

# Chapter 4

## The Social



### 4.1 Introduction

Neurobiologists can say a lot about the dynamics of the interactions between our body, brain, and mind, but to fully understand human existence, they have to enter the realm of the social. The neurobiologist, Antonio Damasio, for example, completed his analysis with the notion of the autobiographical self that participates in stories co-created by one's self and others (2003). Another famous neurobiologist, Daniel Siegel, argues that what he calls "myself" always exists in social worlds (2010). In each case, their analysis went beyond the dynamics of the body, brain and mind, into the embeddedness of our body-brain-mind in social worlds. For most of us, of course, we exist in multiple social worlds, some that conflict with each other and some, like Russian dolls, provide the container for others. The social world of American Prosperity, for example, provides the container for a vast variety of less grand social worlds, such as the social worlds of families and friends as well as the social worlds defined by such categories as class, race, gender, age, and ethnicity. One could say our social selves makes us particular persons and that the contours of our core self depends on our social existence.

The Chapter begins with a general description of the composition of social worlds and social trends, and then uses the case of American Prosperity as an example of this process. To avoid the mistake of seeing social trends as "natural" the Chapter then examines current controversies about sex, race and ancestry. This discussion opens the door to explore our different experiences of the social, ranging from social differences and diversity to social conflict and social amnesia. The Chapter then examines the trend of using philanthropy as a responsible way to counter the increasing wealth inequality and environmental destruction of American Prosperity The Chapter ends with a call for social coherence that brings together relevant social experiences.

## 4.2 Characteristics of Social Worlds

Most of us are probably familiar with such expressions as ‘the world of sports,’ or ‘the world of art.’ We experience such worlds when we attend a sports event or visit an art studio. We enter other “worlds” when we enter a church, synagogue or a court room. All these “worlds” emerge from different activities and different attitudes that over time establish patterns of behavior, expectations, and even perceptions. Although we live in these various worlds, they are not biological, but social, which means that they are constructed by on-going conversations and they exist in relationships, not in individuals. Individuals participate in them. They are constructed and maintained by on-going communication and behavioral patterns. These patterns constitute social perceptions and expectations. Guardians of social worlds set moral boundaries to protect them. Let’s look more closely at these three characteristics.

### 4.2.1 *Communicative and Behavioral Patterns*

In her book, *The Social World of Batavia*, Jean Gelman Taylor investigates the behavioral patterns among groups in the Dutch colony of Batavia, Indonesia in the seventeenth hundreds (1983). She describes how the interactions among European men and Asian women created unique “mestizo” social relations between persons of mixed Asian and European ancestry. This particular social world emerged in part because of the absence of European women in the colony and the impunity with which European men took Asian women as slaves, concubines, house keepers, nannies, and with the birth of children, as wives. Taylor writes:

The colonial ruling class was matrilineal in the sense that men passed on posts and privilege to their sons-in-law, the husbands of their daughters whom they kept in Asia [they sent their sons to Europe]. Women-based clans absorbed the immigrant males who came without wives; the clan enfolded the newcomer in a network of immigrants with locally born wives, Mestizo and Asian kin. At the same time, the clan eased adoption of Indies manners for the newcomers (p. 78).

How different than the social world of Anglo-Saxons in the Americas, where the one percent rule protected whiteness. In any case, this mestizo social world was overturned by the extensions of European imperialism in the eighteenth century.

In Taylor’s framework, the notion of a social world includes all the relationships that constituted the settlement of Batavia (now Jakarta). These relationships were established and maintained by the on-going communication patterns that defined the different social roles in the community as well as coordinated the participants’ interactions. At the same time, given the relations among merchant and enslaved, colonizer and colonized, men and women, one could imagine several social worlds where one might serve as a context for another as a whole with various parts, or one dominating another, like the social worlds of American settlers and American

Indians. These different communication and behavioral patterns would set up different perceptions and expectations for those who were located in different parts of the social world.

### ***4.2.2 Perceptions and Expectations***

The interactions among colonizers and colonized or even between managers and workers, can be taken as patterns of behavior that constitute a social world, or they could also be seen as different smaller social worlds belonging to a larger whole. If that is the case, then one can assume not one but rather a multitude of social worlds. We could even assume that participants have very different experiences of the various social worlds that constitute a nation's social life. Different social worlds, in other words, offer different perceptions and expectations. The social philosopher, Kenneth Burke, wrote about the relationship between social worlds and perceptions in terms of what he called "terministic screens":

When I speak of "terministic screens," I have particularly in mind some photographs I once saw. They were different photographs of the same objects, the difference being that they were made with different color filters. Here something so "factual" as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in text, and even in form, depending upon which color filter was used for the documentary description of the event being recorded (1968, p. 45).

