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Soft Infrastructure and Happiness: Toward a Better World

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Abstract

Soft infrastructure comprises values, customs, norms, and the laws and institutions of a society. It is part of our living environment and conditions the way we relate to one another in social, economic, and political life. Soft infrastructure is grounded by institutional logic, being “symbolically grounded, organizationally structured, politically defended, and technically and materially constrained.” Today our world is now very much constrained by an adversarial culture which many people in the west see as fundamental to the western civilization. However, the adversarial culture has a relatively short history and is not really intrinsic to western civilization. In order to build a more peaceful world that is conducive to peace and prosperity, we need a culture that emphasizes the public interest defined under the Rawlsian "veil of ignorance," which asks us to momentarily forget our identities and look for institutional arrangements or policies that serve our best interests if there were an equal chance for us to be anyone within the community. This perspective asks us to put ourselves in the shoes of others and is commonly referred to as the Golden Rule, and it is cherished both in western and eastern cultures for at least two millennia. This paper, through a comprehensive review of historical examples and contemporary experiences, stresses the urgency of developing the “right soft infrastructure” as a means of alleviating social ills and pernicious polarization.

1. Introduction:

In his famous 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article, Huntington (1992) warned that “the conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating civilizations.” He proclaimed that such differences as “views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibility, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy,” being “the products of centuries,” are “far more fundamental than differences among political ideologies and political regimes.”(p.25).

Still, the case that humanity is universal across “civilizations” is compelling. This means we have similar propensities and fears. Culture and “civilization” mainly affect the how these propensities and fears are expressed, but have little to do with the nature of those propensities and fears. Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) is supposed to apply to all human beings. Admittedly, under the influence of different cultures and institutions, people procure their similar needs in diverse ways. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, unfortunately, has often been understood as sequential from bottom to top and not order of value in importance. Human needs for love and belonging needs (friendship), esteem, and self-actualization are of higher order because the satisfaction they bring is of a higher order and not because they are sought after only after more basic needs are satisfied. Banerjee and Duflo (2011) provided evidence that many poor people in South Asia prefer to go hungry rather than being frowned upon for not being able to afford a decent dowry or funeral. In Eastern as well as Western societies many people kill themselves because they cannot face the loss of self-esteem due to bullying and abuse in social media by people that they do not even know.

Today many westerners live in Asia; and many Asians live in the West, and they intermingle peacefully. Inter-racial marriages are common. If we go back to our ancient philosophical roots, Confucian teachings are not really that much different from those of Stoics or Christians. Even in recent centuries till now, many teachings from the West resonate with teachings from the East. In particular, the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, many tenets of existentialism, Carl Jung’s discussion of individuation, can all find their counterparts in eastern philosophy including Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. Notwithstanding a popular belief that eastern cultures are collectivistic while western cultures are individualistic, the concept of

personal development to the Chinese (*xiushen*) is all about introspection which by definition is entirely personal and authentic, and in a fundamental sense individualist. More recently, the *Theory of Justice* as proposed by Rawls (1971) emphasizes fairness as justice, asking us to put aside our own identities “behind a veil of ignorance” and imagine that we could be anyone in the community when we assess policies or institutions. This is really no different from the Confucian “Golden Rule”: “Do not do unto others what you would not have others do unto you,” which again has its counterpart in the teachings of Jesus. Although stated somewhat differently, its spirit is the same.¹

From this perspective, Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” is puzzling. This paper argues that the apparent clash that is apparent in recent history owes its origin to recent institutions in the West and is not grounded in fundamental value differences. Because institutions shape the way we think and often even our instincts we do see apparent differences in dominant culture in the East and in the West. But to portray these differences as leading to fundamental clashes in civilizations will not help the cause of reviving a “humanistic civilization” which ancient sages in both the East and the West cherish.

Section 2 in this paper will outline the historical origins of adversarial institutions in western or westernized societies which appear to run counter to the unitary social and political systems that are more common in the east. **Section 3** will describe the dynamics of the adversarial institutions that have reshaped western societies and produced an ideology-driven civilization that is now producing rifts in the social and political fabric. **Section 4** goes back to the more fundamental question of what institutions will serve the needs of people better in terms of the fundamental values that they cherish. Particularly, is a world “beyond adversary democracy” a better world and is a “humanistic civilization” without distinction to East and West possible? **Section 5** proposes a new socio-political regime that is grounded on the Rawlsian principle of fairness, starting from a rapprochement among the world’s great religions. Through a realization that humanity is connected by universal values and that there is a need to transcend the names and labels of religions to their common spiritual teachings, peace and harmony can be reestablished.

¹ Some commentators make the point that treating others the way one likes to be treated may be poor advice because people may have different preferences. This point is well taken, but if “the way one likes to be treated” is understood not in specific terms but in more general terms such as “being treated with respect” for example, the Christian Golden Rule still stands. What is a show of respect can vary from culture to culture, but the need for respect is still universal.

Section 6, the concluding section, highlights the greatest challenge facing humanity is to overcome our common propensity to mistake means for ends. Only when we all set our eyes on our common and universal values, can we start to rebuild a world that is truly civilized.

