

Original Paper

Social Impact: Social Good, Social Neutrality, Social Bad, and Social Disaster: When Is Doing What You Have A “Right” To Do the “Right” Thing To Do?

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Abstract

Social good has been defined as “services or products that promote human well-being on a large scale.” While there seems to be agreement about the definitional “space” of social good, concepts of social action, social justice, and social impact require further attention.

Producing social good does not require injustice: improvements can be made even when there is no injustice. Social good might be considered the first step in a triad containing social better (ment) and social best (good, better, best), with impactful results produced by social actors.

There may be large cultural “umbrellas,” widely held value bundles, which define whole societies at points in time and over time. We discuss two: “the lonely crowd,” and “party ID.”

We use a portfolio analysis to look at the elements of social good and social bad: social very good, social good, social neutrality, social bad, and social disaster; and then consider three examples of positive social impacts, and five examples of negative social impacts.

We suggest a guide to social action to help us make better decisions aimed toward the A or B outcomes (Social Very Good and Social Good), using three steps: awareness of hidden bias, regular decision refurbishment, and using decision rules.

The goal of this paper is to share ideas to help avoid social bad, and to help achieve social good. Ideally, social good considerations will become a regular part of the decision-making process.

1. What Is “Social Good”?

Mor Barak defines social good as “services or products that promote human well-being on a large scale.” She adds: “These services or products include health care, education, clean water, and causes such as equality and women’s rights. The quest to promote social good around the world can bring together physical and virtual communities that unite around a cause or an idea, discoursing globally and instantaneously, and translating into coordinated actions such as protests or petition drives (prime examples are Black Lives Matter and #Oscar So White). Social good is a term that coalesces many movements around the world, is featured in corporate websites, and unites different sectors of society—government, nonprofit, grassroots, and business.”

She expands this definition in her paper “The Practice and Science of Social Good: Emerging Paths to Positive Social Impact.”¹In interviews with nine social good experts, she develops the following definition:

“Individual, community and social well-being are related to a) domains such as environmental justice and sustainability, b) engaging unconventional systems of change such as grass roots and business collaborations, national and international NGOs, social entrepreneurs, and c) using innovative technologies and approaches such as design thinking, big data driven models and harnessing social media for social change, all **aiming to promote social justice.**” (Mor, 2018, **emphasis added**)

She additionally distinguishes social good(s) from public good(s), citing Scott (2014):

“Public goods are products and services typically provided by the state or government, funded by taxation, and include national defense, public safety, education, health services, emergency services, infrastructure, public transportation, and water and telecommunication services.”

Many other definitions and explanations are also available. This one supports an international component, a technology component, and a social impact component:

“Social good is typically defined as an action that provides some sort of benefit to the general public. In this case, fresh water, education and healthcare are all good examples of social goods. However, new media innovations and the explosion of online communities have added new meaning to the term. Social good is now about global citizens uniting to unlock the potential of individuals, technology and collaboration to create positive societal impact.”

While there seems to be agreement about the definitional “space” of social good, concepts of social action, social justice, and social impact require further attention.

2. Social Justice Implies Injustice; Social Good May Be Bigger Than Justice

The concept of “justice” requires a concept of “injustice,” in a yin/yang way. When we think of injustice we think of unfairness, deprivation, and oppression. We can see injustice on the individual level (Cinderella’s treatment by her step-sisters), on the organizational level (unequal pay for equal work), and on the societal level (“ethnic cleansing”). Changing injustice to justice implies rectification, if not accountability.

On individual, organizational, and societal levels, if situations are bad, rectification is better. If

situations are not unjust, improvement is still better.

Producing social good does not require injustice: improvements can be made even when there is no injustice. In fact, achieving social justice may impede efforts to create further social good. Social good might be considered the first step in a triad containing social better(ment) and social best (good, better, best)

3. Social Actions As Verbal and Behavioral

Social action can be verbal, both hurtful in itself and hurtful in the actions the words trigger. One example: when a candidate for the 2016 U.S. presidency “suggests” that one way to dispose of his opponent is for someone to assassinate her. Frank Bruni recalls the utterance, writing about an interview with the journalist Dan Rather:

“I asked Dan Rather what he was most struck by in the 2016 campaign, and he instantly mentioned Trump’s horrific implication in public remarks that August , that gun enthusiasts could rid themselves of a (Hillary)Clinton by assassinating her.”

