

For the record: US democratization drives are failure-prone
August 10, 2017

Amitai Etzioni formulated the following hypotheses in 1969: “(a) deliberate social change initiatives are highly likely to fail. (b) This is especially true when one society attempts to change social life in another country (long-distance social engineering), e.g. foreign aid projects. (c) Long-distance social engineering that aims to spur democratization is particularly prone to failure. Etzioni specified the conditions that successful democratization requires and showed that these conditions are not extant in the Middle East and many other parts of the world. He hence predicted that democracy drives will fail in Afghanistan and Iraq. This examination briefly reviews the first two hypotheses and then focuses on the third.

a. The limits of social engineering (domestic)

In 1969, Etzioni observed that social engineering (deliberate societal change) is much more difficult than citizens, policymakers, and even many social scientists assume. (He explained that deliberate societal change entails a social entity—the government, civic body, a corporation—setting a goal, developing a policy, and investing resources in bringing it about. It is as different from natural societal change—that is, occurring without any planned intervention—as building a new canal is from a river changing its banks.)

He wrote, in 1969:

“If we observe a society faced with a problem – poverty, riots, unsafe cars – and formulating a program to deal with it, we can be sure that nine times out of ten the problem will not be solved. If we look again, ten or twenty years later, we shall find that the problem may have been trimmed, redefined, or redistributed, but only infrequently

will it have been treated to anyone's satisfaction. Thus, **we flatly predict** that 15 years from now there will still be massive poverty in the United States (despite the 'total war' devoted to its eradication), there will still be outbreaks of violence in the streets during hot summers, and there probably will still be tens of thousands of casualties on the highways each year."¹

Etzioni elaborated in 1972:

"We have come of late to the realization that the pace of achievement in domestic programs ranges chiefly from the slow to the crablike—two steps backward for every one forward—and the suspicion is growing that there is something basically wrong with most of these programs. A nagging feeling persists that maybe something even more basic than the lack of funds or will is at stake. [...] We are now confronting the uncomfortable possibility that human beings are not very easily changed after all."²

The same thesis was a central tenet of the early neoconservatives who pointed to the failure of scores of social programs introduced during President Johnson's "Great Society" initiative.³ Peter Steinfels added that neocons found that the Great Society agenda "proved that the negative, unintended consequences of planned social intervention usually outweigh the positive, intended ones; it increased social conflict without relieving social ills."⁴

To illustrate the difficulty of effecting deliberate social change, Etzioni cites the Soviet Union's failure to refashion the behavior of its own people over 50 years, despite "tight control over the messages its educational institutions and its media carry [...] supplemented by well-heeled and highly regulated ideological machinery," observing that "the needs manifested in the behavior of the average Russian are surprisingly similar to those of the Western person."⁵ The

USSR set out to eliminate religion, class differences, ethnic loyalties, family ties, and state coercion. It failed on all these fronts.

In the US, the prediction has been confirmed by the persistence of many social problems, despite numerous social programs seeking to address these problems. To illustrate: since 1970 the poverty rate has fluctuated between 11% and 15%—in 2014, it was 14.8%.⁶ Gang violence: in 1996, there were an estimated 848,000 gang members in the US, and in 2012, the figure stood at 850,000.⁷ Drug abuse: more than 40 years after the establishment of the DEA, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared prescription drug abuse an epidemic, as 2015 saw 52,000 lethal overdoses, more than double that of 1999.⁸ Alcoholism: Prohibition not only failed to curb the consumption of alcohol, and fed corruption in the US police and judicial systems—but it is the only constitutional amendment that was ever repealed. Progressive taxation and income inequality: the average US household income from 1979-2007 more than tripled for the top 1% of earners, while the bottom 80% saw virtually no real gains during that period.⁹ Climate change: despite growing public concern, “sixteen of the 17 warmest years on record have occurred since 2001.”¹⁰

Etzioni does not claim that social engineering always fails. For example, after more than fifty years of public effort, the portion of Americans smoking did decline from 42% in 1965 to 20% in 2009.¹¹ Violent crime has declined considerably in the last quarter century, though it is far from clear to what extent this decline was the result of social engineering. In toto, the hypothesis that social engineering successes are rare and failures common seems to be well supported.

b. The limits of long-distance social engineering

Etzioni extended his thesis in the early 2000s to long-distance social engineering (when one nation seeks to change another society or parts of it), which he held is failure-prone.

