

This essay asks how we should understand the intersection of social norms and mass societies. We have often studied the operation social norms in traditional societies, and I wish to extend this discussion to modern mass societies. By modern I mean a world characterized above all by mobility: of people, goods and ideas. What happens to local norms when the people carrying them move into mass societies, and what sorts of norms can take on genuinely global scope?

Modernity challenges social norms by revealing their inherent parochialism. The modern condition maximizes the exit option, which engenders a corresponding skepticism regarding onerous burdens imposed by particular community norms. Institutional facts only take on their objective character via collective acceptance (Searle 2010), and this collective acceptance is undermined by awareness of practicable alternatives. The use of status function declarations to semantically construct a metasemantic reality (Searle 2010) is rendered more difficult by mass awareness of the fundamental artificiality of that constructed reality. For mere words to bind, they must be understood by the participants as more than mere words. This introduces the notion of expectations, to which I will have occasion to return.

The epidemiological model of norm diffusion can be adapted to explain the interaction of norms in the modern world. Sperber argues that cultural “representations” are transmitted only when they are both repeatedly communicated and minimally transformed (Sperber 1996). While reflective beliefs differ initially across cultures, the universe of reflective beliefs is disciplined by cultural contact, with the result that as communication among cultures increases, reflective beliefs come to resemble intuitive beliefs, and take on a greater cross-cultural consistency. At the limit (which does not seem particularly distant), reflective beliefs would merge with intuitive beliefs, and much of the etiological peculiarity of cultural differences will have been traduced. The death of particularist norms will be inevitable, but the emergence of new norms is not, as I will discuss below.

The physical churn of the modern world contributes greatly to this sense of dislocation. Discontinuities in physical context disrupt habit consistency, and present an opportunity to introduce habit change (Wood and Runger 2016). I contend that the great physical dislocation experienced in the modern world has diminished the salience of local

norms by providing the dislocated individuals with opportunities and incentives to defy norms that would once have had objective force. As people detach themselves from traditional societies and move to anonymous cities, the landscape of norms in which they live is telescoped sharply. While people inevitably take on new norms in their new settings, the overall norm burden will decline. People will generally comply with fewer norms.

What sorts of new norms might we expect to evolve in a globalized world? Everett Rogers argued that innovations diffuse on the basis of their relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability, and that such diffusion was enhanced (up to a point) by relatively homophilous communication (Rogers 1962). As we saw above, Sperber's epidemiological model predicts increasing homogeneity in reflective beliefs, and such relative homophily makes norm diffusion more likely. As a result, beneficial cultural practices have spread around the world, particularly instrumental norms with clearly demonstrable results, such as vaccination and proper nutrition. Many lives have been saved as a result.

There appears, however, to be a dark aspect to this norm diffusion. Technological progress has put social proof into every pocket (Cialdini 1984), and the particular salience of social proof in socially ambiguous situations (characteristic of the modern world) makes pluralistic ignorance more likely, as we increasingly rely on our peers to evaluate standards of correct behavior. This divorce from cultural familiarity may lead to overimitation (Harris 2012), and even a basic ignorance of the injunctive and descriptive norms governing particular situations. Individuals unsure of themselves rely on others for context, and this process feeds back upon itself in deleterious ways.

We have already seen that intuitive beliefs are relatively consistent across cultures (Sperber 1996). However, they are not identical, and as societies become more pluralistic the intuitive moral core common to the whole society is repeatedly diminished. Ultimately, the residual moral core of a highly pluralistic society is entirely instrumental, and moral restrictions not seen to be directly related to social survival and prosperity are rejected as otiose and antediluvian. A potential objection here is that all cultural norms are fundamentally instrumental, but consider that in traditional societies, while norms may serve an instrumental purpose, they do not feel instrumental to the people practicing them. Norms serve important epistemic, coordination and identity functions (Gelfand and

Harrington 2015). Such norms give life meaning and dignity for millions across the world, and replacement of these ancient patterns with norms of prompt tax payment and civic rectitude feels understandably empty and frustrating.<sup>1</sup>

Expectations play a crucial role in norm formation. Gradual changes in expectations can explain sudden changes in behavior across whole communities. Virtual reference groups deprive us of the opportunity to anticipate and avoid sanctions, making compliance less likely. Crudely, norms are maintained by “beliefs about what would happen if” (Mackie 2015), and such beliefs are inevitably uncertain in transient mass societies. For esteem to operate properly, particular behaviors must be *known* to cause many people to withhold or grant esteem (McAdams 1997). Such strategic “perfect information” is substantially less likely in a mass society. The utility of emotion in guiding behavior might also diminish. On one account, emotion serves to retrospectively associate strong affect with past experience, thereby making particular patterns of behavior either more or less likely. This too is rendered more difficult by unpredictable circumstances. Emotion itself may one day be seen as an atavism.