One is reminded of the words attributed to Henry II: “Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest? (Sometimes expressed as troublesome or meddlesome priest) is an utterance attributed to Henry II of England, which led to the death of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1170. While it was not expressed as an order, it caused four knights to travel from Normandy to Canterbury, where they killed Becket. The phrase is now used to express the idea that a ruler's wish can be interpreted as a command by his or her subordinates.”

Words have power. While they are not “actions” in the usual sense of that word, they can inspire action in others.

And they can be hurtful on their own, as well. When I was a kid I rewrote the old saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” as “Sticks and stones break only bones; it’s words that really hurt me.”

We know that Newton’s First Law “An object will remain at rest or in uniform motion in a straight line unless acted upon by an external force” applies to physical events. But we can expand it include “reactions” to utterances as well.

A problematic example of these dual tracks is contained in an article by Trip Gabriel in *The New York Times* about Congressman Steve King’s incendiary remarks and divisive actions. Gabriel provides a banquet of “offensiveness” during the 2002 through 2019 period, an excellent example of the intermingling of words and actions.

3.1 The Differential Results of Social Actions: Good, Neutral, Bad/Awful, and Disastrous

Social good is one kind of impactful result produced by social actors. Other kinds of impactful results include social neutrality, social bad, and social disaster. Each may be defined differently by different social actors: environmental protection may be defined as “good,” but the coal industry may find it “bad.” Regulation may generally be seen as good for the large majority, but it can be disastrous for those whom it drives out of business.

3.2 Two Categories of Social Impact: Direct and Indirect

Direct social impact occurs when “good” is the first-order result of the action. Some businesses donate some (or all) of their profits to charity. Social benefit organizations are seen to do “good” acts (although they can also do things that are socially neutral, socially bad, or even socially disastrous).

Indirect social impact can be considered external to the primary social action. In economics, “externality” is defined as “a side effect or consequence of an industrial or commercial activity that affects other parties without this being reflected in the cost of the goods or services involved, such as the pollination of surrounding crops by bees kept for honey.”

3.3 Social Action As a Multiplayer/Multilayer Game

Social actors engaged in social action can be family groups, acquaintance/affinity groups, organizations, states, or nations. Typically each is acting/enacting all the time, with impacts beyond the actor. While we could consider individuals as social actors, for purposes of a social good analysis we will start with families, then communities, states, nations, regions, and the world itself.

3.4 Various/Diverse Results/Impacts

It’s almost impossible to do just one thing, and then for that one thing to not have repercussions. So even if “one thing” is undeniably a “social good,” some of the repercussions may be less good. And, of course, with diversity of actors at every level, there will be different understandings of good and bad at each level.

hose results can occur at the same point in time (as in a zero-sum game) but may occur over a period of time, as when something that “seemed like a good idea” now becomes, later, an idea with bad results. Even on the individual level, something I do now that does social good may later end up being not so good after all.

3.5 Contested Claims

Values may be offered as a basis for an action, but values often conflict. Consider these examples: the American Values of Achievement and Equality,” a rising tide lifts all boats” versus “Each tub on its own bottom,” ownership versus trusteeship, “mountain” versus “wagon train,” “public regarding” versus “private regarding,” approaches to permission vs. control. Each of these values is more juxtaposed than opposed. “Opposed” means that an actor (person, organization, etc.) tends to favor one side or the other. “Juxtaposed” means that an actor holds some of each orientation and is constantly balancing them.

Policies, programs, and social actions at any level can be used as a justification for actions seen as socially good by some and as socially awful for others, depending on value orientation.

