Book Review Column


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Those who are familiar with Lindblom's work will find here a masterful statement of concerns in social theory which have preoccupied him for nearly half a century and are now brought to a summative conclusion in a comprehensive vision of science and society. Those who have not as yet encountered Lindblom will find here one of the most significant social thinkers of our time.

If the thesis of this book had to be summed up in a single statement perhaps this is the closest one could come to:

If solutions to social problems were anchored in wants, preferences, or interests regarded as 'there' and empirically discoverable, social scientists might do better than ordinary people in the task of discovery. But if anchored instead in formulated, decided-upon, willed or created volitions, then roughly everyone must probe and resist preemption by social scientists. (p. 190)

This statement contains the two major themes which taken together distinguish him from his peers: his critique of rationalistic scientism ("resist preemption by social scientists"); and his affirmation of a multiplist politics ("roughly everyone must probe"). These two themes in their culminating versions come together in the concluding part of this book and are encapsulated in his opposition to the model or vision of the Scientific Society and his presentation of an original alternative, that of the Self-Guiding Society. (Many readers not so familiar with Lindblom's previous work might be advised to read this last part first). The fundamental difference between these two ideal images, each of which draws on powerful currents of thought throughout the ages, is set out as follows:

The [Scientific Society] puts science, including social science, at center stage. In that model, social problem solving, social betterment, or guided social change (regarded as roughly synonymous) calls above all for scientific observation of human social behavior such that ideally humankind discovers the requisites of good people in a good society and, short of the ideal, uses the results of scientific observation to move in the right direction. Social science also of course studies and learns how to go where it ought to go. In contrast, the model of the Self-Guiding Society brings lay probing of ordinary people and functionaries to center stage, though with a powerful supporting role played by science and social science adapted to the lay role in probing volitions (p. 214).

The critique of rationalistic Scientism and the presentation of an alternative view of the role of science as well as the affirmation of multiplist politics and a critique of scientistic views of the role of politics figure prominently in the confrontation of the two models. For ease of exposition we shall outline the two themes separately, though substantively they are in the closest possible interconnection with each other.

A-Critique of Rationalistic Scientism of the Scientific Society

To consider this theme merely as a criticism of the scientistic presuppositions of so much current social science and policy analysis, or even further as an attack on "social engineering", "planning" and "dirigisme", would be to underestimate its scope - it is no less than an implicit attempt at a critique of practical reason. The book opens with a criticism of rationalistic conceptions of social action, those that distinguish too sharply between means and ends, interests and choices, desires and decisions, preferences and judgements, values and knowledge and ultimately between ethics and science, power and reason. Instead of these dichotomies, Lindblom elaborates his own concepts of volition, probing, imposition and partnership, concepts designed to capture the tangled interconnections that examining problem solving and problem defining in vivo requires. The rationalistic analyses on which Scientism relies are thus implicitly disposed of and in their stead there emerges a far more realistic
conception of how people, both lay and expert, act together on the difficulties that confront them.

Scientism of one kind or another is the basis of the vision of the Scientific Society that has continually reemerged in Western thought since Bacon and even further back since Plato. Its great nineteenth century exponents were Comte (positive knowledge) and Marx (scientific socialism); later in the twentieth century it appeared among the Progressivists and Pragmatists of America and the Fabians of England; in our own time Lindblom’s contemporaries Lane (the knowledge society), Brzezinski (technetronic society), Bell (post-industrial society) and even Habermas (undistorted communication) have offered more up-to-date versions of it based on the newer sciences. Lindblom sets himself against this whole tradition in upholding his own opposed model of the Self-Guided Society which has few past precedents, though he does locate intimations of it in Polybius, Hume, Rousseau, Burke, the Anarchists, the liberal economists and market advocates such as Hayek, certain aspects of Dewey and Michael Polanyi - a mix of figures who are not usually associated with each other, and which attests to Lindblom’s catholicity in theoretical matters and the impossibility of pinning him down with an ideological label.

