored unpractical philosophical issues as unimportant; this attitude, to Popper's regret, "may easily lead to the end of science and its replacement by technology" (Popper 1992, p. 100).

In economics, the shift from fundamental to practical concerns can be traced through leading economists' attitudes toward the discipline's philosophical problems across historical periods. The classics—Senior (1831, 1854), Say (1836, 1840), Mill (1844, 1869), and Cairnes (1857)—devoted serious attention to supposedly 'useless' topics such as definition, scope, fundamental assumptions, and method. In their work, they valued explanation and understanding of social phenomena at least as highly as immediate practical application. Cournot (1971, p. 171) showed no frustration when he likened economists' influence on society to that of grammarians on language, and Gossen (1983, p. cxlvii) aspired to be the Copernicus, not the Galen, of social science. Accordingly, early Austrian economists concentrated on advancing theory, although the school later developed a distinct perspective on economic policy (Andersson and Hudik 2022; Leeson and Rouanet 2023).

More than a century later, Hausman (1984) complained that economics professed scorn for philosophizing, which at the same time he found unsurprising, given that very few economists practice it. And even though interest in philosophy and methodology of economic got some new vigor by Blaug's (1992)

well-known book, pursuing this subject remains to be a ticket to obscurity. Writing at about the same time as Hausman, Samuelson (paraphrasing G. B. Shaw) expressed the attitude of many economists when stating: "Those who can, do science; those who can't, prattle about its methodology" (Samuelson 1992, p. 240). In his Nobel lecture, the same author considered important to emphasize usefulness of economics for businessmen and bureaucrats, which was according to him achieved only in the second half of the 20th century (Samuelson 1972). This evidence, although admittedly scant and anecdotal, suggests no shift towards pure theory and fundamental issues of the science at the expense of applicability in the last two hundred years; on the contrary, it may be—together with Popper—feared that scientist's (and philosopher's) 'wonder' will eventually be replaced by the want for usefulness of a practical individual.

It seems non-controversial to say that those engaged in applied economics should strive for maximum relevance; it is arguably more difficult to defend the view that there is nothing wrong with economic theorists pursuing research with no direct or indirect applications. The purpose of this paper is precisely to make such a case. One argument has been suggested by Hayek, according to whom "too deliberate striving for immediate usefulness" is "likely to corrupt the intellectual integrity of the economist" because "immediate usefulness depends almost entirely on influence, and influence is gained most easily by concessions to popular prejudice and adherence to existing political groups" (Hayek 1933, p. 40).

Hayek's argument, although perhaps valid, applies to social sciences only; I shall pursue a different course here and focus on more general arguments in favor of 'useless' theorizing. Specifically, I argue that research that appears to be useless in the short run can turn out to be useful in the long run. Hence, to limit research only to fields with direct and obvious applicability can be short-sighted since uselessness is only apparent. Furthermore, I suggest that the ultimate aim of economic theory is to help us to understand the world around us and that this aim has nothing to do with practical applicability. Improved understanding is achieved through the process of explanatory unification. However, as theory becomes more general and 'abstract', it is necessarily less 'relevant' to everyday experience. Real-world relevance is the primary goal of applied economists and only an indirect concern for economic theorists. I therefore distinguish the activities of theorists and applied researchers and argue that economic theory and applied economics should remain separate spheres.

2. A PRACTICAL CASE FOR USELESSNESS

The first argument in favor of 'useless' research is presumably easy to accept even for highly practical individuals: what seems useless at one point in time may later prove to be extremely useful—sometimes after a period so long that it far exceeds the average human lifespan. Whitehead (1911) provides several examples: first one is Faraday's law of induction discovered in the early 1830s. When asked what the use of his discovery was, Faraday answered: 'What is the use of a child—it grows to be a man.' And as Whitehead (1911, pp. 34-35) adds: "Faraday's child has grown to be a man and is now the basis of all the modern applications of electricity."

His next example is even more striking:

> No more impressive warning can be given to those who would confine knowledge and research to what is apparently useful, than the reflection that conic sections were studied for eighteen hundred years merely as an abstract science, without a thought of any utility other than to satisfy the craving for knowledge on the part of mathematicians, and that then at the end of this long period of abstract study, they were found to be the necessary key with which to attain the knowledge of one of the most important laws of the nature (Whitehead 1911, pp. 136-137).

To stay within mathematics, we may cite G. H. Hardy who had, in his own words, "never done anything 'useful'" (G. H. Hardy 1992, p. 151); yet, he contributed to (relatively) applied field of population genetics with what is now known as Hardy-Weinberg law.[7]

These examples suggest that when science is pressured to focus solely on directly applicable ideas, it tends to underperform relative to its true potential. Such a decline in intellectual productivity appears to have been evident in the past, particularly, when the Greek culture was replaced by Roman, as again beautifully documented by Whitehead, this staunch advocate of 'useless' theorizing:

> The death of Archimedes by the hands of a Roman soldier is symbolical of a world-change of the first magnitude: the theoretical Greeks, with their love of abstract science, were superseded in the leadership of the European world by the practical Romans. Lord Beaconsfield, in one of his novels, has defined a practical man as a man who practices the errors of his forefathers. The Romans were a great race, but they were cursed with the sterility which waits upon practicality. They did not improve upon the knowledge of their forefathers, and all their advances were confined to the minor technical details of engineering. They were not dreamers enough to arrive at new points of view, which could give a more fundamental control over the forces of nature. No Roman lost his life because he was absorbed in the contemplation of a mathematical diagram" (Whitehead 1911, 40-41).

All the examples provided above concern mathematics and natural sciences; are there examples from economics as well? One candidate is the auction theory that was elaborated as an application of the game theory. Game theory is a descendant of Lasker's and Zermelo's investigations into chess and although already in the 1940s RAND supported game theoretical research with a hope of warfare applications (Leonard 2010), this hope eventually remained largely unfulfilled: game theory continues to be for the most part conceptual framework for the study of decisions that affect each other (Rubinstein 2007; Leonard 2010). Yet, auction theory, developed from the game theoretical foundations, was successfully applied, for example, in the sale of 3G mobile phone licenses in Great Britain (Binmore and Klemperer 2002) or licenses to use electromagnetic spectrum for personal communication services (PCS) in the USA (McMillan 1994; McAfee and McMillan 1996; Cramton 1995, 1997, 1998). It thus appears that even in economics can sometimes 'useless' theorizing turn out to be useful in the long run.[8]

3. A PHILOSOPHICAL CASE FOR USELESSNESS

I now turn to my second argument: I suggest that economics helps to explain and understand the world around us and together with other sciences is part of cosmology—an endeavor to "paint a coherent and understandable picture of the Universe" (Popper 1992, p. 1). What I mean is that economics should attempt not only to explain *concrete* phenomena but more importantly to show, how seemingly unconnected explanations can be considered manifestations of the same underlying principles. This process may be called explanatory unification (Mäki 2001) or (scientific) reduction (Popper and Eccles 1983).[9] In his *History of Astronomy*, Adam Smith, comparing a scientific or philosophical system to a machine, described the explanatory unification as follows:

> The machines that are first invented to perform any particular movement are always the most complex, and succeeding artists generally discover that, with fewer wheels, with fewer principles of motion, than had originally been employed, the same effects may be more easily produced. The first [philosophic/scientific] systems, in the same manner, are always the most complex, and a particular connecting chain, or principle, is generally thought necessary to unite every two seemingly disjointed appearances: but it often happens, that one great connecting principle is afterwards found to be sufficient to bind together all the discordant phenomena that occur in a whole species of things (Smith 1982, p. 66).

I now present two examples of this unification in economics. First example is the development theory of price formation from the classics to the present. Ricardo's (2005) cost-theory of price focused on the expla-

nation of long-run prices of reproducible goods, although he leaves the impression that he would be able to provide more comprehensive theory (Marshall 1982, p. 670ff). Nevertheless, he failed to do so and the task had to be taken up by Marshall (1982), who was already equipped with marginal utility theory that Ricardo lacked. He added more emphasis on the demand side, which opened the door to the analysis of the short run. Yet, he still let the costs of production co-determine the price.

Böhm-Bawerk (2006) and Wicksteed (1957), building on earlier contributions of Jevons (1965) and Menger (1950), argued that ultimately, it was only valuations of market participants what determined the price. They thus established the most general model of price formation that could account not only for the prices of goods but for *all* prices, including those of non-reproducible goods and of factors of production. Later it was shown by von Neumann and Morgenstern (1953) that the model of price formation can be thought of as an instance of even more general theory of coalitional games, which has much wider applicability in economics (Telser 1994; Moulin 1995), as well as in other social sciences (e.g., in political science (Austen-Smith and Banks 2000, 2005).

My second example concerns the development of the demand theory, specifically, the explanation of downward sloping demand. The stage was set by Marshall (1982), who explained the negative slope of demand with diminishing marginal utility (Hudik 2020). This explanation, however, required the assumption that consumers are able to rank differences of utilities; Hicks and Allen (1934a, 1934b) and Hicks (1946, 1986), elaborating on the insights of Pareto (1971) and Slutsky (1998), have shown that we can dispose with this assumption and still obtain all important results of the demand theory. Finally, Samuelson (1974) proved that downward sloping demand is the implication of consumer making consistent choices. Samuelson's theory was then transformed into a general choice theory now used both, within and outside economics.

Note that the more unification advances, the less relevant to the world of our immediate experience (more 'abstract') theory appears. Whereas Böhm-Bawerk's investigations of marginal pairs or Marshall's discussion of marginal utility are easily comprehensible and clearly related to the problem at hand (i.e., formation of price and downward sloping demand, respectively), Samuelson's and Houthakker's examination of integrability can seem remote, and only specialists can trace the route from such high-level principles to the concrete models used by practitioners.

4. THEORY AND HISTORY

Morrison (2000) and Hodgson (2001) point out that there is a trade-off between unification and the 'informative content' of a theory, and they claim that this unification has limits. This trade-off implies that 'useless' theoretical research must be complemented by 'useful' historical research. Whereas a theorist's goal is explanatory unification—focused on universal statements—a historian seeks explanations of concrete events—focused on singular statements—such as the Great Depression or U.S. unemployment in 2009. Theory and applied work should not be conflated: as Popper (1979) has already shown, a historian, unlike a theorist, takes theories as given (he does not test them) and instead examines the presence or absence of initial and boundary conditions. Hayek (1955) argues that this is the typical approach not only in economics but in all disciplines that study complex phenomena.

Consider, for example, Milgrom et al.'s (1990) attempt to explain the success of the Champagne Fairs that began in the twelfth century. The authors observed the absence of strong political authorities in France and, assuming the validity of a game-theoretical model, showed that a system of private judges could sustain markets without public enforcement. Their task was to identify the initial conditions and apply an appropriate model; they did not test the underlying theory.

Their explanation would be false if either a) the conditions they posited never existed—precisely the point raised by Edwards and Ogilvie (2011), who argue that political authorities were in fact present and actively enforcing property rights, providing security, and building infrastructure—or b) it were shown that people generally do not play subgame-perfect Nash equilibria in indefinitely repeated games, which

would invalidate the model's theoretical foundation. Demonstrating the latter would amount to an unintended test of theory, but conducting such a test is not the historian's aim.

If this account of what theorists and historians do is correct, then McCloskey's claim that economics is a "proper subset of history" (1986, p. 64) does not hold; theorists and historians address fundamentally different questions. Both groups should work on clearly defined problems, yet a theorist typically tackles conflicts among universal statements or mismatches between theory and evidence, whereas a historian confronts problems that arise directly from concrete events in the real world. Although history may seem more useful because it engages directly with concrete problems, it cannot be adequately pursued without theory, which helps connect the dots (Mises 1985; Leeson and Boettke 2006).

5. THEORY AND POLICY

In the previous section, I argued that the work of a theorist differs from that of a historian. Explaining historical events with theory is only one form of applied research; another is policy design. Accordingly, this section examines the difference between the roles of theorists and policy advisors. In fact, a policy advisor's role closely resembles that of a historian: both take existing theories as given and look for the presence or absence of specific initial conditions (Popper 1979).

To give an example, suppose a policy advisor is designing a tax system. His goal may be to achieve a particular income distribution or to maximize tax revenue subject to specified constraints. Before he adopts a specific tax scheme, he must examine factors such as the possibility of migration, possible differences in individual preferences, the nature of the economy's returns to scale, market structure, and demand- and supply-elasticities. The appropriate scheme—whose theoretical foundations the advisor does not question—is chosen on the basis of empirical investigation of these initial conditions. Some factors (for example, the nature of individual preferences) are often very costly to determine, and the choice of an appropriate system sometimes depends on which conditions can actually be measured. If the chosen scheme fails to achieve its intended goals, the fault lies either with the initial conditions or with the theory—that is, the theory was misapplied or it is incorrect. Nonetheless, as with historical explanation, it must be emphasized that improving theories is not the primary concern of economic policy: for both the policy advisor and the historian, theories are instruments to be applied more or less appropriately.

To summarize the difference between a policy advisor and a theorist, the former takes both the problem to be solved (the policy goals) and the relevant theories as given, and then seeks to determine the initial conditions. The latter likewise accepts the problem itself as given; nonetheless, he does not accept theories uncritically. On the contrary, his task is to replace them with more adequate ones—often by manipulating the initial conditions to delineate the theory's domain of applicability (Popper 1979).

Whereas a policy advisor must engage in empirical research to discover which particular theory applies in a given case, much theoretical work is armchair work: deriving the explanandum from an ever-smaller set of assumptions. Although cooperation between theorists and policy advisors can clearly benefit both sides (the theorist supplies the instruments, and the advisor indicates where those instruments may fail), they are distinct roles and should be recognized as such.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to defend the space for work that seems 'useless' today yet advances our understanding of economic phenomena. I first showed that several discoveries in mathematics and economics were born as curiosities and only later revealed their practical power. Compressing inquiry into projects with an obvious, near-term payoff risks repeating the Roman preference for engineering tweaks over Archimedean breakthroughs, and thus throttling science's generative capacity.

Second, I argued that economic theory plays an indispensable integrative role among the sciences. By stripping away context-specific detail, theorists seek explanatory unification, binding disparate phenomena

under ever more general principles. Inevitably, this abstract work feels remote from everyday experience, but its purpose is not immediate utility; it is to forge the conceptual links that make the world intelligible to us.

Third, I distinguished the tasks of theorists and applied researchers, such as historians, and policy advisers. Applied researchers accept existing theories as tools, investigating whether the initial and boundary conditions required for those tools to work are actually present; theorists, by contrast, question and refine the tools themselves. Confusing these distinct roles should be avoided. In particular, theorists should be spared demands practical relevance: their task is to clarify first principles and they should be allowed to pursue it as effectively as possible.

NOTES

1 See also Hayek (1967, pp. 22-23). Veblen (1919), when addressing this classical ideal of disinterested pursuit of truth, so dramatically expressed by Democritus ("I would rather find a single causal law than be the king of Persia!"), would talk about 'idle curiosity'.

2 However, Whately (1847, p. 97) reports how this sentiment was excited in Moyhanger, the first New Zealander to visit England, who was "struck with especial wonder, in his visit to London, at the mystery, as it appeared to him, how such an immense population could be fed; as he saw neither cattle nor crops. Many of the Londoners, who would perhaps have laughed at the savage's admiration, would probably have been found never to have even thought of the mechanism which is here at work." Europeans experiencing the expansion of markets in the nineteenth-century possibly also wondered about its operation, as documented by Thomas Hardy through a character in his novel *Tess of the d'Urbevilles* (T. Hardy 2007, p. 240). See also note 4 below.

3 Writing already in 1821, James Mill still maintained that "Political Economy is to the State, what domestic economy is to the family" (J. Mill 1844, p. 1).

4 Newcomb (1966, p. 9), according to whom there is "nothing in the wonders of the heavens or the mysteries of chemical combination better fitted to kindle our curiosity, and to gratify our desire to understand what is going on around us, than the study of the social organism," seems to have been an exception.

5 Notwithstanding this, economists have done little of actual 'preaching' (read: policy-recommending) in their professional works—at least if one finds evidence provided by Stigler (1980) sufficient to substantiate this claim.

6 The progressive 'imperialism' of the utilitarian reason over the personality of a modern man has been observed long ago. The classic works here are Schumpeter (2006), Ortega y Gasset (1950) and – from belles-lettres literature—Huxley (2007). Nonetheless, it has also been suggested that in fact, the opposite tendency was observable in economics: that there had been a shift away from policy relevant issues towards pure theory; this shift is said to be caused by the frustration of economists stemming from their limited influence on practical policy (Šťastný 2010, p. 66).

7 Ortega y Gasset (1950, p. 60) even claims that technical requirements are only "useful, practical precipitate of superfluous, unpractical activities."

8 It was suggested to me by Pavel Pelikán that there may be an evolutionary advantage to 'idle curiosity', which can explain the existence of this sentiment. The logic behind it is that some piece of information can gain new function in a new context. If collecting of information is not too costly and if the probability that a piece of temporarily useless information will increase fitness in the future is sufficiently high, it is advantageous to possess a capacity to collect information in excess to what is directly useful.

9 Mäki (2001) distinguishes between two versions of explanatory unification: derivational and ontological. Roughly speaking, the former can be denoted as Kantian or impositionist, the latter as Aristotelian or realist. For the purposes of the present article it is immaterial which of the two versions is adopted.

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The Road to Serfdom Framework: Hayek's Critique of France's Centralized Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: This article offers a Hayekian analysis of France's response to the COVID-19 crisis, exploring the tension between spontaneous order and centralized planning in a systemic, international crisis context. Drawing on Hayek's insights, we examine the difficulty for social scientists to conceptualize spontaneous and constructed orders in moments of emergency, where the pressure for immediate state intervention often obscures decentralized alternatives. We then turn to the specificity of the French case, arguing that France's intensely bureaucratic and centralized political elite makes it uniquely susceptible to planning pitfalls. This article offers a novel theoretical contribution by systematically applying the structure of Hayek's book, *The Road to Serfdom*, to the analysis of France's COVID-19 crisis management, what I would call in *The Road to Serfdom Framework*. By following the book's key chapters, this study transposes Hayek's arguments on the dangers of centralization and planning to the pandemic response, introducing, for the first time in the literature, a methodology that highlights the pitfalls of state centralization through a Hayekian lens. Hayek was particularly critical of France's legal tradition and conception of liberalism, shaped by rationalist and dirigiste intellectual currents that prioritize state intervention over emergent social order. This institutional legacy explains the rigid, top-down structure of France's pandemic management, which we document through an analysis of key public policy measures implemented during the crisis—ranging from lockdowns to emergency decrees and the extension of executive powers.

Keywords: Hayek, Spontaneous Order, Applied Austrian Economics, Centralized Planning, COVID-19 Pandemic, French Legal Tradition, Crisis Management, Pandemic Policy

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most significant global crises of the 21st century, disrupting economies, societies, and healthcare systems (Schwab and Malleret 2020; Bagus, Peña-Ramos, and Sánchez-Bayón 2023). Most governments worldwide took rapid decisions, directives sometimes coming from international organizations like the World Health Organization, often relying on centralized planning to manage the crisis (Pennington 2023; Kuznetsova 2020). France exemplifies this approach, as its pandemic response reflected a strong tradition of centralized authority, deeply embedded in its administrative and political culture (Hebert 2002; Clévenot and Saludjian 2022). From strict nationwide lockdowns to the centraliza-

tion of health resources and decisions, France's actions highlight the strengths and weaknesses of a centralized model in handling complex and uncertain events (Pennington 2021; Malliet and al. 2020). Friedrich Hayek, a staunch critic of central planning, argued that such approaches inherently fail due to the "knowledge problem," the inability of any authority to effectively gather and process the dispersed information needed for efficient decision-making (Hayek 1945, 1978). The French case thus provides a valuable opportunity to evaluate Hayek's theories in the context of a modern crisis, questioning whether his critique remains relevant and whether his alternative, the concept of spontaneous order, could offer a more effective solution (Huerta de Soto, Bagus, and Sánchez-Bayón 2021; Hayek 1972).

While Hayek's critique of centralized planning and his defense of spontaneous order are widely discussed in economic and philosophical circles, there has been little research done to apply his ideas to specific contemporary crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Pennington 2020; Block 2020; Cato and Inoue 2022). The existing literature on France's pandemic response tends to focus on technical evaluations or policy critiques, often overlooking broader theoretical frameworks that could provide deeper insights into its successes and failures (Bouchet and Duvoux 2023; Malliet et al. 2020; Christl et al. 2024). Moreover, the French case remains underexplored from a Hayekian perspective, despite its unique administrative structure and history of centralized governance (Bartoli 2007). This gap is particularly striking given Hayek's critique of the French intellectual tradition, which he saw as overly rationalist and prone to centralization (Wenzel and Thomas 2023). Addressing this gap allows us to not only revisit Hayek's ideas in a concrete and timely context but also to contribute to broader discussions about the viability of centralized governance in managing crises in modern democracies (Devine 2020; Grayling 2017; Hahnel 2013).

This paper addresses the following key questions: (1) To what extent does France's centralized response to COVID-19 illustrate Hayek's critique of state planning? (2) What are the broader implications of Hayek's framework for crisis governance in contemporary democracies? (3) How can *The Road to Serfdom Framework* serve as a replicable analytical model for evaluating state interventions in crises? This article offers a contribution to the literature. First, it applies Friedrich Hayek's concepts—such as the limits of centralized knowledge, the role of spontaneous order, and the dangers of reactive regulation—to analyze the French government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, it develops a structured theoretical framework based on Hayek's book, *The Road to Serfdom*, using the book's key chapters as an analytical grid to examine the crisis, offering a valuable contribution to the fields of economics, political science, sociology, philosophy and crisis management approaches to *governance and liberty* (Boin 2008; Linz 2000; Ikeda 2002; Mises 1998, 1929). This approach is further reinforced by a pedagogical table and a comparative perspective, contrasting the French case with international examples. What I would call in *The Road to Serfdom Framework* in this research. Finally, this methodology—applying *The Road to Serfdom* as a structured lens to study crises—can be extended to other cases, whether in different countries or historical contexts, By doing so, it bridges the gap between theoretical critiques of central planning and the empirical realities of crisis management in a centralized system (Block 2020; Cato and Inoue 2022).

I. SPONTANEOUS ORDER VS. CONSTRUCTED ORDER: HOW DO THEY FUNCTION DURING A PANDEMIC?

Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic put into question the viability of spontaneous order in the face of rapid and unpredictable societal upheavals (Pennington 2020; Schwab and Malleret 2020). Hayek's theory of spontaneous order relies on the slow evolution of norms, institutions, and market mechanisms that emerge organically from individual interactions (Moroni 2014; Marsh 2010). In *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Hayek distinguishes between two approaches to law and regulation: Nomos and Thesis. These two forms of law reflect fundamentally different ways of understanding how legal systems operate and maintain societal order. Hayek's discussion highlights the importance of recognizing the organic development of law within society (Nomos) versus the imposition of laws by authority (Thesis) and how each approach impacts social order and economic efficiency. Nomos refers to laws that emerge spontaneously from the customs,

traditions, and collective practices of individuals within society. It represents a set of universal rules of just conduct that individuals generally follow without formal legislative processes. Nomos evolve, reflecting the values and expectations shared by community members. Its adaptability and decentralized nature allow for a flexible legal order that aligns with the organic development of society (Hayek 1976, p. 99). In contrast, Thesis refers to laws deliberately created and imposed by governments or central authorities. These laws are formal, enacted through legislative processes, and may not always reflect the underlying customs or spontaneous order that governs individuals' behaviors. Thesis-based laws can be arbitrary and often designed to achieve specific outcomes, disrupting the natural flow of societal interactions. Hayek criticizes this approach for its top-down nature, which frequently conflicts with the organic order of Nomos (Hayek 1976, p. 100). However, pandemics introduce immediate disruptions—mass mortality, shifts in social customs, and changes in economic behavior—that alter the conditions under which spontaneous order operates. The challenge, then, is twofold: on the one hand, global governance institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) advocate for a coordinated, centralized response to public health crises, reinforcing the idea that swift and uniform state action is necessary (Davies and Wenham 2020; Kuznetsova 2020). On the other hand, some argue that crises make decentralized responses even more essential, as localized knowledge and flexible adaptation can yield better outcomes than rigid, top-down directives (Greer et al. 2022; Burger et al. 2022; Park and Fowler 2021). The tension between spontaneous and constructed order becomes particularly acute in moments of emergency: how can societies react swiftly to immediate threats while respecting the rule of law and the decentralized nature of knowledge? This section will explore how Hayek's critique of central planning applies—or struggles to apply—when the urgency of action collides with the principles of emergent order and voluntary cooperation.

A. The Evolutionary Nature of Spontaneous Order

In his exploration of societal organization, F. A. Hayek emphasizes the *limits of centralized knowledge*, which he presents as a central challenge in both economic and social orders (Hayek 1945). He argues that knowledge is inherently dispersed among individuals, and no central authority can possess the comprehensive information necessary to make informed societal decisions (Hayek 1988). This idea underpins his critique of central planning and forms the foundation for his defense of decentralized systems like markets (Hayek 1972). Hayek's argument is rooted in several key points.

Hayek begins by pointing out that knowledge in society is widely dispersed among individuals. Each person holds a fraction of the knowledge available, specific to their experiences, local conditions, and personal circumstances. This fragmentation of knowledge makes it impossible for any single authority to access or aggregate all the relevant information needed to make effective decisions on behalf of society. "Not only do we not possess such an all-inclusive scale of values," Hayek argues, but "it would be impossible for any mind to comprehend the infinite variety of different needs of different people" (Hayek 1972, p. 62). This dispersal is vital for the functioning of a complex society, as it allows individuals to act based on their unique knowledge, which contributes to a more dynamic and efficient system.