We are thus left with a dual picture – one of fastidious obedience to fewer and fewer shared norms. The “disinterested elicitors” that trigger our moral foundations (Haidt 2003) will be overwhelmed by the scale of the society we participate in, and the areas of salient moral activity will be “culturally hypocognized” (Fessler 2004).<sup>2</sup> We may be left, however, with the moral foundations relating to harm, which have been established experimentally among young children (Turiel 2015). Children universally deplore harm and uphold morality independent of particular convention. Indeed, moral parochialism appears to be a contradiction in terms, at least where harm is concerned (Sousa and Piazza 2014). As useful as this harm foundation is, however, something more must be added to build a culture dedicated to the development and flourishing of its members.

What sort of global civic culture might mass society lead to? Law can manipulate the information environment to publicize an emerging norm consensus (McAdams 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> Modernity enables “loose” cultures to survive and prosper. The distal ecological threats that motivated the emergence of “tight” cultures have receded in importance, with the result that micromanagement of individual behavior is no longer justifiable (Gelfand et al. 2011).

<sup>2</sup> In a modern society, disinterested norm enforcement would seem to be a losing game because individual contributions are nugatory in maintaining social order.

However, law can only lead by degrees (the “legal-social-legal ratchet”), as laws that differ dramatically from existing norms may not be obeyed (Mackie 2018). Incremental policy change may also end in a “social trap equilibrium,” where expectations can only be shifted through broad, sudden and irreversible change (Rothstein 2011). These findings caution us against attempts to legislate a particular social order.

There seems to be something inherently contagious about building norms together. While observing norm violation makes subjects more likely to violate norms (Kizer 2008), observing others actively working towards norm restoration and upholding prosocial norms makes subjects more likely to assist in the process themselves (Kizer 2013). This presents a strong argument for political devolution. Civic norms can be best enhanced by involving as many citizens as possible in active opportunities to restore and uphold the social order. The hardest part will be redundant demonstration that “enough people see that enough people are changing” (Mackie 2015).

Emerging global norms will have to appeal to disinterested emotions, particularly higher emotions like pride, gratitude and elevation (Haidt 2003). Elevation (awe) is elicited by exposure to certain kinds of beauty and perfection, particularly manifestations of humanity’s “higher” or “better” nature such as charity, kindness, loyalty and self-sacrifice. Elevation seems to make people more open to new experiences and new ideas, directly motivating prosocial behavior. The associated action tendency is a desire to follow the example of the moral exemplar and become a better person oneself. Face-to-face communication seems to be crucial, as the “face effect” of increased compliance depends on anticipated facial feedback (Liu et al. 2019). This also points the way towards devolution, both to maximize face-to-face communication and to coax moral exemplars into public life. This research seems to indicate the desirability a face-to-face society engaged in collective construction and maintenance of moral order.<sup>3</sup>

When the ancient Greeks became more cosmopolitan, they came to find their gods ridiculous and embarrassing, giving rise to a capricious and arbitrary moral order. As a result, they jettisoned their religion and the moral order that went with it – by the Hellenistic era, nothing was forbidden, everything was permitted, and treachery was the

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<sup>3</sup> The resemblance of such a society to the classical Greek *poleis* does not escape my notice, but I lack the space to discuss the resemblance more deeply here.

norm. The Hellenic world fatally undermined its own moral order by becoming a mass society, and failed to build anything new in its place. The vacuum was filled by instrumental motives, and profit supplanted glory as the apogee of the good life. Our own mass society is upon us, and we have so far failed to articulate a program of norm change that will save what is best and most meaningful about social life in traditional communities. I am very gratified that this course has given me the tools both to properly articulate the problem and to consider mechanisms for its resolution.

**1386 words**

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