3.6 The Umbrellas of Culture

There may be large cultural “umbrellas” that define whole societies at points in time and over time. These are widely held value bundles. Values are ideas to which commitment is attached. It is the difference between “words” and “fighting words.” we’ll discuss two of them here, because they have importantly different impacts on what is considered social good and social bad. Here are a couple

examples.

1) The Lonely Crowd. In 1950, David Reisman, and Nathan and Reuel Denny published *The Lonely Crowd*, a blockbuster about American cultural norms, which they argued characterized American society. The three norms they described were **tradition direction** (guidance from the past, as in “What did Grandpa think?”), **inner direction** (guidance from your own thoughts, as in “What do I think?”), and **other direction** (guidance by the larger social group, as in “Let’s run it up the flagpole and see what which way the kind is blowing”).

They argued that mid-20th century America was into **other direction**, but had passed through the previous two stages. One need not think of them as temporally progressive, but as extant sub-cultures with some dominant and others sub-dominant in different regions of the U.S., as well as in other countries in the world.

“Traditional wisdom,” “internal thought,” and “going with the crowd” are well-understood bases on which to both take social action and to define social good and bad. It seems true that these bases exist and have committed followers. Each competes for dominance in policy and action. Each ethos substantiates what is “the right thing to do,” what is social good, and what is social bad.

2) Party Identification (Party ID). Party Identification (Party ID) is one of the most powerful attitudinal variables in social science research. It measures the conservative (Republican) and liberal (Democratic) orientation of registered voters. Many social scientists have used it.

I tracked Party ID and a number of other independent variables (including race) between 1952 and 1978, using the National Election Study conducted every two years (consistent with Congressional years). This study explored the variables that seemed to predict a supportive orientation to a class of positive, social good activities by the government. With over 14 independent variables, Party ID was a significant predictor 69% of the time. Clearly this was a powerful tool to use to determine what respondents think is social good or social bad. It was also powerful over time: later respondents (offspring) must have learned it from their parents and extended family.

As a line in South Pacific puts it, “You’ve got to be carefully taught.”

“You’ve got to be taught

To hate and fear,

You’ve got to be taught

From year to year,

It’s got to be drummed

In your dear little ear.

You’ve got to be carefully taught

You’ve got to be taught to be afraid

Of people whose eyes are oddly made,

And people whose skin is a different shade,

You’ve got to be carefully taught.”

Party ID is an important shaper of what is considered social good and social bad in American society. People's opinions form and their decisions are made using cultural "heuristics," a mental shortcut, as Daniel Kahneman called them in *Thinking Fast and Thinking Slow*.

3.7 The Pressure of Structure

Our ideas/values help shape our concepts of social good and social bad. That is what Max Weber argued in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and what I argued in *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Community*. (Freud essentially argued this as well.)

But lived experiences shape them, too. Karl Marx was a proponent of the behavioral approach: social conditions and lived experiences shape perception and perspective just as culture does. (And, on the individual side, B.F. Skinner was the "Marxian" parallel to Freud).

Referring again to the matrix reported earlier in Public Policy Opinion and the Elderly, "Race" weighed in one point higher than "Party ID," at a beta of .70. Clearly, being in a group that has been historically victimized shapes one's perceptions and judgment of social good and social bad.

3.8 Could We Grade Social Good and Social Bad?

Given so many pressures on the definitions of "social good" and "social bad," is there a scheme that could give us a workable way of looking at these elements? A start might be a portfolio analysis

1) Social Very Good: The "A" Result. All benefit. Socially positive consequences for a wide spectrum of relevant groups. For example, "Obamacare," despite its significant opposition.

2) Social Good: The "B" Group. Gains and losses, but overall all groups under analysis are better off. For example, various governmental regulations that protect the environment but are costly for specific groups.

3) Social Neutrality: The "C" Group. There are gains and losses with some relevant groups, but the overall effect is a wash.

4) Social Bad: The "D" Group. Some elements of the community move ahead, or more fall behind, leading to an overall situation where the social unit is worse off. Two examples: opening federal lands to drilling and logging, strip-mining for coal.