Related to dispersed knowledge is the concept of "constitutional ignorance," which Hayek uses to describe the inherent limitations of human understanding (Streit and Kloten 1997). He asserts that individuals, particularly central authorities, are ignorant of the specific facts that influence economic activities and social interactions. This ignorance is not a temporary problem that can be solved with better data or technology; it is a fundamental barrier to the rational construction of society. As a result, no central planner can fully understand the conditions, needs, and preferences of all individuals within a society. Consequently, attempts at central planning or overly regulated economies are doomed to failure.

Given the limitations of individual knowledge and the impossibility of centralized understanding, Hayek underscores the importance of rules of conduct. These rules emerge as essential tools that allow individuals to navigate their ignorance and make decisions based on their limited knowledge. Rules help to guide behavior in a way that facilitates cooperation and coordination, creating a framework within which

individuals can interact effectively. Hayek contends that society would become unmanageable without such rules, as people would struggle to make informed decisions without comprehensive knowledge (Candela and Jacobsen 2021). A central authority does not impose these rules but emerges spontaneously from the interactions of individuals over time.

Hayek further argues that the market operates as a spontaneous order that effectively harnesses dispersed knowledge. In the market, individuals make decisions based on their knowledge and circumstances, which leads to a more efficient allocation of resources than a centrally planned system could achieve. The decentralized nature of the market allows it to incorporate a wide array of information that no single planner could access. Conversely, centralized planning tends to ignore or mishandle this dispersed knowledge, leading to inefficiencies and misallocations (Hayek 1945, 1988). Hayek views the market as a superior system for organizing society: it is adaptable and responsive to human knowledge's decentralized, fragmented nature.

In addition to critiquing centralized planning, Hayek also addresses the belief that scientific advancements can overcome the limitations of human knowledge. While science can provide valuable insights, Hayek asserts that it cannot eliminate individuals' fundamental ignorance regarding the specific facts necessary for effective decision-making. Even the most sophisticated scientific models cannot capture the complexity and diversity of individual needs and preferences. As Hayek states, "Whether [an individual's] interests center around his own physical needs, or whether he takes a warm interest in the welfare of every human being he knows, the ends about which he can be concerned will always be only an infinitesimal fraction of the needs of all men" (Hayek 1972, p. 62). Thus, science cannot fully compensate for centralized systems' lack of comprehensive knowledge.

In summary, Hayek's exploration of the limits of centralized knowledge highlights the importance of recognizing the dispersed nature of information in society. Centralized authorities, he argues, are inherently incapable of gathering and processing the vast amount of knowledge needed to make effective decisions for a complex society. Instead, Hayek advocates for decentralized systems—such as markets—that allow individuals to navigate their limited knowledge through spontaneous rules of conduct. His critique extends to the limitations of science, which, while helpful, cannot overcome the fundamental ignorance individuals face. This underscores Hayek's broader argument for minimal government intervention and the importance of spontaneous order in the functioning of society.

However, during a pandemic, the difficulty of relying on spontaneous order becomes particularly pronounced, as the urgency of the crisis often leads to demands for immediate, centralized interventions (Pennington 2020, 2021; Kuznetsova 2020). Governments face immense pressure to act swiftly, and the dispersion of knowledge that Hayek champions may appear inefficient compared to top-down directives (Gao and Zhang 2022). However, the pandemic also underscores the very limits of centralized knowledge that Hayek warns against. Rapidly evolving scientific understanding, unpredictable virus behavior, and diverse local conditions challenge the ability of any single authority to craft effective, universally applicable policies. Lockdowns, travel bans, and mass mandates often fail to account for regional variations in risk, economic trade-offs, and unintended social consequences. Meanwhile, decentralized responses—such as voluntary adaptation by businesses, local community-driven health initiatives, and market-driven innovations in medical treatments and supply chains—demonstrate the resilience of spontaneous order even in crises. The pandemic thus presents a paradox: while centralized action appears necessary in moments of extreme uncertainty, Hayek's insights remind us that excessive reliance on central planning risks inefficiencies, misallocations, and infringements on individual liberties that may outlast the emergency itself.

B. The Limits of Centralized Knowledge

In his critique of centralized planning and governance, F. A. Hayek highlights the inherent limits of centralized knowledge as a fundamental challenge in managing complex social and economic orders (Hayek 1945, 1972, 1988). Hayek argues that knowledge is not concentrated in the hands of a few but rather widely dispersed among individuals, making it impossible for any central authority to effectively collect and process the vast array of information necessary for governing an entire society. This limitation in centralized knowledge forms the basis of Hayek's argument for decentralized systems and spontaneous orders, such as markets, where individuals, guided by their knowledge, can make more efficient and informed decisions.

A key concept in Hayek's critique is that knowledge is inherently dispersed across society. Each individual holds unique, localized knowledge relevant to their specific circumstances and needs. Hayek emphasizes that no single entity or central planner can ever have access to the total knowledge required to make decisions on behalf of society. "It would be impossible for any mind to comprehend the infinite variety of different needs of different people which compete for the available resources" (Hayek 1972, p. 62). This dispersed knowledge means that each person can only know a small fraction of the information needed to manage complex social and economic systems, rendering centralized decision-making inefficient and prone to failure.

In connection with dispersed knowledge, Hayek introduces the concept of "constitutional ignorance," which refers to the inherent limitations of human understanding (Streit and Kloten 1997). He argues that no one, including those in positions of authority, can fully grasp all the factors that influence social interactions and economic activities. This ignorance is not simply a temporary shortcoming but a fundamental barrier to effective central planning. Despite their best efforts, Hayek insists that central authorities can never fully know the diverse and ever-changing conditions under which individuals make decisions. Consequently, this inherent ignorance will constrain any attempt to construct a rational and centrally planned society.

In light of this dispersed knowledge and constitutional ignorance, Hayek emphasizes the importance of rules to navigate the complexities of social interaction (Zubčić 2021; Martin and Wenzel 2020). These rules of conduct, which emerge spontaneously over time, serve as essential tools for guiding human behavior in a way that allows cooperation and coordination. Hayek contends that individuals, limited by their partial knowledge, rely on established rules to interact effectively with others. A central authority does not necessarily impose these rules; instead, they arise organically from the interactions of individuals within society. Without such rules, the complexity of social order would become unmanageable, as individuals would struggle to make informed decisions based on their limited knowledge.

Hayek sees the market as an exemplary spontaneous order that efficiently utilizes dispersed knowledge. The decentralized nature of market interactions allows individuals to make decisions based on their unique circumstances, preferences, and knowledge. In this system, information is not concentrated in the hands of a central planner but is instead diffused across millions of individual decisions. Hayek argues that this decentralized process leads to a more efficient allocation of resources than any centrally planned system could achieve. Central planning often fails to account for individuals' diverse and specific knowledge, leading to misallocations and inefficiencies that disrupt the economy's natural balance.

Hayek also critiques the notion that scientific advancements can overcome the limits of knowledge. While science can offer insights into specific areas, Hayek asserts that it cannot eliminate individuals' fundamental ignorance regarding the particular circumstances in which they must make decisions. No scientific model, no matter how sophisticated, can fully capture the complexity of human needs and preferences in a dynamic, evolving society. "The ends about which [a person] can be concerned will always be only an infinitesimal fraction of the needs of all men". Hayek argues that even the best scientific understanding cannot replace the local and tacit knowledge that individuals use to navigate their own lives.

In conclusion, Hayek's critique of centralized knowledge underscores the dispersed nature of information within society and the limitations this imposes on central planning. His argument centers on the

idea that no central authority can ever gather or process the full spectrum of knowledge needed to make informed decisions for society. Instead, Hayek advocates for spontaneous orders, such as markets, where individuals, guided by their knowledge and the rules of conduct that emerge naturally, can act in a way that leads to a more efficient and adaptive social order. His broader critique extends to the limitations of science, which, while valuable, cannot overcome the fundamental ignorance that plagues centralized decision-making.

In this sense, France presents a particularly compelling case study of Hayek's critique of centralized knowledge. The French administrative system, deeply rooted in its Napoleonic tradition, relies heavily on technocratic governance and centralized decision-making, particularly in times of crisis (Rosanvallon 2004). This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the government imposed uniform national lockdowns and curfews with little regard for regional variations in infection rates, hospital capacities, or local economic conditions (Greer et al. 2022). Unlike Germany or Switzerland, where decentralized federal structures allowed for tailored responses at the regional level, France's reliance on a top-down approach led to inefficiencies, including supply chain disruptions, delays in vaccine distribution, and economic dislocation in areas less affected by the virus (Schnabel and Hegele 2021; Freiburghaus, Mueller, and Vatter 2021; Greer et al. 2022). Institutions such as the École nationale d'administration (ENA) have historically cultivated a political elite trained in top-down management, reinforcing a culture of centralized control (Stevens 1978).

However, while this system has fostered administrative efficiency and policy coherence, it has also been criticized for its rigidity and detachment from local realities, often leading to a lack of adaptability in responding to complex and rapidly evolving crises (Gazier 1965; Medica 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this tendency was evident in the French government's response, which prioritized sweeping national mandates, uniform lockdowns, and bureaucratic control over healthcare resources (Malliet et al. 2020; Anderson 2023). Rather than allowing for decentralized, regionally adapted responses, policies were dictated from Paris with little consideration for local conditions or the diverse needs of businesses and communities. The centralized nature of the French response, while efficient in imposing compliance, led to significant inefficiencies, including supply shortages, delayed medical interventions, and economic dislocations that could have been mitigated through a more flexible, bottom-up approach. Hayek's insights into the limits of centralized knowledge help explain why such a rigid model struggled to account for the complexity and unpredictability of a rapidly evolving public health crisis (Pennington 2021). In contrast, countries with more decentralized governance structures, such as Sweden, Switzerland, or the United States, were often able to adopt more tailored responses, adjusting restrictions based on regional circumstances (Bylund and Packard 2021; Burger et al. 2022; Park and Fowler 2021). France's experience during the pandemic underscores Hayek's argument that centralized authorities, no matter how well-intentioned, are inherently constrained by their inability to access and process the dispersed knowledge embedded in society (Hayek 1988, 1972).

C. Principles as the Basis of Effective Regulation

In Chapter 3 of *Law, Legislation and Liberty (1976),* F. A. Hayek focuses on grounding effective regulation in *principles* rather than arbitrary decisions. He argues that only by adhering to clear and consistent principles can a legal system maintain individual freedom and prevent the abuse of power by rulers. For Hayek, principles are a bulwark against transforming laws into tools for pursuing specific ends at the expense of individual liberties. This focus on principles is critical to maintaining a stable and just society where laws protect freedom rather than undermine it.

Hayek argues that society must continually return to fundamental principles to preserve the blessings of liberty. Without a commitment to these principles, the legal system risks becoming a mere instrument for rulers to achieve their persona even rather than a protector of individual freedoms. He warns against allowing expediency or short-term goals to drive legal decisions, as this can erode the rule of law. By basing

regulations on time-tested principles, society can avoid this pitfall and ensure that laws protect freedoms and promote justice (*1976,* p. 62).

Hayek believes the law emerges from the judicial process through general rules of conduct. Once established, these rules regulate interactions among individuals by providing a consistent and predictable framework for behavior. The key feature of these rules is their universality—they are intended to apply to all individuals and an unknown number of future cases. This ensures that the law is based on principles of justice rather than tailored to specific situations or expedient outcomes. This way, principles-based laws promote social order and individual liberty by offering a stable and just framework for societal interactions *(*1976, pp. 63-64).

Hayek also cautions against the unintended consequences of interfering with the market order or social systems in ways disregard fundamental principles. While the immediate effects of such interference may be visible and even beneficial, Hayek warns that the more remote consequences are often unknown or overlooked. These distant effects, which may arise long after the initial interference, can disrupt the delicate balance of social and economic interactions. Hayek emphasizes the complexity of these systems and the importance of adhering to principles that consider the long-term, often unseen consequences of regulatory action (1976, p. 64).

For Hayek, the effectiveness of regulations depends on their universal application. Rules of conduct must be consistent and applicable to all individuals, without exception. He argues that arbitrary changes to these rules by authorities undermine the stability of the legal system and create uncertainty in society. Individuals rely on the stability of these rules to plan their actions and interactions. If rules are subject to frequent or arbitrary changes, it erodes trust in the system and creates confusion, ultimately destabilizing society. Therefore, Hayek asserts that laws must be based on universal principles that provide a reliable framework for behavior (1976, p. 65).

Hayek strongly advocates for the separation of powers, notably the division between the legislative and executive functions. This separation is crucial to ensuring that the enforcement of rules remains impartial and that individual freedoms are protected. If the legislative body—responsible for making the laws—also controls the enforcement of those laws, it risks using its power arbitrarily, making laws that serve its interests. By separating the creation and enforcement of laws, society can safeguard individual liberties and ensure that rules of conduct are applied fairly and universally (1976, pp. 66-67).

In summary, Hayek's discussion in Chapter 3 underscores the critical importance of principles in formulating effective regulation. He argues that laws must be grounded in enduring principles that promote justice and protect individual freedoms rather than being driven by expediency or short-term goals. Universally applied and consistently enforced rules of conduct form the foundation of a stable and free society. Hayek's insistence on the separation of powers further reinforces his view that regulation should be designed to safeguard liberty and prevent the concentration of power in the hands of any one authority.

France's approach to regulation, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, stands in stark contrast to Hayek's principle-based framework. The French legal and administrative system, characterized by its centralized governance and interventionist tradition, often prioritizes expediency over foundational legal principles (Wenzel and Thomas 2023). This was particularly evident in the rapid and sweeping legislative changes enacted during the crisis, such as emergency decrees that bypassed normal legislative scrutiny, frequent modifications to health regulations, and the expansion of executive authority under the *Loi d'urgence sanitaire* (LOI n° 2020-290). These measures, though justified as necessary responses to an evolving situation, undermined legal predictability and eroded trust in the regulatory system.

Hayek warned against such reactive, short-term policymaking, arguing that laws must be rooted in general and predictable principles to preserve liberty. In France, however, pandemic-era regulations often lacked this consistency, creating uncertainty for businesses, workers, and individuals. For example, the government's shifting stance on vaccine mandates, curfews, and travel restrictions led to widespread confusion and legal challenges. The enforcement of these rules, often at the discretion of regional prefects, fur-

ther exacerbated the instability, reinforcing Hayek's argument that arbitrary legal changes compromise individual freedom and economic stability.

Additionally, the fusion of legislative and executive power during the crisis exemplified the risks Hayek highlighted in undermining the separation of powers (Lachmayer 2024; Griglio 2020). The French government effectively concentrated decision-making authority within the executive branch, sidelining parliamentary debate and judicial oversight. The *Conseil d'État*, while occasionally reviewing government actions, largely upheld the administration's expansive use of emergency powers, raising concerns about the long-term implications for the rule of law (Lasserre 2020). From a Hayekian perspective, France's crisis management approach illustrates the dangers of disregarding stable legal principles in favor of ad hoc interventions, ultimately strengthening state control at the expense of individual rights and market adaptability.

D. The Dangers of Reactive Regulation

In his work, F. A. Hayek highlights the dangers of reactive regulation, prioritizing short-term needs and expediency over long-term stability and freedom. This type of regulation, driven by immediate concerns, can lead to unintended consequences that distort market signals and undermine individual liberties. Hayek argues that effective regulation must be grounded in coherent principles rather than reactive, situational responses, as the latter often sacrifices long-term societal health for short-term gains. His critique of expedient regulation is a caution against the temptation to regulate based on immediate visible effects rather than considering the broader, more complex implications.

Regulations driven by short-term expediency are often designed to address immediate problems or crises without sufficient regard for long-term consequences. Hayek notes that such regulations prioritize visible outcomes, making them appealing in the short run, but neglect the later indirect effects. This focus on the immediate can obscure the broader, less visible impacts, leading to a situation where the regulations solve one problem only to create several others down the line. Hayek emphasizes that "Freedom can be preserved only by following principles and is destroyed by following expediency" (1976, p. 56).

One of Hayek's key concerns about reactive regulation is its failure to account for the indirect effects of regulatory interventions. While the immediate impacts of regulation may be obvious and seemingly beneficial, the more remote consequences are often unknown or disregarded. These indirect effects may include distortions in market behavior, inefficiencies in resource allocation, or unintended shifts in economic activity. Hayek warns that because these broader repercussions are frequently overlooked, policies based on short-term considerations can ultimately harm the systems they are intended to help (Ibid.).

Reactive regulations also risk distorting the natural functioning of the market by interfering with price mechanisms and resource allocation. When authorities impose rules based on short-term needs, they can disrupt the market's ability to signal changes in supply, demand, and consumer preferences. Hayek argues that these distortions prevent the market from making necessary adjustments, leading to inefficiencies and misallocations. Over time, these disruptions can undermine the stability of the market system, eroding its capacity to allocate resources efficiently and adapt to changing conditions (Hayek 1976, p. 57).

Another danger of reactive regulation is the potential for organized interests to co-opt the regulatory process for their benefit. In a reactive regulatory environment, special interest groups may pressure policymakers to implement regulations that protect their positions at the expense of overall market efficiency. These groups often advocate for rules that favor their specific interests, which can lead to market distortions and unfair competition. Hayek cautions that this dynamic encourages a regulatory cycle in which powerful groups continually push for further interventions that benefit them, eroding the principles of fair competition and economic freedom (Ibid).

The most significant consequence of reactive regulation is the erosion of individual freedom. Hayek warns that focusing on expediency can lead to a dirigiste organization of society, where personal liberties are gradually sacrificed to achieve immediate regulatory goals. As each new regulation imposes restrictions on individual behavior, it creates a cycle in which further regulations are justified to address the problems

created by previous interventions. Hayek emphasizes that "freedom can be preserved only if treated as a supreme principle" and warns that prioritizing short-term expediency over long-term principles will inevitably lead to the progressive destruction of freedom (Ibid.).

In summary, Hayek's critique of reactive regulation underscores the dangers of prioritizing short-term expediency over long-term principles. Rules designed to address immediate needs often neglect the complex, indirect effects that emerge later, leading to market distortions and the erosion of individual freedoms. Hayek argues that effective regulation must be based on enduring principles that promote justice and freedom rather than expedient responses to immediate crises. By adhering to these principles, society can avoid the unintended consequences of reactive regulation and maintain a stable and free market order.

France's response to the COVID-19 pandemic clearly illustrates Hayek's warnings about the dangers of reactive regulation. The government's swift and often inconsistent policymaking—such as abrupt lockdown measures, shifting vaccine mandates, and fluctuating restrictions on businesses—prioritized immediate crisis management at the expense of long-term stability and legal consistency (Hafsi and Baba 2023). Though intended to curb the pandemic, these measures created widespread economic disruptions, market inefficiencies, and legal uncertainty. Hayek cautioned that such short-term interventions distort market signals and create regulatory cycles where each new restriction justifies further government control. The French regulatory approach, characterized by top-down decrees rather than principle-based legal frameworks, not only deepened economic instability but also normalized expanded state authority over individual freedoms. Hayek warned that freedom can be preserved only if treated as a supreme principle. Yet, expediency took precedence over constitutional norms in France, reinforcing a dirigiste governance model that undermined spontaneous order and market adaptability (Hayek 1960, p. 130).

II THE SINGULARITY OF FRANCE FOR HAYEK

France occupies a unique position in Friedrich Hayek's analysis of political and economic systems. Unlike the Anglo-Saxon tradition, which favors evolutionary institutions and spontaneous order, France has historically embraced a rationalist, top-down approach to governance. This intellectual and administrative legacy, deeply embedded in the country's institutions, explains why France remains one of the most centralized modern democracies—an outlier in Hayekian terms.

A. Hayek's Critique of the Dominant Conception of Liberalism in France

Hayek highlighted a critical distinction between the French and Anglo-Saxon traditions of liberalism, emphasizing how these differences have shaped France's unique trajectory (Hayek 1958). Anglo-Saxon liberalism, rooted in the British tradition, emphasizes individual autonomy, spontaneous order, and limited government intervention. In contrast, French liberalism has historically leaned toward rationalist ideals, where society is viewed as a construct that can and should be shaped by reason and centralized authority. This difference, Hayek argued, reflects the French intellectual tradition's reliance on top-down structures to achieve social order. This perspective often clashes with the bottom-up, decentralized approach championed by Anglo-Saxon thinkers (Wenzel 2010, p. 60).

Indeed, Hayek argues that freedom is not a natural state but a product of civilization, emerging not through deliberate design but as a result of spontaneous social evolution. He emphasizes that "the institutions of freedom, like everything freedom has created, were not established because people foresaw the benefits they would bring" (Hayek 1960, p. 107). Instead, once their advantages became evident, societies sought to understand and refine them. The study of liberty took shape in the eighteenth century, particularly in England and France, but with stark differences. In England, liberty was rooted in an "interpretation of traditions and institutions which had spontaneously grown up and were but imperfectly understood" (1960, p. 108).

In contrast, France, which did not have a tradition of liberty, pursued a "speculative and rationalistic" approach, attempting to construct a utopian vision through reason alone (Ibid). Over time, Hayek laments that this rationalist French tradition, with its "flattering assumptions about the unlimited powers of human reason," gained influence while the empirical and evolutionary English tradition declined (Ibid.). Though seductive in its logic, he warns that the French approach repeatedly fails because it disregards the organic, decentralized processes that sustain genuine liberty.

For Hayek, this divergence explains France's enduring preference for state intervention in economic and social affairs. French liberalism, shaped by figures such as Rousseau and later the *dirigiste* tradition, places a higher value on equality and collective welfare than individual freedom. Hayek viewed this as a fundamental misunderstanding of true liberalism, which he believed should prioritize protecting individual rights and facilitating voluntary cooperation within a decentralized framework. By subordinating individual autonomy to collective goals, French liberalism, in Hayek's view, paves the way for centralized planning and the erosion of liberty.

B. Hayek's Critique of the Culture of Central Planning Among the French Elite

Hayek was particularly critical of the French elite's penchant for central planning, which he attributed to the dominance of institutions such as the École Polytechnique and the École des Mines. These prestigious schools, which have trained generations of French technocrats and engineers, epitomize a mathematical, deterministic approach to governance. Hayek argued that this culture fosters a belief in the feasibility of designing and controlling complex social and economic systems, an assumption he viewed as fundamentally flawed. According to Hayek, the mathematical rigor and technical expertise prized by these institutions encourage their graduates to view society as a system to be planned and optimized, ignoring the unpredictable and adaptive nature of human interactions (Nakayama 2002). As Robert F. Hébert (2002, p. 19) notes:

> Hayek traces the roots of modern socialist thought to nineteenth-century France. His most pointed criticisms are reserved for Claude-Henri Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte. Saint-Simon is said to have inspired the École Polytechnique, a training ground for state planners. Comte, who served as Saint-Simon's secretary and collaborator, is credited with the pernicious doctrine that the entire social order can be changed through revision of the law of property. Together, these two writers launched a kind of social physics that encouraged socialism and other forms of centralized control.

This engineering mindset, Hayek contended, reflects a dangerous overconfidence in human reason and a disregard for the dispersed knowledge that underpins a free society. The tendency of French elites to prioritize efficiency and uniformity often leads to policies that stifle innovation, constrain individual choices, and create unintended consequences. Hayek warned that this culture of centralized planning not only undermines the principles of a free market but also concentrates power in the hands of a select few, increasing the risk of authoritarianism. In his critique of French technocracy, Hayek underscored the importance of humility in policymaking, emphasizing that no central authority can ever possess the knowledge necessary to manage the complexity of society effectively.

III. COVID-19 AND THE FRENCH RESPONSE: A CHALLENGE TO HAYEKIAN PRINCIPLES

The French government implemented extensive restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly impacting businesses, public gatherings, specific sectors, and key markets (Malliet et al. 2020; Clévenot and Saludjian 2022; Desson et al. 2020). While aimed at controlling the virus and protecting public health, these interventions had profound economic and social consequences, drawing criticism from a liberal perspective for distorting markets and infringing on individual freedoms (Karadimas 2023).

1. Mandatory Closures of Non-Essential Businesses
   Beginning in March 2020, non-essential businesses such as restaurants, bars, retail stores, and entertainment venues were mandated to close under the state of emergency law (LOI n° 2020-290). Essential services, including grocery stores, pharmacies, and banks, were allowed to continue operations. The economic fallout was severe, with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the retail and hospitality sectors experiencing widespread closures and job losses. The Austrian School critiques such interventions, highlighting their role in disrupting market efficiency and suppressing entrepreneurial activity (Fillieule 2025; De Soto 2010).

2. Restrictions on Public Gatherings and Curfews
   Public events and gatherings were heavily restricted, and curfews were imposed in high-risk regions, prohibiting movement between 9 PM and 6 AM under *Décret n° 2020-1310*. These measures greatly affected industries dependent on large gatherings, such as tourism, entertainment, and cultural events. Theaters, cinemas, and music festivals were canceled, creating a ripple effect on supply chains and employment in these sectors.

3. Sector-Specific Restrictions
   Specific industries faced targeted restrictions. The hospitality industry was required to comply with stringent health protocols, such as reduced seating capacities and curfews, which severely affected profitability. Public transportation services implemented capacity limits, and healthcare professionals were subjected to vaccination mandates, which barred unvaccinated workers from practicing. These measures disrupted healthcare services and strained the sector's already limited workforce (Pennington 2024).