In his 2007 book, *Security First*, Etzioni wrote:

“Actually, social engineering is an extremely primitive art that faces countless obstacles, especially in the short run, and especially when undertaken by foreign powers in lands that are poorly prepared for whatever grand changes are favored by those powers.”¹²

The findings of William Easterly, a former economist at the World Bank, support the hypothesis regarding the limits of long-distance social engineering (LDSE). He showed that foreign aid has been unsuccessful in alleviating the economic woes of underdeveloped nations. Tracing the origins of Western foreign aid to 1950, Easterly examined the economic growth of the world’s poorest countries over the period 1950-2001. He found that countries in the poorest fifth grew by an average factor of 2.25. When he split that lowest fifth into two groups of those that had received above average and below average amounts of foreign aid, there was no difference in growth.¹³ Moreover, Easterly points out that the so-called Gang of Four—Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea—became first-world nations in the course of a single generation, without their economies propped up by Western development money.¹⁴

More recently, Hristos Doucouliagos and Martin Paldam conducted a meta-study of 40 years of foreign assistance and growth research and found no statistically significant correlation between the share of foreign aid received and economic growth. They further observed that China and India, countries that do not rely on foreign aid, have grown rapidly in recent years, lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty.¹⁵

For detailed, vivid illustrations of how LDSE foundered in Iraq and Afghanistan, see Rajiv Chandrasekaran's acclaimed accounts, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* and *Little America*, respectively.¹⁶ For a detailed social science account of the failures of LDSE in both nations see Etzioni's "COIN: A study of strategic illusion".¹⁷

c. Democratization particularly failure-prone

Etzioni posited that American drives to democratize other nations are particularly likely to fail. This, he predicted, is above all true if a coerced regime change (in which the foreign power topples a regime and tries to forge a new and democratic one) is involved.

While Etzioni added his name to an open letter supporting the combat against terrorist groups in Afghanistan,¹⁸ he opposed the toppling the Baathist regime in Iraq. In November 2003, at the beginning of the War in Iraq, Etzioni criticized American reconstruction ambitions as ignorant of the gap between the sociological conditions of the country and those conditions required for successful democratization. He wrote,

"The US's Iraq problem needs to be addressed by fewer generals and more sociologists, whose vocation it is to understand how societies function and the extent to which they can be restructured. I happen to be one, but this isn't an application for a job. Rather, it's a plea for a realistic approach to social engineering.

The neo-Wilsonian plan to turn Iraq into a "shining, prosperous democracy" - "a model that will change the whole Middle East" - and then bring our troops home fails the social-science test. Practically all attempts to do so in countries less prepared than Germany and Japan have failed. Among the dud democracies are countries as different as Haiti and Cambodia, Nicaragua and South Vietnam."¹⁹

In the *New York Times* in March 2004, Etzioni:

“Democracy is a delicate plant that thrives only if the soil is carefully cultivated. Even an incomplete list of what it takes to secure democracy suffices to show how hollow are promises to mass-produce it. For democracy to take root, there must be a fair level of law and order, economic development and education; a sizable middle class; respect for the rule of law; independent judges; and a rich fabric of voluntary associations.

[...]

When many of these factors are lacking, and when big powers are quick to declare victory and go home especially as elections loom they lower the definition of democracy, pinning the label on whatever they have concocted. Elections are a frequent fixture of these sleight-of-hand democratizations, disregarding the fact that elections are regularly held in places like China, Iran and Singapore. In Iraq, neither elections nor caucuses will result in anything resembling democracy.”²⁰

Etzioni stipulated that “all this is not to suggest that there is some biological or otherwise permanent feature of the societies in such places as the Middle East that will forever prevent them from becoming sound democracies one day. It is simply to observe that the sociological conditions prevailing in such countries today are not suited to democratization.”²¹ Etzioni argued that there is nothing inherent in Islam that makes democracy unworkable, but the conditions are not available currently and cannot be produced on short order. On Iraq, Etzioni noted that “US officials greatly overestimated the extent to which less than favorable conditions for the reconstruction of Iraq could be recast.”²²