5) Social Disaster: The "F" Group. All lose, or the "nuclear result" where almost everyone is worse off. For example, the lessening of bank regulations.

Three Examples of Positive Social Impacts

3.9 Random Acts of Kindness

The phrase "practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty?" was written by Anne Herbert in 1982. "Random acts of kindness," which might be defined as non-premeditated, inconsistent action designed to offer kindness towards the outside world," has developed into a phenomenon.²⁰ The concept even has a foundation devoted to it, which offers encouragement through calendars, planners, etc.²¹

3.10 Do A Good Turn Daily

The Boy Scouts slogan encourages doing “good turns,” both big and small. “Leave the campsite better than you found it?” is an example.

4. Water Works

Sometimes something already extant can have an expanded purpose more than just “re-purposing.” Ivan Penn’s article in the August 4, 2018 *New York Times* discusses a proposal to turn the Hoover Dam into a giant battery.²²

Or consider the discussion in “It’s All Connected: Private water work can influence downstream angling opportunities” as discussed by Chris Wood in the *Trout Unlimited Magazine*.²³ A wealthy landowner (upstream) improved his section of a river. This benefited him personally, but also greatly improved downstream fishing opportunities.

4.1 Eight Examples of Negative Social Impacts

1) The Pierce Veto, 1854—A Presidential Social Bad

Dorothea Dix persuaded Congress to use 10 million acres of federal land to support mental health care for the indigent insane.

“Franklin Pierce (14th President of the United States) had to make...an important decision in 1854. He was grieving the recent death of his son in a railroad accident, an event that left the mourning First Lady so depressed that she rarely left her bedroom. Ironically, the new decision had to do with care for people with psychiatric disabilities. Pierce had to decide whether to sign the newly enacted bill that would provide for the care of the “indigent insane.”

The arguments Pierce made in the veto of Dix’s bill are familiar ones to historians of social policy. Pierce feared that if the federal government assumed responsibility for the care of the indigent insane, the care of all impoverished Americans would then become its responsibility, a development in which the Founders would never have acquiesced. Pierce declared he sympathized with the aims of the bill but could not agree with its means. **Federal lands eventually would be used to help to build a transcontinental railroad, would be given to homesteaders, but would not be provided to finance care for people with psychiatric disabilities** (Emphasis added). Responsibility would remain with the states.”

4.2 Feeding the Poor: the Nicholas Plan—Individual Social Bad

During the 1930s, the problem of homelessness and providing food for the poor bedeviled the American conscience, leading to at least one very odd proposal, in which the proposer felt obviously good about the “social good” he was suggesting. It was the Nicholas Plan:

“Thus John B. Nicholas of the Oklahoma Gas Utilities Company wrote to his friend Patrick J. Hurley, the Secretary of War, about an idea he was trying out in Chickasha, Oklahoma. By the Nicholas plan, restaurants were asked to dump food left on plates into five gallon containers; the unemployed could

qualify for these scraps by chopping wood donated by farmers. ‘We expect a little trouble now and then from those who are not worthy of the support of the citizens,’ Nicholas wrote philosophically, “but we must contend with such cases in order to take care of those who are worthy.” Hurley was so impressed by the plan of feeding garbage to the homeless that he personally urged it on Colonel Woods” (Schlesinger, 1957, p. 179).

The orientation does not seem to have changed that much since 1935.

4.3 Feeding the Poor in Kansas City, 2018—Civic Social Bad

“They unfurled colorful blankets on a grassy slope, and unloaded steaming trays of corn dogs, baked beans and vegetable beef soup. Every week for the past three years, the volunteers have gone to a park just outside downtown Kansas City with home-cooked meals for the homeless. They call it a picnic with friends.

But on a cloudy afternoon earlier this month, an inspector from the Kansas City Health Department showed up and called it something else: an illegal food establishment.

She ordered most of the food put into black garbage bags, bundled them on the grass and, in a move that stunned the gathered group, doused the pile with bleach.

Allen Andrews, who has been living on the streets for the past year, said he watched silently as the bleach was poured, thinking back to when he had a home.