Clearly this book thrusts us into the gigantomachia, the battle of gods and titans, that has already been going on for a long time and will continue into the indefinite future. Certainly it is not the last word on the subject, but it is a very timely word for it has captured and theoretically expressed the mood of disillusionment with the efficacy of social scientific knowledge for which such glowing promises were held out, especially in America after the Second World War. It seemed that with enough funding and research time the workings of the social system would be resolved and all problem made solvable. Nowhere was this hubris more pronounced than in economics, for a booming post-war economy helped along by neo-Keynesian tinkering made it seem as if the secret of unimpeded growth had been unlocked. The other social sciences were not slow in making analogous claims for themselves. As hubris inevitably brings on its own Nemesis, so since the slump-ridden seventies the economists and the whole social scientific cohort have received something of a come-upance. It is beginning to seem that the more social scientists are assigned to solve problems, the worse the problems get. The US spends twenty or thirty times more on social research and professional personnel that the UK, yet “what superiority, if any, does the US buy with its expensive support for professional social research?” (p. 138).

To his credit Lindblom does not despair of social science, though he is sceptical of the usual claims made for it and devotes a whole chapter to explain why it is so impaired at present (pp. 192-212). He is particularly doubtful of the Scientistic “misperception of knowledge of the social world as an instrument of social control, parallel to knowledge of the natural world as an instrument of social control, parallel to knowledge of the natural world as an instrument of man’s mastery” (p. 221). Not only is this epistemologically dubious but it has the political potential of sanctioning a “knowledgeable elite” of “such dominance as society has never seen” (p. 221). Lindblom is particularly intent on distinguishing the application of social science from that of natural science. Natural scientific knowledge converts into useful technical applications, physics becomes engineering; social scientific knowledge need not have any useful practical applications, social engineering is a dangerous misnomer. Thus it does not follow that the greater our theoretical understanding of economics the better our ability to manage an economy, or that countries with more economists can manage better than those with fewer (often the opposite is the case, as evidenced by the performance of Britain and Japan). But from this it also does not follow, as popular prejudice has it, that “eggheads” are only good for “cooking” the books where the better course is to burn the books altogether.

Lindblom does believe that social scientists, including economists, have a useful role to play in policy formulation provided they are circumspect and modest about what their contribution can be. Social scientific knowledge or what he calls professional probing is only an adjunct or supplement to ordinary knowledge or lay probing. Ordinary knowledge, derived from the practical experience of ordinary people engaged in affairs, is the real basis of social scientific knowledge. Without it scientific knowledge cannot even begin. Without it, too, no amount of scientific knowledge could ever lead to a practical decision. In an essay of 1970, Lindblom had expressed it as follows:

We know a good deal about organizations, collective problem solving, decision-making processes, public administration, public policy making and politics; but all our information taken together is far from giving us specific design and guideline for complex decision making. What is required, therefore, is the art of practical judgement, at best only supported but never displaced by our social scientific knowledge.
The issue as it presents itself here is how to assess the respective contributions to this art of practical judgement of social scientific knowledge and of ordinary knowledge. This is, of course, the old problem of the relations between theory and practice restated in terms of a better sense of the nature of scientific knowledge and its applicability to concrete situations.

If the art of practical judgement is the central concern then it seems to me that in this work, but not in his earlier works, Lindblom has at times deprecated too much the contribution of social science and overestimated the capacity of ordinary knowledge. As an instance of the former we get the following assertion:

Yet the troubling possibility persists that with no or only a few exceptions, societies could perhaps continue to go about these and other activities if social scientists vanished, along with their historical documents, findings, hypotheses, and all human memory of them, or if the likes of Plato, Hobbes, Adam Smith, Marx, Freud, Weber, Keynes and few thousand others had never lived. The disappearance would presumably in some ways render social tasks more difficult, but perhaps in no case render any existing social task impossible, as would the disappearance of any one of many contributions from natural science and engineering (p. 137).

How is one to take this? No matter how I try to interpret it, I do not manage to give it a satisfactory sense.

As for the converse overestimation of ordinary knowledge, there is this statement as to its supposed achievements:

Lay inquiry did not end with the rise of science, did not restrict itself to the physical world, and today massively explores the social world. From it people have learned that prices usually move in response to supply and demand; that many third-world nations lack a corps of competent and motivated entrepreneurs; that bodily postures reveal attitudes; that a smile sometimes expresses hostility; that in many political systems incumbents resist yielding office; that nations violate treaties in some circumstances but not in other; ..... that people emulate other people; that seashells serve as money among some people; that the Mauryan Empire endured for 150 years; ..... Beyond empirical knowledge, why is there widespread belief in the practice of honesty, return of favors and avoidance of cruelty? And whence the belief that democracy and dictatorship serve as useful concepts for distinguishing forms of government .... and that one can distinguish a world ‘out there’ from people’s impressions of it (p. 162).