4. Interference in Key Markets
   The government intervened in several markets:
   - Labor Market: Vaccination mandates and the promotion of teleworking created disparities in work accessibility (Abulibdeh 2020). Essential workers could not benefit from remote work flexibility, particularly in public-facing roles.
   - Information Market: The government sought to regulate information, combat misinformation, and raise concerns about censorship and control over legitimate information dissemination (Patel et al. 2020).
   - Healthcare Market: Restrictions on alternative treatments, such as hydroxychloroquine, highlighted tensions between public health policies and medical autonomy, sparking debates on innovation and individual medical decisions (Shakeel et al. 2023).

IV. THE FRENCH ROAD TO SERFDOM

We illustrate our argument here by a structured theoretical framework based on Hayek's book, *The Road to Serfdom*, using the book's key chapters as an analytical grid to examine the crisis that I would call *The Road to Serfdom Framework* in this research (see Table 1 below).

The Road to Serfdom Framework systematically applies Friedrich Hayek's key arguments from *The Road to Serfdom* to contemporary political crises—such as the COVID-19 pandemic or revolutions—by using its chapter structure as an analytical grid to assess the risks of centralization, state overreach, and the erosion of spontaneous order. The framework applies Friedrich Hayek's arguments from *The Road to Serfdom* to France's centralized response to COVID-19, assessing 14 key themes that illustrate the risks of state overreach. These include: (1) *The Abandoned Road*, highlighting the departure from liberal principles through emergency decrees; (2) *The Great Utopia*, demonstrating how utopian thinking led to strict lockdowns and vaccine mandates; (3) *Individualism vs. Collectivism*, showcasing the prioritization of collective well-being over individual freedoms; (4) *The Inevitability of Planning*, revealing how crisis narratives justified increased government control; (5) *Planning and Democracy*, illustrating how executive orders sidelined legislative debate; (6) *Planning and the Rule of Law*, where rapid regulatory shifts eroded legal predictability; (7) *Economic Control and Totalitarianism*, exposing how dirigisme reinforced state power; (8) *Who, Whom?*, examining the unchecked authority of health agencies; (9) *Security and Freedom*, discussing the trade-off between safety and individual liberties; (10) *Why the Worst Get on Top*, critiquing the rise of politically motivated decision-makers; (11) *The End of Truth*, addressing censorship of dissenting scientific voices; (12) *The Socialist Roots of Nazism*, cautioning against exclusionary policies such as banning unvaccinated professionals from working; (13) *The Totalitarians in Our Midst*, highlighting how COVID-19 measures blurred the line between democracy and technocracy; and (14) *Material Conditions and Ideal Ends*, questioning whether restrictive measures were justified in the name of public health. Through this structured analytical grid, the framework systematically evaluates France's pandemic response, demonstrating how Hayek's critique of central planning remains highly relevant in contemporary crisis governance. This approach is further reinforced by a pedagogical table and a comparative perspective, contrasting the French case with international examples.

Moving forward, France's administrative and intellectual evolution exemplifies what Friedrich Hayek termed the "abandoned road," marking a departure from liberal principles in favor of centralized authority. Indeed, in this sense, while the French Revolution initially championed individual liberty and economic freedom, subsequent developments veered toward collectivism and state intervention (Furet 1981; Hunt 1988). This shift was embodied by the rise of the welfare state and *dirigisme*, prioritizing centralized planning over decentralized market solutions. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified this trend, as the French government relied heavily on executive orders to impose sweeping measures such as lockdowns and curfews. These decisions, often bypassing parliamentary debate, concentrated power in the presidency, underscoring Hayek's warnings about the dangers of unchecked authority and the erosion of economic freedom in crises. Despite these strict measures, France did not achieve significantly better public health outcomes than countries with more decentralized and voluntary approaches, reinforcing Hayek's argument that coercive state intervention is neither a necessary nor an effective response to crises.

This centralization was fueled by what Hayek described as "The Great Utopia," a belief in the perfectibility of society through rational planning (Hayek 1972, pp. 24-32). During the pandemic, the French government's zero-risk approach exemplified this utopian mindset, striving to save everyone through mandatory vaccinations and other top-down measures (Negroni 2024). However, this idealistic pursuit ignored the complexity of human interactions and the trade-offs inherent in central planning. Policies designed to ensure public safety often disregarded decentralized decision-making processes, leading to inefficiencies and unintended consequences. The resulting economic and social tensions validated Hayek's critique that utopian thinking frequently undermines individual liberty and exacerbates the issues it seeks to resolve.

The tension between individualism and collectivism became starkly evident in France's implementation of the *laissez-passer sanitaire*, which restricted access to public spaces based on health status (Schouler 2024). These measures prioritized collective security at the expense of individual autonomy, aligning with Hayek's critique of collectivist systems. Critics highlighted the discriminatory nature of such policies, which excluded individuals from essential services and raised questions about equality before the law. Moreover, the overlaps between past public health policies and the COVID-19 response revealed a deeply ingrained centralist reflex, further reinforcing Hayek's warning that collectivism often erodes the balance between state control and individual freedom.

The narrative of planning as "inevitable" dominated French political discourse, particularly during the pandemic. President Macron's declaration, "Nous sommes en guerre" ("We are at war.") encapsulated the justification for sweeping state intervention (Macron 2020). Hayek critiqued this mindset, arguing that crises often serve as convenient pretexts for expanding state control. The French government's reliance on emergency measures, framed as necessary for public welfare, underscored the risk of normalizing such interventions, raising questions about the long-term implications for democracy and liberty.

Hayek's critique also emphasized the incompatibility of planning with the rule of law. Centralized decision-making during the pandemic led to frequent regulatory changes, undermining the principle of legal certainty. Measures such as mandatory vaccinations sparked debates about state intervention's limits and individual rights' inviolability. Critics drew parallels to the Nuremberg Code, emphasizing the ethical necessity of informed consent (Weindling 2001). By prioritizing collective health objectives, the French government often bypassed established legal protections, validating Hayek's concerns about the fragility of the rule of law under centralized regimes.

The French dirigiste model also reflects Hayek's assertion that economic control fosters authoritarian tendencies. While not overtly totalitarian, centralizing economic decisions created vulnerabilities, as the state assumed greater control over private enterprises and individual freedoms (Schouler et al. 2024). The *laissez-passer sanitaire* and restrictions on unvaccinated professionals, such as healthcare workers and police officers, exemplified how collectivist policies could lead to coercive practices (Maltezou et al. 2022). These measures deepened societal divides and highlighted the dangers of subordinating individual rights to state-defined collective goals (Gagneux-Brunon et al. 2022).

Finally, the pandemic revealed how technocratic governance could stifle dissent and manipulate truth (Davis 2021). The French government's reliance on scientific expertise[1] as an unquestionable authority curtailed public debate and suppressed alternative perspectives. Hayek warned that centralized systems often undermine the competition of ideas, replacing critical discourse with conformity. The elevation of expert-driven narratives during the pandemic reinforced this dynamic, reducing public trust in governance and eroding the foundational principles of a free society. These developments demonstrate the enduring relevance of Hayek's critique, as France's pandemic response illuminated the risks of central planning in undermining democracy, liberty, and the rule of law.

Table 1

The French Road to Serfdom during COVID-19: Key Themes and Examples (Using the methodology of The Road to Serfdom Framework).

The Road to Serfdom Framework systematically applies Friedrich Hayek's key arguments from his book,The Road to Serfdom, to contemporary political crises—such as the COVID-19 pandemic —by using its chapter structure as an analytical grid to assess the risks of centralization, state overreach, and the erosion of spontaneous order.

Theme	Key Argument	Example in France	International Comparison	Hayekian Principle
1. The Abandoned Road	Departure from liberal principles toward centralized authority.	The état d'urgence sanitaire allowed the government to rule by decree without parliamentary oversight (e.g., Decree No. 2020-1257, October 14, 2020).	In Germany, restrictions were implemented through parliamentary debate; in Sweden, most measures were advisory rather than coercive.	Centralized planning erodes individual autonomy and economic freedom.
2. The Great Utopia	Pursuit of a utopian vision through central planning.	The 'zero-risk' COVID-19 approach led to drastic interventions (lockdowns, mandatory vaccinations).	The UK initially resisted lockdowns before reversing course; Denmark abandoned most restrictions early on.	Utopian thinking leads to inefficiency, overreach, and unintended consequences.
3. Individualism vs. Collectivism	Collectivist policies prioritize majority well-being at the expense of individual freedoms.	The pass sanitaire restricted access to services (Decree No. 2021-1059).	The US varied by state: Florida rejected mandates, while New York enforced strict restrictions.	Collectivism undermines innovation, freedom, and voluntary cooperation.
4. The 'Inevitability' of Planning	Justification of planning as 'inevitable' in crises reinforces state intervention.	Macron's declaration: "Nous sommes en guerre," to justify government control.	Japan promoted voluntary compliance rather than coercive mandates.	Planning is not inevitable; spontaneous order offers alternatives.
5. Planning and Democracy	Centralized planning undermines democratic processes by concentrating power.	Executive orders sidelined legislative debates during COVID-19.	Italy followed a similar path, while Switzerland held referendums on pandemic policies.	Democracy is incompatible with the coercive power required for central planning.
6. Planning and the Rule of Law	Central planning leads to arbitrary governance, eroding legal predictability.	Frequent regulatory changes (mask mandates, vaccine doses increased from one to three, etc.).	In Australia, emergency powers allowed for extreme measures like forced quarantine camps.	General and predictable rules are essential for legal certainty and individual rights.
7. Economic Control and Totalitarianism	State control of the economy increases vulnerability to authoritarianism.	Dirigisme amplified by health mandates and business closures.	China used COVID-19 as justification for expanding social credit surveillance.	Economic freedom is essential to safeguard against totalitarian tendencies.
8. Who, Whom?	Central planning creates power imbalances between citizens and technocrats.	Health agencies (agence de santé) exercised unchecked authority.	In Canada, public health officials, not elected representatives, determined prolonged restrictions.	Power centralization enables coercion and reduces accountability.
9. Security and Freedom	Trade-off between public safety and personal liberty.	Lockdowns and vaccine mandates restricted freedoms in the name of public health.	Sweden maintained voluntary measures, arguing that coercion was unnecessary.	Security often comes at the cost of liberty; balance is crucial.
10. Why the Worst Get on Top	Centralization attracts individuals who seek power for its own sake.	Politicians like Olivier Véran, with no scientific expertise, made critical health decisions.	The WHO was accused of prioritizing political interests over scientific evidence.	Centralization incentivizes power-seekers rather than effective leaders.
11. The End of Truth	Centralized systems suppress dissent and critical debate.	Critics like Professors Raoult and Montagnier were sidelined.	In the US, dissenting scientists were censored on major platforms.	Open competition of ideas is essential for truth and liberty.
12. The Socialist Roots of Nazism	Collectivist policies can lead to authoritarian practices under the guise of public welfare.	Unvaccinated professionals (doctors, soldiers, police) were barred from working.	Austria briefly attempted mandatory vaccination for all adults.	State-directed collectivism risks undermining individual rights and freedoms.
13. The Totalitarians in Our Midst	Normalization of state intervention blurs the line between democracy and technocracy.	COVID-19 restrictions faced legal challenges (70 jurists signed critiques).	In the EU, the digital COVID pass became a de facto requirement for cross-border movement.	Technocracy and normalization of interventionism weaken democratic safeguards.
14. Material Conditions and Ideal Ends	Material conditions justify restrictive measures at the expense of liberal ideals.	Lockdowns and mandates were justified as necessary public health measures.	New Zealand implemented strict lockdowns and border controls, while Taiwan relied on targeted tracing.	Liberty must not be sacrificed for temporary material gains.

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V. THE FUTURE OF *THE ROAD TO SERFDOM FRAMEWORK*: LIMITATIONS, ADAPTATIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH

While *The Road to Serfdom Framework* provides a valuable lens for analyzing state intervention and crisis management, it has limitations. Hayek's insights remain highly relevant, but the socio-economic landscape has evolved considerably since the mid-20th century (Sémanne 2025). The modern state operates within a complex digital and globalized environment, where power is centralized within governments and dispersed among private monopolies, surveillance networks, and media conglomerates (Andrejevic 2007; Zuboff 2019). This necessitates expanding Hayek's framework to incorporate new factors shaping contemporary governance, including the role of digital surveillance, corporate monopolization, and the transformation of public discourse in an era dominated by social media (Sémanne 2025).

One major limitation of Hayek's original model is its relative neglect of corporate monopolies' role in fostering centralized control. While Hayek focused primarily on state intervention and planning, modern economies are increasingly influenced by powerful multinational corporations, particularly in the technology and finance sectors. The rise of "surveillance capitalism" suggests that economic control is no longer the sole domain of the state; instead, digital platforms collect vast amounts of personal data, shaping consumer behavior and political discourse in ways that resemble centralized economic planning (Zuboff 2019; Kettl 2011; Freeman 2003). A refined version of *The Road to Serfdom Framework* would need to consider how private sector monopolization interacts with state power, especially in cases where governments and large corporations collaborate to regulate speech, economic activity, and personal liberties.

Additionally, the emergence of social media and digital media conglomerates raises questions about the extent to which freedom of expression and public discourse remain decentralized. Hayek was deeply concerned with the control of information under totalitarian regimes, but in today's world, the threat to free expression does not always come from the state alone. Platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, and YouTube have gained extraordinary power over the dissemination of information, often acting as gatekeepers of acceptable discourse (Giglietto, Rossi, and Bennato 2012; Arafa and Armstrong 2016). While these companies are private, their ability to de-platform individuals, suppress dissenting opinions, and coordinate with governments on content moderation policies blurs the line between state and corporate control (Couch, Robinson, and Komesaroff 2020; Cousineau, Kumm, and Schultz 2023; Jordan and Klein 2020). Future applications of *The Road to Serfdom* Framework should examine how this dynamic influences public perception, political outcomes, and societal cohesion.

Another crucial element missing from Hayek's framework is the influence of cultural and religious factors on perceptions of liberty and authoritarianism. The notion of "servitude" itself is not universally defined—what constitutes excessive state control in Western democracies may be perceived differently in regions with distinct historical and philosophical traditions (Bales and Robbins 2001; Guasco 2008). For example, Confucian values in East Asia emphasize harmony and collective well-being, often leading to greater acceptance of state intervention in economic and social life (Arthur and Mair 2017; Zhao and Roper 2011). Similarly, Middle Eastern societies with strong religious governance structures may interpret freedom and state authority differently from secular liberal democracies (Hashemi 2009; Lust 2011). A more comprehensive model would need to incorporate these cultural variations to understand better how different societies respond to centralized control and interventionist policies.

The secularization of Western societies also poses new challenges that Hayek did not fully anticipate. Historically, religious institutions played a role in limiting state power, serving as an alternative source of moral authority and social organization (Chaves 1994). As societies become more secularized, the absence of such counterweights to state authority may facilitate more excellent centralization and societal dependence on government intervention (Bader 2007). This evolution calls for a deeper exploration of how ideological shifts influence the trajectory of political centralization and economic planning. *The Road to Serfdom Framework* could benefit from integrating a sociological dimension that examines the impact of secularism on individual autonomy, social trust, and resistance to state expansion (Fox 2015).

Furthermore, as we consider expanding the framework, it is essential to explore whether *The Road to Serfdom* applies equally across different political and economic systems. Would the same principles hold in a study of the Soviet Union, where state control reached its apex? How might the model be used to analyze modern-day China, where a blend of authoritarian governance and capitalist markets challenges traditional categories of centralization and economic freedom? Likewise, contemporary case studies such as El Salvador under Nayib Bukele or Argentina under Javier Milei could provide valuable insights into whether Hayekian dynamics play out in non-Western contexts. The applicability of *The Road to Serfdom Framework* across diverse political regimes remains an open question that future research should address.

A promising avenue for further research would be the development of quantifiable indicators based on *The Road to Serfdom* Framework. While challenging to construct, such indicators could measure key variables related to centralization, economic planning, and public liberty across different countries and historical periods. For instance, metrics could be developed to assess the concentration of executive power, the frequency of emergency decrees, the extent of regulatory intervention, or the degree of economic monopolization. These indicators could then compare governance structures across time and space, offering a more empirical foundation for evaluating Hayek's theoretical claims.

Beyond research, *The Road to Serfdom Framework* holds potential as a pedagogical tool in political science, economics, and international relations. By structuring political crises and authoritarian shifts within the framework's analytical grid, educators can help students grasp the dynamics of centralized control and spontaneous order more effectively. Comparative studies of different countries could be used to illustrate how varying institutional structures impact the trajectory of state intervention. Likewise, interdisciplinary approaches integrating insights from law, sociology, and behavioral economics could refine the model, making it more applicable to modern governance challenges.

Expanding *The Road to Serfdom Framework* requires balancing theoretical purity with empirical complexity. Hayek's core insights remain influential, but their application to contemporary realities demands a broader set of analytical tools. Whether examining the role of surveillance capitalism, the monopolization of digital spaces, or cultural divergences in political philosophy, a more comprehensive framework will allow us to understand better the forces shaping modern political and economic systems (Fuchs 2013). By refining and applying this model across different contexts, we can continue to explore the tensions between freedom and control, spontaneous order, and central planning in an increasingly complex world.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has provided a Hayekian analysis of France's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating how the French case exemplifies the risks associated with centralized planning and the limits of state intervention in crisis management. By applying the framework of *The Road to Serfdom* to France's COVID-19 policies, we have demonstrated how key Hayekian critiques—such as the knowledge problem, the rigidity of technocratic governance, and the dangers of reactive regulation—manifested in the French administrative response. The centralization of decision-making, the reliance on emergency decrees, and the suppression of decentralized alternatives all reflect the structural vulnerabilities of a dirigiste political system. France's response underscores Hayek's warning that crises often serve as pretexts for expanding state power in ways that outlast the emergency itself. Sweeping lockdowns, the sidelining of parliamentary oversight, and the concentration of authority in the executive branch reinforced long-standing tendencies in French governance—prioritizing uniform control over adaptive, localized responses. This approach, while efficient in enforcing compliance, often led to inefficiencies, unintended economic consequences, and a growing disconnect between state policy and societal realities.

Beyond the French case, this article highlights the broader applicability of Hayek's insights to contemporary crisis management. By demonstrating how *The Road to Serfdom* can serve as an analytical lens for assessing government responses to significant disruptions, this study offers a replicable methodology for evaluating central planning in other historical and international contexts. Future research could extend

this framework to compare France's pandemic response with more decentralized approaches, such as those of Sweden, Switzerland, or the United States, to further assess the effectiveness of alternative governance models. Future research could also apply *The Road to Serfdom Framework* to crises beyond pandemics, such as financial bailouts, climate regulations, or emergency policies during social unrest.

Ultimately, the French experience during COVID-19 reaffirms Hayek's core argument: centralized planning is inherently limited in its ability to process dispersed knowledge and respond dynamically to complex, evolving challenges. While crises may justify temporary interventions, they also reveal the perils of prolonged state control and the erosion of legal and economic freedoms. As policymakers consider lessons from the pandemic, this analysis suggests that reinforcing principles of decentralization, legal stability, and market-driven adaptation could offer more sustainable and practical approaches to future crises.

NOTES

1 The key French health agencies during COVID-19 were Santé publique France (surveillance and public health campaigns), Haute Autorité de Santé (vaccine and treatment evaluations), ANSM (medication and vaccine safety), ARS (regional crisis management), Institut Pasteur (research on the virus), and INSERM (clinical trials and biomedical research).

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Political Polarization and the Constitutional Approach to the Problem of Policymaker Ignorance

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INTRODUCTION

It is *almost* a tautology to say that political polarization would be limited if the range of topics subject to political debate and, thus, to polarized debate, were narrowed. It is not quite a tautology because the number of topics subject to polarized debate is only one of at least two dimensions (that I can think of) along which polarization might be measured. In addition to the *number* of topics subject to potential polarization, there is the *vehemence* with which polarized positions are argued. We might limit the range of topics open to debate to a single issue; yet, if this issue were argued over with greater vehemence than, combined, the many issues currently open to debate are argued over at present, we would not have limited polarization. Setting aside this possibility, which, though conceptually possible, seems unlikely as a practical matter, it seems fair, if not quite tautological, to say that, if we want to constrain polarization, we might want to limit the range of topics subject to political disagreement.

In the present paper, I consider a particular justification (other than the desire itself to limit polarization) for narrowing the range of topics subject to, and a specific method of determining the topics to be jettisoned from, political debate.

The justification is that policymakers can positively affect, are capable of making a helpful contribution to, a far narrower range of policy goals than is typically assumed in today's polarized political discussions. Many of these discussions concern problems the solutions to which policymakers are unable to contribute, solutions that are beyond policymakers' ken and control. If it is not the case that policymakers can positively affect some problem, if it is the case that amelioration of the problem can emerge only from private, non-political, action, then it is not a *political* problem and, therefore, should not be subject to political debate. If we could achieve a modicum of agreement about the problems that policymakers can contribute to solving and those that are beyond their powers, we could remove the latter problems from the realm of politics, from that of political debate, and, thus, from the realm of polarized political debate.

The method of deciding which topics to jettison from political debate involves what I call "Empirical Political Epistemology" in my *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics* (2020).

The ignorance and incapability of policymakers is the ultimate constraint on efforts to deliberately reform and improve society. To the extent that policymakers lack some

of the knowledge and capabilities required to realize—or, more circumspectly, approach—some social goal, the goal will be approached only as far as spontaneous forces of the appropriate kind intervene to compensate for the nature and extent of relevant policymaker ignorance.[1]

In the sixth chapter of *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics*, I argue that empirical inquiry into the nature and extent of policymaker ignorance would contribute to an understanding of the limits of the effectiveness of policymaking. If we rigorously analyzed the knowledge available to policymakers, we would be in a better position to explain and predict the success, or failure, of their policies, and to understand the kind and extent of spontaneous considerations necessary to approach the professed goals of these policies. I argue that we could use the results of such analyses to re-formulate our political constitutions so as to constrain policymaking to those domains in which, given the nature and extent of relevant policymaker ignorance, it is likely to improve upon relevant social conditions, and leave all other domains of human action to the operation of spontaneous forces. At the ideal extreme (worthy of pursuit as a goal, if unlikely to ever be fully achieved in the real world), such a constitution would assign goals to policymakers in proportion to their relevant knowledge. It would apportion to policymakers goals regarding which their knowledge was adequate to a positive contribution and reserve to spontaneous forces all those goals respecting which policymaker knowledge was insufficient to improve upon existing circumstances. Such a constitution would afford the best prospects for the realization of our goals, whatever they might be. It would ensure both that goals better approached through deliberate policymaking were assigned to policymakers rather than to spontaneous forces and that goals better advanced via spontaneity were not misallocated to policymakers too ignorant to make a positive contribution to their realization.

The extent to which policymakers possess knowledge relevant to some social goal, the solution of some social problem, is always an empirical question, never one that can be determined *a priori*. However, casual empiricism and common sense suggest that many social goals are beyond the epistemic reserves of policymakers. Perusing the annals of world history and glancing around the contemporary world reveals that many important social goals go unpursued. My analysis of the problem of policymaker ignorance suggests that this negligence to pursue seemingly worthy social goals is often due (to some extent) to the fact that, when policymakers recognize their own ignorance regarding some social goal, they tend to pursue less epistemically burdensome goals instead. Thus, the neglect of some social goal can be evidence that policymakers believe themselves, correctly or not, to be ignorant with respect to it. To the extent that some social goals *are* sincerely pursued by policymakers, relatively few such goals are ever approached, much less realized. Furthermore, to the extent that some social goals are approached, it is often indeterminate how far such success is due to policymakers' decisions rather than to spontaneous considerations. It is far from obvious, for example, that whatever improvements have been observed in Western societies in mitigating explicitly racist, sexist, or homophobic behavior have been due to top-down policies rather than to unplanned bottom-up social developments.

We have reasons to think that the sort of reformed constitution I recommend, one that constrained policymakers to domains in which policy might have a positive effect, as revealed by rigorous empirical analysis of the potential of, and limitations inherent in, available policymaker knowledge and ignorance, would be relatively narrow compared to many existing, more expansive, political constitutions. A constitution that limited deliberate policymaking to domains in which policymakers' knowledge was adequate to contribute positively to the realization of related goals would assign relatively fewer goals to policymakers and comparatively more goals to spontaneous forces than do existing constitutions. Against the frequently heard assertion that everything is political, relatively few things would be political in societies governed by such a constitution. There would be relatively little grist for the mill of political debate.

If this is right, what are the implications of such a reduced constitution for the possibility of mitigating the political polarization that currently roils Western societies? Could we improve social relations, could we make political discourse less adversarial and hate-filled, more cohesive, perhaps even kinder and friendlier, by removing from the realm of political decision-making goals unlikely to be advanced via such decision-making, given the relevant ignorance of the decision-makers?

A BRIEF PRIMER ON THE PROBLEM OF POLICYMAKER IGNORANCE

The problem of policymaker ignorance has two aspects, one metaphysical, the other psychological.

Policy is the means via which we collectively seek to deliberately effect social change. *Policymakers* are those tasked with deliberately bringing about social change via policy. The metaphysical aspect of the problem of policymaker ignorance is that policymakers may not possess the knowledge necessary to deliberately approach, much less realize, some social goal. Expressed pithily, policymakers are causally responsible—they have the causal authority, if anyone has it—to bring about particular states of affairs associated with various perceived social ills, problems, goals, etc.; however, they are limited in their causal powers, as determined by their epistemic circumstances. There are also, of course, *spontaneous* (or accidental) ways in which social change can occur without—or, indeed, despite—the intervention of policymakers. These spontaneous forces can operate either in tandem with or against efforts to use policy means to deliberately bring about particular states of social affairs.[2] To the extent that policymakers lack some of the knowledge required to deliberately approach some social goal, the goal can be approached only to the extent that spontaneous considerations intervene in the causal nexus to mitigate the effects of policymaker ignorance.

