

THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2023

Reclaiming Paradise. *Heterotopic Spaces* as Drivers for Better Solution Strategies

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The worst legacy we have inherited from previous generations consists not in often-discussed 'grand challenges', but in our unimaginative and narrow understanding of what we can do about them – which results in a dominance of insufficiently ambitious solution approaches. Tracing the ideological roots of this imaginative impoverishment, I argue that creating heterotopic¹ spaces in which alternative social orders in miniature can be enacted, tested, and their desirability demonstrated, will greatly enhance our capacity to formulate and adopt better solution strategies.

Should we be grateful to live in an age of progress and unprecedented freedom (Pinker 2018, Rosling 2018, Norberg 2017) or outraged to be stuck in times of scandalous inequality and environmental

depletion (Piketty 2020, 2014; Klein 2019, 2014), in which, in spite of countless conferences and policy strategies (European Commission 2021, White House 2021, Ocasio-Cortez 2019, United Nations 2015, Paris Agreement 2015), the trend of rising global annual emissions is continued (Tiseo 2023, IPCC 2022)? Such seemingly detached debates about the general state of the world have an undeniable political and practical nature: Each position strongly suggests adopting (or abandoning) a set of controversial policies, beliefs, practices and personal choices that are often diametrically opposed to each other. Historian Jared Diamond (2019: 411-543), who has written extensively about catastrophes and civilizational collapse, discusses four urgent, potentially existence-threatening global challenges: nuclear war, climate

¹ Adopted from Foucault (1970) and Foucault (1986).

change, inequality, and resource depletion. Do we expect that any of these challenges will be solved any time soon? The negative answer most people would give indicates that humanity's capacity to deal with global challenges is still leaving substantial room for improvement.

Hobbesian vs. Rousseauian analyses of grand challenges

Analyses of 'grand challenges' and corresponding solution approaches can be sorted in two broad categories. The first, 'Hobbesian'² approach is based on the assumption that our age with its emphasis on markets, technology, bureaucratic state organizations and consumerist culture is *generally* on the right track. Only *some* issues – the carbon footprint of industry and transport, or the problem that the most advanced technological blessings are not (yet) benefitting the majority of people living outside of developed countries – require *some* adjustment or additional effort. However, one should not throw the baby out with the bath water: Only because markets, technology, state organizations and consumerist culture seem to play *some* role in the emergence of mentioned challenges, there is no need to completely abandon these institutions. What counts is that they can be rendered compatible with mitigating the risks global challenges entail. We need therefore the *right kind* of technology, adequately regulated markets, and more sustainable consumer culture. The bottleneck for Hobbesians is the unwillingness of policymakers (and, in democracies, the electorate) to adopt

'rational' technocratic policies and embrace technological solutions to hunger, poverty, climate change and so forth (e.g., Pinker 2018).

The second, 'Rousseauian' approach assumes, by contrast, that our age is fundamentally flawed. Global challenges are not deviations from a generally desirable course, but the predictable outcome of an inherently dysfunctional social order based on a logic of competition, permanent hierarchy, and maximized resource extraction. We must not assume that this logic can solve the problems it continues to produce. Since we have stopped living in small, egalitarian communities, social orders have continued to become ever more hierarchical and exclusive – a state of affairs hard to overcome by any other means than an (unlikely) revolution. For Rousseauians, the bottleneck is the unwillingness of dominant actors to acknowledge the fundamental dysfunctionality of our age and the need to rethink it to (again) enable egalitarianism and freedom from economic constraints.

Beyond Hobbes vs. Rousseau

What Hobbesian and Rousseauian accounts have in common – and what is reproduced in many prominent accounts on the origins of the contemporary social order (Harari 2019, North et al. 2013, Fukuyama 2012, Diamond 1997) – is the teleological view on history, according to which social orders progress from small and simple (egalitarian for Rousseauians, violent and unpleasant for Hobbesians) to

² As neither Hobbes nor Rousseau have ever commented on today's challenges, I do not claim that they would make any such argument. I rather use their names as labels for certain fundamental views on history (and accounts explicitly or implicitly drawing on them), which they were the first to formulate forcefully and seminaly. A 'Hobbesian' in my account is thus not a person subscribing to Hobbes's philosophy, but somebody embracing a position as described here.

big and complex. This view faces two main problems: First, it is incompatible with what archeology and anthropology teach us about early and prehistory, as a growing number of publications on the social orders, practices and life conditions of prehistoric and early men show (Graeber and Wengrow 2021, Michel and van Schaik 2020, Scott 2017, Ryan and Jetha 2011). Neither were people so attracted by the first signs of civilization (in the sense of cities, states, hierarchical social orders) that they could not wait to join them, nor was the invention of agriculture, the adoption of sedentism or the emergence of complex, permanent settlements automatically or immediately followed by the emergence of such hierarchical societies. Many of the greatest problems that, according to writers like Pinker (2018), can be addressed successfully only thanks to scientific thinking and liberal institutions – famine, plague, war, slavery, state-organized, large-scale violence and discrimination – were enabled and created in the first place through the origins of what contemporaries define as civilization. As an empirical claim, the teleological view cannot be sustained.

