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From Design to Dynamic Structuralism

Amitai Etzioni*

Lord Hannay's inspiring and heartfelt presentation provides a stellar example of a design approach to international relations. It is noble, essential, and woefully inadequate. Most of the presentation is dedicated to outlining that which we want or need, or at least to those purposes favored by those who share Lord Hannay's values, this author included. Who can oppose saving the climate, preventing economic meltdowns, advancing conflict resolution and the deproliferation of nuclear weapons, and the other goods Lord Hannay champions? These are indeed noble goals.

Moreover, listing goals is an essential part of any policy analysis. As Montesquieu put it, in the days of sailing ships, no wind will do to a ship that has no designated port it is seeking to reach. We do benefit from sorting out what we seek to accomplish. And, even by merely listing goals, we face the question of which projects are more compelling and urgent than others. Thus, Lord Hannay lists saving the climate first, shoring up the international economic order second, and deproliferation third. An argument can be made that this order should be reversed—however, we do not face this issue until we are provided with the kind of list here charted by Lord Hannay.

The limits of design

I refer to Lord Hannay's approach as one of design because it points our deliberation toward the question: What kind of structure we would like to erect? Implicit in this approach is the notion that we are builders and that we have at our disposal the resources and capabilities required to construct an international order that will serve our purposes. It is a rather sanguine approach, previously exhibited by the founders of the League of Nations and the United Nations, and even more so by those who seek to form a global federation. It was also at the foundation of President George

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W. Bush's regime-change foreign policy, which led him to hold that the United States could build a "shining, prosperous democracy" and a free market in Iraq in short order, a change that will in turn "flip the Middle East." Moreover, that the United States, acting unilaterally, could promote democratic, peace-loving regimes in all the nations that did not democratize on their own following the fall of the Berlin Wall, including Iran and North Korea. This is a position the Bush administration adopted despite the fact that the neoconservatives—who championed this ambitious regime-changing foreign policy—demonstrated repeatedly and convincingly that the United States was unable to advance the major domestic changes which previous liberal administrations had set for the country. That is, to advance social change (or "progress") is very challenging, taxing, and failure-prone. It is now widely agreed that the Bush administration endeavors to change regimes extracted much higher human and economic costs than the administration expected, while yielding much less. I strongly suggest that the same fate awaits those who will take on Lord Hannay's agenda and try to advance all of it, or even merely a good part of the goals he listed—starting with what is good and right, and seeking ways to construct an internal order that will serve these goods.

Instead of starting with such a "design" approach, I suggest we best rely on what might be referred to as a dynamic structural approach. Its starting point is the question—what are the contours of the existing structures, and in what direction are they changing on their own? The main reason we must adopt this focus is that our leverage is much smaller than we tend to imagine. Hence, we often must build on the foundations already in place or modify them but cannot start *de novo*; we must seek to make use of those resources that are available, rather than rely on making or importing large amounts of new ones; we must ride trends that are unfolding anyhow and seek to redirect them somewhat, rather than seek to fashion new ones. Granted, such an approach is much less sanguine than the design approach, but—I hold—much more realistic. And while the design approach is much more inspiring and uplifting, it tends to lead to despair and resignation, when we—again and again—find that our achievements fall far short of our goals. In contrast, the realistic approach allows us to have a sense of progress and accomplishment, albeit often a rather modest one.

A brief case in point

Ever since the Tower of Babel, observers have recognized the merit of having a shared tongue that the different people of the world could use to communicate with one another. Since then, several attempts have been made to design such a language. The designers chose not to use any of the spoken languages because they found them defective for several reasons. These include the fact that if the tongue of any one people is chosen as the universal one, other people may resent that choice. Also, spoken tongues are not inherently as logical as the designers felt a language could be. And the designers held that by replacing the primary languages—the ones adopted by various people—with a universal one, they would be able to move people to give up on their particularistic identities and move toward forming one universal community. They hence designed languages all of their own. All these languages, without

exception, utterly failed in terms of the goals set for them, although some gained a measure of following.

If one instead examines the current trend already in place, one realizes that a universal language has evolved—namely English. Nearly a quarter of the world’s population (between 1.2 and 1.5 billion people) has a functional command of English. This proportion of the population is rising. International air traffic is conducted in English, and numerous transnational meetings are conducted in English, even if none of the participants are from English-speaking nations, e.g. meetings in continental Europe. English has not replaced the primary language of any people, but it is adopted by many as their secondary language. This trend was not initiated deliberately by a UN committee or some other international organization but is a complex result of the interaction of numerous historical forces.