The list is long and contains many diverse items of knowledge and belief deriving from quite diverse sources. Some of these indisputably come form past philosophic, scientific and other specialized intellectual endeavours. The distinction between “world ‘out there’” and “people’s impressions of it” is one that has only occurred to philosophers; it does not occur in any pre-philosophic culture; people in such cultures and in general people outside a modern society as well as most ordinary people in our society do not understand what it means. Again, “that the Mauryan Empire endured for 150 years” is known by very few historical scholars; it was a historical fact forgotten in India itself for thousands of years together with Buddhism which Asoka espoused; it all had to be reconstituted by Western historical scholarship largely in the nineteenth century. Historical scholarship utilizing epigraphic techniques, philological research, hermeneutic interpretation and often archeological excavation is in no sense ordinary knowledge or lay probing. The same is true of anthropological scholarship and field-work that corrects the simple view “that seashells serve as money” by pointing out the “money” as we understand it is a very poor translation of the specialized exchange role of seashells in many primitive societies. Even an assertion that seems so common-sensical today, such as “that prices usually move in response to supply and demand” was not understood until the time of Gresham in the late Renaissance; until then it was assumed that commodities have a natural price and inflation appeared a mystery. Hence much of what appears to be ordinary knowledge today is the product of past science and long-forgotten theorizing—such obvious things as that the earth is spherical and that it move round the sun.

We can conclude from this that what Lindblom calls ordinary knowledge is an extremely heterogeneous category that includes very many different types of things which need to be distinguished. At least the following need separating: information or news, quantified data, factual observations that call for a degree of theoretical interpretation, practical judgements made by competent authorities, generalizations utilizing current scientific concepts
and theories as well as those based on past scientific concepts and categories, and, finally all those based on non-scientific conceptions of religion, myth and metaphor. All of these are prevalent among lay and casual regurgitators or among professional experts and any of these can enter validly or illicitly into the act of practical judgement.

Just as ordinary knowledge is not a coherent category neither is scientific knowledge. Lindblom devotes a whole chapter (pp. 135-136) to the varied activities that are carried out under the name of social science; apart from the usual explanation and prediction, which is itself extremely diverse, there is also reporting, evaluating, conceptualization, drawing up scenarios, interpreting meaning and the synthesis of all of the above. But many of these, as we showed above, enter explicitly or implicitly into some of the epistememic activities called ordinary knowledge. Hence it is just as possible to argue that ordinary knowledge depends on scientific knowledge (either present or past) as the opposite, which is Lindblom’s case.

What is clear from this is that very general categories like those of ordinary and scientific or lay and professional knowledge or any other such oppositions are too subtle to elicit the complexities involved in the art of practical judgement.

A better sense of this can be derived from Lindblom’s own earlier essays. Thus in an essay of 1972 Lindblom distinguishes three modes of social science, which we might call grand theory, middle-level or applied theory and policy analysis. Grand theory is that “kind of analysis that advanced by calling into question, step by step, increasingly fundamental aspects of society.” He instances specifically the very authors from Plato onwards whom he considers dispensable in the present work. In economics such an author is Adam Smith whose work manifests “an intellectual ambition that runs far beyond policy analysis”, and presumably, therefore, far beyond anything that can be considered ordinary knowledge. Keynes’ work is placed on the second level of applied theory because he did not “provide any great insights into man or social organization”, instead “he provided a set of concepts and a theoretical model that were operational in the specific sense that policy makers could manipulate the variables of his model.” Policy analysis, the third level of science, is the work of ordinary professional economists who utilize and apply the theories from the other levels; but this application is not merely a matter of applied science as it is practised in the natural sciences. Policy analysis is the art of practical judgement which brings together theoretical and other forms of scientific knowledge in concert with concrete information, practical experience, partisan viewpoints and the incrementalist techniques of policy making that Lindblom has analysed in his classic papers on “muddling through”. This shows how it is possible to read the present work in the context of Lindblom’s previous work in order to compensate for a degree of exaggeration that has crept into some passages, thus giving the impression that he is depreciating theory and the relative autonomy of intellectual pursuits, on the one hand, and overestimating the independence and foundational nature of what he calls ordinary knowledge, on the other.