“They treat us like animals,” Mr. Andrews, 46, said.

As the nation prepared for one of its biggest holiday feasts in a season of giving, a bitter fight has emerged in this city over who is permitted to help the hungry and how they may do it.

On one side are city officials, who say they’re merely concerned about the safety of donated food; on the other, the volunteers, who consider the city’s food-sharing regulations heartless technicalities whose real purpose is to discourage homeless people from congregating.

Similar battles have erupted in places like Fort Lauderdale, Tampa and El Cajon, Calif., where volunteers have been arrested after feeding the homeless.

Kansas City officials have said their crackdown is about protecting the needy. They said city ordinances require groups like Free Hot Soup, the one that organizes gatherings every Sunday at four parks, to get a “food establishment” permit, and that the “Homeless folks are more at risk of food-borne illness because of the challenges they are living under,” said Rex Archer, director of the health department. “Feeding them an unsafe meal, they actually will be lucky if they’re able to get an ambulance and get to the hospital.”

But Free Hot Soup volunteers and their supporters have said the city’s cleanliness concerns are just a cover. In reality, they said, the city wanted to break up large gatherings of homeless people, bowing to the demands of some residents.

The volunteers said their model for feeding hungry people is incompatible with permitting requirements, in large part because the approximately 100 volunteers who now prepare meals in their homes would be required to cook in commercial kitchens instead. The group considers its gatherings more akin to church

barbecues or family reunions than to public events that require permits.

“This is about anti-homeless-people, anti-poor-people policy,” said Quinton Lucas, a city councilman who is running for mayor of Kansas City.”

4.4 Do Americans Hate the Poor?—Civic Social Bad

In my book *Do Americans Hate the Poor* (Tropman, 1998) I suggested that while we Americans might be collectively generous, we have strong worries about those in need, who are differently abled, and so on. Historical poverty relief has been long in coming and often mean and punitive in spirit. Certainly the Pierce Veto and the Nicholos Plan give evidence of this orientation. Moving from 1854 through the 1930s to Kansas in 2018 we come to Leelanau County, Michigan, in 2019. The following two excerpts are from the *Leelanau Enterprise*, on the same date:

4.5 “Teaching hotel” Now Doubtful

By Eric Carlson of the Enterprise staff

Plans to build a 100-room “teaching hotel” just off M-22 and Cherry Bend Road in Elmwood Township appear far less certain following action last week by the township planning commission.

At their regular monthly meeting last week, Elmwood planners recommended that a rezoning request from “Foundations Workforce Solutions (FWS)” be denied.

The church-based nonprofit had applied to rezone several parcels in the neighborhood from residential (R-1) to Neighborhood Commercial (NC) to accommodate construction of a 45,000 square-foot hotel. FWS would use the hotel to provide jobs and skill training for “underemployed, unemployed, and under-educated persons.”

FWS was formed by members of Pine Grove Church in Traverse City as a public service.

Many of the neighbors of the proposed “teaching hotel” would just as soon not see it there, however, according to Elmwood Township zoning administrator Sara Kopriva. About 40 of them packed the Elmwood Township Hall during last week’s meeting, and about an hour of public comment was heard, mostly from those opposed to the project, Kopriva said.

Following public comment and a review of the application for a rezoning request the Elmwood Township Planning Commission decided to recommend that the rezoning request be denied, Kopriva reported.

4.6 Board nixes boat launch OK

By Eric Carlson of the Enterprise staff

Having sent officials of the Discovery Center back to the drawing board once already regarding the location of a small boat launch for disabled people on Discovery Pier, members of the Elmwood Township Board now want to see whoever did the drawings.

At its regular monthly meeting last week, the township board once again declined to approve a request from Discovery Center project manager John Noonan to use state-owned bottomland controlled by the township through a lease with the state.

Use of the bottomland would be required for installation of an elevator-type small boat launch that would help disabled people into the water aboard canoes and kayaks in West Grand Traverse Bay waters just

offshore of the township's Greilickville Harbor Park.