The psychological aspect of the problem concerns the way that policymakers' recognition or non-recognition of their relevant ignorance in some decision context with respect to some social goal affects their incentives to pursue the goal.

In thinking about the psychological aspect, it is important to keep in mind that the persons whom policymakers ostensibly serve, their *constituents*, are often (perhaps always) unable to distinguish policymakers' earnest efforts to approach some social goal from insincere efforts to merely make it appear that they are trying to improve upon relevant conditions. A policymaker serious about, say, mitigating the deleterious consequences of climate change might create special "blue-ribbon" committees and task forces, and "put their best people" on the problem. So, too, might a policymaker who couldn't care less about climate change, who disingenuously wants only to convince constituents that she cares about and is trying to do something to address climate change. Yet, if climate change is, as it may well be, a problem the deliberate mitigation of which eclipses the boundaries of the epistemic capacities of mere mortals, the ultimate results of the relevant policies of both serious and insincere policymakers—i.e., failure to mitigate climate change in either case—are likely to be indistinguishable from the perspective of constituents. Thus, the electoral benefits of serious pursuit of the goal of moderating the negative effects of climate change are likely to approximate those of its insincere pursuit.

Policymakers understand this on some level. They understand that the sincere pursuit of a goal that they recognize to be too epistemically challenging to approach is likely to generate roughly the same benefits as its unserious, *faux*, pursuit. Crucially, in most cases, the fake, pretended, pursuit of some goal is likely to be less epistemically burdensome, is likely to be epistemically easier—less costly in terms of the knowledge needed to be learned—than the earnest pursuit of the same goal. It is relatively easy to form special "blue-ribbon" committees and task forces to disingenuously pretend to address some impossible-to-solve problem; it is far more difficult to acquire the necessary knowledge. When confronted with constituents' epistemically difficult policy demands, the balance of perceived benefits and costs tends to encourage insincere rather than earnest efforts to satisfy these demands. Thus, other things equal, policymakers alive to their relevant ignorance confront an incentive to merely pretend to pursue epistemically challenging goals. Policymakers who believe, whether truly or falsely, that they cannot acquire some of the knowledge required to improve upon some set of circumstances that constituents want addressed tend to merely pretend to address such circumstances. This is how recognition of their relevant ignorance affects policymakers psychologically.

On the other hand, failure to see, recognize, or acknowledge their relevant ignorance with respect to some goal tends to artificially incentivize policymakers to pursue it. However, given policymakers' ignorance, such pursuits tend to end in failure, if not disaster. This is the problem of "unknown unknowns" that former United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (2002) invoked in justification of the George

W. Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq. According to this justification, policymakers in the Bush administration believed falsely (as it turned out) that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and invaded the country, in large part, because of this false belief. Relatedly, in his 1974 Nobel Prize lecture, F. A. Hayek (2014 [1975]) attributed the failures of Keynesian-style demand-management policies to economic policymakers' "pretense of knowledge." Unaware of the inadequacy, falsely believing in the adequacy, as policy instruments of Keynesian theory and national-accounting statistics, in the decades following the end of the second World War, economic policymakers around the world acted as Keynesian theory suggested and, as a result, led their economies into the disastrous stagflation of the early 1970s. When policymakers do not know that they do not know something, they are disproportionately incentivized to pursue policies based upon their incorrect beliefs, but, precisely because they do not know the thing they falsely believe they know, such policies tend to end poorly.

It is only when policymakers know that they possess the knowledge required to advance upon some goal that epistemic impoverishment cannot distort their incentives. Moreover, it is only when policymakers possess adequate knowledge regarding some goal that its pursuit is not likely to end in failure, that reliance on spontaneous forces is not required for success.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF POLICYMAKER IGNORANCE

The only true and permanent solution to the problem of policymaker ignorance would be to make policymakers omniscient and omnipotent. Unfortunately, this is impossible. Short of achieving the impossible, a second-best option would be to apportion goals between the complementary realms of deliberate policymaking and spontaneity in a way that best promotes their realization. We cannot make policymakers truly omniscient and omnipotent, but we might make them *functionally* omniscient and omnipotent by limiting their range of action to the pursuit of goals regarding which their knowledge is, or can be made, adequate, if not for full realization, at least for a positive contribution to the realization of, the relevant goals.

There are two ways that functional policymaker omniscience and omnipotence might be achieved.

The first involves improving upon existing democratic institutions (voting, elections, referenda, campaigns, surveys, etc.) to make them more effective mechanisms for the communication of relevant knowledge between constituents and policymakers. As they currently exist, such mechanisms do a poor job of conveying to both constituents and policymakers the knowledge that members of each group require to adapt their, respectively, policy demands and policy supplies to relevant circumstances, to pertinent epistemic circumstances, in particular. Democratic mechanisms do not convey to constituents the knowledge that they need about policymakers' relevant knowledge and ignorance that would allow constituents to demand only policies fit to policymakers' epistemic circumstances and capacities, policies that policymakers are able or can learn to supply in the way and to the extent demanded by constituents. Because they don't understand policymakers' epistemic limitations, constituents sometimes demand the pursuit of policy goals that policymakers, because of their ignorance, cannot contribute to realizing. On the other hand, majoritarian democratic devices like election campaigns and voting do a poor job of conveying to policymakers the knowledge they need concerning constituents' political priorities that would permit policymakers to supply policies most demanded by or—what might be the same thing—most consistent with the interests of constituents. There is often a mismatch between the policies demanded by constituents and those supplied by policymakers. Expressed in economists' terms, *disequilibrium* reigns in policy "markets."

The *epistemic-mechanistic* approach to the problem of policymaker ignorance would seek democratic devices that might better promote equilibrium, the matching of constituents' policy demands with policymakers' policy supplies. However, the epistemic-mechanistic approach can only be a long-term ambition, as the required democratic devices have yet to be either scientifically discovered or spontaneously developed.

Alternatively, the *constitutional* approach to the problem of policymaker ignorance is a method of mitigating the effects of policymaker ignorance more plausible in the current state of knowledge. The consti-

tutional approach involves the investigation of policymakers' knowledge and learning capacities (treated as more or less given) to determine the boundaries of deliberate policymaking, and the reformulation of political constitutions to constrain their policy actions within these boundaries. At the same time, inquiry into policymakers' epistemic capacities would reveal the range of policy goals that lie beyond these limits, the goals that, because policymakers are too ignorant to realize them deliberately, can be realized only with the assistance of spontaneity.

A bit more carefully, such inquiry would, over time, facilitate the division of the entire set of policy goals into various sub-sets: 1) goals deliberately, but not spontaneously, realizable; 2) goals realizable either entirely deliberately or entirely spontaneously; 3) goals realizable through a combination of deliberate choice and spontaneity; 4) objectives spontaneously, but not deliberately, realizable; 5) unrealizable goals. At the end of such inquiry, we would be in a position to bracket goals more likely to be realized via deliberate planning and goals more likely to be realized through spontaneous forces.

On the basis of such inquiry, constitutions might be re-formed to keep policymakers to the pursuit of goals in the first, second, and third sub-sets, and prevent them from pursuing goals in the fourth and fifth sub-classes, which would be left to spontaneity. Such constitutions would assign policy goals to the domains of deliberate policymaking and spontaneous forces in proportion to their likelihood to be realized in each domain and would, therefore, advance the realization (approach) of goals to the greatest extent possible. Such a constitution would also mitigate the ignorance-induced distortion of policymakers' incentives. Functionally omniscient and omnipotent policymakers, properly constrained to the pursuit of goals regarding which their knowledge was adequate, could not be mis-incentivized by their relevant ignorance to pursue other goals.

Almost as important as preventing policymakers from the pursuit of goals they cannot help realize, given their epistemic deficiencies, such a constitution would prevent constituents from demanding the political pursuit of such goals. Political expectations are disappointed not only because policymakers take on tasks beyond their epistemic capacities, they are also disappointed because constituents too often demand that policymakers pursue goals beyond their ken and control. A constitution that prevented policy pursuits beyond the epistemic capacities of policymakers would hinder both of these sources of political disappointment.

In a context governed by such a constitution, only a subset of constituents' interests would qualify as politically relevant and subject to debate. Relatively few issues, as compared to the existing state of things, would count as political. Only issues regarding which collective political decision-making could make a positive contribution, as indicated by empirical political-epistemological methods, would be topics of political significance.

A SKETCH OF EMPIRICAL POLITICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Three kinds of knowledge are required to deliberately make a positive contribution to the realization of some goal, whether an individual or collective goal. The actor (in political contexts, a policymaker or, more typically, the class of policymakers positioned to attempt to realize the relevant policy goal) must possess adequate *theoretical* knowledge. That is, the actor(s) must possess a theory of the causes of the phenomena adequate to effectively manipulate those causes so that the relevant goal is effected. The actors also need adequate *data* or *empirical* knowledge. They need to know the current state or condition of the causes well enough to ensure that their interventions on these causes suffice to bring about the goal. If the actors do not know the condition of the causes prevailing at the pertinent time, their interventions may either under- or over-shoot the objective. Finally, it is not enough that the actors possess both an adequate theory of the causes and sufficiently accurate data concerning the state of these causes, they also need to be able to manipulate the causes well enough to bring about the desired effect, i.e., realization (approach) of the goal. In short, to make a positive contribution to the realization of a goal, actors need relevant theory, data, and capacities, talents, powers, and abilities.

Political analysis almost always begins from an unspoken assumption that policymakers are somehow epistemically privileged, but a moment's reflection reveals the absurdity of this assumption. After all, policymakers are mere mortals. They are not wizards or omniscient deities. At no point in their ascension to public office are policymakers given the keys to some epistemic kingdom closed off from the rest of us. Policymakers are only privy to knowledge that is publicly available. They do not have privileged access to theories or data, neither do they possess capacities, that are not available to everyone. This is important to appreciate, because it means that policymakers' epistemic circumstances regarding a policy goal can be investigated empirically. We can ask about the knowledge necessary to mitigate climate change to some desired degree, and we can investigate policymakers' epistemic circumstances to determine whether their knowledge reserves are adequate and, if not, the nature and extent of either the knowledge they need to learn to realize the goal deliberately or the spontaneous forces necessary to realize the goal non-deliberately.[3]

POLARIZATION AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

If it were the case that fewer ends could be pursued through political means, because policymakers were constitutionally constrained to fewer goals than they are at present, then fewer ends would be subject to debate and, therefore, to polarized debate. Ignoring the unlikely possibility that the comparatively few ends left to political deliberation after such a reduction might be fought over with even greater vehemence than political ends were fought over prior to such a culling, then applying empirical political epistemology in service of the constitutional approach would seem a promising method of moderating political polarization.

However, it is possible that polarization would just shift to another ground, i.e., to that of the empirical inquiry meant to determine the limits of deliberate political action. Polarized first-order arguments about specific issues might simply morph into polarized second-order arguments about arguments about specific issues, with one group of interlocutors arguing that some issue *is* and other interlocutors insisting the same issue is *not* a legitimate topic of political debate, as determined by empirical political epistemology. Polarized debate might emerge, in other words, about the relevant empirical evidence that seems to indicate policymakers either do or do not possess the knowledge necessary to make a positive contribution to the solution of some social problem.

However, even if this were to happen, it might nevertheless be an improvement on present circumstances, where the rival parties to some of the most vitriolic debates defend their positions on some combination of psychological and emotional grounds that, by their nature, make intersubjective agreement unlikely, if not impossible. A person ill-disposed to accept some position for its emotional pull on the heartstrings is unlikely to be convinced by an interlocutor inclined to make and accept arguments on the basis of emotional appeals—and *vice versa*. However, it is just possible that the same two parties will be convinced by an empirical display of the inadequacy of available policymaker knowledge concerning the relevant issue to mutually agree to set it aside in favor of some other topic.

NOTES

1 Moving forward in the paper, I will use "knowledge" and "ignorance" in both *propositional* and *non-propositional* senses. In other words, for my purposes, knowledge encompasses not only knowledge of facts and theories ("knowledge *that*"), but also capacities, capabilities, abilities, talents, and skills ("knowledge *how*"). Accordingly, rather than writing "knowledge and capability" and "ignorance and incapability," I will simply write, respectively, "knowledge" and "ignorance."

2 For example, consider the drastic and sudden change in attitudes that occurred in the first decade or so of the new millennium throughout Western countries with respect to gay marriage. To what extent was this a product of policymaking purposefully directed at the goal of making attitudes more tolerant of homosexuality and marital unions between homosexual persons, and how far was it a spontaneous change that emerged without—indeed, perhaps despite—specific policy actions?

3 If the foregoing analysis of the effects of relevant ignorance on incentives is sound, then policymakers' incentives are also, indirectly, subject to a degree of empirical investigation.

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Developing Hayekian Insights on Social Science: Tensions and Contradictions Within and Between Spontaneous Orders

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INTRODUCTION

Daniel D'Amico writes "In a way, spontaneous order theory is both the alpha and omega of a shared research project in positive social science. With its discovery and elucidation, thinkers could utilize the spontaneous order framework as a baseline for comparative institutional analysis" (D'Amico 2015, p.). I strongly agree.

The recent volume *Towards a Hayekian Theory of Social Change* is a promising start in expanding the realm of Hayek influenced social analysis (Boettke 2024). I published a review essay earlier this year discussing the essays and the editors' introductory framework (diZerega 2024). I argued that many essays were steps forward in applying Hayek's concepts to a wider range of social phenomena, but the coherence of the whole was weakened by a defective discussion of what constituted spontaneous orders.

In my view the editors argued quite correctly that while Hayek often used the term very broadly, a more serviceable approach would limit it to the human realm. They agreed with D'Amico that a clear line separates human spontaneous orders from other in many ways similar biological orders. However, I argued they and D'Amico erred as to where they drew the line between the human and the not-human. They claimed culture, language, and common law, along with the market and science, fell into this category (2015).

Theirs was a near miss, and grasping the reasons for the miss lead to a better understanding of spontaneous orders. Language, culture, common law, and spontaneous orders are all complex adaptive social systems: dynamic networks of relationships where coherent patterns arise out of independent actions among their components. These patterns maintain themselves even when every element comprising them changes. This concept applies to more than the human social world. Ecosystems, for example, are complex adaptive systems. Spontaneous orders are a special subset within this larger category. Treating culture, language, and common law as spontaneous orders unintentionally undermined developing the concept "as a baseline for comparative institutional analysis" leading to mistaken analytic, empirical, and philosophical results.

PART I: WHAT IS A SPONTANEOUS ORDER?

Within the human realm, science and the market differ in important ways from culture, language, and common law. Hayek's term 'spontaneous order' helps distinguish between them, illuminating a taxonomy useful for the social sciences. The distinction between complex adaptive social systems such as culture, language, and common law, and spontaneous orders is based on the nature of the feedback signals such systems generate and who has access to contributing to such systems' adaptive patterns. As a subset of complex adaptive systems, spontaneous orders depend on *simplified and standardized* feedback emerging from the application of *explicit* rules governing cooperation within a system.

Because D'Amico and the volume's editors include culture, language, and common law as spontaneous orders, I will describe how they differ from spontaneous orders as I describe them.

CULTURE

Cultures adapt through the impact of many different feedback signals arising from a variety of causes and often becoming part of a largely tacit network enabling strangers within a given culture to easily cooperate. This is as true for illiberal cultures as illiberal ones. The antebellum South with its foundations in slavery certainly had a culture that was the product of human action but not of human design. So did Tsarist Russia.

Culture also has very clear non-human expressions. Chimpanzees have complex cultures (Polito 2019). Even closer to human culture, chimpanzees have recently been found to improve on exiting cultural techniques when female chimpanzees from one group become members of another with different cultural traits. Sometimes the new techniques they bring are combined with existing practices to create something new (Leste-Lasserre 2024, p. 13). Nor is culture confined to the great apes and humans, for it exists in very different species, from birds to whales, and much more (Le Page 2021; Whiten 2021). We observe a continuum between animal cultures and more complex human cultures, not a sharp dividing line.

Nor can we draw the line between human and non-human cultures by the presence of explicit moral rules. Socrates demonstrated for most Greeks of his time known moral values such as virtue were known only tacitly. Socrates asked Meno to describe "virtue". Meno responded by giving many examples of virtuous action. Socrates responded "I only asked you for one thing, virtue, but you have given me a whole swarm of virtues." Meno and others of his time used the word to define certain actions as virtuous, and others as not, but when asked to define the abstract word itself, could not do so (Ong 1977, p. 290; Havelock 1963, pp. 197-133; Abram 1996, p. 110).

This kind of tacit morality pretty clearly applies to some nonhumans. Chimpanzees and bonobos voluntarily open doors to give another access to food, even if the assisted one then eats food they would have had to themselves. Rats act similarly, when they either know the trapped rat, or are familiar with that strain of rat, even if that particular rat is a stranger. They do not when the other rat is a stranger and of a different appearance. (DeWaal 2016, pp. 197-201; Safina 2015, p. 64; Bekoff 2009). Morality's foundations are prelinguistic, located in Charles Darwin's concept of sympathy, which he derived from David Hume (diZerega 2023).

Explicit definitions of moral principles arose later, when literacy began to change how people thought about the world and themselves (Ong 1977; Abram 1996). Socrates and Plato lived when literacy and the habits of thought it encouraged first became well-established in Greece.

If the line separating culture from what is not culture *included* many animals, the line that separated explicit moral rules from a morality without such rules *excluded* many people. Culture and morality do not form categories unique to human beings.

LANGUAGE

Like culture, language is a complex adaptive system without a clear feedback signal. As Wittgenstein demonstrated, words such as virtue do not have clear meanings, but are understandable in terms of the complex contexts within which they and similar terms apply. Think about how much more easily words in a text can be misunderstood compared to the same words in a conversation. Many people in the same linguistic community use common words to which, if they were queried, they would give somewhat different definitions (Christiansen 2022, pp. 225, also 74-6, 188-90). Consider 'freedom,' 'justice,' and 'work' as contemporary examples.

Most human beings are usually not aware of the rules for correct grammar they follow when speaking. Like many rules shaping a culture, they are not explicit. Children learn to speak English by hearing speech, not by taking lessons. Grammatical rules can also shift in important ways, as with the contemporary changing use of pronouns with respect to individual identities. Fluent speakers' knowledge of the appropriate rules for speaking is tacit in Michael Polanyi's sense (1951). Like culture, living languages are the product of human action, not of human design, but have no explicit feedback signals serving the function prices, votes, or impersonal standards of evidence such as measurement, prediction, and experiment serve in spontaneous orders.

Spontaneous orders arise from people following *explicit procedural rules* while pursuing projects of their own choosing. These rules generate a standardized pattern of signals assisting people in successfully pursuing their plans or signaling they are unlikely to succeed. Spontaneous orders facilitate effective cooperation by relying on a *single feedback standard for determining systemic success.* Their rules are *purely procedural and impersonal, and so open in principle to anyone*.

Complex adaptive systems need not embody liberal values and spontaneous orders always do. *Liberal principles generate spontaneous orders and illiberal ones do not.* Spontaneous orders depend on a broadly liberal ethic of formal equality for all who participate. This framework also enables us to see why common law is not a spontaneous order.

COMMON LAW AS A COMPLEX ADAPTIVE SYSTEM, NOT A SPONTANEOUS ORDER

Common law adapts through processes of persuasiveness in important ways similar to science, but whereas in principle anyone can engage in scientific research (Robles-Gil 2024), only judges are involved in discovering the law (Hayek 1973, pp. 72-93). Sometimes common law's conclusions have very coercive impacts on people excluded from participating as formal equals, and its roots had little to do with any recognition of equality in any sense. Slavery was considered lawful for a long time in common law (Brewer 2022). Common law also has no equivalent to prices, votes, or what we loosely call the scientific method, which seeks as far as human efforts can to base its findings on impersonal standards. It is statute law that seeks to maximize impersonality. Common law is a complex adaptive system but not a spontaneous order.

DEMOCRACY AS A SPONTANEOUS ORDER

Members of this gathering will presumably agree to my describing the market and science as spontaneous orders. After all, Hayek did. But what of democracy?

The rules generating a spontaneous order reflect the dominant value inherent its processes. The rules of the market facilitate formally voluntary exchanges among legal equals. The rules of science facilitate discovering a consensus among formal equals about what constitutes reliable scientific knowledge (Ziman 1978).

Within science, consensus develops through a process of persuasion about the nature of the physical world. The market generates its feedback signals about the advantageous use of resources through the price system automatically adjusting to changes in the supply of and anticipated demand for goods and services.

However, the market cannot determine what counts as exchangeable goods and services, it only shapes the patterns arising when exchanges take place. Time matters in the market far more than in science because much of what is exchanged is necessary for human life, such as food, shelter, clothing, and medicine. These rules defining what can and cannot be exchanged allow the market process to emerge and rapidly adjust to price signals more than any alternative, but the rules can take many forms. They can be discussed abstractly only in theory, without direct connection to life as it is actually lived.

Within a spontaneous order rules apply community-wide to all participants. Science developed and enforces its rules, united by a common commitment among scientists to discover as much reliable knowledge as possible (Ziman 1978). Their common procedural value is to maximize *impersonal* standards in evaluating claims. The market has the same dependence on universal. *impersonal* rules. but lacks the means to define, enforce, and change them. Whereas scientists can judge the applicability of rules for experiment, measurement, and prediction as they best apply to the matter studied, the market process lacks similar adaptability to different applications.

PROPERTY RIGHTS

In the market, exchanges of goods and services must take place within a context of common rules facilitating cooperation. Further, what is exchanged must be defined accurately enough as to minimize conflicts between parties after the agreement to exchange has taken place. The umbrella concept for such requirements is property rights: the enforceable right to use something in certain ways and exclude others from doing the same. The result is not "property" but, as Harold Demsetz (1967) emphasized, *bundles* of property rights, with each element of the bundle defining a legal relationship into which the owner could choose to enter, either with another, or with the 'property' itself.

Bundles of property rights differ with the kinds of property involved. I do not own 'land' or a 'car' or a 'dog.' Those nouns are simplifying descriptions of a more complex relationship defining specific rights and corresponding obligations with respect to them. The ante-bellum South once had a free market in owning and selling human beings. However, you could not legally kill your slave, whereas you could legally kill your pig. Slave owners owned a different bundle of rights than pig owners. This point manifests in an extraordinary variety of ways.

When I rent a house, the landlord temporarily gives up some rights associated with home ownership so long as the rental contract exists. The renter controls certain bundles so long as rent is paid. To give another example, if I live out in the country I will have more rights to make noise than if I live in a condominium apartment complex, such as the right to play loud music late at night. In both cases I own a dwelling, but what I actually own are somewhat different bundles of rights with respect to it.

When rights in one bundle appear to conflict with the rights held within another, as when the music I play in my backyard is considered too loud by my neighbors, my outdoor lights shine into their window at night, or smoke from my barbeque invades their yard, a legal system is required to adjudicate the dispute. Property rights are inextricably connected to the moral and ethical issue of what kinds of relationships are appropriate for people to engage in? *The market itself cannot define such bundles of rights, only how they are exchanged.*

Common law plays a role here, but is not sufficient (Hayek 1973, p. 168 n. 35). At one time, in America, owning human beings was an acceptable property relationship. today it is not. That property right no longer exists. Few miss it today, though at one time hundreds of thousands fought and died in its defense. The market was 'free' in both cases: property rights could always be exchanged between willing partners.

Democracies coordinate relations among and between the explicit rules that govern society as a whole, including fundamental property rights. Such rules are essential for any complex society. The democratic process is the only means people have developed to give *everyone* potentially impacted by a change in property rights an equal voice at some point along the way in determining what change, if any, will happen regarding bundles of property rights.

Rights to many exchangeable values can be defined in very different ways, as whether or not we own our personal data or whether the tech industry can use it without paying us for their use. Had people possessed such rights, the nature of the web would be very different today (Lanier 2019). Today a major issue is AI's uncompensated appropriation of other people's work that, in other contexts, they own. And, of course, there is the increasingly important issue of CO2 emissions now endangering well-being on a global scale. Some means must exist to determine what are or are not legitimate property rights open for exchange. This occurs when people vote for representatives or for an initiative or referendum or, in small towns, meet together. A *particular* majority 'rules' on a *specific* issue or set of issues.

This process of democratically determining property rights is a spontaneous order. Democracy's basic rules are procedural, explicit, apply equally to all, and impersonal. Like science and the market, democratic decisions depend on persuasion. Unlike the market, and like science, a number of different criteria common to the issue must be evaluated, such as costs, practicality, whether some group feels victimized, and so on, all in relation to a measure's impact on the community as a whole, as scientists must determine how its basic procedural rules apply to a field of study. The mix is different for astronomy than for biology. In democratic theory the ideal is called the public good, and a simple definition of the public good is "fair rules for everyone in the community."

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF DISCOVERING THE PUBLIC GOOD

The importance of discovering the public good expands as a society becomes more complexly integrated. Relations between property owners become increasingly complex, and in that complexity the possibility of conflicts over boundary issues increases. To pick an uncontroversial example, the amount of uncontested noise a landowner can legitimately make is related to the proximity of a neighbor. The more closely people live together the more necessary such rules become. If you want to internalize negative externalities, fewer rules are needed when building a house out in the country compared to building one in a densely packed urban environment, and even more in a historically valuable neighborhood.

According to research on many kinds of complex adaptive systems, the most adaptive networks have very few links between individual nodes within them. Stuart Kauffman described it as "somewhere in the single digits" no matter how large the network (quoted in Kelly 1994, p. 399). The modern NIMBY phenomenon is an example of what can happen to attempted changes when connections become very highly linked.