The point is that we always use some filter in looking at what is going on. A non-filtered (non-social) view does not exist. As Burke says, "much of what we take as observations about "reality" may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms" (p.46). The terminology also provides some coherence as it connects the dots, so to speak, and maintains some social order. Social order is also maintained by the guarding of moral boundaries.

### ***4.2.3 Guarding Moral Boundaries***

The anthropologist, Christopher Boehm, gives us a good description of how communities began to use moral boundaries to maintain social order (2012). When hunter-gatherer societies began to hunt large game, Boehm reasons, they required the cooperation of all hunters. To ensure cooperation during the hunt, they made sure that after the hunt the kill was equally distributed. The shift to hunting large game, in other words, pushed social relationships toward "equalization." Boehm writes:

Although the earliest humans may have been egoists, around 45,000 thousand years ago, when hunter-gatherer communities required cooperation for survival, they became decisively equalitarian" (p. 154).

Even if early humans were not egoists, Boehm's observation still seems logical. Still, this equalitarian requirement by itself would not have made humans moral. They

could have simply been calculative. The added element, as Boehm points out, is that humans have the capacity (or liability?) to blush, a sure sign of shame. Shame occurs when we feel a gap between how we want to be seen and how we experience others seeing us. Shame, in other words, belongs to a social not an individual morality, and it becomes an important strategy to protect cooperation.

As Boehm tells the story of these early big game hunters, sometimes a few of the hunters sought to capture more than their share of praise for a successful hunt or to take more than their share of the killed game, which threatened the climate of cooperation necessary for the survival of the community. One common method of handling these members was shaming them through gossip. People would get back in line to avoid feeling shame. Gossiping about someone's self-centered behavior would so damage the person's reputation that they would not engage in such behavior again, especially if one's reputation was socially valuable in gaining access to community goods or a better mate.

In Boehm's research, he finds instances not only of shaming, but also of exclusion, ostracism, and even capital punishment. These acts of protecting an equalitarian social order, however, had another consequence: they produced a consciousness of what one should be like. As hunter-gatherer communities protected themselves from bullies and other deviants, in other words, they also developed a sense of what they were protecting—equalitarian and generous human relationship. What emerged over time was a consciousness not only of what was wrong (a bully) but also what was right (a generous person). Boehm writes:

Ultimately, the social preferences of groups were able to affect gene pools profoundly, and once we began to blush with shame, this surely meant that the evolution of conscientious self-control was well under way. The final result was a full-blown, sophisticated modern conscience, which helps us to make subtle decisions that involve balancing selfish interests in food, power, sex, or whatever against the need to maintain a decent personal moral reputation in society and to feel socially valuable as a person. The cognitive beauty of having such a conscience is that it directly facilitates making useful social decisions and avoiding negative social consequences. Its emotional beauty comes from the fact that we in effect bond with the values and rules of our groups, which means we can internalize our group's mores, judge ourselves as well as others, and hopefully, end up with self-respect (p.173).

These two processes—the protection of social norms and their affirmation through internalization—do seem to go together. In a very general way, our moral conscience knows that we should avoid bad and do good.

What counts as good and bad, of course, depends on what holds the community together, or what was needed for maintaining one's social world in the first place. For hunter-gather communities, one of their primary tasks was making provisions for their communities by hunting game. Good and bad behavior depended on its impact of accomplishing this goal. A similar analysis can be applied to the social trend of American Prosperity. It turns out, however, that the moral boundary in this case protected unjust social relations among whites and non-whites rather than just ones, which resulted in a climate of injustice.

### 4.3 The Social Trend of American Prosperity

The social world of American Prosperity has its origin on the Atlantic commerce between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The dominant pattern involved Europeans occupying the Americas and importing enslaved labor to create wealth for white property owners and investors. As the trend developed, whites maintained the social order through military might and terroristic practices toward enslaved and Indigenous peoples. Their land and labor served as the primary source of the “wealth of nations” that European traders and investors, and American settlers enjoyed.