Township trustees James O'Rourke and Dave Darga have been especially outspoken in their concern that waters are sometimes too rough for launching small paddle-craft along the Discovery Pier breakwall immediately south of the township marina.

Noonan has presented plans for the special boat launch and other improvements at Discovery Pier that have been approved by state officials and prepared by a professional marine engineering firm whose chief designer has visited the site numerous times in all conditions and has declared the proposed installation safe.

After the Discovery Center's plans for the small boat launch were shot down by the township board for at least the second time, Noonan last week suggested that members of the township board might be unnecessarily "micromanaging" the nonprofit's project. The only reason the Discovery Center is seeking the township's approval is because the state bottomland on that side of Discovery Pier is covered in a lease the township has with the state.

The Discovery Center has been planning improvements to the pier ever since it acquired the old coal dock from Traverse City Light & Power more than two years ago. Those plans were put into high gear last month when officials learned that some \$2 million in state grant funding would be provided for the project.

Although consideration of approval of the Discovery Center project was on the agenda of last week's Elmwood Township Board meeting, no approval was given. Township Supervisor Jeff Shaw said it was clear that board members would first like to hear from the "expert" the Discovery Center hired who located the launch on that portion of the pier before making a final decision. The issue is expected to be on the board's agenda next month.

Interesting in these examples is the self-satisfaction they each illustrate, claiming to offer social good in the case of actually offering social bad.

Sometimes social bad comes as the result of bureaucratic conflation and confusion. Consider the following example:

4.7 Foiling and Soiling your Staff - Organizational Social Bad

In a profile of Elizabeth Anderson, currently Chair of the Department of Philosophy, the University of Michigan (*New Yorker*, January 7, 2019), Nathan Heller describes two "social bad" observations of her summer employment at a bank while a college sophomore. It is a harbinger of the "banks gone bad" scenario. The first observation involves the bank's staff, and its attempt to delay and obfuscate employee complaint when there was not enough money to pay staff. The bank sent "rubber" checks. It appeared to happen with some regularity.

The second observation was of a capricious and authoritarian office reorganization that soured the office culture and interrupted the flow of collective work. (**Emphasis added.**)

"American stories trace the sweep of history, but their details are definingly particular. In the summer of 1979, Elizabeth Anderson, then a rising junior at Swarthmore College, got a job as a bookkeeper at a

bank in Harvard Square. Every morning, she and the other bookkeepers would process a large stack of bounced checks. Businesses usually had two accounts, one for payroll and the other for costs and supplies. When companies were short of funds, Anderson noticed, they would always bounce their payroll checks. It made a cynical kind of sense: a worker who was owed money wouldn't go anywhere, or could be replaced, while an unpaid supplier would stop supplying. **Still, Anderson found it disturbing that businesses would write employees phony checks, burdening them with bounce fees. It appeared to happen all the time.**

Midway through summer, the bank changed its office plan. When Anderson had started, the bookkeepers worked in rows of desks. Coordination was easy a check that fell under someone else's purview could be handed down the line—and there was conversation throughout the day. Then cubicles were added. **That transformation interrupted the workflow, the conversational flow, and most other things about the bookkeeper's days. Their capacities as workers were affected, yet the change had come down from on high.**

4.8 Caught in Bureaucratic Crossfire—Interorganizational Social Bad

As Lizzie Johnson wrote in *The San Francisco Chronicle* (July 18, 2018):

"The flames killed two residents of Journey's End, incinerated 121 homes and melted the new gas and electric system. The 40 surviving units—the ones Morgan helped save—were contaminated by smoke and asbestos and red-tagged. Ten months later, the residents of those units are stuck. Those who had insurance can't collect a settlement because the units are standing, and they can't go home because the land is condemned. A nonprofit housing organization plans to build a mix of affordable and market-rate condos on the wrecked lot. "Insurance companies don't cover that," said Ronit Rubinoff, executive director of Legal Aid of Sonoma County, a nonprofit group that helps low-income households. "Because the park was closed by government action, they said the condemnation applies, and we don't have to cover it. But the reason the park closed was because a wildfire destroyed it first."

