

IPSP: One Issue, Two Themes and Three Messages

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My Task

- The draft chapters of the IPSP Report—Rethinking Society for the Twentieth Century, are now in: <https://www.ipsp.org/>
- We have 850,000 words.
- Two tasks:
 - First, get 850,000 words down to the target of 700,000.
 - Second (easier?), figure out what the 700,000 words are saying as a collectivity.

My Task

- I have always taken the view that the individual chapters are stand alone pieces crafted by their authors.
- The Steering Committee and Scientific Council helped in designing the chapter structure.
- Now that the draft chapters are in, we can sketch out the overall terrain as we see it, and encourage chapter authors to respond to that and to the other chapters.

My Task

- With that in mind, I have been asked to say what I saw in these 850,000 words, and to do it in 10 minutes.
- So, very idiosyncratically, I will say what I see in terms of
 - One Issue
 - Two Themes
 - Three Messages
- This is obviously my take, and it is meant not as anything definitive, but grist to the mill of discussions which will happen here over the next three days.

One Issue

- The Issue: What is Social Progress?
- The report has faced this issue from the start. Some wanted to replace “social progress” with “social change” to skirt the inevitable normative debates we would get into.
- It was decided to keep social “progress”, but to take a broad perspective on it.
- From Chapter 2:

One Issue

- “All views of social progress depend on identifying the dimensions along which progress is being measured or defined as well as the relevant indicators and benchmarks for comparison.”
- “.... there are a plurality of value dimensions along which social conditions differ—not only the standard of living, but also freedom, social inclusion, sustainability and so on. Moreover, because these values are multiple, they can conflict and tradeoffs are often unavoidable.”
- “This chapter provides what its authors take to be the most important normative dimensions for making comparisons. Our aim is to provide the key, non-derivative values and the important principles for guiding action that can be used to generate a “report card” for assessing different social policies and institutions.”

One Issue

- The issue will not go away, however.
- The details of what is on the report card may matter.
- Quite often, author chapters do give weights to what is on the report card—for example on gender roles.
- And, despite protestations to the contrary, there is often a Eurocentrism to the normative weightings.
- Perhaps a more accurate statement might be that there is an Enlightenment-centrism to the normative framing of the chapters (as a whole).

One Issue

- There are other issues, of course:
 - Timeframe, how far back to go into history, how far to look ahead? (plus/minus a century at most seems to have been the time frame).
 - The balance between coverage of developing and developed countries. Have we got it right? Is it too northern focused? Is it erratic?
 - Etc.
- But the issue of the normative compass gives an idea of the type of substantive and presentational challenge the report will face.

Two Themes

- As I read through the 850,000 words, I see two themes running through them.
- First theme:

The World Is Going To Hell In a Handbasket

- Quite the doom and gloom merchants!

Two Themes

- Although these facts are of course present in the narratives, from the tenor of the chapters one would never guess that the last 50 years have seen spectacular improvements in:
 - life expectancy,
 - maternal and child mortality,
 - girls' school enrollment,
 - income measures of poverty,
 - income inequality in the world taken as a whole
 - etc etc.

Two Themes

- This sense of foreboding is actually fine because in some sense it is the calling card of the report, and the motivation behind the whole exercise.
- These achievements are now under threat because of..... (technology, inequality, climate change, etc etc).
- And since the world is now so much different from the world of fifty years ago, the lessons of the past, on what led to success, may not be directly relevant to the new realities.

Two Themes

- Second Theme:

Collective action at different levels—family, community, nation, global—is a key determinant of social progress.

- The different chapters of the report discuss collective action centrally, albeit in different dimensions and at different levels of aggregation.

Two Themes

- The most obvious is the most aggregated—global collective action to address climate change.
- The most frequent is collective action at the level of the nation state. The effect of within nation state inequality on democratic decision making; of between state inequality on global decision making; the effect of migration and heterogeneity on cohesion at the national level, etc etc.
- But the evolution of the family, of civil society, of religion, etc also all have a collective action discourse embedded in them.

Two Themes

- If you agree with me that this is a theme which could provide us with (at least one) Ariadne's thread to navigate the report, what more could we say about it?
- Conditions for and determinants of success/failure:
 - Size of grouping relative to nature of the problem
 - Nested collective actions, with higher levels providing platforms for lower levels
 - How could new technology help?
- etc

Three Messages for Action

- Rather risky to set down three messages.
- Obviously they reflect my own biases.
- They may also encompass too much, and in doing so may encompass nothing.
- But they may nevertheless be useful for discussion purposes.
- They are cast in terms of action rather than analysis.

Three Messages for Action

- Given the current conjuncture, social progress in the coming decades will require three interrelated sets of actions on the part of a range of actors:
- **Managing and Mitigating Local and Global Inequalities in Different Dimensions.**
- **Reversing the Retreat From, and Further Advancing and Improving, Collective Action at Local, National and Global Levels.**
- **Individual Empowerment to Hold Collectivities Accountable at All Levels.**

Summary

- 850,000 words.
- One Issue:
 - What is Social Progress?
- Two Themes:
 - Hell In A Handbasket
 - Collective Action is the Key
- Three Messages for Action
 - Manage and Mitigate Inequalities
 - Advance and Improve Collective Action
 - Individual Empowerment Holding Collectivities to Account

Thank You!