This Atlantic commerce of cheap land and enslaved labor endured for over 250 years before the formation of the United States as an independent nation and more than another 100 years before the Atlantic slave trade was abolished (1807). Domestic slavery lasted until the Civic War, and after Reconstruction, a Jim Crow regime continued until the 1960s. The stories of American Prosperity and nation building were not about the experiences of American Indians or enslaved Africans and their descendants, but rather of rugged individuals and innovative technologies.

No one better illustrates this type of storytelling than the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith. Although Smith lived in Glasgow, Scotland, he knew a lot about the lucrative tobacco trade between the American plantations and the Glasgow merchants. Instead of recognizing the role of enslaved labor in producing wealth, he attributed it to an “invisible hand.” In fact, according to Smith, human evolution had “naturally” made European nations not only wealthy, but also civilized.

Like many others in the European Enlightenment, Smith posited four stages of history: first were hunter-gathers, then shepherds, then farmers or agriculture, and finally the age of commerce, or the stage of civilization (1994). Because Europeans were civilized, they were not required to treat others who were not yet civilized as they would treat themselves. The writers of the Constitution appear to have a similar stance when they wrote that all men are created equal. The writers, of course, knew that there were 4 million enslaved persons at the time, but they lived in a social world where the enslaved did not belong. In fact, the maintenance of their social world meant that they had to split off from their consciousness the misery of slavery. The “moral boundary” of American Prosperity, in other words, protected the status of white people as superior to others and allowed social inequalities to continue. American Prosperity, in other words, was taken as separate from the injustices on which it relied, and from the climate of injustice that these injustices created.

Many of us, most of the time, probably do exist in the “bubble” of American Prosperity. If you went to public schools similar to mine, you learned of American progress and innovation. Perhaps one of the most puzzling aspects of the American Prosperity social world is the dismissal of the social, even though American Prosperity could only exist in some social worlds and not others. Instead of seeing American Prosperity as a social reality, it was presented as “natural.” “That’s the way things work.” The fact is that things work that way in some social worlds and not others. What is “normal” for us in our social world is no more “natural” than what is “normal” in other social worlds. Enslaving others is not “natural.” It’s social,

and until we see it as social, it will be difficult to recognize the social climate it created and how to change it. To understand this better, let's look at three controversies that allow us to highlight the distinction between our social and biological lives.

## 4.4 Our Social and Biological Lives

Once we recognize the validity of different social worlds (different religions, cultures, and customs), then we can no longer take our moral boundaries for granted, but rather are challenged to examine their legitimacy. In fact, some moral boundaries have been barriers to understanding others and even ourselves. Three current controversies may give us more agility in tracking ourselves and others as social beings: the differences between sex and gender, between race and color, and between the social and biological evolution of our ancestry. Recent investigations of these topics have given us a language to think more clearly about the range of the social.

### 4.4.1 Sex and Gender

Since, for the most part, traditional social relations between men and women have been hierarchical and oppressive/submissive, we must be very careful how we use terms, so we honor everyone's human dignity and their social identity. The social philosopher, Sally Haslanger, suggests that we can understand the difference between sex and gender with the slogan: "gender is the social meaning of sex" (2012, p. 227). That would mean that sex is biological—it is about our anatomy or we could say our genes. Gender, on the other hand, is socially constructed. Haslanger also proposes that we use the terms male and female for our sexual identity and man and woman for our gender identity. One finds a similar distinction in Siddhartha Mukherjee's book, *The Gene: An Intimate History*:

By sex, I mean the anatomic and physiological aspects of male versus female bodies. By gender, I am referring to a more complex idea; the psychic, social and cultural roles that an individual assumes. By gender identity, I mean an individual's sense of self (as female versus male, as neither, or as something in between) (2016, p. 356).

This distinction may seem odd at first because our interactions between men and women depends on social perceptions and expectations (our social worlds), and most social worlds have rigid categories for male and female. In such worlds, sex and gender are not differentiated, and the social is taken as natural. As we have learned from the struggles of feminists and LGBTQ communities, these assumptions have been mistaken. Their struggles now give us a chance to rethink what is social and what is natural, and to construct a more viable understanding of sex and gender.

Recent scientific developments have made the picture of sexual identity even more complex. In the 1990s, researchers discovered what is called the SRY protein or gene, which acts as a master switch to turn maleness on or off. Even more recently, researchers have discovered the function of what they call “epigenetic markers.”