2. Historical Origins of Adversarial Institutions

John W. Burton, in the inaugural issue of the *International Journal of Peace Studies* in 1996, noted that “Systems failure has been a feature of human history. Revolutions have led to alternatives which have in time run into their own problems. And now, with continuing failures to deal with societies' problems, there is, even in advanced 'democracies', a growing reaction against the Westminster adversarial party-political system and its no less adversarial American version.” This, importantly, is not just an American problem. Bell & Jayasuriya (1995) coined the term illiberal democracy, which was further popularized by Zakaria in his 1997 *Foreign Affairs* article. Zakaria warned that “Governments produced by elections may be inefficient, corrupt, shortsighted, irresponsible, dominated by special interests, and incapable of adopting policies demanded by the public good.” The problem is that electoral democracy does not automatically prevent power abuse. It only offers a pathway to power, and interest groups are naturally drawn to this pathway.

Mansbridge (1983), in her *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, attributed the emergence of adversarial politics to the emergence of capitalism. She was aware of the natural propensity of capitalists as well as workers to vie for power. She wrote, “Nascent capitalism required the loosening of personal ties and the legitimation of self-interest...The new economic order required a new political ethos, for which Thomas Hobbes obligingly provided a rationale.” (Mansbridge, p.15) Again, it may be noted, the propensity to seek power to further one's interests is found in the East as in the West. Is there any difference between Eastern and Western civilizations? Moreover, Mansbridge pointed out: “For Rousseau, an adversary democracy with its base in conflicting interest was an abomination.” “He traced three stages by which society moved from a unitary to an adversary democracy.”(p.18) Thus even in the West, unitary democracy that stressed consensus has a longer history than adversary democracy.

On the legal front, a parallel adversary system of justice has emerged more or less about the same time, no doubt under similar influences. Landsman (1983a), a staunch advocate of the adversary system, began his widely cited article on the development of the adversary system thus: “Since approximately the time of the American Revolution, courts in the United States have employed a system of procedure that depends on a neutral and passive fact finder (either judge or jury) to resolve disputes on the basis of information provided by contending parties during formal proceedings.”(p.713) The “neutral and passive fact finder” role is a key feature of the common law system that distinguishes itself from the civil law (continental law) system which gives the presiding judge an active investigative role to seek the truth using all sources of information. The civil law system has been described as a comprehensive system of rules and general principles codified to spell out the rights and obligations of citizens. Notwithstanding the distinction, however, the civil law system is no different from the common law system in being intended to further the public interest and to allow adaptation over time, even though it is less based on case laws and more on doctrines and principles that are the results of collective wisdom deemed to be widely accepted.

Thus the non-adversarial civil law tradition is also very much a western tradition. In the words of Dainow (1966-1967):

In the course of time these jurists came to enjoy the very highest prestige in the law; emperors and magistrates not only sought their consultation and advice but in general followed and adopted their opinions. During this time, not a matter of years or generations but of centuries, some efforts were made to coordinate and group the rules of law;...to compile the results of a very large number of actual case decisions.... It was against this background...that Emperor Justinian brought together the great jurists of his day and had them compile the body of law that immortalized his name.”(Dainow, p.421)

The tradition gave rise to the doctrine of *jurisprudence constante*, that holds that a consistent line of court decisions on a particular legal issue forms an authoritative and binding precedent and thus represents collective wisdom that upholds the public interest. Accordingly, “Judges’ decision is less crucial in shaping civil law than the decisions of legislators

and legal scholars who draft and interpret the codes.”² Today civil or continental law is still very much a European system and that means it is not inimical to western civilization.

To Landsman, it is important to uphold the adversary legal system because it helps preserve key values in society that include “freedom from restraint on economic and political action, tolerance of change in both business and social relations, and willingness to adjudicate questions not previously considered by society.” He was particularly worried about the overreach of government (Landsman, 1983b, p.7) which will be effectively countered by a “neutral and fact-finding role” of the judiciary process. While the need for judiciary independence is beyond dispute, however, the presumption that an inquisitorial approach will be biased is not valid. Finding the truth successfully is a win for society. Under the adversary approach, on the other hand, a win for the prosecution is a loss for the defense. Although mechanisms to avoid conflict of interest are important, the goal of the judiciary as well as that of the legislature is furthering the public interest. This is the *raison d’être* of the law and that of the political system. The true, final values that politicians and policy makers should pursue, whether in the West or in the East, is the public interest.

Although Burton was talking about the political system when he addressed the “systems failure” facing society, his advocacy for less adversarial processes based on analysis and reason applies to the law as much as to politics. In both cases, the problem of adversarial processes stems from vested interests who care not for societal values but for private interests. Today the prevalence of adversarial processes both in law and in politics has led many westerners to identify adversarial processes as a key characteristic of the western culture and even a western value. This is notwithstanding that the adversarial mentality is not really intrinsic to western civilization, and that enlightened political scientists in America today, including Jane Mansbridge (1983) and Jason Brennan (2016), and Hudson (2022) are agreed that the adversarial political system may not be in the best interest of the country.

² See Law, C. (2017). The common law and civil law traditions.
<https://www.law.berkeley.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2017/11/CommonLawCivilLawTraditions.pdf>

To Michael Hudson (2022), the idea of fighting for one's private interests somehow laid "the fatal seeds of its own economic polarization, decline, and fall." Hudson pointed out that "the Greek concept of hubris involved egotistic behavior causing injury to others. Avarice and greed were to be punished by the justice goddess Nemesis." "Divine kingship," rather than leaders chosen by population election, was obliged to protect the weak from the powerful. These concepts bear much resemblance to Chinese beliefs. Yet with the equating of democracy to ballot box politics in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, any country not playing the game of party rotation and regular popular elections becomes by definition lacking in human rights and thus authoritarian, a "clash of civilizations" emerges. This narrow view of democracy, unfortunately, laid the seed for polarization. Gradually and irreversibly the tendency to polarization gradually takes hold, as partisan politics continues to erode unity.