B – Affirming Multiplidie Politics or the Self-Guiding Society

The complementary facet to Lindblom’s attack on the scientific conception of knowledge entertained by exponents of the Scientific Society is his critique of their resultant denigration of politics and power in general in favor of reason. This aversion to politics and to the capacities of ordinary people engaged in political and problem solving activities evinces itself in the major theorists in many different ways, usually in favor of a knowledgeable elite. It is there in Plato (hostility to democracy and rule of philosophers), in Bacon and Descartes (superior role for scientists), in Bentham (rational politics) in Saint-Simon, Comte and Marx (not the domination of men, but the rational administration of things), in the Webbs and Dewey (a deliberate organization of society) and more recently in Lane, Brzezinski and Bell who speak of an end to ideology and the subsidiary role of politics in the coming society based on science, and it is even there in Habermas’ advocacy of rational unenforced agreement. Lindblom sets himself against this whole tradition in asserting the necessity of politics and power in the very possibility of utilizing knowledge for problem solving and social effectiveness. This in turn brings him to an affirmation of a multiplidie democratic politics and the model of the Self-Guiding Society. As he puts it, “a complex connection joins a greatly limited faith in reason to a belief in democracy in the self-guiding model” (p.227).

I consider this aspect of the work to be Lindblom’s greatest achievement, one that will exert a lasting influence on all those who wish to maintain the undiminished importance of democratic politics. His argumentation is subtle and sustained, based on considerations of the application of knowledge to society; indeed, the very same concerns that were invoked by his opponents to argue the opposite case, that as knowledge increased, politics would diminish.
Lindblom’s contention is that knowledge of itself alone cannot provide solutions to social problems. Firstly, because preferences, wants and interests are not there simply to be discovered; they must be formulated in the form of volitions of the “great mass of ordinary citizens as well as functionaries” (p.29). Secondly, because “probing cannot carry people all the way to decisions or solutions of social problems. For conflict resolution in particular, it has to be supplemented by the imposition of solutions, especially by the state” (p. 59). And finally, because “analyzed solutions or outcomes never constitute an alternative to an imposed solution they constitute instead a different set of impositions” (p.46). If, then, politics and power are ineradicable it becomes a crucial consideration how they are to be exercised.

Lindblom’s conception of politics in his Self-Guiding Society is based on his view that only masses of people formulating their own volitions and probing individually and collectively can solve their own problems. This he calls multiplexism; it “requires pervasive sustained inquiry at many levels of competence broadly distributed in society” (p.233). Multiplexism “does not call for the extremes of popular participation in public affairs called for in many versions of participatory democracy” (p.233) and it is compatible with representative democracy and pluralism. However, Lindblom’s version of pluralism is so removed from main-stream American theory as best to be called by another name. Multiplexism then is the better term for the politics of the Self-Guiding Society. It is a politics of mutual adjustment and the dispersion of power which is familiar from his earlier work. He deliberately avoids giving it institutional and constitutional specificity, but no doubt exponents of Lindblomian theory will proceed to do so.

For Lindblom the greatest bar to the present practice of a multiplexist politics is neither institutional nor constitutional rather it is the vast, persistent and instituted impairment of the ordinary peoples’ capacity to probe and decide for themselves. Putting it crudely, most people are indoctrinated most of the time, but not all people or all the time. Hence a study of the various forms of impairment exercised by the dominant institutions of society over its members is a major preoccupation of the book. He concentrates particularly on the damage wrought on peoples’ capacities to think and decide for themselves by the major institutions of enculturation, by family, school and church, and also by the most influential sectors of society, by business, the media and elite groups with their orthodoxies of belief. According to Lindblom the major step towards the Self-Guiding Society could be taken even now, with institutions as they exist and people as they are, if only the “negative reforms — reducing impairment, getting the monkey of impairment off the citizen’s back” (p.230) could be carried through. For “societies do not need to urge citizens to probe; they need only permit them to do so . . . to reduce the disincentives to probe, the diversions and obfuscations that muddle or dampen probing, the misinformation and indoctrinations that misdirect it and the intimidations and coercions that block it” (p. 230).

Lindblom’s claim for the damaging effects of impairment is backed by a vast array of scholarship drawn from a variety of sources. Indeed, all his arguments are thoroughly supported. Nevertheless, it seems to me that he has exaggerated a valid insight, that he has oversubscribed to the effectiveness of impairment and, consequently, is far too sanguine of the beneficial consequences of lifting it. The exaggeration reveals itself most prominently in his claim that any conformity or convergence in peoples’ beliefs, attitudes or behavior which cannot be accounted for by common knowledge or other such plausible assumptions “constitutes evidence of impairment by elites and other advantaged groups” (p.128) without the need of any further positive proof. This is in many ways a stronger thesis of social conditioning than the typical Marxist claims for the role of ideology in maintaining consensus on the terms of the ruling class. For Marx never considered all “convergences on complex social issues” — with some obvious exceptions such as “common tongue, seductive or compelling observation, biolgical imprinting, knowledge” etc. — as “evidence of impairment in a pattern of defence of elite advantages” (p.129). Lindblom thus issues the challenge for anyone to find “another alternative so far missed” (p.129) and falsify his thesis.