A cluster of residents lives in the Sandman Hotel, just across Highway 101. Sometimes, they leave voice mails on Morgan's phone. They talk about suicide. Most don't blame Morgan, but they wish their homes had burned down."

4.9 A Stroll Along the Great Lakes—National Social Bad

The Supreme Court plans to consider a case that will determine where personal property ends, when one lives along a body of water. A couple from Indiana who own land along Lake Michigan argue that their ownership goes right the water's edge, meaning that no one can stroll along the beach along their property without their permission.³⁰

The couple lost unanimously in the Indiana and Michigan Supreme Courts. In the Michigan case, the Court ruled that their land ended at the high water mark, so there would always be a strip along which folks could walk. This was unsatisfactory

It would be my guess that about 90 percent of Americans would prefer being able to stroll freely ("stakeholders not in the room," see below), and restricting strolling would be a socially bad decision

(since it could affect most of the American shoreline of the Great Lakes!). It is a perfect case of not doing the right thing, even though the owners (and others, presumably) feel it is their “right,” and are willing to deny simple pleasures to others for their own wishes.³¹

4.10 International Social Bad, or Social Bad Repeating Itself

Writing in the *New York Times* (Sunday, January 20th, 2019) Pankaj Mishra describes an intertemporal social bad producing culture that had disastrous results in India 70 years ago and is reproduced today in the form of Brexit.

With Brexit, the “chumocrats” (public school elites with no particular expertise at their tasks) who drew borders from India to Ireland are getting a taste of their own medicine.

“Describing Britain’s calamitous exit from its Indian empire in 1947, the novelist Paul Scott wrote that in India the British “came to the end of themselves as they were”—that is, to the end of their exalted idea about themselves. Scott was among those shocked by how hastily and ruthlessly the British, who had ruled India for more than a century, condemned it to fragmentation and anarchy; how Louis Mountbatten, accurately described by the right-wing historian Andrew Roberts as a “mendacious, intellectually limited hustler,” came to preside, as the last British viceroy of India, over the destiny of some 400 million people.

Britain’s rupture with the European Union is proving to be another act of moral dereliction by the country’s rulers. The Brexiteers, pursuing a fantasy of imperial-era strength and self-sufficiency, have repeatedly revealed their hubris, mulishness and ineptitude over the past two years. Though originally a ‘Remainer,’ Prime Minister Theresa May has matched their arrogant obduracy, imposing a patently unworkable timetable of two years on Brexit and laying down red lines that undermined negotiations with Brussels and doomed her deal to resoundingly bipartisan rejection this week in Parliament. Such a pattern of egotistic and destructive behavior by the British elite flabbergasts many people today. But it was already manifest seven decades ago during Britain’s rash exit from India.”

5. Producing Social Good

Is there a way that we could develop a guide to social action or have an assessment tool that would help us make better decisions aimed toward the A or B outcomes (Social Very Good and Social Good)? After all, we choose paths that lead us to this range of outcomes (A through F, as discussed earlier), and probably in most cases our intentions were “good” even if the outcome was “bad”. Perhaps the road to hell is indeed paved with (and self-satisfied) intentions. How can we make high quality decisions? Is there a way to make our decisions better? There is. And three steps are necessary, plus some practice.

5.1 Step 1: Awareness of Hidden Bias

Recognize the impact of Kahneman’s heuristics on decision making. It might be called “awareness of awareness.” When we ask, “What were/are they thinking?” the answer is always that they weren’t/aren’t . . . at least not in any sensible use of that term. Instead, they were using a shortcut (like meaningless nostrums, like “Make America Great Again”), or stereotypes. Stereotypes crop up in the

usual places, but also unexpected ones. For example, FBI trainers tend to punish women for their trainee mistakes but overlook mistakes by men.

“Female trainees are singled out in group tactical exercises because they are perceived as being weak and prone to failure,” they wrote in the complaint. “Male trainees are provided multiple avenues for success, in spite of their errors. Male trainees are often permitted to retake tactical exams when female trainees are denied the opportunity to do so.”

