

THE LISTENING SOCIETY

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is a superficial sketch so that you know roughly what we are talking about. The basic idea is this:

Deliberately and carefully cultivate a deeper kind of welfare system that includes the psychological, social and emotional aspects of human beings, so that the average person, over the length of her lifespan, becomes much more secure, authentic and happy (in a deep, meaningful sense of the word).

Once the average person is much more secure, authentic and happy, she also tends (again, on average) to develop into a braver, more mature, more idealistic and reasonable person who cooperates more easily with others and makes better priorities, both individually and politically. Such people can then recreate society in a myriad of ways, solving many of the complex, wicked problems that we are facing today.

We are talking about **generativity**—i.e. the propensity of society as a cultural, economic and social-psychological system to, on average and over time, generate the conditions for psychological thriving and growth to occur. We are *not* talking about shoving some formula for the good life down everybody's throat. We're talking about creating likelihoods for good conditions.

But what are we trying to "fix", really? What's "wrong" with society in the first place? While we cannot "repair" society once and for all, we can certainly understand some things that are deeply messed up—and address them in an efficient and productive manner.

Here's a rough diagnosis to start from. What we think of as "normal life" is simply too harsh and cruel on our psyches, too demanding and full of insoluble dilemmas. We thereby, from childhood and onwards, become mutilated versions of our fuller potentials. Because of these many wounds and arrested developments, we fail to become truly kind, intelligent and open-minded. On a subtle level we fear the world; we expend energy protecting ourselves, and this means that we fail to awaken in ourselves the playful curiosity and love that are needed for us to comprehend the challenges of the world. We make poor decisions for ourselves and for our lives, what to prioritize, what to care about, and what to produce and consume. And we hold ourselves and each other back.

Solution? So the basic idea is to institute six new forms of political, cultural, economic and very deliberately work with the psychological and positive development of human beings, our relationships to one another and our relations to society at large (these are presented in Book Two).

Ideology). These are not "solutions"—although I will suggest more than a few practical policies as well—but rather **open-ended processes**.

Processes? All modern states have finances, security and schools. The fact that these phenomena exist does not in itself answer any questions about what financial policies to adopt, how to improve security or what the education of our young should entail. They just name the categories and give us general ideas about what the institutions of our society are for. Lately we have added new forms of politics to the list—environmental politics being the prime example—whereas e.g. pyramid building has taken a backseat as of late. We can add or remove different forms of politics, if we have good arguments for doing so. We can add new processes to our society's self-organization.

As a society, we haven't fully admitted to ourselves and one another just how sensitive, how utterly emotionally vulnerable, we really are. The aim here is to make this embarrassing truth publicly obvious, so that we can together reshape society thereafter—until even the most sensitive among us can blossom; indeed, until the truly sensitive become our kings and queens.

SHOULD WE REALLY MAKE PEOPLE HAPPY?

Should we really make people happy? Is it a viable goal for society? People sometimes make the distinction between *hedonic* happiness (pleasure, amusement, fun) and *eudemonic* happiness (meaning, purpose in life, and sense of fulfilment). Both of these can be supported for the long-term development of each person as well as society as a whole.

Supporting happiness means relieving suffering, which also means improving the quality of human relationships. Negative emotions such as pain and frustration are, in manageable quantities, an integral part of a person's productive life—but they must be effectively learned from and surmounted. And that requires happiness, or mental health, or at least a certain peace of mind. Happiness not, then, as the opposite of suffering but as the opposite of suffocating misery and degradation.

So how do we develop and improve the psycho-social environment in which our lives does *not* (I repeat: *not*, read that word again, *not*) consist of a lot of people mistread this sentence) mean that people are protected from all challenges, difficulties or pains in the name of an immediate "happiness". We're not going to induce people to a state of total emptiness, hysterical laughter at their mother's funeral or to their family responsibilities to "find happiness".