3. Culture, Soft Infrastructure, and Infrastructure Logics

Culture, norms and values, laws and institutions have been referred to as soft infrastructure. "Soft" refers to their non-physical nature. "Infrastructure" refers to the fact that they take time to build and that once built they will stay for a long time and will form part of the environment in which we live. An example is neo-liberalism (Béland, 2005, p. 2). The policies that reflect neo-liberalism values range from social security to healthcare, from education to housing. A specific example is the Right to Buy pioneered by Margaret Thatcher that started in the United Kingdom in the 1980s³. It was replicated in Hong Kong in the form of the Tenants Purchase Scheme launched in 1998. The Right to Buy did not enjoy a good reputation in the UK.⁴ Yet it found its way to Hong Kong and led to similar consequences.⁵

Generally speaking, the heritage of a country's values and culture has primacy over new ideas. For instance, the failure of the US to adopt a nation-wide health insurance programme is

³ The Housing Act that laid out the framework of Right to Buy was passed into law in 1980.

⁴ See <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jun/29/how-right-to-buy-ruined-british-housing>

⁵ It had benefited some original tenants and some speculators. But Hong Kong's homeownership did not go up, and the wait for public housing kept getting longer.

linked to its the unique political culture in America (Steinmo and Watts, 1995).⁶ Collier & Collier in authors' note to the 2002 edition of their book (originally published 1991) on Latin America, remarked: "Today it is even clearer that with the rise of neoliberalism in national economic policies, the partial eclipse of union power... Latin America is in the midst of fundamental political change." (p.xv) A key question that we need to ask is: If public policy is always affected by the prevalent culture, is there a culture that we should nurture that will allow policy changes consistent with the public interest?

Relative to neo-liberalism, the caste system of India perhaps stands at the opposite end of the cultural spectrum as it is anything but liberal. Again it is very much constraining on social and political development all the same. It has had pervasive impacts on the Indian economy (Munshi, 2019). The system has generated substantial inefficiencies in critical areas, such as labor allocation, whereby the full development of human capital in India became impossible (Thorat & Newman, 2007). Previous studies also show that these impacts extend beyond economic activity, affecting access to public resources and well-being. For instance, recent evidence (Shaikh *et al.*, 2018) suggests that the caste to which individuals belong significantly predicts inequalities in the waiting time for non-emergency medical care, which has even worsened over time. The endurance of the caste system through centuries is explained by the nature of institutional logics, which are organizing principles that are "*symbolically grounded, organizationally structured, politically defended, and technically and materially constrained*" (Friedland & Alford, 1991, pp. 248–249).

Boltanski and Thenevot (2006) offered important insights to the dynamics that drive the change of institutional logics. They argue that people justify what they say and do by appealing to principles they hope will command respect, which are otherwise known as "values" or "worth". They distinguished different categories of worth in six different worlds: market, inspired, domestic, fame, civic, and industrial. Each of these institutional orders have conceptions, models, or logics at the supra-organizational level, which shape organizational and individuals' activities. For instance, in the world of fame, the logic of people's reputation assignment depends only on the opinion of others which is based exclusively on people's attributes. In contrast, in the domestic world, worth is rooted in a hierarchical chain of dependency relations. One's reputation is based

⁶ Steensland (2006) similarly associated America's objection to the guaranteed income policy with America's culture.

on the capacity to encompass the will of subordinates. In these domains, two distinct institutional logics of worth assign distinct status to individuals. Thus, culture is a resource of agency (DiMaggio, 1997). Even within the same domain, it is possible that different groups of people subscribe to different values. Fights to defend different values would surface.

We provide two examples to understand how institutional logics affect individuals' well-being through its embeddedness in physical and non-physical infrastructure. First, scholars have debated why the Industrial Revolution did not occur in fourteen century China if every major condition for it to occur was apparently present. According to Lin (1995), institutional factors provide a possible answer: the centralization of power in the hands of the emperor probably constrained China's development of modern science. In particular, the contents of civil service examinations and the criteria for promotion made unlikely the transition from primitive science to modern science. The incentive structure diverted intellectuals from scientific endeavors and from the acquisition of the human capital necessary and nullified an impending scientific revolution (i.e., hypotheses testing and controlled experiments). For the developed industrial western countries, biomedical developments and physical knowledge dramatically reduced mortality rates, enhancing well-being (Easterlin, 1995). However, this material and knowledge revolution did not happen in China (Lin, 1995) because the Chinese state was ruled by bureaucrats selected through civil service examination, and a position in the bureaucratic apparatus was the final goal for upward mobility. Thus, gifted individuals with means, often invested significant time and resources in passing the "all-important" civil service exams rather than seemingly less rewarding scientific training and research. According to Lin, during premodern times Chinese technological achievements were based on the work of a small number of highly gifted individuals from a big population and "happenstance and experience." China's comparative advantage faded when the western world devoted much effort and resources to technological development. Further, the Industrial Revolution (which gave the West its technological edge) started in Europe, mainly due to the fact that the continent, in its entirety, was never ruled by an all-powerful emperor akin to the Chinese "Son of Heaven" who saw technological innovation as a potential catalyst of "political creative destruction" (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2013). Indeed by the reign of the Ming dynasty emperor Jiajing, he and his predecessors were instrumental in the destruction of the "crown jewels" of

Chinese technological achievement, its prized naval fleet and related seafaring technology which earlier spearheaded seven unprecedented ocean expeditions (Wei, 2014).

