The Weasel Word 'Social'

The noun 'society', misleading as it is, is relatively innocuous compared with the adjective 'social', which has probably become the most confusing expression in our entire moral and political vocabulary. This has happened only during the past hundred years, during which time its modern usages, and its power and influence, have expanded rapidly from Bismarckian Germany to cover the whole world. The confusion that it spreads, within the very area wherein it is most used, is partly due to its describing not only phenomena produced by various modes of cooperation among men, such as in a 'society', but also the kinds of actions that promote and serve such orders. From this latter usage ==it has increasingly been turned into an exhortation, a sort of guide-word for rationalist morals intended to displace traditional morals, and now increasingly supplants the word 'good' as a designation of what is morally right==. As a result of this 'distinctly dichotomous' character, as *Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms* appropriately puts it, ==factual and normative meanings of the word 'social' constantly alternate, and what at first seems a description imperceptibly turns into a prescription.==

* On this particular matter, German usage influenced the American language more than English; for by the eighteen-eighties a group of German scholars known as the historical or ethical school of economic research had increasingly substituted the term 'social policy' for the term 'political economy' to designate the study of human interaction. One of the few not to be swept away by this new fashion, Leopold von Wiese, later remarked that only those who were young in the 'social age' – in the decades immediately before the Great War – can appreciate how strong at that time was the inclination to regard the 'social' sphere as a surrogate for religion. One of the most dramatic manifestations of this was the appearance of the so-called social pastors. But 'to be "social" ', Wiese insists, 'is not the same as being good or righteous or "righteous in the eyes of God" ' (1917). To some of Wiese's students we owe instructive historical studies on the spreading of the term 'social' (see my references in 1976:180).

The extraordinary variety of uses to which the word 'social' has since been put in English is brought home vividly when in the *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (1977), cited earlier in another context, is found, appropriately preceded by 'Soap Opera', a series of no less than thirty-five combinations of 'social' with some noun or other, from 'Social Action' to 'Social Wholes'. In a similar effort, R. Williams's *Key Words* (1976), the author, although generally referring the reader, with the conventional 'q.v.', to corresponding entries, departed from this

practice with regard to 'social'. Apparently it would have been impractical for him to follow his policy here, and he simply had to abandon it. These examples led me for a while to note down all occurrences of 'social' that I encountered, thus producing the following instructive list of over one hundred and sixty nouns qualified by the adjective 'social':

accounting	action	adjustment
administration	affairs	agreement
age	animal	appeal
awareness	behaviour	being
body	causation	character
circle	climber	compact
composition	comprehension	concern
conception	conflict	conscience
consciousness	consideration	construction
contract	control	credit
cripples	critic (-que)	crusader
decision	demand	democracy
description	development	dimension
discrimation	disease	disposition
distance	duty	economy
end	entity	environment
epistemology	ethics	etiquette
event	evil	fact
factors	fascism	force
framework	function	gathering
geography	goal	good
graces	group	harmony
health	history	ideal
implication	inadequacy	independence
inferiority	institution	insurance
intercourse	justice	knowledge
laws	leader	life
market economy	medicine	migration
mind	morality	morals
needs	obligation	opportunity
order	organism	orientation
outcast	ownership	partner
passion	peace	pension
person	philosophy	pleasure
point of view	policy	position
power	priority	privilege

problem	process	product
progress	property	psychology
rank	realism	realm
Rechtsstaat	recognition	reform
relations	remedy	research
response	responsibility	revolution
right	role	rule of law
satisfaction	science	security
service	signals	significance
Soziolekt (group speech)	solidarity	spirit
structure	stability	standing
status	struggle	student
studies	survey	system
talent	teleology	tenets
tension	theory	thinkers
thought	traits	usefulness
utility	value	views
virtue	want	waste
wealth	will	work
worker	world	

Many of the combinations given here are even more widely used in a negative, critical form: thus 'social adjustment' becomes 'social maladjustment', and the same for 'social disorder', 'social injustice', 'social insecurity', 'social instability', and so on.

It is difficult to conclude from this list alone whether the word 'social' has acquired so many different meanings as to become useless as a tool of communication. However this may be, its practical effect is quite clear and at least threefold. First, it tends pervertedly to insinuate a notion that we have seen from previous chapters to be misconceived – namely, that what has been brought about by the impersonal and spontaneous processes of the extended order is actually the result of deliberate human creation. Second, following from this, it appeals to men to *re*design what they never could have designed at all. And third, it also has acquired the power to empty the nouns it qualifies of their meaning.

In this last effect, it has in fact become the most harmful instance of what, after Shakespeare's 'I can suck melancholy out of a song, as a weasel suck eggs' (*As You Like It*, II,5), some Americans call a 'weasel word'. As a weasel is alleged to be able to empty an egg without leaving a visible sign, so can these words deprive of content any term to which they are prefixed while seemingly leaving them untouched. A weasel word is used to draw the teeth from a concept one is obliged to employ,

116

but from which one wishes to eliminate all implications that challenge one's ideological premises.