Adding to this problem, unlike within science, time matters when determining rules governing property rights. When a conflict between right holders emerges, no decision is a decision for the status quo. How much pollution is acceptable is an important example. In a liberal order the democratic process is required to oversee and occasionally modify basic rules regarding property rights based on the community's judgement as to what is best for the group as a whole. *Democracy is the one method providing everyone affected by a decision an equal standing at some point in the process of decision-making.* The same standard applies for other decisions sometimes made by democratic orders that citizens believe are important for the community as a whole, such as standards for public health and education.

Determining the public good is a discovery process (diZerega 2019b). It's *ideal* is unanimity regarding public policy, as science's ideal is unanimity among scientists about the nature of the material world. That unanimity is never fully attained is no more an argument against the concept's usefulness than is science's failure to reach unanimity an argument against its usefulness in understanding scientific processes. Something similar exists in markets, which rely on powerful tendencies toward attaining an equilibrium that is never reached.

BUT WHAT ABOUT MAJORITY RULE?

The most egregious description of democracy possible is when its critics call it 'mobocracy.' The second most misleading description is to define it as majority rule.

The United States was designed to make sure majority *rule* was unlikely- while never subordinating decision-making to a person or institution not subject to majority *acceptance*. In *Federalist 58* James Madison wrote:

> That some advantages might have resulted from [a minority veto] cannot be denied… But these considerations are outweighed by the inconveniences in the opposite scale. In all cases where justice or the general good might require new laws to be passed, or active measures to be pursued, the fundamental principle of free government would be reversed. It would be no longer the majority that would rule: the power would be transferred to the minority. . . . an interested minority might take advantage of it to screen themselves from equitable sacrifices to the general weal, or, in particular emergencies, to extort unreasonable indulgences. Lastly it would facilitate and foster the baneful practice of secessions (Publius 1961, p. 361)

Madison argued abuses through majority rule could be prevented if the House, Senate, and President, were elected by *different* majorities at *different* times, and all had to agree to initiate policy. Members of the House of Representatives were elected all at once for two-year terms. Unlike in the House, one third of the Senate is elected every two years. It would take four years to change a majority of Senators. Each also represented different constituencies. The president represented a different constituency as well. The logic here was to get as close to a practical unanimity as possible while still preserving the ability to act reasonably quickly. I have showed how both Aristotelian and Madisonian arguments in favor of democracy emphasized the ideal of consensus, not majority rule (diZerega 2000).

Majorities of Representatives, Senators, and a nationally selected President are needed to adopt a measure. The two violations of this principle, the electoral college and the divorce of Senate representation from population, have become major threats to maintaining the constitutional democratic character of the government. They may yet destroy it.

Except in the rarest of instances, in a liberal democracy there is no mob. In fact, *no one rules*. As with the market and science, a democracy cannot be understood in terms of the final outcome (or products) emerging from its processes. It is the entire process, from the man or woman acting as a citizen engaging in political discussions, through the media and different organizations seeking to influence public policy, all the way through the electoral process and final decisions on issues and how that influences the same process in the future, that distinguishes democracies from states. The best study of this process and its superiority to top-down control that I know of is John Kingdon's *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies* (1995).

Hayek came very close to grasping the similarities between democratic processes and market processes. In *The Constitution of Liberty* he wrote

> We may admit that democracy does not put power in the hands of the wisest or best informed and that at any given moment the decision of the government of the elite may be more beneficial to the whole; but this need not prevent us from still giving democracy the preference. It is in its dynamic, rather than its static, aspects that the value of democracy proves itself… the benefits of democracy will show itself only in the long run, while its more immediate achievements may well be inferior to those of other forms of government (Hayek 1960, pp. 108-109).

This argument is *identical* in logic to one Hayek (and others) made about the market. In Hayek's words, the market is "a multi-purpose instrument which at no particular moment may be the one best adapted to the

particular circumstances, but which will be the best for the greater variety of circumstances likely to occur" (Hayek 1976, p. 115; see also Kirzner 1973, pp. 232-3).

A democracy is a discovery process seeking general rules for the well-being of society as a whole. Every citizen has equal status at one crucial point in the consideration of public policies while the long-involved process of designing policies enables informed input from every interest affected.

Today a minority veto has arisen in the Senate through the abuse of the filibuster. Its impact has been as Madison predicted. Polarization has increased and the well-being of the nation is held hostage to extortion by small minorities of politicians. Proposals with clear majority support are prevented from being voted on. The democratic discovery process is undermined to the increasing cost of the country as a whole.

CONSTRUCTIVISM?

Some might object that the United States constitution is an example of 'constructivism.' Getting clear on this issue requires making a distinction about procedural rules. A spontaneous order requires its rules to apply to all participants equally and not be designed to attain specific ends. Rather, the ends at any time must be discovered through its processes, and can always be questioned or changed through the same processes. The constructivist elements in the constitution reflect giving unequal status to slave-holding states and to states with smaller populations. These exceptions were seen at the time as the price to be paid to enable thirteen quite different states to unite in a union. (An interesting question is whether there was enough of a public good in common between the North and South to maintain a political union rather than an alliance.)

In every other respect the original constitution fit the description of a spontaneous order. The liberal value of equality under the law, at least for white men, meant equal status as participating citizens. Further, the constitution could only be implemented if a super majority of nine states agreed, and did so through popular referendums. The emphasis on popular acceptance and a super majority weakened efforts to include specific policies into the document, such as efforts to include property qualifications for voting rights. Most of the constitution, and certainly its core, established abstract procedural rules empty of concrete political implications, a major requirement for a spontaneous order to arise.

Those elements that sought to protect concrete values or policies almost immediately caused serious problems, as they continue to. Weighted voting power for slave states enabled minority domination by slave states, followed by secession and civil war. The Senate empowered small states out of proportion to their actual numbers, effectively diluting the votes of people in larger states. The electoral college gave some states more influence than population alone justified. Collectively these failures to observe democratic rules has led to the crises we face today in presidential elections, and earlier led to abandoning constitutional amendments protecting Black Americans leaving them to the tyranny of the former slave states. Two constitutional amendments shared the same flawed character. The 2nd amendment has subordinated civil safety to its most extreme interpretations. Prohibition was such a failure that it was repealed from the constitution, the only one to have been rejected. Hayek's warning against constructivism is confirmed in these cases.

The general rules for electing the legislature, the executive, and establishing the courts, are almost purely abstract and procedural, and have fared much better, and would fare better still in the absence of what survives in the above.

THE STATE

Some readers will likely reply democracies are called states, and aren't states coercive hierarchies? Often such people will talk of the "deep state," as if the concept has any meaning at all, which it does not.

That terminology is rooted in the same kind of ambiguity Hayek identifies when the term "economy" is used to describe both the market and organizations operating within the market, such as a business (Hayek 1976, pp. 107-32). Hayek suggested the market order be called a catallaxy rather than an economy. In popu-

lar terminology, the term "state" applies both to hierarchical organizations of rule and to democratic spontaneous orders. Getting clear about these distinctions is one of the major contributions a Hayekian approach to political economy can provide. *In Hayekian terms,* democracies are not states.

In a democracy each legislator is him or her-self subject to the independent influence of the voters and the political discussion about what policies are desirable permeate society as a whole. No overarching authority determining who gets heard. In this sense it is like science where the ultimate judgements reflect very complex networks of investigation and evaluation long before a final (if sometimes temporary) consensus arises about a theory.

What of the 'deep state'? It is an ignorant term for the Civil Service, often used by people who seek to turn the Civil Service into a tool for the executive- which would, in fact, create the foundation for a genuine state.

Eliminate the legislature so that only the president is elected, and has legislative as well as executive power. We would then have a hierarchy of power relations, a state. Situations of extreme polarization, such as we see today, can encourage one or both sides to seek subordinating democratic procedures to organizational criteria, as with the *Heritage 2025* plan to subordinate Congress and the courts to an imperial or 'unitary' presidency. If the legislature is subordinated to the executive, a democracy becomes a state, even if 'elections' are held, as in Putin's Russia.

After his own term as President ended, Harry Truman said of the newly elected Dwight D. Eisenhower "He'll sit here, and he'll say, 'Do this! Do that!' *And nothing will happen*. Poor Ike—it won't be a bit like the Army" (Neustadt 1960, p. 9). Neither Putin nor Trump, if the Heritage 2025 plan implemented, would have that problem.

A democratic government is not sovereign because ultimate authority lies with the people through their voting and the influence of the organizations with which they are involved. The system is sovereign. Within a democracy, the closest resemblance to a sovereign state is the dominant governing party or coalition and the administrative apparatus over which it presides. In a more than rhetorical sense, however, sovereignty resides in the community of citizens as a whole, and not in the government.

PART II: PERSONAL AND SYSTEMIC VALUES

Any set of abstract rules governing human action will privilege values emerging from the complex of rules and not necessarily mirroring the values of those acting within this context. Different systemic values emerge independently from participants within systems created by different rules. I can engage in political action for many different reasons: a desire for power, a desire to make alliances bringing me wealth, a desire to solve an important community problem, or a sense of duty, such as a desire to impact policies with anti-war demonstrations. Winning an election is subsidiary to these motives.

I can engage in science because I seek to discover unknown truths, enjoy the hunt for solutions to defined problems, love teaching, or want scientific prestige. And again, many other possible personal values. Science has many examples of dogged researchers whose pursuit of truth led them to ignore the judgment of their peers for years, only much later to be proven right. For example, in the 1920s G. Harlan Bretz discovered the cause behind Eastern Washington's strange landscape as due to enormous floods dwarfing anything the mainstream in geology believed could exist. His discovery was rejected because mainstream geology assumed the same causes shaping landscapes today explained what happened in the past. Decades later Bretz was proved right. In 1970 he was awarded the Penrose Medal, the highest medal of the Geological Society of America for extraordinary contributions to geological science (Hodges 2017). Bretz weighed scientific methodology and assumptions differently than had his peers.

I can participate within the market because I want to make money, support my family, provide for my retirement, acquire prestige, because I do not want to have a boss, or I prefer to 'buy local,' and many other possibilities. Only the first is in perfect agreement with the market's purely instrumental systemic values.

For example, Peter Barnes helped manage Working Assets as a privately held socially screened money market fund, which means supporting values beyond money income alone were to be a part of its investment strategy. At one point Working Assets considered going public with an initial public stock offering. Barnes writes "Our investment banker informed us that, simply by going public, we'd increase the value of our stock by 30 percent. He called this magic liquidity premium. What he meant was that stock that can be sold in a market of millions is worth more than stock with almost no market at all. The extra value would not come from anything we did, but from the socially created bonus of liquidity."

"Wall Street's calculus" would override the decisions and values of the then owners of the company. They would still own stock, and presumably be richer, but the values associated with private property are not simply financial, and those values would be subordinated to an impersonal market calculating whether the company's assets were being utilized with maximum efficiency in seeking wealth (diZerega 2019a). Working Assets ended up not going public because, Barnes wrote, "we didn't want to be subjected to Wall Street's calculus" demonstrating he and other investors put other values ahead of maximizing money profit (Barnes 2006, pp. 67-68).

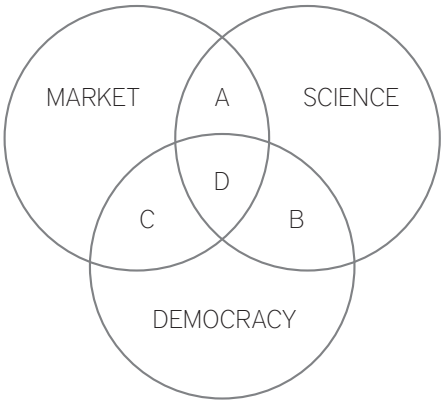
This 30% "liquidity premium" gives a sense of the financial advantages of replacing complex value decisions by people with a single-minded focus on profit. The market determined that eliminating human values not compatible with maximizing profit increases resources' money value by 30%. In market terms this is more efficient. In human terms, it impoverishes the values able to be expressed within the economy.

These examples, and many more, demonstrate that every spontaneous order has a *systemic bias*. Science privileges impersonal standards and so continually struggles with issues involving consciousness, markets privilege instrumental exchange over values resisting quantification, and democracies privilege winning elections over serving the public. Their procedural rules are not neutral channels through which individual choices are harmonized within complex systems. Rather, they bias some values over others, values not necessarily motivating the people participating within them.

These systemic biases manifest as *systemic power*. The context of rules within which we act shapes the outcome of our actions. Those whose values are in greatest harmony with these systemic values will tend to acquire more *systemic* resources, such as scientific status, money, or political power, over those whose values differ (diZerega 1997). Systemic power is also the outcome of human action but not human design.

Spontaneous orders actively shape the kinds of projects people are most likely to pursue within them and independently define what counts as success within them as distinct from the value judgements of those whose actions generate the system. The result of integrating systemic power into the study of spontaneous orders is far more complex than their simply being the "product of human action but not human intent."

TENSIONS BETWEEN SPONTANEOUS ORDERS



The Venn Diagram above outlines the various interrelationships actions within a society can have with respect to the three spontaneous orders I have described. Sometimes a project might require interacting entirely within one such order, sometimes within two such orders, and sometimes within all of them. A competent approach to analyzing spontaneous orders must deal with all of these possibilities. Here are some illustrative examples.

Consider individuals engaging in medicine. Much American medicine takes place within a market context. Doctors enter the field for many reasons, from a desire to engage in a profession helping people, to a desire for a prestigious occupation, to the desire to make a good living, and more. Some of these motives fit the values of the market, particularly the desire to make money. Others do not, such as the desire to engage in a helping profession as a good in itself. This second motive accords better with the systemic values of science and democracy than the market. For example, Jonas Salk discovered the first polio vaccine and refused to patent it, in order to make it maximally available (Salk Institute 2015). This contrast between systems becomes explicit when the dominant priorities in emergency rooms in medicine change after they become owned by private equity firms. Patient care and doctors' medical judgement are subordinated to a heightened emphasis on profit (Landman 2024; Morgenson 2020). The same conflict in interests arises when private insurance is relied on to cover medical expenses despite doctors' recommendations (Miller 2024). **ZONE A.**

Scientific research is sometimes funded by market-based organizations. Whereas scientists benefitting from the funding are generally motivated by their search for truth in a particular field, the funders are motivated by a search for profit. Market-oriented research can lead to medicines that would not otherwise be discovered. On the other hand, market institutions neglect research unlikely to lead to profit, such as in the medicinal qualities of plants that cannot be patented. The first example, but not the second, falls into space **ZONE A**. Public funding is more likely to fund this kind of research, with final choices as to its targets made within the political system, not the scientific community. **ZONE B**. So might educational and philanthropic organizations as part of civil society, to be discussed below.

Scientists want their publications to be read by as many as possible. Publishers of academic journals also want many readers, but only if they pay. Those of us with years of teaching may well remember when professors could put together readers of journal articles for our students tailored to our courses. This practice largely ended when journals demanded financial compensation for articles included, compensation their authors, as practitioners of science and the gift economy, would never see. The clash of systems could not be more stark. **ZONE A**.

The American press is almost entirely composed of private businesses. Freedom of the press is the only private business granted explicit constitutional protection because of its political role in informing citizens.

However, some kinds of political coverage are more profitable than are other kinds, creating a system-based tension between its political function of informing *citizens* and the desire to maximize profit by appealing to *consumers* (diZerega 2004). The recent refusal of the *LA Times*, *Washington Post,* and Gannet, to make endorsements for President are another example where the financial interests of their owners clashed with their staff's concern with fulfilling the media's constitutional function. The clash was so strong many long-time staff members resigned and *NPR* reported some 200,000 people cancelled subscriptions to the *Post,* **ZONE C** (Folkenflik 2024)**.**

For a different kind of example, some rules made democratically will influence the form the market takes, as when slavery was abolished in the United States, wiping out enormous concentrations of Southern economic wealth and power. Changes in laws shaping contracts among employees and employers, such as the scope of do not compete or nondisclosure agreements, also shape the kind of market that emerges (diZerega 2020). In all these examples and many more the values served within the two spontaneous orders do not necessarily harmonize. **ZONE C**.

Government could make decisions about public values not directly interacting with either science or the market, such as setting speed limits, or it could rely on science, the market, or both to make policy decisions about issues that are not strictly economic or scientific, such as in public health. In such cases both scientific criteria and market criteria play a role with political criteria. Public provision of vaccines is a good example. Sometimes the government may rely on the market to produce resources needed for scientific research that also serves a political purpose, as with funding Space X for rockets transporting astronauts to the International Space Station. In such cases all three spontaneous orders contribute to the phenomena studied. All three help shape the outcome. **ZONE D**.

In most cases, if I want to have a career in scientific research entering the marketplace is not my first choice. On the other hand, in most cases scientific research is not an inviting place to engage in business. To be sure, there are areas where success in one breeds success in the other, but these are also areas where the contrasting values of the two orders can come into conflict.

A viable social science rooted in acknowledging the importance of social spontaneous orders must investigate the systemic relations in all seven of the areas enclosed within these three circles. Focusing on a single spontaneous order coordinated by the feedback it generates can lead to a very misleading picture of how such orders function in society as a complex whole. Any attempt to focus only on one: the market, democracy, or science, will give misleading conclusions outside of a very narrow context.

COSMOS VS. TAXIS

Spontaneous orders select for projects within them that are in greatest harmony with their systemic rules and interpret systemic feedback most successfully. But any person or group who initially succeeds in these ways is not guaranteed to continue doing so. Today's success might be displaced in the future by an unexpected competitor. Such orders reward successful adaptation, but with no guarantee that what initially promises to be such a success will long remain so. Sometimes an adaptation will prove inadequate when confronted by competition, and sometimes a successful enterprise or project will be rendered extinct or relegated to a smaller niche because no amount of adaptation would have sufficed.

Manufacturers of typewriters, schools of geological theory emphasizing land bridges, and advocates for prohibition created organizations to further their goals. They are now either extinct or niche dwellers. Even very successful organizations might eventually be confronted with competition that renders them small, or extinct. Throughout most of the 20th century, Kodak held a dominant position in photographic film, and produced important technological innovations in its Kodak Research Laboratories. In 2012 Kodak filed for bankruptcy.

Scientific research organizations and academics favoring particular scientific theories can disappear when scientists find better alternative approaches. The replacement of Newtonian Mechanics with Relativity and Quantum theory is perhaps the most spectacular such development, but on a smaller lev-

el, it happens frequently. The Psychology Department at the University of Kansas was dominated by Behaviorists. Behaviorism began losing its dominance by the 1960s, and today its most useful insights have been integrated into other psychological approaches based on different assumptions.

Prohibition is among the most spectacular political fails. It once gained a constitutional amendment enforcing it. The amendment was later repealed and no significant political pressure to repeat the experience exists today. Its 1960s equivalent, the outlawing of marijuana, is following suit, happily without needing to repeal a constitutional amendment.

Markets have often been compared to biological ecosystems (Vermeij 2004). Both generate stable patterns whose specific details may or may not harmonize with the continued success of its most successful participants. In an ecosystem a dominant species may be pushed to niche status, or even exterminated. In the market a dominant industry or company may suffer the equivalent fate. The same is true within science and democracies. Succeeding within such a system does not guarantee that at some future point the winner will not become a loser.

This lack of security over the long run for even the most successful organizations within a spontaneous order explains the deepest conflict within such orders. But they have in principle a wider range of ways to cope. In a biological ecology plants and animals must either adapt to change, find a niche, or die out. In spontaneous orders successful organizations can seek to continue innovating, or they can do something unavailable to organisms in nature: seek to change the rules. A great many seek the latter, especially in the market and democracies. (This is more difficult in science because its ideal tests for evaluating a thesis are as impersonal as possible, but there are always academic departments to control). Although scientific organizations have proven unable to exert long-term control over the rules that generate science, it is a different story for markets and democracies.

Businessmen were not simply victims of political power, they often advocated centralizing and manipulating it in their favor. Long before FDR, Samuel Insull initiated Federal regulation of his industry because it made life simpler for him compared to dealing with independent state rules. Insull pushed for political centralization of regulations where his advantage in wealth and focus gave him an edge in determining what those regulations would be (MacDonald 2004).

The logic of corporate structure and advantages in wealth pushes them in that direction, and far more successfully than labor unions, environmentalists, and others. To give a clear example, today copyright and patent laws are written to serve corporations, an example to which I will return. The same is true for many liability, food safety, and pollution rules.

TROUBLING IMPLICATIONS

One implication of this analysis is that the role of organizations is more important than much 'spontaneous order' analysis appears to recognize. Ignoring this is a major impediment to creating a genuine social science. The market can operate within the context of many different organizational forms, and different forms reflect and reinforce different values, and ignoring this fact impoverishes understandings of markets. Ignoring the '*taxis*' dimension of markets as a *kosmos* obscures other market institutions that better reflect the richness of human values over the thinness of purely instrumental ones.

Cooperatives are one clear example distinct from publicly traded corporations. Their economic success has been a major problem for their longevity, for their shares can accumulate such value as to be unaffordable to new generations of workers when the initial ones retire.

The Mondragon worker-controlled 'cooperatives' in the Basque region of Spain played a major role in turning the country's poorest region into its richest. Their organizational model incorporated the Vatican's alternative to traditional capitalism and socialism: labor hired capital rather than capital hiring labor. They have prospered and grown for over 50 years. The Mondragon co-operatives are not really cooperatives as Americans think of them, and have solved the problem afflicting more traditional cooperatives (diZerega 2014).

Family owned businesses are another value-rich example (Skorodziyevskiy et al. 2024). Individual proprietorships and partnerships are others.

Consider also the advantages of locally owned small businesses over corporate chains. More money stays in the community, creating a richer social ecosystem. Jane Jacobs won deserved renown by emphasizing the non-market services vital neighborhoods with small businesses contributed to urban life (Jacobs 1992). By contrast, once busy small downtowns are often destroyed by Walmart, and left in worse shape if they then leave (Miczek 2016).

What distinguishes all these examples from publicly held corporations is the greater complexity of values they embody in their actions. The publicly held corporation is entirely constrained by market values, and successful ones will tend to seek means subordinating the market process to their own benefit. This is less often the case with more value-complex organizations.

This particular problem is stronger in the market than in science or democracy because virtually all social activity must make use of resources, especially physical ones. The price system has proven superior to alternatives as a means for producing useful physical resources, and so exerts pressure on all acting within it. However, the complex values of other productive forms modifies the impact of purely instrumental values. When an activity shifts from other organizational forms into a corporate one, the values it responds to become much more narrow.

It can even eliminate the human element.

ELIMINATING THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Ludwig von Mises famously titled his magnum opus *Human Action*. It certainly described action by active agents. But he did not describe *human* action. Mises' praxeology depended on separating means from ends in action, which accurately describes the systemic values of the market process as privileging only instrumental values. But outside of sociopaths, this does not describe *human* action.

When an organization exists only to maximize making money, the complexity of fully human motivations becomes a problem. Now that the technology exists to do so, organizations seeking to maximize market values alone are often eliminating the human dimension completely. Today important managerial functions at major hedge funds such as Bridgewater Associates are being turned over to computer programs in order to eliminate the 'fallible' human dimension in financial management (Copeland 2016). Many rents for housing are now set by algorithms that completely eliminate the human element, essentially engaging in price-fixing, which is illegal when done by human beings (Alford 2024). No human need be involved, just the logic of the market at its most inhuman. Its error rate is 90% (Ross 2023). With the human element minimized, profits increased. There is no more clear distinction between the logic of profit maximization and actual human action.

It is easy to anticipate a time not far off where important investment decisions will be made without any input by messy human values at all, because human beings will have been largely eliminated from the process. From computerized buying and selling stock, to managing the organizations in whose name the buying and selling happens, in principle, virtually no human element need remain. People will prosper to the degree they serve this process.

With its emphasis on maximizing impersonal objective analysis, science can have a similar impact in eliminating complex human values, as the history of eugenics in the United States demonstrated (Black 2003). On balance, democracies are less prone to this particular problem because a vote does not signal a particular value or set of values. Each individual vote incorporates the various values motivating a particular voter and public policies are often chosen for value-complex reasons.

EXTERNALITIES

Economists frequently speak of externalities, the positive and negative unintended consequences of economic activity. My analysis deepens this issue for three reasons. First, because the market (and every other spontaneous order) generates systemic biases independent of the values held by participants, *the market itself is an "externality."* The more pure market values dominate in exchanges, the harder time other values will have in shaping people's abilities to harmonize exchanges with their own values. This is obviously also true for democratic politics and (more subtly) in science.

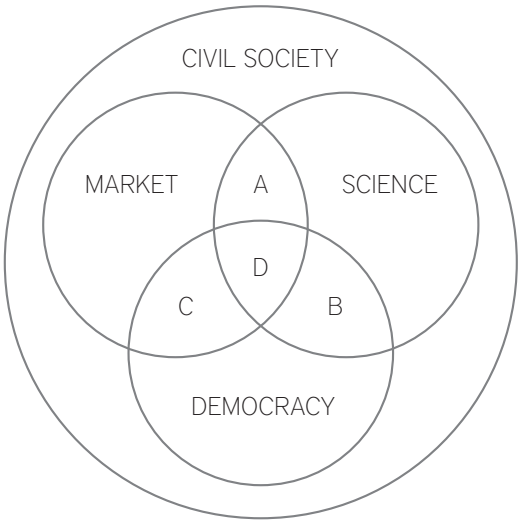
Second, the interactions of different spontaneous orders, each with its own systemic bias, generate another level of complexity. For example, science is based on the "gift economy" but the market is based on the price system, and scientific research depends on materials and skills that the market (or some other means) provides (Hyde 1983, pp. 77-83; Titmuss 1971). Each system imposes externalities on the other when they interact.