Another example of institutional logic preventing institutional development and negatively affecting population’s well-being is America’s persistent failure to contain gun violence. Like cancer, gun violence is metastasizing, with Americans acquiring increasingly deadlier firearms traditionally reserved for the battlefield (Shapiro, 2021). The Second Amendment to the American Constitution reads: “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” The right to gun ownership is embodied in a legal corpus. Once institutionalized and blessed with political interests, gun ownership is almost impossible to curb and regulate. America did not choose to be the world’s top country in gun ownership per capita, but became such through the working of institutional logics. In 2008, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the Second Amendment confers an individual the inalienable right to possess a firearm for traditionally lawful purposes such as self-defence (Supreme Court of the United States, 2008). Moreover, it ruled that two earlier District of Columbia provisions, one banning handguns and the other requiring the disassembly or trigger-locking of lawful household firearms, violated this right. Since that ruling, gun-related deaths have increased, with the crude rate (number of gun-related deaths per 100,000) rising from 10.34 before the ruling to 11.16 in the 2009-2019 period⁷ (See **Table 1**). In 2020, buffeted by tumultuous political events and riots, the crude rate leapt to 13.14.

Table 1: Gun-Related Deaths in the USA (1999-2020)

Year	Number of deaths (cumulative)	Population (cumulative)	Crude Rate	Age-Adjusted Rate
2020	43,553	331,449,281	13.14	n.a.
2009-2019	390,293	3,498,701,258	11.16	11.16
1999-2008	301,464	2,915,941,237	10.34	10.34

Note: age-adjusted rate was provided by CDC but cannot be provided for 2020 for lack of information.
Source: CDC, US Census Bureau, Gun Violence Archive

⁷ The increase from 10.34 to 11.16 may appear small, but it is significant, as the rates refer to averages over a decade.

According to a recent Gallup Poll, the majority of Americans have always been in favor of tighter regulation. This is unsurprising given that there are nearly 400 million guns in civilian hands in the United States, which translates into a staggering 120.5 civilian-held firearms per 100 residents (Small Arms Survey, 2018). From 1990 to 2007, the percentage of Americans in favor of tighter regulation had initially declined precipitously from 78% to 51%, which facilitated the Supreme Court's decision to rule in favor of relaxing regulation. This decline in the support of tighter regulation reached an all-time low of 43% in 2011, which nonetheless still significantly outnumbered the 12% favouring less control. In the ensuing years, the proportion in favor of stricter gun control has generally been on the uptrend, reaching a high of 67% in 2018 (Gallup, 2022). Mass shootings over the last years have contributed to this surging demand for tighter regulation (Politi, 2012). The apparent futility of clear and continuing public preference for tighter gun control testifies to the extent to which an institutional logic embodied in the Second Amendment compromises the interests and well-being of Americans.

4. What Kind of Institutional Logics are Needed for a Better World?

In the last section, we have underscored the primacy of culture through the role of institutional logics. An interesting question is what kind of culture can be embodied in our institutions which can guide individuals' actions for the best interest of humanity. Antonella Delle Fave *et.al.* (2016) and Ho (2014) offered some clue. Fave *et.al.* underscored "the primacy of inner harmony and relational connectedness" as lay principles of happiness; the latter pointed out that culture determines how different people procure their mental goods and physical goods in different ways. The former concluded that "Over and above differences related to country membership, cultural dimensions, and demographic features, [there is] a substantial similarity across countries in the core definitions of happiness. At the psychological level, happiness was predominantly identified as inner harmony, a balanced and positive connectedness perceived among various facets of the self." Ho suggests that what people see as values that are central to their wellbeing mostly reflect culture-bound "household production" for their ultimate values. People adopt different lifestyles to acquire similar "end goods" (such as nutrients and tastes of food and a sense of achievement) that are essential to wellbeing.

Tim Kasser (2003) has identified materialistic culture (i.e., consumerism) to be extremely detrimental to subjective well-being. Ho (2014) explained that consumerism is not mainly about seeking the enjoyment of material goods. Rather, the materialistic lifestyle often just represents an inefficient way of procuring the mental goods that all human beings need, such as a sense of achievement, being accepted by the social group which one identifies with through acculturation (for example, having supposedly refined tastes so one could belong to the perceived “right social circles”). In economic parlance, people procure similarly needed mental goods in different ways because their “household production functions” are shaped by different cultures. The inefficiency of the rat race (i.e. “keeping up with the Joneses”) is demonstrated by the fact that one’s production of a needed mental good (such as perception of being recognized and accepted in an identified social circle) destroys the mental good of one’s neighbors. Meanwhile ecological footprint shoots through the roof, further exacerbating the climate crisis, and undermining the long-term welfare of everybody. This inefficiency contrasts with the efficiency of a culture of identifying with those who opt for a simple but still wholesome life. Recognizing that culture has important implications for economic efficiency, we need to build a culture that facilitates the procurement of mental goods that are needed for well-being and yet are non-rival in nature. Non-rivalry means that the acquisition of a particular good by an individual need not be at the expense of another. As shown by Shekhar *et al.* (2020) in the case of India, changes in institutional logics of the market have the potential to affect individuals’ consumption practices.