Epigenetic markers are “beyond-genes” that act as gene regulators. They also can make genes expressive or silent, but more importantly, they carry with them the impact of the environment. One’s height, for example, depends on one’s genes, which reflect one’s ancestor’s social and geographical history. Given the role of epigenetic markers, instead of thinking about the conflict between nature and nurture, we can now see how nurture—one’s social environment—changes one’s nature. When we apply this insight to one’s sexual identity, it makes more sense to see our identity on a continuum between male and female rather than on a rigid map of male or female.

The long history and even continued practice of men treating women as inferior now faces this science of human equality and social differences. The experience of one’s core self, to use Antonio Damasio’s language, is the same for all humans. This does not mean that in the future the social selves of men and women will be the same. It does mean that our gender identity partly depends on our collective actions of constructing the social world in which we live. We find a somewhat parallel situation in terms of race or following Haslanger’s terminology, in terms of race and color.

### 4.4.2 *Race and Color*

Men and women have to negotiate their gender identity by finding the right fit between their genetic makeup and their social identity. Race, on the other hand, does not refer to any meaningful genetic difference. First, there are no racial genes responsible for the complex morphologies and cultural patterns we associate with different races. Second, in different contexts racial distinctions are drawn on the basis of different characteristics; for example, the Brazilian and U.S. classification schemes for who counts as “black” differ. For these reasons and others, it appears that race, like gender, could be fruitfully understood as a position within a broad social network (Haslanger, p. 235).

Remember Haslanger’s slogan for gender: “gender is the social meaning of sex”? She also has a slogan for race: “race is the social meaning of ‘color’” (p. 193). Skin color is rather thought-provoking. All of our ancestors were black. Black is original. Migrations into different geographical and climate areas changed the human collection of skin tones and colors, along with other changes in our DNA. These differences are part of the DNA not shared by all of us—the 0.01% that is left over from the 99.9 that we share with each other. These tiny differences have opened a new interest in the issue of ancestry.

### **4.4.3 Ancestry and Social Evolution**

Some people are using DNA research to find out about their ancestors and heritage. Even though DNA is “biological,” it actually records one’s social history. A person’s DNA provides a record of a family’s migrations, geographical locations, and interactions. So, although DNA is located in the human body, it provides us information about our ancestors’ life in the world. One organization that has allowed many to use this new science is the company, “African Ancestry” ([www.africanancestry.com/home/](http://www.africanancestry.com/home/)).

African Ancestry matches a client’s DNA to the over 300,000 samples of DNA in their African DNA database, which will probably tell the country and maybe even the tribe of one’s ancestors. As of 2016, over 150,000 people had used the service to “re-connect with their roots.” One can imagine how significant this service is for African Americans who know their ancestors are African but have no knowledge of their specific African people. As Alondra Nelson makes clear in her book on the “social life of DNA,” the interest in one’s ancestry is not biological, but rather social. As she says: “What is certain is that while race may be spoken in the language of biology, it is fundamentally a political category” (2016, p. 109).

The Black Live’s Matter movement has made this abundantly clear. Their challenge to take seriously the historical and current relationship between Black and White lives has led some white people to examine their participation in oppressive social relations. Remembering these stories can be challenging, especially to those whose identity has depended on their assumption of superiority. The diversity trainer, Robin DiAngelo, writes about such challenges in her analysis of what she calls “white fragility.” (2018). She uses the concept of “white fragility” to refer to the defensive stance white people take when asked to talk about their white social world. Since this social world is largely based on not-being non-white, and on the privileges of being at the top of racial hierarchies, when these hierarchies are dismantled, there is little to stand on. What seemed socially coherent becomes incoherent, and things seem quite fragile. This also creates the opportunity, of course, for persons to develop more critical and mature responses to the social world in which they exist. Gaining an awareness to our own social world allows us to think about how we learned racist behavior and how to unlearn it. Awareness of our social world also allows us to experience other social worlds.

## **4.5 Experiencing the Social**

For most of us, the social world in which we grow up seems “natural” until we encounter other social worlds where they think what’s “natural” seems quite strange to us. Then we have a chance to reflect on our “world” as one of several “worlds,”



instead of the only world that exists. Our experience of other social worlds, of course, is always shaped by the social world in which we exist. My experience of visiting China, for example, might be quite different than yours because we experience it from our particular social world. Once we acknowledge the existence of multiple social worlds, we can also outline a variety of ways that people experience the social, from social diversity to social conflict, to even social amnesia.