When decisions are based on feelings rather than facts, they are difficult to challenge. It is difficult to tell people they can’t or shouldn’t feel the way they do. Awareness is vital.

5.2 Step 2: Regular Decision Refurbishment

Once decisions are made, they tend to remain unchanged until there’s a crisis. In the ensuing flurry of review, problematic actions are often taken, followed by systemic collapse and avoidance of further changes until the next crisis. Making changes from a position of strength and calm rather than pressure or panic obviously yields better results. It’s always better to see the fuller picture and to have the time to take the implications of that picture into account.

The Agenda Bell (below), originally developed as a guide to decision structure in meetings, provides a useful guide for decision refurbishment (Tropman, *Team Impact*, 2018 Congella).



Figure 1. Agenda Bell here

This bell-shaped array suggests that easy decisions are made (or refurbished) early. Difficult decisions fall in the middle, and discussion and review come at the end of the decision framework, setting one up for the next decision cycle.

A clock face can be used as another way to think about decisions: make decisions between 10 and 2—not too early, but not too late (10-to-2 corresponds to the grey hard-decision items in the Agenda

Bell above).



Figure 2. Clock Face Here

5.3 Step 3: Use the Decision Rules

Decision rules are norms that improve the quality of decisions. The more of the following seven decision rules that are incorporated, the better the decision. That said, decisions makers from people top nations have “rule preferences. That is, there is a subset of the seven that are preferred and given greater weight than others. But often some accommodation needs to be addressed to the majority of these rules.

1. **Breadth of Preference.** The majority rule. What do most people want?
2. **Depth of Preference.** Who cares deeply? How can we accommodate the wishes of those who care most deeply?
3. **Involvement.** Who has to carry out the decision? What does he or she or they think about it?
4. **Information.** What do the experts think?
5. **Power.** What does the boss want? What do the powerful people want? Don't ignore important influences!
6. **Stakeholders Not in the Room.** There are important, pertinent people not in the room. What do they want?
7. **The complexity of the idea and its requisites (too many moving parts, too expensive, too many assumptions.)**
8. **The Optics** How does the decision appear or might Appear?
9. **Potential for “Social Bad Externalities**

The better the decision, the less likely it will be short-sighted or selfish, and the more likely it can produce a more positive social impact. The decision rules are discussed more completely in Tropman, (2018).

Avoiding Social Bad, Achieving Social Good (Note 1)

What we call “social bad” may be your “right” (at the “me” level) and may be good for you personally, but bad for society (“us” and “them”). We need to understand that our personal “rights” need to be

balanced by the rights of others. The “right” to do for society is almost always a balance among competing rights and outcomes.

Given American individualism, social good tends to be seen as subordinate to individual good. In other words, first I take care of myself, then I’ll try to take care of others, if it doesn’t create conflicts. Our challenge is to always seek to insure there is at least a component of social good in all our actions: individual, communal, organizational, societal, and global.

The goal here would be to make social good considerations a regular part of our decision-making process. Princeton Professor Peter Singer, in his TED talks and his book *Doing the Most Good* focuses on the altruistic element in our actions, and proposes a kind of “cost/benefit analysis” decision tree to assess where you can get the most social impact for your charitable contribution. He calls this approach “effective altruism.”

This distinction seems to conflate “the (ethically) right thing to do” with “the most “effective (efficient/impactful) thing to do.” And he makes a compelling argument for it. We all might not agree with his argument or his conclusion; however, his premise is an excellent one—that we should have a “social good/impact” element in our decision making. I would go beyond his application to the elementary sector, and argue that it should be applied as a matter of routine (Kahneman’s heuristic) as we go about our daily life. The production of social good begins with thinking about social good.

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Note

Note 1. An interesting set of criteria is offered by the philosopher called "The Baloney Detection Kit"
<https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/01/03/baloney-detection-kit-carl-sagan/> REtrived 9/23/2020