2020 was evidently a tumultuous year for America. There was the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic that plunged the economy into a deep recession, which was subsequently followed by the “Black Lives Matter” movement. These events preceded the divisive Presidential Election that culminated in the controversial siege on Capitol Hill by Trump supporters on January 6, 2021. The trigger for these developments could possibly be the sheer divisiveness of American society, to the extent that a Google search on “Divided States of America” quickly yielded multiple entries; the most provocative being the CNN Fareed Zakaria Special Report on “How to Watch THE DIVIDED STATES OF AMERICA”, posted on January 31, 2021. This destructive divisiveness did not emerge overnight but had been brewing and simmering for decades, underscoring the fact that America sorely lacks a culture of reciprocity and mutual respect.

Fundamental to these divisions is a common disconnect of many Americans with people that they consider alien; a 2019 study by Claire L. Adida, Adeline Lo and Melina L. Platas (2019) indicates that many Americans seem to prefer immigrants who are English-speaking and Christian. What matters is not at all who people consider alien. What really matters is that somehow in one's upbringing, one develops this invidious sense of "me" or "my kind" versus "them", sowing the seeds for the rise of destructive tribalism. Once tribalism emerges, it leaves this group particularly vulnerable to manipulation by extremist and opportunistic politicians, touting their supposedly nativist policies. In this divisive and contentious landscape, facts and meaningful policy debates are discarded. The ugly aspects of tribalism would supplant reasoning, invariably creating bitter divisions in the country.⁸ Actually, this fixation on identities leading to discrimination and racism goes against an important tenet in the Declaration of Independence which proclaims that "all men are created equal."⁹

But democracy does not have to be like this. Whereas the route to disaster is based on fixed identities, transcending fixed identities would enhance the public interest and by extension lead to happiness. Transcending fixed identities is understandably difficult but not impossible. Transcending fixed identities is difficult only because those fixed identities were built up over a long stretch of time. Fixation on identities is the soft infrastructure that has led to polarization. To address this problem, Lijphart (1999) proposed the concept of "consensus democracy", which stands in contrast to the simple majority rule or "Westminster democracy." He insisted consensus democracy is better than majoritarian democracy, and stated that the first dimension of consensus democracy involves "multiparty face-to-face interactions within cabinets, legislatures, legislative committees, and concertation meetings between governments and interest groups has a close fit with the collective-responsibility form."(p.5) But consensus is difficult to form unless everybody is prepared to perform the Rawlsian "veil of ignorance" thought experiment in forgetting one's identity *before* assessing the impact of a policy (i.e., "*ex ante*" assessment of the merit of a policy without a vested interest). This would then naturally consider fully the interests of minorities because, *ex ante*, one could be a member of any minority. If minorities' interests are taken care of

⁸ Zakaria referred to two books, "Identity Crisis," by John Sides, Michael Tesler and Lynn Vavreck and "Why we are polarized," by Ezra Klein, in his Special Report.

⁹ Klein (2020) argues that the American political system boils down to a collection of functional parts whose efforts combine into a dysfunctional whole.

and the goal of public policy is maximizing the *ex ante* interpretation of the public interest (Ho, 2012), the focus of the political system should be preventing power abuse through effective public governance rather than on elections. Shifting of the focus on fair competition among interest groups to fend for their different *ex post* private interests to effective governance to enhance the *ex ante* public interest based on impartial assessment of policy alternatives is the way out.

While an operational definition of the public interest seemed elusive for half a century¹⁰, Ho (2012) proposed to salvage the possibility of consensus by following the Rawlsian veil of ignorance thought experiment. Under this “*ex ante*” approach, if we momentarily put down our identities and interests specific to those identities, and imagine that our identities are to be determined by a wheel of fortune beyond our control, we would certainly object to slavery. If I could be black, male or female, straight or LGBT, Muslim or Christian, etc., I would form an impartial judgment about policies or any institutional arrangement. This exercise is fundamentally no different from asking people to “put themselves in the shoes of others.” Only when one momentarily relinquishes one’s identity and considers the impact of policy change on different people would one truly “connect” to others. Although we are all different *ex post*, we are all equal *ex ante* (before the wheel of fortune determines our identities).

Rawlsian thinking invariably seems antithetical to our nature. Because we are used to the identities that we have formed over the years, putting down our identities when we assess the impact of public policy is not instinctive for most of us. But seeing the connectedness of everyone in the community is the only way out of polarization and the conflicts that have caused extensive human suffering throughout history.