### ***4.5.1 Social Diversity***

In the 1990s, I worked as an external consultant in an ethics and diversity-training program at Levi Strauss and Company in San Francisco (Brown 1998). Mid-level employees attended a four-day program focusing on making good decisions in line with the values of the company. The company supported the training program because employees deserved to be treated with equal respect and because research had demonstrated that a diverse and open work environment benefited the company's productivity.

For many white employees, the idea that they were just as "different" as others was news to them. They had assumed that they could understand what others were experiencing in the workplace from remembering what they had learned from similar experiences—others were more or less like them. That their differences gave them privileges that others did not enjoy was not only new but also challenging. They had not really grasped that others had quite different interpretations of workplace interactions. Once they accepted the fact that people had very diverse interpretations of things, and that such diversity was a contribution to the work community, they were able to participate, in varying degrees, in a more open and thoughtful workplace.

The "diversity wheel" is one way of leading a conversation about these differences (Loden and Rosener 1990). The inner circle of the wheel represents "primary" social categories and the outer circle "secondary." The primary categories are more or less given while the secondary are more or less chosen, or at least are easier to change. Persons, of course, belong to several of these categories and will usually identify more strongly with some than others.

This diversity wheel is especially helpful in appreciating that different persons have different experiences, and because of different experiences they know things that others do not. As people learn more about each other's differences, such as differences in education or income, they also learn that they live in very different parts of the larger society that is composed of different social worlds. These different social worlds not only are a source of our diversity, but also of various social divisions.

### 4.5.2 *Social Divisions*

I experienced the reality of social division when I changed my commute route from my home in Berkeley to the University of San Francisco. When I began teaching, I traveled on the freeways and major city streets. I sat in the car listening either to music or the news, and worried about finding a parking place. Some years ago, I decided to use public transportation, which included taking a bus from the center of San Francisco through the Tenderloin to USF. On the bus, I became one among other bus riders, many of whom were women and people of color. I waited for the bus to kneel so people with wheelchairs could board and watched as others boarded and exited the bus. Instead of living in the world of car commuters, I joined the bus riders.

This experience highlighted what is perhaps the most obvious and most consequential of social divisions, housing segregation. There are lots of stories to tell. One is the migration of around 6 million African Americans from the Southern states to the Northern cities between 1915 and 1970. As Isabel Wilkerson writes in her book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, this was “America’s Great Migration” (2011). As a result of this migration, the percentage of African Americans in Chicago changed from 1.8% at the beginning of the twentieth century to 33%, and the African American population in Detroit changed during this same period from 1.4% to 44% (p.190). Other Northern cities had similar population changes.

As African Americans moved into the Northern cities, whites moved out. Whites moved to the suburbs and with the help of redlining and other forms of discrimination, divided our cities into over-served and under-served populations. Richard Rothstein in his book, *The Color of Law*, documents government’s active role in segregating housing and neighborhoods (2017). Social divisions show up in the unequal distribution of well-paying jobs, control of drug trafficking, incarceration, pollution, and safe shopping areas. Without adequate public resources, some people struggle much more than others to protect their families, educate their children, and create viable communities. All of us must deal with the struggles of everyday life, but some of us do so in a world of poverty, failing schools, and decaying neighborhoods.

There are other social divisions, but the continued existence of segregated neighborhoods illustrates the challenge we face in making a shift from a climate of injustice to a climate of justice. Because this social divide is so unequal, we continually experience episodes of social conflict, which is a more disruptive way of experiencing the social.

### 4.5.3 *Social Conflict*

Some of us may not have directly experienced social conflict, but it remains a major force for change especially in the tradition of Socialism, which emerged as a reaction

to the misery caused by Capitalism. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx formulates the conflict as a historical class struggle:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in a common ruin of the contending classes (1955).

The nineteenth and twentieth century did endure bitter and violent struggles as workers fought for the establishment of labor unions, collective bargaining, and workplace safety. These struggles, for the most part, achieved some legal protection for workers, but were not successful in changing the basic thrust of American prosperity, especially in terms of its exploitation of land and maintaining a racialized caste system.. The struggles of the 1960s and 70's for civil rights, women's rights, environmental protection, and gay rights focused more on challenging white male privilege. These struggles also brought about some change, but like other historical struggles, they did not shift our nation from a climate of injustice to a climate of justice.

