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The Humility Factor

There is a humbling lesson in the recent sharp decline in highway fatalities. Traffic accidents are a major social problem by any standard, and until recently more Americans died each year on the roads than in all the years of war in Southeast Asia, roughly 55,000 in 1970. The number of persons injured that same year ran to 5,100,000. The annual economic loss per seriously injured person in medical expenses, property damage, and lost earnings runs into the billions.

Over the years the problem was studied and a variety of efforts were launched to correct it. Some favored the educational approach, especially driver education classes and public persuasion campaigns ("the life you save may be your own"). Others subscribed to technological cures: redesign of the automobile (Ralph Nader argued that the cars were "unsafe at any speed," not the drivers) and redesign of the roads (railings, flexible signposts, and so on). Still others appealed to the long arm of the law, asking for stiffer penalties for traffic violators and mandatory use of seat belts. And yet another set of people pointed to alcohol as the major cause of fatal accidents and called for greater use of breath analyzers to get those driving while under the influence of liquor off the road. Each approach had its proponents, detractors, supportive data, and counterclaims. The number of traffic deaths continued to rise from 38,000 in 1960 to 49,000 in 1965 to 55,000 in 1970, while injuries went from 3,078,000 to 4,100,000 to 5,100,000 in the same years.

Then came the energy crisis, hardly designed by any traffic safety council, and the 55 mile an hour speed limit, introduced, oddly enough, not to save lives but to conserve energy. Since then the slaughter on the highways has been curtailed by more than 23 percent.

This is not the only social problem to be drastically affected by factors neither foreseen nor deliberately introduced for the purpose. The sharpest drop in the number of mental patients in state mental hospitals was caused not by any root change in the psychiatric treatment administered, but chiefly by the discovery of tranquilizers, which allow many patients to remain at home with little cost to the state. Thanks to tranquilizers, the number of people kept incarcerated in state mental hospitals fell from 535,540 in 1960 to 373,984 in 1969.

Finally, the problems of the major urban centers, such as housing, welfare, and busing, were to a very large degree created by an influx of millions of poor Americans from the countryside, especially the South. More than any program created by any major city council or state or federal agency, the recent cessation and partial reversal of this movement, including remigration to the South, may ameliorate conditions in the cities. (Between 1940 and 1970, 4.4 million blacks alone left the South. A recent study suggests that between 1970 and 1973 more blacks migrated to the South than from the South.)

The moral? Our capacity to engineer society is at a relatively early and primitive stage. The cliché "If we can put a man on the moon, we should be able to . . ." holds only as an aspiration for the farther future. For the near one, humility is of the essence. A scientific orientation to our societal problems is essential, but first of all in the sense of a rational, open-minded, empirical orientation, rather than one which relies on a priori beliefs and assumptions. The easy optimism that goes with the assumption that we can design a quick cure for most things that ail us is not called for. It results in an oversell of what science and technology can do for the highly intricate, societal world, whose dynamics we are only slowly learning to understand.—AMITAI ETZIONI, *Professor of Sociology, Columbia University, and Director, Center for Policy Research, Inc., 475 Riverside Drive, New York 10027*

Science

The Humility Factor

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