Currently there is some growing following to this position, especially after the Arab Spring (which greatly energized the democratization optimists) resulted in little democracy, and following the setback to democratic order in Russia, Venezuela, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, Indonesia, and the US. One should hence recall that the sanguine position that embraced worldwide democracy promotion by the US was a key theme of President Wilson after WWI, was the lead theme of the Allied Forces fighting fascism in WWII, was at the foundation of the liberal world order the US introduced in 1945, and has been a key goal of US foreign policy ever since. Following the collapse of the USSR, Francis Fukuyama famously saw it as evidence that the world is democratizing and the US' mission was to help those regimes that resisted becoming democracies. Promoting democracy was a key justification of US involvement in Iraq after no nuclear weapons were found and of nation-building in Afghanistan. Only recently, as these drives failed, has there been some growing support to the thesis Etzioni and a few others advanced half a generation ago.

A major study that supports the thesis that democracy needs favorable sociological conditions and that these cannot be produced via LDSE, is the study by Minxin Pei and Sara Kasper that identified 16 American attempts at nation-building abroad. Of these 16 attempts, which began in Cuba in 1898, 11 failed, one is considered inconclusive (Afghanistan), and only four succeeded.²³ Of the success cases—West Germany, Japan, Grenada, and Panama—only Germany and Japan offer instances in which major US nation-building projects in complex societies flourished.²⁴

d. What democratization requires

In several publications since the early 2000s, Etzioni has delineated the key sociological conditions present in post-WWII Germany and Japan—features that he holds were crucially missing when democratization projects began in modern-day Afghanistan and Iraq and in many other countries.

Democratization by US and its allies began in Germany and Japan only after the militaries of these nations were defeated and surrendered, hostilities had ceased, and a very high level of domestic security was established. There were no terrorists and no insurgencies. Second, there was no danger that Japan or Germany would slip into a sectarian or ethnic civil war. Citizens of Germany and Japan had a very strong level of commitment to their nation which readily trumped any and all sub-loyalties.²⁵ Third, Germany and Japan had in place functioning political institutions run by competent government personnel with relatively low levels of corruption. Finally, each country had a strong industrial base and an educated middle class, the building blocks for a robust economy.²⁶ None of these conditions were available in most of the nations in which the US attempted to engineer democratic regimes.

e. A warning and a prediction

In the last decade, Etzioni has extended his thesis, asserting that LDSE engineering efforts are not only likely to fail, but that they are likely to engender very high human and economic costs. Moreover, that these will not be the labor pains of developing democracies (and hence arguably worthwhile) but end up leading to new authoritarian political systems. Etzioni writes,

“One may argue that the kind of high-level anarchy that followed the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in Iraq, Afghanistan and, more recently, Libya is the price to be paid to achieve democracy – that such is the cost of gaining freedom. This argument is

falsified by the finding that, as a rule, anarchy is not followed by democratisation, but by new authoritarian regimes. The bloody anarchies that follow the overthrow of tyrants are rarely 'creative disruptions' that open the way to the formation of new, constructive polities; rather, major sacrifices are usually followed by a return to regimes that are quite similar to those that were disrupted in the first place."²⁷

Etzioni stresses that the dismal outcomes produced by coerced regime changes and nation building do not rule out legitimate armed humanitarian intervention, building on the UN's Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) principle. However, these must be limited to stopping genocides and ethnic cleansing but not used to coercively usher in regime change.²⁸

NOTES

This document was compiled and vetted by Kevin Hudson, a research assistant at the Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies at The George Washington University.

¹ Amitai Etzioni. 1969. "Toward a Theory of Guided Societal Change." *Social Science Quarterly* 50.3: pp. 749-754. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42860191>

² Amitai Etzioni. 1972 (June 3). "Human Beings Are not Very Easy to Change After All." *Saturday Review*.

³ Justin Vaisse. 2009 (September 23). "Was Irving Kristol a Neoconservative?" *Brookings Institution*. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/was-irving-kristol-a-neoconservative/>

⁴ Peter Steinfels. 1979. *The Neoconservatives: The Origins of a Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster): p. 230.

⁵ Amitai Etzioni. 1976. *Social Problems* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall): pp. 40-41.