If one accepts the dynamic structural approach, one realizes that although it might be desirable to use some other language as the new lingua franca, as, for instance, the French and German still favor, such a change is extremely unlikely to take place. At the same time, if one sees the merit of a universal language, even if it is not ideally designed nor properly chosen, one can seek ways to help and accelerate trends already in place.

To give but one example, currently the EU calls on member nations to ensure that all pupils will learn two foreign languages—any two. Thus a Finn may learn Swedish and French; an Hungarian, German and Russian, and they will still be unable to communicate. The suggestion that they make English their fourth language is (a) not recommended by the EU, nor is any other shared language, and (b) flies in the face of strong data that learning languages is much more arduous than is often assumed. Hence, one who follows the dynamic structural approach would suggest that the EU modify its policy to hold that all pupils will learn two foreign languages, in addition to their primary one, but that one of them will be English. In colloquial terms, the design school may point to the best; the dynamic structural one—to the good that can be achieved.

Starting with a vectorgram

I must note that, even in terms of the design school, Lord Hannay does not proceed very far, which is not surprising, given the limited time accorded to his presentation. He mainly informs us of the kind of construction he believes we need—one that will accommodate all the fine purposes he favors—but tells preciously little how this construction may be erected. Indeed, Lord Hannay himself points out in an aside that the institutional approach he adopts will not carry us there all by itself.

Actually, as I see it, it poses many more questions than it answers. For instance, the suggestion that the UN Security Council needs to be expanded may be a sound design idea, but it has been around for quite a while. Those who seek to rely on such a redesign to treat major international problems best ask why the Security Council has not been reformed, and what forces block its reform, and which forces could lead

to its reform, and how these may be marshaled. And if the answers to these questions in turn point to steps that are very unlikely to be undertaken, one must ask whether we can find another, more reliable approach to the construction of a new international order.

One major way to proceed is with drawing vectorgrams of the forces in place, both internationally and on the relevant domestic fronts. Vector grams are used in physics to explain the reasons that a given body moves in a certain way or is stuck in place (what in politics is referred to as a gridlock). The vectorgrams help highlight that, typically, more than one force is at play. Indeed, forces of varying magnitude may all pull and tug at the same object at the same time. The combination of all these forces determines the movement of the object of interest. More importantly, the vectorgram reveals how forces must be realigned if one seeks to change the object's direction—or to get it off dead center.

One major virtue of drawing such a vectorgram is that it reveals that there are many power players, large and small. That is, we do not face one super power, one consolidated power elite, the way C. Wright Mills had it, or a military-industrial complex, but a much more complicated array of players who sometimes work together and sometimes clash. It is this cardinal fact that gives the system more play and, frankly, more hope than it would have if there were one monolithic force in control.

Also, the vectorgram reveals that, in contrast to democratic theory and the hope of many reformers, voters are often a weak sister. Their voice is mainly heard once every two or four years, and even then, half of them sit on their hands. Each voter has but one vote, and hence does not have a say on specific issues, such as deregulation or bailouts for banks but not for people. Also, voters' thinking and choices are affected by the worldview they absorbed long ago and by campaigns run by the main political-economic players. Above all, in between elections—when legislatures enact thousands of laws, the executive issues hundreds of rulings, and the courts issue numerous judgments—there is very little voters can do. Analyses hence must pay much mind to other forces, both intra- and transnational ones, such as interest groups (e.g. multinational corporations), social movements (e.g. environmental ones) and communitarian bodies (e.g. INGOs).

Once we have such a vectorgram, we can ask under what conditions a new vector can be added, some vectors can be built up, and others can be undermined. In each case, one must take into account that the changes one is working to achieve in the array of forces are likely to be limited, that other vectors will continue to hinder or defect the new or changed vector one is bringing about. Hence, change is likely to be challenging. Finally, the concept of a vectorgram suggests that the most promising changes will occur if they can draw on building a new coalition of forces, because those entail, by definition, that one or more actors or forces already in place will change direction—rather than forming new ones.

The ethics of policy triage

Listing one problem we ‘must’ address, next to another that we ‘cannot afford but to attend to,’ on top of half a dozen others—will lead us to much less good than we might do if we carefully choose which problems to face. Truth to be told, that means that some, oftentimes quite a few, will remain unaddressed. However, the bitter fact of social life in general, and international relations especially, is that we inevitably face many more problems than we can deal with. By tilting at all of them, we tend to squander whatever economic resources and political capital we do have. The best way to proceed is to engage in a sort of policy triage. Some problems can wait; some—we have next to no clue how to fix, however badly they call to be tackled; and some—seem particularly ready to be taken care of. Lord Hannay’s good list of major problems should be submitted to such an analysis. For reasons I spelled out elsewhere, I would turn first to deproliferation, but even those who will see different priorities should not stop from setting them.