To move toward a world of connected humanity, it is critical to reiterate that the fixation on identities has to be attenuated. Institutions that reduce identity fixations need to be enshrined

¹⁰ Back in 1962, Downs noted that “no general agreement exists about whether the term [public interest] has any meaning at all, or, if it has, what the meaning is, which specific the public interest actions are in the public interest and which are not, and how to distinguish between them.” (Downs, 1962: 1-2) As he pointed out, that is because people are intrinsically different. They have diverse interests, diverse perceptions, diverse beliefs. He also noted that it would be unrealistic to expect people in exercising their roles as citizens would push aside considerations for their own immediate self interests. What is likely is that people would implicitly form some kind of subjective balance between their self interest and their perceive public interest in their political activities.

in each country's constitution to facilitate "a connected humanity." Only then the public interest defined in the *ex ante* sense can trump tribal instincts, which have become more pronounced with increasing use of digital communication (Bazalgette, 2017). This paper advocates nurturing this perspective and understanding the public interest from this perspective is the way forward to bring society together. Back in 1962, Anthony Downs wrote "it might be argued that the ultimate motive for good citizenship, even for patriots, is the long-run self-interest of the individual." (Downs, 1962: 27). The *ex ante* perspective to public policy is what it takes to look after the long-run self-interest of each individual, because in an all-out fight among those with fixed identities and interests, no one can be sure who the final winner will be. The only certainty is that over the course of the fight, everybody loses. All in all, there is a growing urgency to build a culture of interconnectedness among people across ethnicities and different walks of life.

5. A Roadmap to a Better Tomorrow for the World

5.1 Making Peace among Religions

One of the key divides that has torn humanity apart into different and sometimes opposing camps is religion. An article posted in 2017 by the American Psychological Association on its website referred to "a growing tide of Islamophobia" in America (Clay, 2017: 34). This is evidenced in an earlier 2015 Council on American-Islamic Relations study which showed that of the more than 600 Muslim students surveyed, more than half had experienced bullying—twice as high as the national average (Council on American-Islamic Relations- California Chapter, 2015). A Southern Poverty Law Center report released in February 2017 found that the number of organized anti-Muslim hate groups had jumped from 34 in 2015 to 101 in 2016. There is little doubt that the fear of Muslim domination is one of the drivers behind Islamophobia. Such paranoia could sometimes lead to tragic circumstances. For instance, Anders Breivik, a Norwegian far-right extremist gruesomely massacred 69 participants (mostly teenagers) attending a Workers' Youth League (AUF) summer camp on 22 July 2011 using semiautomatic firearms. Earlier in the day, he had detonated a bomb in the center of Oslo that killed eight people and injured another 209 (Smith,

2018); Breivik tried to justify his heinous acts in a manifesto which declared his resolve to stop “the Islamic colonization of Western Europe” (Reuters, 2011).

Unfortunately, such fears have their roots in otherwise harmless demographics (Elżbieta & Péter, 2018). It is well documented that Muslims have much higher birth rates than Christians and other groups; research from the Pew Research Center indicates that Muslim women have on average 2.9 children, surpassing the next-highest group (Christians at 2.6) and significantly exceeding the average of all non-Muslims (2.2 children) (Lipka and Hackett, 2017). Moreover, if all the children of Muslims are initiated by their parents to become Muslims, there is fear that Muslims would soon outnumber non-Muslims. In a democracy that respects the majority rule, non-Muslims naturally fear that their society and their laws could change, leading to a loss of their original identity. The way out would be the enshrinement of the *ex ante* approach to public policy and public institutions.

This means that people should all be taken as equal *ex ante*. From the *ex ante* perspective, adherents of any religion would imagine they could be adherents of any religion and could also be an atheist, and they could also be the child of any faith. They would not like to see any particular religion dominate. In addition, as they could be children of any faith, they would prefer to have the freedom to choose any religion or not to subscribe to any faith when they come of age. Although the spiritual teachers who founded the different religions all want their adherents to achieve spiritual awakening and thus inner peace, they had to face an audience with existing beliefs and cultural traditions. They want their adherents to unquestioningly practice what they preach with humility. It would not help their cause if they expounded on scientific principles such as the earth orbiting around the sun while rotating to generate night and day.

5.2 Transcendence as the Glue to Connect Different Religions

Since the theologies of different religions are mutually incompatible, they must be taken as merely reflecting the cultural and historical background at the time of their inception, to avoid irreconcilable conflicts and clashes. By extension, every religion or sect would have to respect

each other's theological beliefs. Given this background, it is evident that the separation of church and the state is a great institution as it implies that none of the religions could override policy considerations which must be based on what best serves the public interest. Choice over public policy is the preserve of the state and should not be biased toward any particular religion.

Throughout history, there have been innumerable religious conflicts and wars. This is notwithstanding the fact that economic and social factors often come into play. Matthew White's *The Great Big Book of Horrible Things* named religion as the primary cause of 11 of the world's 100 deadliest atrocities. According to Thomas Greven, "The more ethno-centric the conception of the people, the more xenophobic the positioning against 'the other', and the clearer the desire to overthrow democratic governance, the more likely it is that a rightwing populist party is also extremist" (Greven, 2016: 2).