Third, and perhaps most fundamentally, the more closely linked people within a society become, the more externalities appear that were not an issue when links were looser. I came across an example regarding antibiotic resistance while working on this paper. As is well-known, antibiotic resistance towards an effective medicine gradually develops in bacteria the longer they are exposed to it. In the absence of new medicines, as this happens the death rate from a disease treatable by this antibiotic will increase. This has been one argument for making antibiotics requiring a physician's approval to be available. But even with this protection, many antibiotics are used in agriculture, especially in factory farming. And we know that diseases can jump the species barrier. Factory farming and easy availability of antibiotics both increase the rate of antibiotic resistance, and with it, the death rate from once treatable diseases (Le Page 2024, p. 17). These extra deaths are externalities.

The traditional concept of externalities contains an additional unexamined problem illuminated by studies of complex adaptive systems. As discussed above, when linkages causing negative externalities are frequent, seeking to address them all leads to stagnation

Nor are externalities simply market phenomena. Within spontaneous orders, and complex adaptive systems more generally, the saying "You can never do just one thing" holds true. The problem is as real in public policy as it is within the market. Establishing an organization to pursue public goals also establishes an organization that will tend to redefine those goals to subordinate them to the well-being of the organization itself. Because most readers of this piece will be very sensitive to the unintended consequences of some public policies, while being less so to the unintended consequences of the market process, I have focused on the market. But from urban renewal to busing in public schools to the Forest Service's commitment to put all fires out as soon as possible, organizational interests have often overridden the scientific evidence and the public interest alike, in government and science as well as in the market.

CIVIL SOCIETY



Michael Polanyi distinguishes a free society from science (and democracy) as one in which 'the public interest is known only fragmentarily and is left to be achieved as the outcome of individual initiatives aiming at fragmentary problems" (Polanyi 1969, p. 71). Polanyi describes what I define as "civil society."

Neither the market nor science nor democracy can be described as simply the expression of free men and women cooperating together. All are emergent patterns arising from formally voluntary cooperation within a different contexts of rules. Reducing a free society to scientific, democratic, or market values is crude reductionism. Not every individual value is best served within a particular spontaneous order, or even within any of them. For example, the arts are to some degree independent of all three.

The larger encompassing context within which people engage in voluntary cooperation is, called civil society: a field for voluntary cooperation among status equals in which markets, science, and other social institutions provide contexts for different kinds of projects. Civil society, and not any subset within it, is the ultimate context for freedom (diZerega 2014a). Civil society encompasses all spontaneous orders plus the rest of society engaged in relations of formal equality under the law. It is depicted here in the encompassing circle that includes the market, science, and democracy. I think much of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, especially vol. I., provided the first in-depth appreciation of civil society and how it was something new under the sun.

WHY IT MATTERS

The distinction I am making between social spontaneous orders and other kinds of complex adaptive systems, such as language, as well as organizations described in terms of a hierarchy of goals helps explain important empirical patterns distinguishing spontaneous orders from other social phenomena, as well as shedding attention on important phenomena that do not fit into established categories of social science.

The most important, perhaps, is it explains why humanity might have finally found a cure for the curse of war.

DEMOCRACIES HAVE NEVER FOUGHT WARS WITH ONE ANOTHER

If democracies are spontaneous orders for discovering true public values, I think it would be hard to deny that the most important public value possible to establish is peace between different peoples. Liberal democracies have *never* fought wars with one another, with war being described as a conflict with 100 or more casualties (diZerega 2024; 1995).

From the earliest tribes, war has been a constant issue. World history is characterized by an endless record of conflicts between peoples leading to continually redrawn boundaries, massive casualties, profound suffering, and new conflicts. Many studies appeared suggesting a tendency to waging war was either hardwired in human character (Morris 1999) or emerged and spread out of the logic of survival when challenged by others (Schmookler 1994).

Almost entirely ignored until the work of R. J. Rummel (1997) was the fact that even in nations with a long history of mutual conflict, such as Britain and France, Germany and France, or of violent conquest of one by another, as with Japan and Korea, or Britain and Ireland, the likelihood of war became virtually unthinkable once both parties became democratic. Even when some nations were in one alliance, and another was not, their borders were demilitarized, as with Switzerland and its neighbors, or Sweden and Norway, Norway and Finland, or the US/Canadian border.

When a democratic nation did wage aggressive war, as the US more than others has, it has been the doings of an executive able to free himself from democratic oversight, as with the American invasion and conquest of Iraq. Such executives also assisted in the violent overthrow of democratic governments when the scale of the engagement was so small as not to involved other democratic institutions, such as the US and Iran, US and Guatemala, US and Chile. An executive branch independent of the legislatures, like all undemocratic governments, is understandable as a state not a spontaneous order (diZerega 2024b).

SCIENCE IS A PROCESS OF DISCOVERING RELIABLE KNOWLEDGE

Unlike religions, ideologies, and forms of purely philosophical knowledge, science has repeatedly transformed what once seemed central assumptions because it holds its assumptions to the same standards as it holds any other claim to knowledge: based on maximally impersonal rules for investigation: measurement, prediction, and experiment, are they reliable? Early science began with core assumptions central to the Protestant religious beliefs most held at the time (Toulmin 1990, pp. 109-115). Today virtually all have been abandoned in favor of different assumptions. Measurement, prediction, and experiment are procedural, and do not say anything about truth. Unlike religion and many philosophical systems, science does not claim to discover truth, but eliminate error. What remains is the most reliable account known by these standards, but not a claim to truth (Ziman 1979).

No other conception for understanding reality has come close to science in its ability to reframe even its most basic assumptions when they conflict with findings about reliable knowledge. Nor has any other way of knowing led to such an enormous impact on human life. The reason is other approaches to knowledge *began* with an affirmation of a truth, and then sought to provide evidence for the claim and rebuts arguments against it. They are constructivist. Science instead relies on abstract procedures able in principle to evaluate any truth claim. Science is a discovery process, not a confirmation process, even though its original founders thought it would be (Hayek 1978, pp. 180-1; Polanyi 1969; 1954).

THE MARKET AS A PROCESS FOR COORDINATING EXCHANGES THROUGH THE PRICE SYSTEM

Prices shaped by previous decisions among producers and buyers, as well as by their future expectations, create a coordination network far more sensitive to relevant information than any attempt to manipulate prices from the outside based on other values or replacing the price system with central planning. Hayek as well as some other economists saw this as the strongest advantage of the market process over would-be alternatives (Hayek 1948, pp. 119-208).

THE BIG PICTURE

Economics mostly stays firmly within analyzing a market framework focusing on the implications of instrumental exchange within a price system. Political science focuses on the organization of power, particularly within governmental organizations. A Hayekian approach illuminates a new framework emphasizing the interactions of spontaneous orders and organizations within different overlapping contexts. In doing so it sheds light on important institutions that do not fit within either traditional category because they have elements of several. I will briefly discuss two examples.

THE NATIONAL TRUST OF ENGLAND, WALES AND NORTHERN IRELAND

The National Trust is the world's oldest land trust, celebrating its centenary in 1995. The National Trust's properties now extend to 612,000 acres (about 1000 square miles) in the UK, including about 18% of the total coastline of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. After the Crown, the National Trust is the largest landowner in the UK. It has over 3 million members, and is very popular. A similar trust also exists in Scotland. The National Trust's ability to incorporate ecological as well as historical values and its consistent acquisition of new land is impressive evidence of the concept's promise, even in densely settled lands.

The National Trust has a substantial democratic component. Anyone can become a member by joining, thereby obtaining voting rights. As of 2005, The National Trust has a Council consisting of 52 members, 26 elected by its membership, another 26 appointed by outside bodies. Direct management of the National Trust is through a Executive Committee, under which are a number of decentralized Regional Committees. Far from being devoid of political debate, the National Trust is frequently the site of vigorous campaigns by members seeking changes in policies regarding hunting, recreational use, and similar issues (Dwyer and Hidge 1996, p. 84). The National Trust integrates successful management of public land and democratic values, and has done so largely scandal free for 130 years. US National Forests could be managed as democratic trusts, integrating democratic values with civil society rather than subordinating them to bureaucratic and legislative priorities (diZerega 2006).

SPAIN'S MONDRAGON 'COOPERATIVES'

Cooperatives have traditionally been organized and analyzed on purely economic grounds, but seek to integrate democratic values within this framework. They have actually often been successful economically but as the value of shares increases, new workers cannot afford them when older ones retire and seek to sell them. They end up being bought by more traditional economic organizations such as corporations. The Mondragon cooperatives solved this problem and have prospered since 1956, now having over 90,000 members.

The most basic theoretical distinction between the Mondragon cooperatives and more traditional cooperatives concerns property rights. In a genuine sense Mondragon style cooperatives are owned by no one. They resemble democratic communities of citizens more than traditional cooperatives.

Membership in Mondragon is based on working in the cooperative, not on owning a share. I am a member *only* so long as I actually work there. Every member has an equal vote, and collectively they govern the business. If a worker retires or goes to work elsewhere he or she loses the right to vote and the right to a share of the cooperative's net profits.

Every member has a right to a share of the cooperative's net profits, paid out in a way superficially similar to wages in a traditional business. It will not necessarily increase in an unusually profitable year. At the same time the worker also accrues a portion of the company's net worth, but only receives this portion after ceasing to be a member, usually upon retirement. Increases in capital value are kept within the enterprise to be used for business needs, and when a person retires they receive their accrued portion over and above their pension. This arrangement is best understood politically rather than economically. In many ways membership in Mondragon is more analogous to citizenship than to traditional ideas about ownership of property (Ellerman 2012).

By having membership rights attached to work but rights to capital attached to the person working, the problem of future workers not being able to afford membership in a successful enterprise is solved. No worker need come up with the enormous amount needed to buy into a successful enterprise. Nor does the retiring worker need to sell his or her share to reap the benefits of capital accumulated during their membership because this capital is distinct from the share. This way shares can be kept affordable (diZerega 2014).

CONCLUSION

The framework I am helping develop in this article creates the foundation for a genuine "political economy" rather than what is often the case today of reducing politics to a form of economics. Spontaneous orders are products of human action but not of human design. All arise from people acting within formally equal contexts and choosing projects according to their own values and interests. Thus, all these systems incorporate the most basic liberal assumption: that all humans are formally equal, into their basic character.

Equally importantly, organizations within these systems will have interests different from the values that create the systems and will perpetually be drawn between two alternative strategies to flourish within them: creative adaptation or seeking to control the system to give it special protection from its dynamics.

Also important, people upon becoming members of organizations have a tendency to modify their own values and actions in ways to bring them into greater harmony with the organization itself. This effect is easily observed in corporations, sports teams, the military, religious organizations, and charities.

All of this takes place within civil society, the encompassing framework within which these and other networks of cooperation and connection arise within a free society. One could expand this framework farther, exploring how human complex adaptive systems and spontaneous orders themselves exist within the large complex adaptive system of the planet earth. But that is another paper (see however, diZerega 2020b).

I hope this analysis has demonstrated getting spontaneous orders right provides enormous analytical depth to our research, demonstrates liberal principles are inherent in the most important institutions of the modern world, and explain enormously important empirical patterns. One cannot ask much more from social science.

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Entrepreneurship in the City: Action Space & Jacobs Density

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Abstract: This essay explores how a social-network approach enhances our understanding of the entrepreneurial-competitive process, particularly within urban environments. Introducing two key concepts—Jacobs density and action space—the analysis demonstrates how social networks facilitate entrepreneurial discovery and innovation by enabling information flows and fostering new connections. Drawing on insights from Israel Kirzner's and Jane Jacobs's work, the essay argues that cities, with their unique social and spatial structures, play a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial opportunities. The study also raises critical questions about the relationship between social networks, economic dynamism, and institutional structures, suggesting that the nature and density of social ties, as expressed in those key concepts, influence the robustness of market processes. By framing entrepreneurship within the spatial and social fabric of cities, the paper offers a fresh perspective on how urban environments stimulate economic creativity and development.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, social networks, cities, Jacobs density, action space, Israel Kirzner

I. INTRODUCTION

Since at least the time of Richard Cantillon (1755) to Joseph Schumpeter (1934) to the present day, economists have appreciated to some degree the role of entrepreneurship in the competitive process. More recently, the sociologist Ronald Burt (1995) has shown how Israel Kirzner's (1973) particular concept of entrepreneurship is key for understanding how and why valuable connections are formed in social networks. This essay looks at the role of social networks in advancing entrepreneurial discovery in the market process[1] and sheds light on the significance of other factors in that process, social norms in particular.

It does so through the lens of two concepts, "Jacobs density" and "action space," which I have developed and discussed extensively elsewhere (Ikeda 2024, 2012), and draws attention to an important institutional dimension of entrepreneurship: cities. By framing entrepreneurship within a spatio-social context, this essay offers a fresh perspective on how urban environments uniquely stimulate economic creativity and development. But this approach to the analysis of market entrepreneurship itself has its complications, which I raise toward the end of the essay. The final section offers a summary and concluding thoughts.

II. THE PROBLEM: PURE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IS MISSING A CRUCIAL SOCIAL CONTEXT

For Israel M. Kirzner, entrepreneurship is essentially alertness to pure profit opportunities, which he argues is an *aspect* of all human action (Kirzner 1973). Unlike Joseph Schumpeter's concept *the entrepreneur*, who innovates by upsetting routines through boldness, drive, and vision (Schumpeter 1934), Kirznerian entrepreneurship is not limited to a particular kind of agent or personality. For Kirzner, anyone might manifest entrepreneurship, and he thus does not speak in terms of the role of "the entrepreneur" as such. Accordingly, Kirzner abstracts from psychological propensities and says little about the institutional context in which entrepreneurship takes place, save for the "free entry" enabled by a regime of private property (Kirzner 1973: 97). While private property is vital for entrepreneurship, an equally vital *social* dimension appears to be missing.

The highly abstract character of Kirzner's approach does have certain advantages, however. For instance, broadly speaking, we could also view the idea of pure alertness as an aspect of Schumpeter's innovating entrepreneur, who recognizes the opportunity to profit from introducing new products, new forms of organization, new sources of supply, and new markets (Kirzner 1973, p. 79; Schumpeter 1950, pp. 82-83). A less-appreciated advantage of the Kirznerian approach is the way it applies entrepreneurial alertness not only to the supply side of market processes but to the demand side as well, in the form of buyers throughout the structure of production who recognize the advantages of lower prices, new products, and new techniques and resources, and without whom new markets and new forms of organization could not arise. Looking at entrepreneurship from the demand side emphasizes the subjective nature of innovation, both on the part of those who create value and those who recognize the value of that which is created. This is something that a Schumpeterian supply-side approach to innovation tends to obscure. Innovation, i.e. discoveries that propel socio-economic development, is driven as much by the changing perceptions of buyers as by the efforts of producers and sellers to change them.[2]

But there are also important limitations to Kirzner's approach, and addressing them is the primary focus of this essay. Specifically, abstracting from the thick institutional and social context of the entrepreneurial-competitive process leaves unanswered how and under what circumstances an actor is likely to become alert to and discover a profit opportunity. And while the entrepreneurially driven, market process cannot take place at all without the institution of private property (although in its absence other non-market forms of entrepreneurship may still occur), the robustness of that process depends crucially on more than private property.

The competitive market process involves acts of buying, selling, borrowing, lending, investing, consuming, producing, and innovating. A crucial part of all these activities is Kirznerian entrepreneurship because they all involve some form of arbitrage. As buyers, we act entrepreneurially when we discover how to profitably outbid rival buyers. As sellers, we act entrepreneurially when we discover how to profitably outsell rival sellers. But whether as buyers or sellers, the information we use in our trading decisions must come from some trusted source, otherwise we would be reluctant to act.[3] Fifty years ago, we traded face-to-face, over the phone, or through the mail. Today, a great deal of what we buy and sell as consumers appears to be take place, wholly or in part, on online platforms, from Amazon to E*Trade. For bigger-ticket items such as cars and houses, or for businesses with large, first-time customers or suppliers, face-to-face contact is still the rule. Both the traditional and the modern methods of trade involve formal social networks. That is, when we act entrepreneurially there is always an implicit social context, i.e. a relationship with one or more persons, because we are buying from or selling something to someone. The trust we need to complete the exchange may come from someone who initially recommends a platform—"Have you used this before? What do you think?" who may be an acquaintance, relative, or reputable agent (who was referred to us by someone we already trust) with whom we have a connection. In the case of buying from Amazon.com, for example, that could be the person who recommends the platform or the person who makes deliveries to our

door. The absence of a social-institutional context in the Kirznerian version tends to elide this aspect of the entrepreneurial act.[4]

This is where the concept of social networks can help.

III. A SOCIAL-NETWORK APPROACH AS A SOLUTION

In the most general terms, a social network is a collection of people who are connected to one another through personal ties (Degenne and Forsé 1999, p. 28). Social networks include our families, friends, neighbors, coworkers, business associates, classmates, school faculties, teams, clubs, political parties, and co-religionists, to name but a few examples. Social networks may be formal or informal, long lasting or ephemeral. As these examples suggest, the foundation for social networks is some form of shared goals, beliefs, values, expectations, rules, norms, or conventions. Other things equal, the more such values etc. we share with others, and the more intensely we share them then, in the terminology of Mark Granovetter, the "stronger" are the ties among us (Granovetter 1973).[5] Strong ties help to stabilize a social network, i.e. enable it to persist and resist change or to change slowly over time.

A social-network approach to market processes locates an actor in a web of relationships. Some of those relations are strong, such as with close family, old friends, and long-time colleagues; others are weak, as with people whom we may have recently met. Granovetter argues that we are more likely to be exposed to novel information and ideas through weak ties, i.e. ties with people who, other things equal, tend to have knowledge, beliefs, customs, understandings, or expectations substantially different from those with whom we already have strong ties. And as Ronald Burt (1992, p. 26) argues: "Weak ties are essential to the flow of information that integrates otherwise disconnected social clusters into a broader society." By definition, however, we form weak ties with people who move in different circles, and who may have knowledge etc. useful to us that we don't have but are located in those circles. This implies that, to the extent entrepreneurial alertness flourishes when new ideas and information come to our attention, then the scope for entrepreneurial discovery in a relatively static, strongly tied network would be more limited[6] compared to a network whose norms more easily allow weak ties with strangers to form, e.g. norms of tolerance and inclusivity. Some of these ties may then grow stronger with time.

Here, the limited connection between Kirznerian entrepreneurship and institutions can be folded into this social-network approach insofar as Kirzner's emphasis on private ownership of property is associated with open societies that enable the "free entry" of new competitors into markets. But the social-network approach encompasses more than this if we look closely at the foundations of private property and free entry. That is, free entry and respect for private property may be merely formal and not actually practiced, if the values, rules, norms, and conventions held by members of our various social networks pressure us not to practice them. For example, same-sex marriage may be permitted by law but unacceptable to our friends and family. The nature of the social networks in which we are embedded, e.g. whether inclusive or exclusive, is critical and must therefore be carefully considered.

The information and ideas flowing into our networks in a more open society—and in such a society each of us will have memberships in many, ever-changing social networks—can offer us greater opportunities for critical speculation and experimentation. These may be disruptive, and certainly not all will be worthwhile, but it is through criticism and trial and error that innovations may eventually arise. This rather messy process, under the pressure of competition, drives economic development, and expands and refines the division of labor (Jacobs 1969). And just as weak ties with relative strangers serve as the main conduits for novel information and ideas, they also facilitate the spread of new knowledge and successful innovations to others, whether intentionally or not, and lay the groundwork for even more experimentation and as-yet-undiscovered innovations.

In a strongly tied network, stability can easily become stasis. To take an extreme case, if, because of the norms of our network, we avoid contact with anyone from outside our extended family or who differs from us in their race, language, social status, customs, dress, or spiritual beliefs, then our strong connections can

trap us. They will be extremely hard to break and prevent us from forming new ties with other persons and networks. Even if they have not reached such an extreme, as strong ties dominate weak ties, our social networks will become harder to escape. Indeed, the very idea of escaping them may grow less appealing to us.

On the other hand, as our tolerance for difference, novelty, and change expands, entry into and exit from our social networks becomes more open, and our ability and willingness to break old ties and form new ones increases. This adds to the dynamism of our networks and fosters greater experimentation and innovation in what we think and do. While this kind of dynamism stimulates the growth and expansion of what Adam Smith calls the necessaries, conveniences, and amusements of life, it can also radically change what we consider necessary, convenient, and amusing. To employ Schumpeter's useful phrase, it engenders "creative destruction."

IV. JACOBS DENSITY[7]

All this might imply that if the global population constituted a single, enormous social network with everyone completely connected, by "six degrees" or less (Barabasi 2003), with everyone else then over time all ties might eventually grow into strong ties. Consequently, in such a world, entrepreneurship would be severely constrained because, following Granovetter (1973), in time the information flowing through these strong ties would ensure that everyone would eventually share all knowledge in common and the opportunity to acquire novel information would radically diminish. Indeed, consistent with Ronald Burt's analysis, knowledge would effectively be "complete," and we would live in something like the static competitive world of neoclassical economics (Burt 1995).

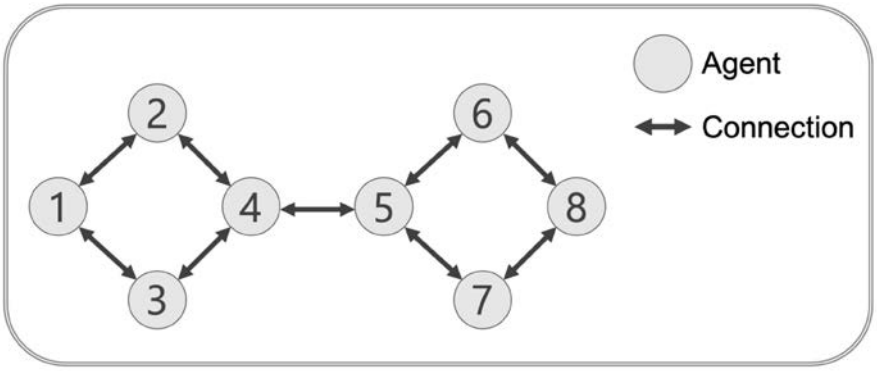
However, there do appear to be practical limits to how far and how deep an effective social network can extend. This has to do first with the maximum "degrees of separation" over which information can travel before its content becomes untrustworthy. For example, *ceteris paribus* we tend to find the recommendation of a friend to be more reliable than one from a colleague of that friend whom we don't know, and even more so than one from that colleague's colleague whom we also don't know. The number of such degrees of separation for which information remains reliable is around three, which restricts the "depth" of a social network (i.e. no farther than the colleague of a colleague of friend) (Christakis and Fowler 2009). There is also a limit imposed by the so-called "Dunbar's number," which is the maximum number of stable personal relationships we can maintain at any given time. On average that number appears to be around 150 (Dunbar 1992). Beyond 150, adding contacts means having to lose contacts. The source and exact value of this number is debatable, but the point is that there is some practical limit to the number of relationships we can successfully maintain at any time. Thus, any given social network tends to consist of a maximum of around 150 direct contacts, each of which can only be a source of reliable information out to three degrees, beginning from someone with whom we are directly tied.

Given this limit, a crucial consideration influencing the value to us of our contacts would appear to be how connected we actually are with others in a given social network and the potential of those connections to form new, perhaps more valuable contacts elsewhere. And that is somehow related the "density" of our social spaces.

Now, a familiar concept in urban discussions is "population density," which is the number of persons residing a given area. It is often used as a measure of urbanity, with cities described as dense and suburbs described as "sprawled." While useful for some purposes, population density fails to capture the idea of connectivity among those occupying an area. However, a standard concept in social network theory called "network density," which is the ratio of the actual connections there are in a social network to the maximum number of potential connections in that network, might look like a more useful concept for thinking about the relation between connectivity and information flows among a group of people.

For example, in the Network A,[8] among the 8 agents there are 9 actual pairs of ties out of a possible maximum of 28. The density of that network is 9/28 or 0.32, or only about a third of all possible ties in this network are realized (although all agents are connected indirectly through other agents).

FIGURE 1: Network A

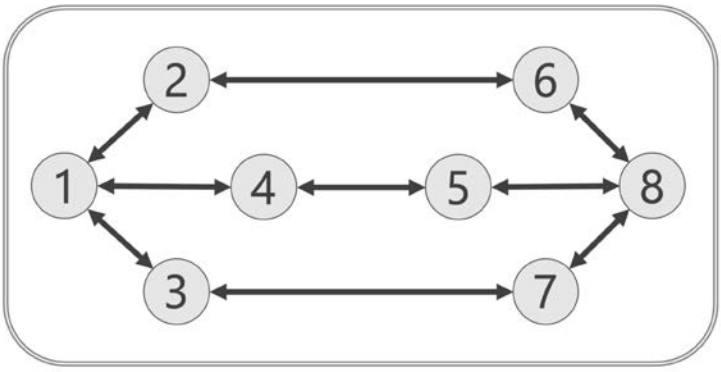


Thus, the more connections one has, *ceteris paribus*,[9] the more sources of information there could be. According to Granovetter (1973), Network A is not stable because over time agents who are currently only indirectly tied, such as Agents 2 and 3, via their strong ties with Agents 1 will eventually come into direct contact with each other and form a strong tie because of their mutual commonalities with Agent 1. The process would continue between all the other agents in Network A that are currently only indirectly tied to one another until its network density reaches a maximum of 1.0. Moreover, in this current structure, Agent 1, because of the degrees-of-separation rule, will find unreliable the information originating from beyond Agent 5 (i.e. from Agents 6, 7, and 8). This is true from the perspective of each agent in the network, except for Agents 4 and 5, with respect to at least one other agent (e.g. for Agent 6 it is Agent 1).