These struggles continue today as demonstrated by recent occupations of Wall Street and protests against the "One percent," the Black Lives Matter movement, and the ongoing resistance of Native Americans at Standing Rock and elsewhere. Social conflict assumes that different groups can, at least, stand up and resist. Sometimes the social relations among groups are so totally destroyed that we are left with what could be called a social rift.

#### **4.5.4 Social Rifts**

Social rifts occur when one group violates the human dignity of another so deeply that they create relations of hate and fear. Many of us have experienced members of groups that have written us off as incapable of understanding them, and it's not that hard to understand their reasoning. Still, these social rifts cannot be ignored if we are serious about creating a climate of justice. Instead of facing the frustration of such experiences, it is easier to pretend that we can abandon these social relationships, which results in a kind of social amnesia.

#### **4.5.5 Social Amnesia**

Russell Jacoby wrote about "social amnesia" as a way to criticize how the contemporary generation of psychologists had ignored more critical aspects of Sigmund Freud's theory (1997). Instead of working from Freud's view of the dialectical relationship between the self and society, in which social repression caused

individual neurosis, neo-Freudians, according to Jacoby, forgot about the social dimension and focused on therapies for individuals. Jacoby quotes Freud in this regard: “No therapeutic argument should hamper the development of a theoretical construction which aims, not at curing individual sickness, but at diagnosing the general disorder” (p. 20). This notion of social amnesia applies not only to therapy, of course, but to many other fields as well. Jacoby defines two types of social amnesia: “a forgetting of the past and a pseudo-historical consciousness.” On the latter he writes:

Nowadays, the latter thrives. We are regularly instructed by “futurists” and advocates of cutting-edge technology that computers, cyberspace, and internets are changing life, and that we have entered a new world unlike anything in the past. Meanwhile, nothing changes (p. xi).

New technology by itself, of course, does not necessarily cause social amnesia, but the assumptions that usually accompany it leave little room for critical thought about the social conditions or the social climate in which it exists. Perhaps even more significant than the lack of critical social analysis is that social amnesia excludes the possibility of learning from others who are one’s contemporaries. Social amnesia allows us to forget about society and pretend that individuals exist only in themselves and with their families. Before we can change social systems and trends, of course, we must at least recognize their existence.

These different ways of experiencing the social; as diversity, division, conflict, rift, and amnesia, can be taken as a kind of keyboard on which we locate our own experiences and the experiences of others. Those who experience social amnesia, for example, by definition have forgotten or dismissed experiences of the social. For them, the first step in joining others in creating a sustainable future is to become aware of their own social history and to recognize how their history matches the social history of others. There are others who have recognized the existence of social worlds, such as the social world of refugees or homeless, but have ignored the larger trends that have created and maintain these social worlds. Without an understanding of the larger context in which they work, their efforts may actually prevent the deeper work that needs to be done. One such trend that has both limitations and possibilities is the current growth of philanthropy or charity as a solution to social problems.

## **4.6 Social Philanthropic Trends**

Conceptualizing the social in terms of trends places social relations in a historical context and allows us to investigate how the trends developed and how they carry us into the future. In contrast to social worlds, which are taken as fairly stable, social trends are always moving—either increasing or decreasing in their dominance. They are social systems influenced by positive and negative feedback loops. If a trend’s influence or dominance is growing, then its very success will function as a positive

feedback loop that gives it an added push in its current direction. As they say, “Nothing succeeds like success.” On the other hand, once a trend starts to lose energy, its downward trend can also be reinforced, and it spirals further downward. Sometimes a trend will generate a resistance to its movement—a negative feedback loop—and it will slow down or wilt on the vine. We can easily recognize trends in such areas as fashion and diets, which may seem innocent enough. Other trends are more troubling such as the trend moving us toward a new form of feudalism.

### ***4.6.1 A New Form of Feudalism***

A few years ago, I attended a multi-day conference in Oakland, CA on Food Justice. Among the many workshops, they offered two workshops on how to approach corporations for funding—how to study the corporate foundation’s perspective and interest, write proposals, and “show and tell.” Fine, but not one workshop about how to approach city governments. In effect, they were supporting the empowerment of donors and the privatization of social services, rather than developing proposals to hold public officials accountable to their citizens. Instead of acting like citizens in a democracy, they were more like subjects submitting requests to their possible patrons. Doesn’t that look a lot like feudalism?