The second problem of this view lies in its paralyzing political consequences (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). The perceived unchangeable boundary conditions ('people will never be equal', 'complex society requires permanent hierarchies') and the perceived unreformability of our age, continue to impose severe limits on what reactions to our greatest challenges we can imagine. Therefore, we discuss, at best, about *reducing* inequality, *mitigating* climate change, *managing* the risk of nuclear self-extinction, or *considering* global resource depletion in economic decision-making. The situation is evocative of Odysseus, who famously tied himself to the mast to

listen to the sirens while at the same time making sure his own physical or social position was always secured. Modern Rousseauians can dream of equality and simplicity, whereas their Hobbesian counterparts fantasize about almighty institutions getting rid of all problems. Both can *enjoy* these fantasies, while their own position is never seriously questioned. Caught between the Scylla of Rousseauian pessimism and the Charybdis of Hobbesian technocracy, we have lost the ability to think outside the dichotomy of minimalist adjustment and utopian revolution fantasies. The consequence are unimaginative and insufficiently ambitious solution approaches to what is discussed as humanity's greatest challenges.

Permanent solutions or why no one is afraid of the Thirty Years' War anymore

To give an example of the kind of *permanent solution* I have in mind is what happened to the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) and its causes. By the time, this conflict affected, threatened, and in many cases ended the lives of millions of Europeans, causing unprecedented excesses of violence and erasing up to a third of the total population. Major causes were the religious dispute between Protestantism and Catholicism and the power struggle between emperor, territorial princes and kings. Today however, not only the war itself, but also its major drivers have lost all political relevance. Students of history have to gather a lot of information to get a good intuition what motivated the actors and why the conflict was so hard to resolve. More importantly (although it may sound like a foolish argument to make), it seems impossible that it will rekindle ever again. And that is not due to the technocratic solutions of the time – e.g., the Treaty of Westphalia – but due to a fundamentally altered social order in which problems

that seemed almost insoluble to the greatest minds and statesmen of the Baroque age do not even seem problematic anymore. Therefore, the best way to – in a permanent, eliminative manner – solve a grand challenge is to adopt a different social order in which the problem cannot occur. As Graeber and Wengrow (2021) as well as Scott (2017) demonstrate based on archeological and anthropological evidence, many social orders have existed in the past in which stabilized and permanent hierarchies, a self-destructive over-use of resources, the marginalization of some societal groups – features we take for granted in today's world – were simply not an issue.

However, such (pre)historical evidence can hardly show us how we should progress to deal with today's challenges. My suggestions that experimenting with fundamentally different social orders is the key to more ambitious and permanent solutions faces two main hurdles. The first is epistemic: Nobody knows in advance if and how such alternatives work. The second is political: Why should people (particularly those granted positions of power in the existing social order) enable the development of such alternatives or accept them in the first place?

To address the epistemic hurdle, I advocate for creating heterotopic spaces in which imaginations and models of alternative social orders can be turned into practice. The term heterotopic is adopted from Foucault (1970) and Foucault (1986), denoting places in which current certain societal rules are, in parts, invalid (e.g., clinics, prisons, or brothels). However, I use it only in the narrow sense that in these hypothetical places the rules of existing social orders are fully abolished. What I have in mind are city-sized areas (which can, but do not need to be, populated in advance) in

which people can – by whatever means they wish, and on the basis of whatever 'constitution', core idea or ideal they like to adopt – organize themselves in ways that can be inspired by present or history, but not need to be, to install, to change, design and try out whatever social order they have in mind. The only rule is that anyone can *leave* whenever they want. This rule should only make sure that when the experimental order becomes hostile or unpleasant, it will dissolve automatically, creating space for new experiments. Similar experiments – a couple of hundred or so – should be conducted in different geographical areas of the world.

I expect that the variety of experiments will be great – ranging from libertarian fantasies of untouchable property-rights to approaches resembling communist ideas, from utopias of unlimited sexual freedom to protestant dreamscapes of self-control and Scandinavian-style family life – and that not all of them will be successful. However, since failing experiments terminate themselves as people will simply abandon them, new experiments can replace them. This process is to be iterated until the result is successful (in the sense that participants wish to sustain the experiment). If this rationale is applied consequently and repeatedly, we can assume that to all challenges of today and (in principle, at least) also to any new challenges that might occur or be perceived as such by future generations, *solutions* in the strong and permanent sense that I have suggested can be found. The result is a social order (or a number of social orders) in which all great problems – that is, everything that communities perceive as such – are absent. Religious minds might refer to such a place as *paradise*.

Reclaiming paradise

I feel confident to claim that the epistemic hurdle can be overcome, and clear examples for fundamentally different and, with regards to today's greatest challenges, *superior* social orders can be generated not only from archeological evidence and theoretical reasoning, but from today's lived experience. Since my suggestions may threaten the perceived legitimacy and superiority of the established order, I cannot be sure that dominant actors will do anything to

enable such experiments. The same can be said about the hypothetical large-scale adoption of innovative social orders. What we can, however, expect is that a continued inability to deliver permanent solutions to today's challenges, and political pressure from those not convinced of the inevitability of the status quo, will create a window of opportunity, in which the suggestions of *heterotopic spaces* can be taken up productively.

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