Another aspect of Network A is the average degrees of separation between pairs of agents. For example, only one degree separates Agents 1 and 2, but five degrees separate Agents 1 and 8. For this network structure the average distance is 2.29.[10] This aspect is relevant for entrepreneurship because, as we have just seen, the less distance information has to travel, *ceteris paribus*, the more reliable it will tend to be.

But consider a second social network.

FIGURE 2: Network B



Network B has the same number of agents and network density of 0.32 as Network A, although the way the agents are connected, the "network structure" is different. This is significant because now no agent is separated from any other by more than three degrees. If we calculate the "average distance" between agents, it turns out to be 1.93, whereas the average distance in Network A was 2.29, which is about eighteen-percent larger. This implies that the information circulating among agents in Network B, according to the three-degree rule, is likely to be more reliable than it is in Network A.

However, there is still a problem with Network B. As we have seen, according to Granovetter, in Network B the relation among, say, Agents 1, 2, and 3 is again unstable because, assuming the ties Agent 1 has with Agents 2 and 3 are strong (i.e. if the ties are of long duration, high emotional intensity and intimacy, frequent contact, and multiple uses), there should be no gap or "structural hole" (Burt 1995) between Agents 2 and 3. Agent 1's strong ties and commonality with Agents 2 and 3 means the latter will become acquainted with each other and eventually form a strongly tied triad with Agent 1. In this way, if all the ties in Network B are strong then in time all structural holes will eventually disappear (as was true for Network A). While not all ties need be strong ties, over time weak ties tend to become stronger.

The concept of "Jacobs density" avoids these problems and is a more useful framework for understanding the relation between information flows and entrepreneurship. *Jacobs density*, named for the urbanist Jane Jacobs who inspired it, is the total number of contacts a given person (Ego) could access through direct contacts, divided by the actual number of direct contacts Ego has. Unlike the standard concept of network density, Jacobs density extends beyond a given network and so does not make a distinction among agents in one network or another. And it does not imply complete information. But, as Burt (1995) argues, this leaves space for entrepreneurially alert agents to form weak ties or "bridges" with agents in more diverse social networks, which in turn serve as conduits for novel information that may lead to entrepreneurial profit.

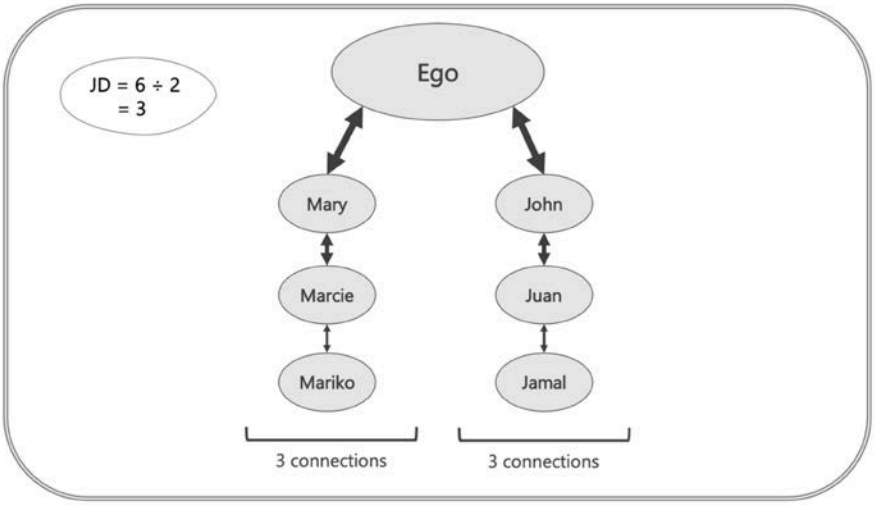
In addition, according to Burt:

> As you expand your inventory from your closest, most frequent contacts to your more distant, contacts tend to be people like yourself before you reach a sufficiently low level of relationship to include people from completely separate social worlds (Ibid.).

This raises the issue of "social distance" between agents, i.e. degrees of separation plus differences in their personal backgrounds.

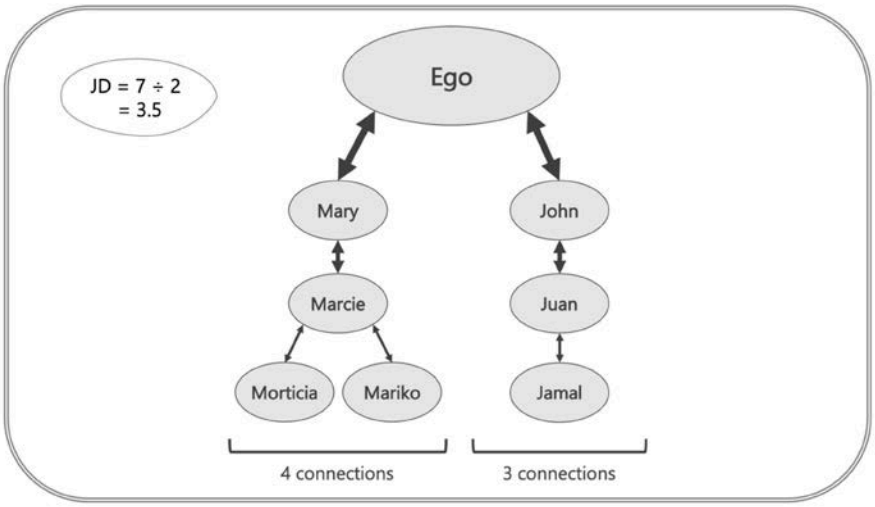
In the following diagram, Jacobs density is simply the number of actual contacts (two) to the potential contacts (six) available to Ego in a particular space, which equals three. Here, social distance appears in both senses as the degrees of separation from Ego and the thickness (i.e. Granovetter's "strength") of the ties, reflecting diversity from Ego. Note that this structure is not itself a social network since only Ego, Mary, and John are directly connected (and a strong tie between Mary and John can be assumed without detracting from the analysis).

FIGURE 3: Jacobs Density 1



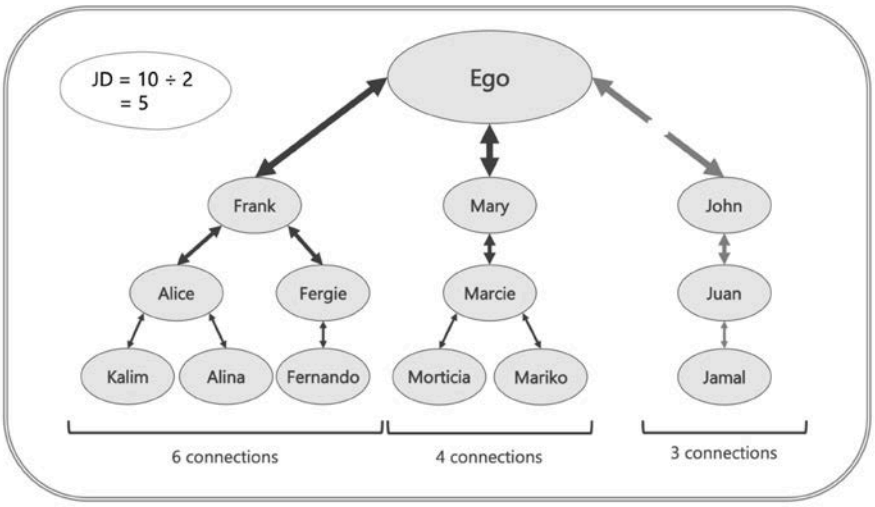
Unlike standard network density, Jacobs density respects the limits of the degrees-of-freedom rule and Dunbar's number. The thinning ties in Figure 3 reflects increasing social distance (i.e. diversity) from, and weaker potential ties with, Ego, Mariko and Jamal representing the limits of reliable information. And Ego's Jacobs density can increase if one of these potential connections forms a new tie with someone outside of Ego's existing networks, as when Marcie creates a connection with Morticia in Figure 4. This aligns with Burt's observation that "increasing network size without considering diversity can cripple a network in significant ways. What matters is the number of nonredundant contacts" (Burt 1992, p. 17). Ego's ties with Mary and John are not redundant in this case.

FIGURE 4: Jacobs Density 2



If Ego and the network or networks to which it belongs hold norms, such as tolerance, that enable a meaningful exercise of appropriate formal institutions, such as private property and free association, Ego may then alter the structure of a given social network by adding a new connection with an agent who increases Ego's Jacobs density. In many cases, according to Dunbar's number, this may require breaking an existing tie. Under these circumstances the following may result:

FIGURE 5: Jacobs Density 3



In Figure 5, Ego has broken ties with John to form a new tie with Frank, who promises a more robust set of potential connections, raising Jacobs density from 3 to 5.

These potential ties are speculative, of course. Ego will be unable to ascertain with certainty the actual Jacobs density of a particular tie except by discovering and making the connection and experiencing how robust it really is. Such discoveries take place in "action space."

V. ACTION SPACE

An action is always done by someone for something, at a particular time and place. I am hungry. I imagine the possibility of not being hungry. Somewhere there is food that could satisfy my hunger. There is a way I can gain access to it. Finally, if I am aware of the food and how to get to it (i.e. the ends-means framework) then, and only then, might I act to satisfy my hunger. These are the abstract conditions necessary and sufficient for a person to initiate an action (Mises 1963, p. 13). Becoming aware of an end and the means to achieve that end are, according to Kirzner, entrepreneurial acts and, as I have been arguing, entrepreneurial acts take place in a social context, at a particular time and in a particular place. These three dimensions (i.e. time, place, and social context) constitute an "action space." An *action space* is the temporal, spatial, and social setting in which we can choose to act (Ikeda 2024). In other words, an action space is where we do things. It could be a home, workplace, meeting room, street, bar, or piazza.

For example, my siblings live over two-thousand miles away from me. We communicate by text almost daily. It might appear then that my relationship with them exists outside of space because we do not need to be physically near one another to communicate. However, while our membership in a family social network may transcend where we happen to be at any moment, my willingness and ability to communicate with them depends entirely on time and place. When a text from one of them arrives, for example, I need to be in a situation where I can conveniently read and possibly respond to it. If I am in my office or in some other secure place, and if I have the time, I might be willing and able to respond right away, but not otherwise. I will reply "when it is convenient," when time, place, and social norms allow. For some people, the right time and place to text may be the middle of a crowded sidewalk at lunchtime, although not for me!

In places where we are more likely to encounter strangers the Jacobs density is likely to be higher, i.e. higher in a "public space" than in a "private space"—a piazza versus our living rooms—because contact with those strangers, in an environment we perceive to be safe, will tend to yield proportionately more novel information of various kinds than from people we already know well. Which brings us back to Jacobs density: Where are action spaces more likely to have relatively high Jacobs density?

VI. CITIES AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Other things equal (but see below section VIII), the higher the Jacobs density in an action space, the greater the likelihood for entrepreneurial discovery and perhaps also for innovation. And this again highlights the importance of "place" in the entrepreneurial competitive process. Entrepreneurial competition can happen anywhere, of course, if there is an action space for it to happen in. Geographically, it could be in a rural district or a city center. Our earlier discussion, however, suggests that a city is a more fertile location, if the city follows a spontaneous pattern of development. What is behind this rather unsurprising perception?

What we call a "city" comes in a variety of forms. The urban form most relevant for entrepreneurial development and the dynamic market process is one that has perhaps multiple centers of activity and where land-uses become denser and more diverse as we approach them, such as in Paris and Tokyo that have separate financial, political, and cultural districts, for example. "Denser" here can also mean a higher population per area.[11] And while "more diverse" refers primarily to the diversity of land uses (e.g. residential, commercial, etc.) in an area, such as a city neighborhood, diversity is also often a reflection of differences in the origins and backgrounds (i.e. the social distance) of the people who inhabit it. Taken together, greater density and wider diversity increase the Jacobs density of an action space.

Urbanists use the term "granular" to refer to the number of separate land uses there are within a given distance or area, e.g. how many uses a person walking at a certain pace can access in given period of time. On a city block or neighborhood, higher granularity usually takes the form of small frontages of different establishments rather than "big box" stores (usually surrounded by enormous parking lots) or other large single uses. Granularity is also a function of population density, as more people occupying an area typically gives rise to higher market demand for a wider variety of products and services, which can take the form of uses that bring people into an area (e.g. jobs, residences, transport hubs, entertainment venues) or uses that serve those who are there already (e.g. grocery and hardware stores, laundromats, and restaurants). As rule, a small town such as Mystic, Connecticut (population just under 5,000) tends to have much lower granularity than Midtown Manhattan. Which is not to deny that Mystic has a charming and very granular downtown—it does—but only for a relatively short distance, as its granularity dissipates rather quickly as one travels farther from the center. And while cars can dramatically change the morphology of a city, introducing cars that can speed from one big-box store to another does not affect this comparison, since the number and variety of land uses one encounters on a stretch of street or road, while driving at a constant speed for a given time, will still generally be considerably higher in a large city compared to a smaller one or a town.

Thus, the more granular an action space is and the higher the population density, other things equal, the greater the Jacobs density will be and, following our earlier discussion, the more fertile the action space will be for entrepreneurial discovery. We might also posit that a smaller city that is experiencing increasing density and diversity will be more likely to grow into a larger one, while a large city that has declining granularity will tend to have a shrinking population and declining development.

VII. THE INTERACTION BETWEEN ACTION SPACE AND JACOBS DENSITY

If action spaces can be characterized by various levels of Jacobs density, does this mean that an action space is always more entrepreneurially robust as its Jacobs density grows higher? Not necessarily.

To evaluate the robustness of an action space we must do so from the point of view of specific actors. Two different actors, or the same actor at different times, will view the same place, a New York City subway car perhaps, entirely differently from the point of view of harnessing the Jacobs density within it. A crowded subway car probably has a very high Jacobs density compared to most public spaces because of the number of people in it and the diversity of their backgrounds. However, if at the moment I am just using the subway as a means to get to my job on time, unless something happens to disrupt my usual expectations, I am unlikely to violate the norm of "don't talk to strangers and mind your own business." But if, as sometimes happens, the car should unexpectedly stop between stations and stay stranded there for an unusual length of time, a new set of norms may emerge, in which case typical New Yorkers might feel freer to exchange meaningful looks with their neighbors or even engage in conversation with them. In that situation, one can tap into some of the Jacobs density there, say, to learn how often this happens on this line or what alternate routes there may be to one's destination. On the other hand, under normal circumstances a panhandler telling his sad life story at length in a loud voice is operating with a different set of norms and expectations from everyone else, one that allows him to habitually try to exploit the car's Jacobs density. And even experienced subway riders tend to find this violation of their space annoying.

In short, a given level of Jacobs density can contribute to the robustness of the action space only under the right set of norms and expectations, which can change with time and circumstances.

When I step outside my hotel for the first time in a city I do not know, where the language or customs might be alien to me, say Prague, I may clearly see the physical granularity of the local land uses and be intellectually aware of the possibilities for profitable connections, large and small, offered among the people within the visible radius of where I am standing, but hesitate to venture too boldly to make those connections. I imagine most of us would. Over time, as I grow more familiar with local norms and customs, and can better identify the values of the people who inhabit that space, I will be able to utilize more fully the

Jacobs density latent there. Thus, my likelihood of entrepreneurial discovery will have increased to some degree, even though the Jacobs density may not have changed.

Over time, too, the dimensions of my action spaces in that city change. Typically, as I experience the city and it becomes more familiar to me, the scope of my action spaces will grow and I become able and willing to utilize more of the geography of the urban landscape. The city as I experience it, its action spaces or what urban planner Kevin Lynch might call my "city image," morphs over time: growing where I feel more secure, shrinking where I feel less. And where my action spaces are expanding and multiplying, again depending on the circumstances, I may be able to discover and possibly tap into the Jacobs density there. This process of growing and shrinking action spaces is ongoing. Even after living someplace for decades, our perception of its action spaces can change, and of course the Jacobs density of different areas will change as our social networks in them change, i.e. their members make or break ties with others, each embodying different Jacobs densities.

As I have suggested, aside from nomenclature, none of this may be particularly noteworthy or surprising to the reader. After all, one can appreciate these things about a city intuitively without invoking the concepts of action space or Jacobs density, just as one can appreciate an economic system to some degree without having studied supply-and-demand analysis. But in the same way that having some knowledge of music structure can help us to identify the downbeats of a familiar song and appreciate that song more, "seeing" a place as a collection of dynamic action spaces and speculating about the factors that would cause the Jacobs densities in them to rise or fall can help us to look behind the visible to the invisible infrastructure of a city and to identify what exactly it is that makes a certain place feel lively or dead. These concepts can help us, so to speak, to find the "downbeats" of a city and to see how its diverse elements hang together and flow through time.

But this raises some important questions.

VIII. QUESTIONS

In my hotel example, for instance, in what sense is it really "the same" Jacobs density the next day, even in the unlikely event that the very same people with the same potential connections occupy the same area? The subjective element goes further than whom a potential contact knows or could know. That is, from my perspective as the focal agent (Ego), what changes from one day to the next is my knowledge of who and where those people are and my willingness to act on that knowledge. Having observed last night that the waitress at the restaurant where I dined and whom I suspect has much local knowledge, is also friendly to foreigners, I will feel more confident today to ask her about the best places to find a souvenir tea towel for my wife. And if she herself may not know, she may be able to tell me about someone who probably does. I could have asked her yesterday, but I was too uncertain.

So, in the meantime did the "latent" Jacobs density simply emerge for me or did it change? Did I change? Is Jacobs density an objective fact to be revealed or is it based on my own expectations? Are the connections the people in my action spaces an "objective fact," so that it is then just a matter of discovering this and mustering the will to act? Or, do my own expectations and actions somehow play a role in creating the Jacobs density I discover?

Also, is more Jacobs density necessarily better? I have been assuming that, from the point of view of entrepreneurial discovery and economic development, other things equal, the greater the Jacobs density in an action space the more likely economic development will take place there. But as the subway example illustrates, a high Jacobs density, i.e. the "objective" fact that there are diverse and valuable connections that could potentially be made there, does not necessarily translate into a rich entrepreneurial environment unless the appropriate norms, rules, etc. are commonly shared.

Another sense in which more may not be better is the situation, often complained about in political campaigns, of immigrants and other socially distant persons moving into a neighborhood in large numbers. (I am using "immigrants" here in the most general sense). While their cultural diversity may add to

the richness of the neighborhood's Jacobs density and variety to its restaurants and other offerings, our awareness of this diversity could itself make us feel uneasy, even threatened, thus reducing our willingness to initiate contact with that diversity or to wish them away. Or, regardless of their social distance, the sheer number of new entrants may lead to congestion in public areas—"You can't even get a seat in that restaurant anymore"—and discourage us from going to those places, effectively shrinking our action spaces.[12]

This raises the related question of whether there is such a thing as having "too much diversity" or being "too socially distant." The answer to these questions might depend on what the objective is: Too diverse or too socially distant for what? Using historical and anthropological evidence, for example, Cesur and Yildirim (2024) argue that high levels of diversity reduces social well-being, but at the same time it promotes economic development. This essay focuses on the latter, so the impact on measured well-being may be less important, at least in the short run because of the positive impact on development. But will the local populace remain tolerant enough in the meantime to tradeoff well-being for greater development?

Finally, perhaps paradoxically, if over time we feel more at ease with an increase in diversity in our communities and the connections we make with entrants become stronger, then at the same time, according to Granovetter, those strong ties will carry less and less novel information to fuel the entrepreneurial-competitive process. An ongoing entry of socially distant persons into a community might offset this, but how likely will that be when, as we have seen, the more strongly tied the social network becomes the less inclusive it may also become (Ikeda 2024, p. 171)?

IX. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A social-network approach can enrich our understanding of the entrepreneurial-competitive process. In particular, a city's action spaces and Jacobs density help to explain how the granularity of its land uses, combined with private property and free entry, contributes to its the overall creativity and innovativeness. These concepts ground entrepreneurship in its spatial context, its place. In this way, they help us to find the "downbeats" that guide our movements and choices around a city. However, this essay raises questions about the exact relation among action space, Jacobs density, social norms, and entrepreneurship, for which we have as yet no satisfactory answers. In the meantime, however, I believe these concepts are still useful for understanding the nature of complex social orders, such as cities and the market processes within them.

NOTES

1 In his keynote address before the 2022 Markets & Society conference, Peter J. Boettke asserted: "Relations before exchange!" This nicely captures the spirit of this essay.

2 Henry Ford is once said to have quipped, "If I asked people what they wanted, they'd say 'faster horses'," suggesting that producers not consumers are the real innovators. But did Ford ever make a product that did not sell because people did not want to buy it? Yes, of course he did. As Adam Smith recognized in *The Wealth of Nations*, "consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production."

3 But we could still act when trust of a certain kind is absent, as I have argued in Ikeda (2024: 159-166).

4 Adam Seligman (1997) makes an important distinction between what he terms "trust in a person" versus "confidences in a system," which I have written about in this context (e.g. Ikeda 2024) but which is not relevant here.

5 Granovetter (1973) lists the four relevant dimensions of social ties as 1) duration, 2) emotional intensity, 3) intimacy or trust, and 4) frequency of contact.

6 Of course, entrepreneurship can occur when relevant information contained in a social network has not yet been discovered.

7 This section and the one following draw from Ikeda (2024) Chapter 5, although they substantially develop that discussion.

8 The diagrams appearing in this essay are from Ikeda (2024).

9 I am leaving out certain complicating factors, such as the possibility of uni-directional or hierarchical ties, and that some of these ties may be undesirable, such as with an abusive partner. Also, a thicker tie need not entrail greater reliability, because knowing more about someone may well lead us to rely on them less. A more thorough treatment of "trust" can be found in Ikeda (2024, Chapter 5).

10 See Ikeda (2024) Appendix to Chapter 5 for the calculation of these average network distances.

11 For an excellent discussion of the various meanings of density and their relationship, see Solly Angel's video lecture, "The anatomy of density." https://unhabitat.org/the-anatomy-of-density-shlomo-angel

12 A recent NBER working paper indicates the evidence for this is at best mixed: "We show evidence among first- and second-generation immigrants in Europe and the USA that while home country diversity continues to hurt the SWB [social well-being] of first-generation immigrants, such effects weaken among the second-generation, suggesting that long-run improvements in the social environment can mitigate the misery of diversity over generations. We complete our analysis by documenting evidence aligning with arguments that humans adapt to diversity by adopting a favorable attitude toward competition and assigning greater importance to family and friends" (Cesur & Yildirim 2024: 36).

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Review

The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History, by J. C. D. Clark

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J. C. D. Clark
The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History, Oxford University Press, 2024.

The idea of 'the Enlightenment', though prefigured in the German word *die Aufklärung*, was only used in English from the late nineteenth century, and did not denote what we currently take it to denote until the 1960s. The idea that there was a single 'Enlightenment project' emerged out of works by thinkers such as Cassirer, Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas, Berlin, and was only named by Alasdair MacIntyre in 1981. There is a vast literature on 'the Enlightenment'—we could instance, only in English, the two volumes of Peter Gay or the six volumes of Jonathan Israel or the many studies by Margaret Jacob, J. G. A. Pocock, John Robertson, James Schmidt, Anthony Pagden and others—but this literature is a literature which achieved escape velocity only in the last fifty or so years. To have shown this is the achievement of J. C. D. Clark in the book *The Enlightenment* published last year.

The argument is this. We, at some point in the last century took a word, reified it so it became a thing, and then wrote as if that thing had existed in the past. Whenever we speak of 'the Enlightenment', therefore, we are exerting the equivalent of an imperial sway over the past. According to Clark, there was no such thing as 'the Enlightenment' in the eighteenth century. Rather, 'the Enlightenment' is an artefact of the twentieth century. It is a consequence which went back in time to set a crown upon its purported cause: though, in fact, it also had to build this strange and awkward stuccoed Ozymandias out of a thousand potsherds and a few lightbulbs.

This argument is simple, decisive, and demands to be faced squarely by anyone who writes about the Enlightenment in the future.

Let me some observations about the book. First, its structure. Every author, especially now, and, dare I say, especially historians—whose form of study is, to say the least, formless until they come to impose form on it—can be seen to be imposing structures on their books. Quentin Skinner's recent book, *Liberty as Independence*, is divided into five parts, each of two chapters: which, to my mind, suggests a certain Shakespearian five-act desire to reach a satisfactory Fortinbrasian end. Richard Bourke's recent book, *Hegel's World Revolutions*, is, as one might expect, is divided into three parts, each of three chapters. It is odd that a book so reluctant to consider Hegel systematically has a structure that apes the logic of its subject. Maurice Cowling's *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* was divided into two major parts, one entitled 'Assaults' and one entitled 'Accommodations', though this concealed a fourfold division of attitudes to Christianity in the modern world—defend it, destroy it, compromise with it, assim-

ilate it. And J. C. D. Clark, who, long ago, was associated with Cowling at Peterhouse in Cambridge, seems to allude to Cowling's titles. He divides his own book into three parts, entitled 'Absences?', 'Aspirations?' and 'Achievements?', the question marks, I take it, suggesting a certain scepticism about the apparently Hegelian structure of the work. As that critic of Hegel, Kierkegaard, once wrote, we understand life backwards, but live it forwards: and it is part of Clark's claim that any Hegelian vision of history puts the cart before the horse, or, as Kierkegaard might put it, the palace before the hut: since it involves the retrospective building of castles in our imaginative picture of a former century which, simply, did not exist at the time. The stones were there, indeed, but we are the builders: we moderns.