In some feudalist regimes, peasants may have actually lived quite well with generous rulers. The peasants could more or less take care of themselves, living off the commons, engaging in exchanges of produce in local markets, and even having time for festivals. A few talented individuals could even have rulers as patrons and with their support develop their artistic capacity. The church also provided comfort for many. Some may believe that that is the best we can hope for especially when one considers the growing disparity in wealth distribution.

### ***4.6.2 Unequal Wealth Distribution***

So, how unequal are we? Or, how unequal do we think we are? In a study of our ideas of wealth distribution, Michael Norton and Dan Ariely asked a nationally representative sample of “regular Americans” about their views of wealth distribution and then compared their views with current data on the actual distribution of wealth (2011) They asked respondents about their estimates of the distribution of wealth among the US population if it were divided into 5 groups—20% of the population in each group. The respondent responses believed that the wealthiest 20% owned 59% of the wealth, when the actual percentage is closer to 84%. The respondents, in other words, thought that the degree of inequality was much less than it actually is. The fact is that the wealth gap between the 1% and the 99% in the United States has made us the “richest and most unequal nation” (Sherman 2015).

The enormous wealth of the few has increased their influence in all of our institutions through campaign contributions, speculative investments, and corporate lobbyists. In 2015, corporations spent \$2.6 billion on lobbyists, which was more than the \$2 billion we spent to fund both houses of congress (Klein 2015). Instead of our elected officials working as representatives of citizens, if they followed the money, they are more likely to represent, or at least not to challenge, corporate interests.

In various studies of the widening gap between the extremely wealthy and the rest of us, researchers have also discovered that very few find this deplorable. The reasons appear to be not only that many people believe the wealth gap is not as great as it is, but also because they believe that they could also acquire wealth if they work hard. As Nicholas Fitz discovered in his research on American attitudes toward wealth inequality, even though most Americans believe that the economy favors the wealthy, 60% believe that most people can make it if they work hard (2015). Such beliefs—different versions of the “American dream”—protect the growing gap between the rich and poor from critical analysis as well as increased the number of people and organizations dependent on corporate and institutional philanthropy. As the wealth of the wealthy has grown, in other words, so has the number of groups and organizations that operate more like feudalistic subjects than democratic citizens, beholden to their source of money rather than the needs of the people they are supposed to serve. That’s only one of the current problems with philanthropy.

### ***4.6.3 The Problem with Philanthropy***

So, what’s the problem? Philanthropy has always played a role in American society. True, but now the growing influence of philanthropy as the source of resources to address social problems has crowded out political and legal responses. As a result, more and more of us are dependent on the good will of billionaires rather than on public institutions. In higher education, for example, Maria Di Mento and Drew Lindsay report in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* that capital campaigns target the wealthy as never before.

The top 1 percent of campaign donors to colleges and private schools account for 79 percent of dollars raised in 2015 — up from 73 percent in 2007, according to the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. (2018).

Not only in higher education, but also generally, more of the donations given to nonprofits come from the wealthy. Mento and Lindsay also report that average Americans have continually decreased their giving since the Great Recession, which “has raised fears that the country’s economic divide is being replicated in philanthropy, with nonprofits increasingly having to rely on the wealthy.” This trend of the wealthy not only becoming more wealthy but also controlling more of the donations leaves the non-wealthy more subject to the agendas of the wealthy than ever before.

Rob Reich, the faculty codirector for the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, has presented a well-researched list of what's wrong with philanthropy in his book, *Just Giving: Why Philanthropy is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better*:

In the United States and elsewhere, big philanthropy is often an unaccountable, non-transparent, donor-directed, and perpetual exercise of power. This is something that fits uneasily, at best, in democratic societies that enshrine the value of political equality (2018, p. 7).

By “big philanthropy” Reich is not referring to individual donors, but rather to large and not so large philanthropic foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Foundations, of course, come in different sizes, and they have been coming at lightning speed.

In 1930 in the United States approximately two hundred private foundations possessed aggregate assets of less than \$1 billion. In 1959 there were more than two thousand, in 1985 just over thirty thousand private foundations. As of 2014 the number was nearly one hundred thousand, with total capitalization of more than \$800 billion (p. 9).