Minkov M, Welzel C and Schachner M (2020) noted that "numerous studies have reported a positive individual-level association between happiness and two psychologically distinct states of mind: religious faith and subjective freedom" (Minkov, Welzel and Schachner, 2020: 2873). But what is it in religiosity that makes people happy? One interesting finding of the paper is that subjective freedom and religious faith appear to be substitutes in furthering subjective well-being. Paul Wong (2016) makes the case that transcending the ego gives one meaning and enables one to realize one's best. Many recent studies (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011) have found self-transcendence an important driver of happiness and this quality is a common denominator among religions. Transcendence is about focusing less on the ego, and connecting more with our humanity (Hanfstingl, 2013; Ho, 2014). The essence of transcendence is perhaps best captured by the Buddhist philosophy of "letting go of the self" and focusing less on the distinctions or concepts of "the self, the others, the living beings, and the lifetime" (Dhyana Master Hsüan Hua, 2000: 181). Moreover, transcendence has long been associated with freedom in the literature (Hart, 1951). If "subjective freedom" is achievable through religiosity, it is not surprising that "cultural evolution shifts the source of happiness from religion to subjective freedom" (Minkov et. al., 2020). After all, if subjective freedom is achieved in the mind through self-transcendence, formal religious activities may not be that important. Maslow (1959) has described self-transcendence as a confluence of intense emotional responses comprising "wonder, surprise, awe, amazement,

reverence, humility and surrender before the experience as before something great”. Spiritual living is living with a deep respect for life; at its core, it involves developing a connectedness to humanity and nature, in the process liberating one from self-centeredness. With this premise, this paper asserts that the all-encompassing nature of transcendence is the ultimate antidote against divisiveness and the “identity crisis.”

The West holds religious freedom as the bedrock for thriving societies. However, much of the religious freedoms practiced today are *prima facie* in nature, with severe repercussions on society. True religious freedom values individual choice. In this context, parents would abstain from dictating the religious affiliation of their children before they come of age and develop the faculties to exercise judgement independently. Moreover, religious freedom should embrace reciprocity in its entirety. There are religions that oblige their adherents to wed only those who would convert to their religions. This is more akin to emotional blackmail than religious freedom. A combination of genuine religious freedom, mutual respect among religions, and an understanding that the essence of all religions lies in their spiritual teachings and not their theologies¹¹, would contribute to a more peaceful, harmonious world. The great religions of the world need to help humanity build spiritual capital¹², a soft infrastructure essential to achieving world peace.

5.3. Evolution toward Truly Open Institutions

We could distinguish between two kinds of institutions (Ho, 2012). An “open” institutional design based on institutional logics and mechanisms that actively facilitate “improving with the times,” or passively allow such adaptations. A “closed” institutional design on the other hand provides little incentive for people to change even if they could, while those advocating change hardly possess any ability or room to effect any change. A closed institutional design is closed typically because vested interests protect their interests through monopolizing power, or because society has come to accept the prevailing rules, values, and practices as sacrosanct and not to be

¹¹ Different theologies reflect the historical and cultural contexts in which the different religions were born.

¹² Spiritual capital “refers to the interconnectedness of the human existence among members of society cultivated through the institutions of the country and a deep respect for life shared among its people” (Ho, 2012:47).

challenged. Those holding on to power tend to emphasise these rules, values, and practices to maintain their power and privileges.

Sadly, although governments based on periodic elections may appear to be more transparent than authoritarian regimes, the former could still lack effective mechanisms that prevent power abuses and may still be subject to short-termism and the dictates of vested interests. Indeed, even in America, Gilens and Page (2014) found that “economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence” (Gilens and Page, 2014: 564). Today, America is classified under “flawed democracies” in the EIU Democracy Index ranking (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). Zakaria (1997) coined the term “illiberal democracies” to describe regimes that are “illiberal” and that trample on people’s civic rights notwithstanding the fact that they hold regular elections. Notwithstanding being democracies in name, many countries could be trapped in a perpetual cycle of power grabbing among various contending interests that could lead to social unrest and the erosion of public interest. From this perspective, governments that are formally democratic may still not be sufficiently open to allow evolution toward the betterment of all stakeholders. An “open” regime with plenty of levers for interest groups to work on without regard to the public interest is not good enough. In a world dominated by powerful business interests capable of influencing politics almost exclusively, it is all too easy for these powerful business interests to collude with politicians to the detriment of the interests of the common man.

6. Conclusion: The Challenges Facing Humanity

What gave China’s economy a rebirth was a new way of thinking that had ancient roots but that had been suppressed by political forces under the power of ideology¹³. Similarly, western democracy needs a new way of thinking that puts the real interests of people first, instead of allowing the inertia of divisive politics to prevail over the public interest. This requires rebuilding our soft infrastructure to this end. This is emphatically not the “end of Western civilization” as Hudson suggested, but rather the revival of Western civilization as it was two thousand years ago

¹³ Mao Zedong had condemned Confucianism. See Gregor and Chang (1979)

and as it is championed by a few lone philosophers and political scientists like Kant, Jung, Rawls, Mansbridge, and Brennan today.

Western institutions possess many fine traditions. In particular, the Separation of Powers, Separation of the Church and the State, the Free Press, Free Speech, the Rule of Law, etc., are important pillars of western civilization that should be preserved. However, even more important than these fine traditions is the “ethics of reciprocity”, which is very much a universal value and sometimes even called the Golden Rule. It is as central to Judaic and Christian teachings as it is to Confucian and Buddhist teachings. In the Sermon on the Mount (Gospel according to St. Matthew) Jesus taught: “All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.” The Mosaic law contains a parallel commandment: “Whatever is hurtful to you, do not do that to others.” Similarly Confucius advised: “Don’t do unto others what you don’t want others do unto you.” (“己所不欲，勿施於人”) (The Analects). More recently, Rawls invented the “veil of ignorance” thought experiment, and asked us to put ourselves in the shoes of others. There is some debate over whether the thought exercise should lead to “maximin” as policy advice. Maximin or maximizing the welfare of the most unfortunate person in the community and completely ignoring the effects on all the others could be too extreme. It could be argued that policy choices should instead be made from the *ex ante* perspective: simply maximizing *ex ante* welfare, which results when policy makers assume that we could be anyone in the community, i.e., when policy choices are evaluated without any vested interest whatsoever.