> On current American usage of the expression see the late Mario Pei's *Weasel Words: The Art of Saying What You Don't Mean* (1978), which credits Theodore Roosevelt with having coined the term in 1918, thus suggesting that seventy years ago American statesmen were remarkably well educated. Yet the reader will not find in that book the prize weasel word 'social'.

Though abuse of the word 'social' is international, it has taken perhaps its most extreme forms in West Germany where the constitution of 1949 employed the expression *sozialer Rechtsstaat* (social rule of law) and whence the conception of 'social market economy' has spread – in a sense which its populariser Ludwig Erhard certainly never intended. (He once assured me in conversation that to him the market economy did not have to be *made* social but was so already as a result of its origin.) But while the rule of law and the market are, at the start, fairly clear concepts, the attribute 'social' empties them of any clear meaning. From these uses of the word 'social', German scholars have come to the conclusion that their government is constitutionally subject to the *Sozialstaatsprinzip*, which means little less than that the rule of law has been suspended. Likewise, such German scholars see a conflict between *Rechtsstaat* and *Sozialstaat* and entrench the *soziale Rechtsstaat* in their constitution – one, I may perhaps say, that was written by Fabian muddle-heads inspired by the nineteenth-century inventor of 'National Socialism', Friedrich Naumann (H. Maier, 1972:8).

Similarly, the term 'democracy' used to have a fairly clear meaning; yet 'social democracy' not only served as the name for the radical Austro-Marxism of the inter-war period but now has been chosen in Britain as a label for a political party committed to a sort of Fabian socialism. Yet the traditional term for what is now called the 'social state' was 'benevolent despotism', and the very real problem of achieving such despotism democratically, i.e., while preserving individual freedom, is simply wished away by the concoction 'social democracy'.

'Social Justice' and 'Social Rights'

Much the worst use of 'social', one that wholly destroys the meaning of any word it qualifies, is in the almost universally used phrase 'social justice'. Though I have dealt with this particular matter already at some length, particularly in the second volume on *The Mirage of Social Justice* in my *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, I must at least briefly state the point again here, since it plays such an important part in arguments for and against socialism. The phrase 'social justice' is, as a distinguished

117

man more courageous than I bluntly expressed it long ago, simply 'a semantic fraud from the same stable as People's Democracy' (Curran, 1958:8). The alarming extent to which the term seems already to have perverted the thinking of the younger generation is shown by a recent Oxford doctor's thesis on *Social Justice* (Miller, 1976), in which the traditional conception of justice is referred to by the extraordinary remark that 'there appears to be a category of private justice'.

I have seen it suggested that 'social' applies to everything that reduces or removes differences of income. But why call such action 'social'? Perhaps because it is a method of securing majorities, that is, votes in addition to those one expects to get for other reasons? This does seem to be so, but it also means of course that every exhortation to us to be 'social' is an appeal for a further step towards the 'social justice' of socialism. Thus use of the term 'social' becomes virtually equivalent to the call for 'distributive justice'. This is, however, irreconcilable with a competitive market order, and with growth or even maintenance of population and of wealth. Thus people have come, through such errors, to call 'social' what is the main obstacle to the very maintenance of 'society'. 'Social' should really be called 'anti-social'.

It is probably true that men would be happier about their economic conditions if they felt that the relative positions of individuals were just. Yet the whole idea behind distributive justice – that each individual ought to receive what he morally deserves – is meaningless in the extended order of human cooperation (or the catallaxy), because the available product (its size, and even its existence) depends on what is in one sense a morally indifferent way of allocating its parts. For reasons already explored, moral desert cannot be determined objectively, and in any case the adaptation of the larger whole to facts yet to be discovered requires that we accept that 'success is based on results, not on motivation' (Alchian, 1950:213). Any extended system of cooperation must adapt itself constantly to changes in its natural environment (which include the life, health and strength of its members); the demand that only changes with just effect should occur is ridiculous. It is nearly as ridiculous as the belief that deliberate organisation of response to such changes can be just. Mankind could neither have reached nor could now maintain its present numbers without an inequality that is neither determined by, nor reconcilable with, any deliberate moral judgements. Effort of course will improve individual chances, but it alone cannot secure results. The envy of those who have tried just as hard, although fully understandable, works against the common interest. Thus, if the common interest is *really* our interest, we must not give in to this very human instinctual trait, but instead allow the market process to determine the reward. Nobody can ascertain, save

through the market, the size of an individual's contribution to the overall product, nor can it otherwise be determined how much remuneration must be tendered to someone to enable him to choose the activity which will add most to the flow of goods and services offered at large. Of course if the latter should be considered morally good, then the market turns out to produce a supremely moral result.

Mankind is split into two hostile groups by promises that have no realisable content. The sources of this conflict cannot be dissipated by compromise, for every concession to factual error merely creates more unrealisable expectations. Yet, an anti-capitalist ethic continues to develop on the basis of errors by people who condemn the wealth-generating institutions to which they themselves owe their existence. Pretending to be lovers of freedom, they condemn several property, contract, competition, advertising, profit, and even money itself. Imagining that their reason can tell them how to arrange human efforts to serve their innate wishes better, they themselves pose a grave threat to civilisation.