Not only are powerful foundations largely unaccountable and have grown way out of proportion to their previous role in society, but they also drain the Federal treasury of much needed revenues. Because donations to foundations are tax-exempt, Reich calculates that in 2016 the government lost at least \$50 billion in forgone federal tax revenue (p. 9).

Given the voluntary nature of philanthropic foundations, it may seem that they exist beyond the State, but Reich shows us that the facts say otherwise. He calls them “artifacts of the State.” Like business corporations, foundations exist through laws that provide them their legal status, protect their property, enforce their contracts, and so on (p. 28).

One might argue that the size, power, and dominance of foundations is justified if they improve social relations—especially inequality—more than other alternatives. Reich is quite skeptical about such a claim. He writes:

What can we conclude from this data? The lesson is obvious: if we believe the purpose of philanthropic or charitable giving to be predominantly redistributive, an important mechanism to provide for the basic needs of others, the actually existing distribution of giving in the United States does not meet the test. Not by a long shot (p. 93).

As the sub-title of Reich's book suggests, philanthropic foundations are “failing democracy,” and we need to make it “do better.” He proposes that we need to find a different purpose for foundations. Instead of doing better at addressing issues of poverty and inequality, which could be done by other agencies, he proposes that foundations could do better at promoting pluralism and at creating or discovering innovative solutions to social issues.

In sum, foundations, free of both marketplace or electoral accountability regimes, answerable to the diverse preferences and ideas of their donors, with an endowment designed to last decades or more, are especially well, perhaps uniquely, situated to engage in the sort of high-risk, long-run policy innovation and experimentation that is healthy in a democratic society and that address the interests of future generations (p. 162–163).

That's quite an order. Are foundations really ready to engage in such creative actions? I think we need to be a bit more critical not only of foundations, but also of Reich's analysis of their social role. The fact is that the triadic framework of State, market, and civil society, which Reich uses, easily leads us to make mistakes, especially when one separates civil society from the other two spheres, as he does.

His analysis begins with wealthy people, who have money to give away. They got their money as businesspeople in the economic sphere, but now they became members of civil society as philanthropists. How they got their money doesn't seem to matter. We are asked to assume that they can simply leave their social identity and become individuals of good will. As I have argued before, we always belong to some social world—the social is ubiquitous.

Reich's argument assumes a "liberal democratic state," an ideology based on social amnesia in terms of the essential role of Africans and Native Americans in the creation of white wealth. As he says, "For the purpose of my motivating framework, I assume lawful and just possession of resources" (p. 112). He doesn't seem to acknowledge that such an assumption doesn't question white privilege and white supremacy. One might wish to move from a climate of injustice in the economic and government sphere to a climate of justice in the civil society sphere, but that is an illusion. Civil society may be non-profit and non-government, but not non-social.

The only way to change from a climate of injustice to justice is to acknowledge and begin to repair the injustices that define our social legacy.. This means, of course, that the fourth part of our interpretive framework, the civic, is not some neutral place beyond the issues of injustice and justice, but rather a place where we work together to move from one social climate to another. Whatever our experiences of the social, the civic serves as the matrix in which we know ourselves and one another. It offers us a place to examine our social experiences from our own perspective and from the perspective of others. As these perspectives collide, we can gain a deeper understanding of social incoherence and social coherence.

## 4.7 Social Coherence

Social coherence is rather tricky. None of us like to live in, and usually cannot tolerate, incoherent social worlds, and yet, social incoherence epitomizes the climate of injustice in which we live. This chapter has focused on different experiences of the social, and most of them expose some degree of incoherence. In these cases, we can either enlarge our social world to include the differences and thereby create a new coherence, or we can dismiss or deny the experience and remain in a smaller coherent world. Remember the principle of coherence? "If you cannot understand A without understanding B, then you cannot understand B without understanding A." Our smaller worlds may give us a feeling of coherence, but this may be a false and even dangerous feeling, if the truth of our social world can only be understood in its relationship to other social worlds. There is a white male social world—a world of privilege and confidence—but any true understanding of this social world requires



that we see its interdependent relationship with social worlds in which people experience the misery of American Prosperity.

Social coherence relies on a story that includes all the groups necessary to understand any one group. You cannot understand women in America without understanding men, and you cannot understand men without understanding women. You cannot understand yourself without understanding those who have loved you and you cannot understand those who have loved you without understanding yourself. We are human beings that live in social relations, and this duality allows for the transformation of social relations in the realm of the civic, where all members are invited to make connections with each other.

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