A second observation about the book is that it is published in exemplary form. In one respect, things are as they should be: the footnotes are on the page. In another respect, there is an innovation, which I think should be adopted by all other historical writers. For the bibliography is not ordered, as is usual, without any logic—alphabetically—but logically: because it is ordered chronologically. This means that reading the bibliography is an exercise in its own right: not the usual exasperated scraping around for references of one's own, but itself a scholarly contribution to the subject. I once began an article I wrote with a short bibliographical list of works in chronological order, simply so the readers could see the lineage I wanted them to take for granted: and Clark has not only outdone me in this, but shown the way to everyone else: especially, the historians.

A third observation about the book has to be that it is massive and marvellous: more than five hundred pages, with bites of argument, extended lines of historical engagement, and much quotation. Clark, as we say nowadays, wants us to see the receipts. It is a scholarly book, so the ordinary reader would certainly find the framing of the book, and many of its asides, heavy and challenging. There are long sequences of reflections on lists of writers from the French eighteenth century, and the German and English nineteenth centuries—Owen, Hyndman, Morris Wells, Beer, Cole etc., and Tenneman, Schwegler, Ueberweg, Erdmann, Windelband etc. But there are stretches of the book which ascend to literature: not only in terms of interest and amusement, but also in terms of a wholly unusual irony. I particularly enjoyed some twenty pages on 'the English Coffee House' and *The Spectator* in chapter 1 (Clark exhibiting a rare gift of literary criticism that is almost unknown amongst historians); and some sixty pages on Locke and Hume in chapter 4. About Hume, Clark is sceptical: and this itself is ironic. As far as Clark is concerned, Hume was highly credulous. Anyone who doubts Clark's high achievement in this book should read pages 167 to 212, which I consider a sublime contemporary example of high literary art. Clark shows us how Hume ruled out final causes, sought a science of human nature, carried out experiments that were not experiments at all, since they were 'thought experiments', and never managed to indicate how a science of man could deal with even the slightest political difficulty. He saw conflicts of parties and of principles and so recommended—moderation. His *History of England*, as no one ever admits, wholly undermined the science of man outlined in his *Treatise* and the *Essays*: for it was a highly entertaining study of endless incidents: of, in Clark's words, 'rebellion, assassination, torture, arbitrary show trials and executions' (p. 197). What science could ever show how liberty came out of those? No one until now, not even Pocock, has ever suggested that enlightened history was, in fact, a highly ironical history. Clark's verdict: 'Hume was, as he wrote, discovering what he thought' (p. 201):

> Hume's *History* was a major intellectual achievement; it had many strengths; it understandably achieved classic status; but taken as a whole, it did not promote an idea of any steady and coherent intellectual or social advance in any part of the British Isles or beyond (not even in Scotland) (p. 208).

I do not want to say more about Clark's book. It has to be read. Summary would be tedious, and, anyhow, obscure to anyone unwilling to read the book himself. And the argument is simple. But I would like to offer some further reflections because I do not think that we are forced only to contemplate enlightenment historically, as Clark does. We can also reflect on it philosophically: especially if we do so with some knowl-

edge of history. In fact, as Oakeshott always supposed, if we want to think about *anything* well, we have to operate in the awkward mixed medium of both historical and philosophical reflection: oils and watercolours. No science could possibly come of this; but we may at least be able to use language with more care.

What is enlightenment?

Its strict and original meaning is coming into the light. Its logic is binary. Its location is usually in the individual, though it may be experienced collectively, as when we come out of Plato's cave, or, like the Hopi people of North America, ascend into the 'fourth world'. Here enlightenment is conversion, *theosis*, nirvana etc: it is simply a standard way of referring to spiritual awakening. This first meaning is probably as old as language.

Its second meaning, by contrast, was not possible before the century of Grotius, Pascal and Bayle. It is negative, possibly atheist, religiously sceptical, also agnostic. Here enlightenment is used antithetically to its standard use. Here spiritual awakening, and religious orders and political systems they sanction, are associated together and considered to be 'dark', so that 'light' is found where they are dismissed or destroyed. This is the origin of enlightenment being associated with a break in tradition: where we leave behind the dark ages in order to make it possible to build a secular modern order. But the problem has always been how to reconcile the destructive activity of this second enlightenment with some constructive order. This leads us inevitably to the third meaning.

Its third, modern, and complete reified meaning is where 'enlightenment' becomes 'the Enlightenment', and is considered to be a historical transition affecting entire societies. It is collective, and it is positive without being religious or traditional. It involves the attempt to show that 'enlightenment' in the secular sense is not only destructive. If the second form of enlightenment is a negation, this is the negation of a negation: hence, a position. Now it requires a capital letter and the definite article.

But what sort of position is it? If we were inclined to be sceptical or historically scrupulous about terminology we would be reluctant to use the third reified form of the word. This is because the idea, again, as Clark insists, is not an eighteenth century idea at all, but a nineteenth century idea only made central to our concerns in the twentieth century. But although Clark's historical scepticism is essential, as a bringing to consciousness of exactly where to locate 'the Enlightenment' (in the ideas of the twentieth century as retrojected onto the ideas of the eighteenth century), it does not prevent us from admitting that, for better or worse, 'the Enlightenment' is now what we could call a reconstitutive idea, held in our time, that enables us to make sense of an earlier time. Indeed, the conviction that there *was* an Enlightenment is often constitutive of our simplicities, and certainly cannot easily be stripped out of our contemporary sense of history. For the moment, the term serves as a battleground. And though I admire Clark's historical restraint, I think it is inevitable that we will use the term 'enlightenment' to try to capture something of the nature of the recent past. Some say there is only one Enlightenment. Some say there are two, one better than the other. Others, like Pocock, have said that there are many. Against all these suggestions, I would say that there are three major positive forms that have been taken by enlightenment, or, if one prefers, the Enlightenment. Anyone interested in this suggestion may consult an article I wrote a few years ago (Alexander 2020). The argument is that enlightenment comes in three major, and incommensurable, forms.

First, it is manifest in the imposition of secular ideals on the world. This has involved criticism of religion, and even displacement of religion, but what has replaced religion has been of similar form if not content: it has required us to subscribe to certain conscious ideals. Instead of 'incarnation', for instance, 'revolution'. Instead of 'salvation', say, 'emancipation'. Here enlightenment is, significantly, about the imposition of enlightened ideals on the world. And these ideas have to be consciously held, and instantiated because believed. This is the blunt and simple meaning of enlightenment.

Second, by contrast, it is manifest in a process that has not been brought to consciousness except after the fact. It did not take the form of the imposition of conscious ideals, but rather took the form of certain contingent historical events which threw up emergent complexities that proved susceptible to explanation. Knowledge of this did not require the adoption of ideals. This sort of understanding was less about belief in enlightenment but retrospective knowledge that it had taken place. This is the sort of enlightenment we

find in Mandeville and Hume, and, much later on, in Hayek: an unintended enlightenment only understood after the fact.

Third, it is manifest neither as something that should happen—the imposition of ideals—or as something that has happened—the emergence of unsought but beneficial institutions—but as something that is happening. This enlightenment is not about convictions or knowledge, but about something lesser: mere opinions, or, rather, opinions in the plural. This is a distinctively political enlightenment, where enlightenment is sought in pragmatic compromises as a result of adversarial political encounters, in which rival positions are counterposed to each other. Here enlightenment is not about being right, or knowing the truth, but simply finding the best possible way in a situation in which disagreement exists. This is the sort of enlightenment that came last: the enlightenment of liberalism, of public disagreement and of justified opposition.

I think that these three forms of enlightenment are still paradigmatic. When we speak of 'the Enlightenment' what we mean is either: 1) the imposition of enlightened ideas, 2) the emergence of civil change through incremental, usually commercial, hence self-interested, activity, and 3) the establishment of institutional means by which arguments can hopefully be resolved. The first is completely conscious before the fact. The second is unconscious, at first, though brought to consciousness after the fact. The third attempts to make the best of the tension between these two types of consciousness, and tries to reconcile them, along with our other commitments, such as the traditions and institutions we do not entirely want to abandon, in such a way that this reconciliation is found through a political process.

Clark would probably consider this temporising. He does not want to think about enlightenment, even in this way. His book has a remarkably Plantagenet simplicity about it. He simply wants us to deal with 'the Enlightenment' the way Henry I dealt with Conan Pilatus at Rouen: throw it out of a tower window. His book is a great valiant and lordly work of negative judgement: and I recommend everyone read it.

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Review

Dark Places: Crime and Politics in the Personal Noir of James Ellroy, Darrell A. Hamlin and Joseph Romance eds.

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Darrell A. Hamlin and Joseph Romance eds.
Dark Places: Crime and Politics in the Personal Noir of James Ellroy, Lexington Books, 2024.

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville observes that the political psychology of the tenth paper of *The Federalist*, of ambition counteracting ambition to preserve free government from tyranny, is present in the overlapping jurisdictions of American political institutions down to the organizational level of county and municipality. On Tocqueville's picture, magistrates, district attorneys, county prosecutors can check one another's transgressions of the law by taking one another to court, holding one another to law, and leaving free citizens to the business of their daily lives. James Ellroy's crime fiction, memoir and journalism, from 1981 to the present, inverts this picture of overlapping jurisdictions into one where competing law enforcement agencies from county sheriff's departments to municipal and state police forces to federal agents fight over control of cases, losing and destroying evidence in a manner which allows violent criminals to get away with murder. Moreover, Ellroy's crime novels display a world of thoroughgoing institutional corruption, systematic bribery and blackmail, in which organized criminality both entraps and bribes elected officials and police officers, with criminals and mafiosi escaping in the interstices of the overlapping jurisdictions, outside the law.

Given the institutional view that stands behind Ellroy's writing as well as the cultural prominence both of Ellroy's novels and of their cinematic adaptations, Ellroy's work would seem a potentially engaging object of analysis for historians of political thought and literature. For this reason, the appearance of *Dark Places: Crime and Politics in the Personal Noir of James Ellroy,* a book of nine essays coupled with an editorial introduction and conclusion, offers a welcome invitation for historians of literature and political thought to engage with Ellroy's work and the political thought of a major body of American crime writing and literary fiction. *Dark Places* opens with an introduction by the editors, Darrell A. Hamlin and Joseph Romance, laying out the stakes of the volume and concludes with a final chapter by Hamlin outlining Ellroy's relevance for reflection on American culture, politics, and civic life. This review outlines the ambit of the nine substantive chapters followed by some reflections on the volume as a whole, which lead into considerations of how texts may be read and studied in the history of American (and not solely American) literature and political thought.

American novelists writing in the aftermath of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha county inherit the centrality of a singular location. For Roth, this was Newark; for Bellow, Chicago. For Ellroy, the pivotal locale is Los

Angeles specifically, and perhaps southern California more generally. The first chapter in the volume, by Susan McWilliams Barndt, ably links Ellroy's social and political psychology to Ellroy's view of Los Angeles as a place. Los Angeles as a place is defined, on this reading, by many people moving there who long to be actors. Those who come to Southern California long to seen (they are running to the stage) and long to start over (they are running from something). For Ellroy, on McWilliams Barndt's reading, the psychology of the actor shares core features with the psychology of the criminal: the actor (like the criminal) is both self-aggrandizing and self-loathing. "For Ellroy," McWilliams Barndt writes, "acting and criminality are inseparable; the movie scene and the crime scene are in too many ways the same kind of place" (p. 18). Ellroy's LA as a place, on McWilliams Barndt's reading, is thus a place full with the in-gathering of potential sociopaths, and hauntingly so. "Ellroy's California," McWilliams Barndt writes, "is a place in which everyone is staring at each other, but nobody knows how to see each other; it is a psychologically and socially damaged and damaging place" (p. 21). McWilliams Barndt's chapter looks closely both at Ellroy's fiction and memoirs as well as Ellroy's journalism, not least Ellroy's *GQ* articles on the murder trials of O. J. Simpson and Robert Blake—in which the psychology of the actor is most emphatically linked to the psychology of the (accused) killer by Ellroy writing *in propria persona*. McWilliams Barndt's chapter is the only chapter in the volume to utilize Ellroy's journalism (collected in *Crime Wave* (1999) and *Destination: Morgue!* (2004)) as a source, the only chapter to relate Ellroy's reflections on America to Tocqueville (p. 25), and the chapter with the widest source base of Ellroy's work overall (pp. 26-28), with a genuine aim to understand Ellroy within the frame of his own work and writing, to understand Ellroy as the novelist understands himself. *Dark Places* is worth buying for this first chapter alone.

In his 2010 memoir, *The Hilliker Curse*, Ellroy describes his politics as a branch of "tory feminism" and himself as "The feminist with the right-wing chivalry code" (2010, pp. 71, 96). Deirdre M. Condit's second chapter of the volume draws upon the work of Sarah Hoagland (pp. 29, 34) and Judith Butler (p. 45) to offer a "reading of Ellroy's work through the eyes of a feminist political theorist" (p. 48). This second chapter doubles both as a feminist re-reading of Ellroy's literary work and as the chapter within the collection which most directly treats Ellroy's earlier novels, *Brown's Requiem* (1981), *Clandestine* (1982), and *Blood on the Moon* (1984, pp. 40-43, 49). The chapter argues that "Ellroy's personal struggle, and the commensurate struggles he writes into the men he invents, derives from a central feature of traditional masculinity that reproduces men as both women's protectors and predators, simultaneously, and which requires, through the system of heterosexualism, that women collude in their own subordination to make the system work" (p. 29).

Both Ellroy's 1987 novel, *The Black Dahlia*, and its immediate successor, *The Big Nowhere* (1988), end with images of departure from Los Angeles, with Ellroy's broken heroes seeking horizons beyond the city. The first word of Ellroy's *Black Dahlia* is "I" and the final word of the novel is "love" (1987, pp. 9, 383). Erik Anderson's third chapter in the volume, "Black Dahlia and Aesthetic Crime," aims to capture Ellroy's novel within the categories of aesthetic theory in contemporary Anglophone philosophy. For Anderson, Ellroy's *Dahlia* is both an "immoralist" work, the moral flaws of which "can be seen as aesthetic strengths and the negative moral value of the work of art can contribute to its aesthetic value" (p. 66) and, for Anderson, the novel also "instantiates" (p. 77) and portrays "aesthetic crimes", where an aesthetic crime, for Anderson, is something "profoundly ugly, poorly executed, and inappropriate to the extent of being cringe-worthy" (p. 61). For Anderson, "Ellroy's *Black Dahlia* both depicts and instantiates a variety of aesthetic crimes" (p. 77). Anderson is particularly keen to distinguish the "immoralism" that he associates with *The Black Dahlia* from distinct positions in contemporary aesthetics such as Noel Carroll's "moderate moralism" (p. 64) and Berys Gaut's "ethicism" (p. 65).

Deploying Judith Fetterley's The Resisting Reader (1978, pp. 81, 83) and Wolfgang Iser's The Act of Reading (1978, p. 85), the fourth chapter of the volume, by Lexey A. Bartlett, is concerned to identify Ellroy's implied or implicit readership as well as to maintain that "the actual reader can and should resist being implicated in this way" (p. 84). In this connection, Bartlett stresses "Ellroy's conception of

his implied reader as male, and one concerned with a certain kind of male identity" (p. 89). Relatedly, Bartlett offers "the metaphor of a dark mirror, one that reflects but also enacts a dark transmogrification of the reflected" (p. 86). Similar to the third chapter of the volume, this contribution is ultimately concerned with the ethics of writing crime fiction and the ethics of representation. "It seems to me," Bartlett here writes, "that continually ruminating on the traces of crime, lingering over them, and using them for titillation without respect for the suffering they connote, falls on the wrong side of the ethical divide, and judging by the examples of the consumers of these images in *The Black Dahlia*, such ruminations dissolve ethical boundaries and push those consumers into dark versions of themselves" (p. 103). Bartlett accordingly ends this chapter with a call to resistance: "we need to resist our darker impulses and find better selves to be on this side of the mirror" (Ibid.).

In the fifth chapter in the collection, drawing upon Raymond Chandler's essay, "The Simple Art of Murder," Caitlin B. Coulter argues that Ellroy's innovations within the genre of detective fiction amount to a corruption of the tenets of Chandler's paradigm of the hard-boiled detective. Chandler's detective, on Coulter's telling, is a private investigator contractually bound to seek truth within his vocation whereas Ellroy's detectives are public police officers seeking official and physical self-preservation at any (violent) cost within a system of harm (pp. 111, 116). Coulter delineates the violence of Ellroy's violent detectives in relation to what these detectives fear. "The violent detective perpetually lives with the fear he so doggedly corrupts himself to avoid and inevitably dies by it" (p. 121). Coulter advances this argument on the basis of a reading of Ellroy's 1990 novel, *L. A. Confidential*, the third volume of Ellroy's *L. A. Quartet*. "The depraved or corrupt actions of the novel's central detectives emphasize Ellroy's maturation and deterioration of Chandler's un-fragrant world into one that is difficult to separate from the world of true crime or the nightly news" (p. 115). Coulter concludes by juxtaposing the category of "violent" detective fiction (which Coulter applies to Ellroy) with "invested" detective fiction, the authors of which, Coulter claims, "are vocal in their intent to present a fictional reality that mirrors the one they live in as marginalized voices and look to the genre as an opportunity to show what systems of harm can do in hopes that it will be seen and understood by those less marginalized than themselves and changed" (p. 123).

Drawing on the work of Jane Jacobs (p. 140), Martha Nussbaum (p. 132), and Carey McWilliams (pp. 136, 143), Jeffrey Becker's sixth chapter argues that Ellroy's "LA Quartet reveals a Los Angeles that is a microcosm of American life: a city that, by its nature, generates an anxiety often expressed through violence and the desire to dominate and control the civic environment" (p. 129). Becker analyses these themes through a reading of policing in Ellroy's middle novels, concluding that "Without a criminal justice system that citizens regard as fair or just, citizens will continue to regard policing as the imposition of arbitrary rules by the strong over the weak, by the well-connected over the disenfranchised, and by the wealthy over the destitute" (p. 143).

Within the first six minutes of the 1997 film version of *L. A. Confidential*, directed by Curtis Hanson and adapted for the screen by Hanson and Brian Helgeland, the character Sergeant Jack Vincennes describes his role consulting for the fictive *Badge of Honor* as "the television version. America isn't ready for the real me." There is no corresponding line in the source material of Ellroy's novel. What Vincennes says of his relation to *Badge of Honor* within the movie (and its screenplay) doubles as a description of the relation between the film version of *L. A. Confidential* and the original novel. Chapter seven of the volume is devoted to a reading of the 1997 film version of *L. A. Confidential*, in which Paul Babbitt claims that the key themes of the movie are police violence and "the political use of illusion in maintaining authority" (p. 149). On Babbitt's reading, the movie offers "an exploration of how violence is the foundation of power and authority" (p. 150), which offers Babbitt the occasion to claim that "the film is presenting an example of the ways Walter Benjamin argued police violence is connected to the state, law, and justice" (p. 160). Babbitt concludes the chapter with reflections on the relation of the genre of film noir to politics, writing of film noir that "the genre is cynical, and while characters might have a personal code that structures their attitudes and actions,

these codes are not really moral codes in that there is no attempt to universalize them. More than that, there is no politics that could emerge from these codes" (p. 164).

Ellroy opens his trilogy of *Underworld U. S. A.* novels with an italicized preface claiming that "*Our continuing narrative line is blurred past truth and hindsight. Only a reckless verisimilitude can set that line straight*" (Ellroy 1995, p. 5). In chapter eight of *Dark Places*, W. John Green argues that Ellroy's crime fiction in this later trilogy, not least Ellroy's portrayal of American assassins, professional killers or "wetworkers", in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s in *Blood's a Rover* (2009), should be read as historical fiction (pp. 168, 178) and that Ellroy's writing about these figures largely attains the "reckless verisimilitude" announced at the outset of the trilogy (pp. 168, 175). "Ellroy (and Fontanarrosa)," Green writes, "offer fiction that is well grounded in the real world; they get this right, to a large degree." On Green's telling, Ellroy captures both the sociopathic, the traumatic, and the tragic character of the novelistic assassins in *American Tabloid, The Cold Six Thousand,* and *Blood's a Rover*. In so doing, Green notes, "Ellroy becomes the bard and chronicler of wetworkers with PTSD" (p. 178).

The ninth chapter of the volume, by Joseph Romance, juxtaposes Ellroy's tale of the assassination of the 35th President of the United States in *American Tabloid* (1995) with Don DeLillo's story of the same events in the novel *Libra* (1988), a novel which Ellroy read and engaged with. On Romance's relation, Ellroy and DeLillo differ in the relative weight they accord to the events of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in their stories of the Kennedy assassination, with DeLillo according the Bay of Pigs causal force in the assassination attempt whereas in "Ellroy's telling Kennedy's fate is controlled by the Mob and three law enforcement types driven by events that predate Cuba, Castro, and the Bay of Pigs" (p. 197). Ellroy, Romance argues, accordingly places greater centrality on organized crime in relating the Kennedy assassination within his fiction. Romance links Ellroy's account of the assassination to the persistent view of institutional and political corruption (primarily via systemic blackmail) that runs through Ellroy's novels as a *roter Faden*. Ellroy's institutional story, as Romance notes, inverts Madison's picture of ambitions checking one another in *Federalist* 10. "The moral rot of the men (and it is almost exclusively men) in control is so pervasive, the greed and naked ambition so all-encompassing, that though they and their institutions do clash the result is not a better, or at least safer, world that Madison envisioned" (p. 188). The clash of interests and the clash of institutional, jurisdictional, and personal ambitions allows organized crime, on Ellroy's portrayal, to dominate and get away with murder. This institutional picture is absent, Romance notes, from DeLillo's fictive account of the same historical events.

At the time this book went to press, James Ellroy was the sole author of more than twenty books (including novels, memoirs, and collections of short stories and journalism). The modal and median number of references to works by Ellroy in the bibliographies of the separate chapters of this book (including the introductory and concluding chapters) is one, and in the case of several contributions, the number is zero. Perhaps not unrelatedly, a number of the chapters are rife with errors of fact related to Ellroy's work. One contributor refers to "the *Black Dahlia*, the fourth novel in Ellroy's LA Quartet" (p. 165n14) when this work is the first book in Ellroy's tetralogy. At times, Sid Hudgens (the character played by Danny DeVito in the movie version of *L. A. Confidential*) is "Sam Hudgens" (p. 160).

These low numbers (and the errors related to them) point to a methodological or methodic problem: a number of the contributors (with chapters one and nine being notable exceptions) are not, in the first instance, aiming to understand Ellroy on his own terms nor to read the corpus of Ellroy's work in its entirety (or substantiality). The subtitle of the collection, *Crime and Politics in the Personal Noir of James Ellroy*, leads the reader to expect an engagement with Ellroy's own ideas, Ellroy's own political thought, which, as the better chapters here observe, is markedly present in Ellroy's work.

While not directly engaging with Ellroy's espousal of a "tory feminism" nor engaging with Ellroy's own genre categories of crime fiction, historical fiction, and historical romance, nor considering Ellroy's intriguing (or simply odd) claim that "History" (with a capital-H) ended in 1972 with the death of J. Edgar Hoover (a claim offered by the narrator in *Blood's a Rover* (2009) and reiterated *in propria persona* by the author in an essay from 2014), several contributors *do* bring other theoretical apparatuses to bear upon

Ellroy's fiction and life-writing. With the exception of the first and ninth chapters, Ellroy's work is considered not primarily in its own terms (with the aim to understand placed prior to the aim to critique, with the latter likely to misfire in the absence of the former), but rather through the light of other writers and thinkers projected on to it. Thus, some of the contributors read Ellroy through Butler (p. 45) and some through Arendt (p. 156), some through Shklar (p. 154) and some through Sarah Hoagland (p. 29).

This apparatus of "reading writer A through writer B" or "reading thinker A through thinker B" in political thought or political theory has become an all-too-common procedure such that at times it seems that the imposition of the theoretical lens comes to take precedence over the understanding (and reading) of the primary author to be understood. Ellroy, in this book, all too often becomes an instance of Sarah Hoagland's view of heterosexualism (p. 29) or Arendt's (p. 156) or Benjamin's (p. 160) view of violence—in this way, a tail has been pinned upon the donkey (and a Donkey has been pinned upon the tale): Ellroy is accused of aesthetic crimes (pp. 70, 77) and tagged with various nefarious -isms (pp. 71, 84, 89, 102, 124, 152, 153), without a corresponding attempt to understand how Ellroy's avowed feminism (and his avowed tory sympathies) differ from the views of the writers and thinkers which are being projected onto Ellroy's work.

One of the contributors to the volume defends the choice to close read *L. A. Confidential* to the exclusion of Ellroy's other books by writing, "I simply enjoy *L. A. Confidential* the most" (p. 125n2). Another of the contributors acknowledges that "Ellroy's writing presents insuperable barriers for me. I cannot enter into the mindsets of any of his characters" (p. 102). In lieu of historical reconstruction and understanding (as a necessary antecedent to critique), all that remains is the heaping of either approbation or opprobrium, a task taken up by a distressing number of the contributions included in the book to the detriment of close reading and scholarship.

The task of trying to understand (and historically reconstruct) Ellroy's political thought and novelistic vision of American life, Ellroy's genre categories, and Ellroy's view of "History", political institutions, and place (a task taken up admirably in the first and ninth chapters of the volume), is one that remains open for historians of American literature and political thought. Scholars and writers who take a genuine interest in Ellroy's body of work as historical (and literary) source material are unlikely to be wasting their time.[1]

NOTES

1 An earlier and shorter version of this review appeared in *American Political Thought* (Summer 2025).

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SIEO refers to the assimilated *Studies in Emergent Order*

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