Lindblom focuses solely on those social similarities in thought, attitude and value which issue from dominant classes or elite groups and which presumably serve their interest, apparently overlooking those that stem from subordinate or even inferior classes and groups. It is sometimes possible for the most lowly and pariah classes to influence the whole of the rest of society. An obvious instance of this is the effect that blacks have had from slavery onwards on the musical tastes and expressions of all Americans and through them on the whole world. And if music alone does not qualify, then it is possible to broaden the example by extending it to the influence of blacks on the counter-cultural like-style that came in the first place with the music including such things as drug taking, free
sexual unions, disrespect for authority and the shedding of "bourgeois" values which pervaded the youth of all classes and eventually became accepted features of social life and thought against the cultural interests of elite white society. There are innumerable historical instances of such phenomena of pariah influence especially in the sphere of religion. Christianity began as the cult of despised Jews, shunned by their orthodox brethren and executed by their Roman masters, and yet they imposed their beliefs on Rome and much of the world. Working class cults such as communism have at times almost had a similar influence in some societies.

All of this goes to show that no class or group in society is ever merely the recipient of impairing impositions from above, that it can not only resist but also counter-attack with some chance of success. The fact that an inferior stratum chooses not to do so is indicative of at least some acceptance of the status quo apart from any conditioning. Hence the status quo situation does not always depend for its perpetuation on impairing conditioning. It follows from this that in many situations, were the impairments to be lifted, it might make no overwhelming difference to the social status quo. The mere fact that people might be free to think and probe as they choose is no guarantee that they will come up with any revolutionary or alternative ideas, proposals or demands. They might in fact be constrained by the historical circumstances of their time and situation: by what it is possible for them to think at a given time, by what their material conditions permit, by what their social and political surroundings make available.

Lindblom seems to be assuming that once the monkey of impairment is lifted off citizens' backs then they become capable of an enlightened form of thought and a multiplist mode of politics. But other enabling conditions need to intervene before anything positive comes of mere liberation. Enabling conditions leading to further enlightenment and multiplist might in fact be impossible for most societies due to their historical limitations. Thus it is not possible for a medieval society to become scientifically enlightened or politically democratic because science and democracy do not as yet exist as a possible choice for the people of such a society not matter how their impairments are removed; and even today many Third World societies, though aware of enlightened science and democracy in the West, are not able to choose these for themselves because their people do not understand these as possibilities. Such societies suffer from impairments, but these must be assessed relative to their historically determined possibilities and limitations. Not having science and democracy is not an impairment of a historically backward society, only one of its inevitable limitations. But our own Western societies also have limitations which are not corrigible impairments. Lindblom seems not to have distinguished between limitations and impairments and as a result he assumes that much more is possible if only impairments are removed than can be granted if the inherent historical limitations which are always there are recognized. The removal of impairment itself requires the acknowledgment of limitations — freedom involves the recognition of necessity.

With exemplary honesty and modesty Lindblom acknowledges his own limitations:

I am sure that I have been captured by some faddish elements of contemporary thought; that I am deeply influenced by the legacy of mid-twentieth-century liberal and social democratic through with their subsidiary Marxist elements; and that I am, with most of my countrymen, parochially American, as a consequence never fully understanding my country’s artpicallity and, on many counts, its extremism (Preface)

But as Goethe said: 'In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister'. Lindblom's limits are the bounds of his mastery, the conditions which make possible his achievements. From where but this American "extremism" could have come the faith in the capacity of ordinary people probing together and relying on their own resources of ordinary knowledge, once their mind-managing impairments are removed? Surely this is the ground out of which developed the model of the Self-Guided Society — a theoretical construction which towers above any ordinary knowledge, and yet is firmly planted in its soil. For let there be no mistake about this, Lindblom’s vision belongs with the great theoretical achievements of social science, one that is not dispensable if we are to deal adequately with our problems.

Notes
3. ibid, pp.265-66.