⁶ US Department of Health and Human Services Report. 2014. Retrieved from <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/154286/50YearTrends.pdf>

⁷ *National Gang Center*. "National Youth Gang Survey Analysis." Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/survey-analysis/measuring-the-extent-of-gang-problems>; Laila Kearney. 2016 (June 17). "Drug Overdose Deaths On The Rise In The U.S." *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/17/drug-overdose-deaths_n_7603302.html

⁸ *American Society of Addiction Medicine*. 2016. "Opioid Addiction 2016 Facts & Figures." Retrieved from <https://www.asam.org/docs/default-source/advocacy/opioid-addiction-disease-facts-figures.pdf>

⁹ Dave Gilson and Carolyn Perot. 2011 (March/April). "It's the Inequality, Stupid." *Mother Jones*. Retrieved from <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/02/income-inequality-in-america-chart-graph/>

¹⁰ NASA. "Global Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet." Retrieved from: <https://climate.nasa.gov/>

¹¹ *American Lung Association*. 2011 (July). "Trends in Tobacco Use." Retrieved from <http://www.lung.org/assets/documents/research/tobacco-trend-report.pdf>

¹² Amitai Etzioni. 2007. *Security First: For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press): p. 39.

¹³ William Easterly. 2006. *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York, NY: Penguin Press): pp. 39-40.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 27. See also Rajan, Raghuram G., and Arvind Subramanian. 2005. *Aid and growth: What does the cross-country evidence really show?* No. w11513. *National Bureau of Economic Research*. Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w11513.pdf>.

¹⁵ Hristos Doucouliagos and Martin Paldam. 2008. "Aid Effectiveness on Growth: A Meta Study." *European Journal of Political Economy*, 24(1): pp. 1-24.

¹⁶ Rajiv Chandrasekaran. 2010. *Imperial life in the emerald city: inside Iraq's green zone*. Vintage; Rajiv Chandrasekaran. 2012. *Little America: The war within the war for Afghanistan*. Vintage.

¹⁷ Amitai Etzioni. 2015. "COIN: A study of strategic illusion." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26.3: pp. 345-376.

¹⁸ *Washington Post*. 2002 (February 12). "Academics Release Letter on 'Just War.'" Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/justwar_letter020102.html

¹⁹ Amitai Etzioni. 2003 (November 18). "A sociologist's Iraqi exit strategy." *Christian Science Monitor*.

²⁰ Amitai Etzioni. 2004 (March 5). "Instant democracy American fantasy." *New York Times*.

²¹ Amitai Etzioni. 2015. "Democratisation Mirage." *Survival*, 57(4): p. 142.

²² Amitai Etzioni. 2015. "COIN: A study of strategic illusion." *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 26(3): p. 357.

²³ Minxin Pei and Sara Kasper. 2003 (May 24). "Lessons from the Past: The American Record on Nation Building." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Policybrief24.pdf>

²⁴ Amitai Etzioni. 2007. *Security First: For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press): pp. 44-45.

²⁵ Stephen Biddle argues that in the context of a sectarian (as opposed to ideological) civil conflict, like that in Iraq, nation-building measures, COIN endeavors such as democratization and the building up of indigenous security forces, will likely exacerbate violence. In Iraq, Biddle writes, "the insurgents are not competing for Shiite hearts and minds; they are fighting for Sunni self-interest, and hardly need a manifesto to rally supporters" (Biddle 2006: 2-14).

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- ²⁶ Jeffrey M. Diefendorf, Axel Frohn, and Hermann-Josef Rupieper. 1993. *American Policy and Reconstruction of West Germany, 1945-1955*. (Cambridge University Press); Ian D. Turner. 1989. *Reconstruction in post-war Germany: British occupation policy and the Western zones, 1945-55*. (New York: Berg Publishers); Gary D. Allison. 2004. *Japan's Postwar History*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Cornell University Press); William K Tabb. 1995. *The Postwar Japanese System: Cultural Economy and Economic Transformation*. (New York: Oxford University Press).
- ²⁷ Amitai Etzioni. 2015. "Democratisation Mirage." *Survival*, 57(4): pp. 139-156.
- ²⁸ Amitai Etzioni. 2016. "Defining Down Sovereignty: The Rights and Responsibilities of Nations." *Ethics & International Affairs*, 30.1: pp. 5-20.