Unfortunately, excessive emphasis has often been placed on individualist rights and freedoms, and this often leads to the erosion of the public interest. This invariably results in the detriment of society at large. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many Americans refused to wear masks and social distancing, and other measures that were necessary to contain the spread of the infections. The result was disastrous. America became the country with the most infections and deaths. This is obviously a breach of the Golden Rule at the individual level: You want to be protected from Covid-19. You prefer that others not far from you wear masks so you will be protected. So you would wear masks when you are physically close to others.

All this appears clear and reasonable enough. But soft infrastructure being what it is, the ideology of individualistic freedom is hard to change; expecting religious fundamentalists and anti-science zealots to shed their dogmas and strive toward enlightenment is likely to be expecting too much; most of those who subscribe to the materialistic culture will continue to ignore the impending existential threat to our planet earth as the only home of humanity and other species. Overcoming this inertia is the challenge that humanity now faces.

At the policy level, upholding the Golden Rule means that we should opt for universal healthcare, more effective regulation of firearms, and better protection of human lives in general; if there had been more effective regulation of semiautomatic weapons, Anders Breivik would not have been able to commit his massacre (at least not to the same degree) in 2011. Similarly, Salvador Ramos would not have been able to gun down and kill 21 students and staff of an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas in May 2022 in under an hour.

Consider the following excerpt from an article posted in City Journal on “Katrina and Pork” in 2005:

.... increasingly Congress uses the growing federal budget to serve the narrow interests of its members, circumventing the traditional budget process and skirting procedures for competitive bidding to insert favored projects directly into appropriations legislation. The process, euphemistically called earmarking, “has become so routine and so pervasive . . . that what was once a boon for the most powerful and favored has become an expected way for local governments and other institutions to get aid from Washington,” wrote the *Congressional Quarterly* last year (Malanga, 2005).

We can see that attention for personal, private interests, instead of the public interest, was very much behind the subgrade design and maintenance of the levees that led to 1,833 tragic and avoidable deaths in New Orleans (Pruitt, 2020). Central to the disaster is that politicians were preoccupied with pleasing their constituents and that voters prefer to look at their short-term private interests first. It was not the lack of funds for the proper maintenance of the levees that caused the problem. Rather, it was short-sightedness and selfishness that caused 2005’s Hurricane Katrina disaster. Lawrence Roth, the then Deputy Executive Director of the American Society of

Civil Engineers had called it “the worst engineering catastrophe in U.S. history” (Roth, 2007). Moreover, Adrienne LaFrance of the Atlantic, based on research from the University of California at Berkeley, was equally scathing, as evidenced by the following statement: “Some levees were constructed atop too-weak soil, others contained too much sand and other highly erodible material that washed away in the storm surge” (LaFrance, 2015). In short, the levees were simply not built to provide meaningful protection.

The above debacle, amongst many others, are not isolated failures but are indicative of the negative soft infrastructure that has become endemic in our lives. All infrastructures take time to build. Between proper physical infrastructure and proper soft infrastructure, however, it is the latter that is the more challenging to build, owing to the inertia of the human mind. The mental habits that we are accustomed to are extremely difficult to change. We all tend to cling onto our beliefs, our biases, our long-established preferred ideologies, and our instincts to defend our identified interests, rather than humbly facing the real choices that we have to confront. For this reason, the “roadmap” for a better tomorrow is fraught with significant difficulties which would require collective understanding and resolve to overcome.

Back in 1997 Fareed Zakaria warned of “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy” in Foreign Affairs. Since that time, liberal democracy appears to be in retreat everywhere. In the western world, we are seeing increasing polarization across many countries. An Economist feature story in 2020 carried the title: “Political protests have become more widespread and more frequent” and the subtitle warns: “The rising trend in global unrest is likely to continue.”

Amid all the confusion, the Democracy Perception Index survey (Latana and the Alliance of Democracies Foundation, 2022) found that people living in many democracies often believe that their countries are not genuinely democratic, while China, a country widely considered to be authoritarian¹⁴ had an 83% rating for “My Country is Democratic”, considerably higher than the US’ 49% rating (see following **Table 2**). With the exception of Iran, Russia, and Nigeria, all of the “Less Free” countries shown in **Table 2** outperformed the US in this category. France was the only “Free” country that underperformed the US in the “My Country is Democratic” category.

¹⁴ Ranked at 151 among 167 jurisdictions in the 2020 Democracy Index (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020).

Further, both the US and France performed below the global average of 56% in this category. The relatively poor performance of the US and France in this category could be attributable to rising income inequality and the growing influence of “Big Business” on public policy; “Big Business” and related organizations spent nearly US\$4 billion lobbying the US government in 2021 alone (O’Connell and Narayanswamy, 2022). In the case of the US, the percentage of people surveyed who believe their government acts in the interest of a minority (i.e. “Big Business”) is a staggering 63%, significantly higher than the global average of 49%. Dr Nico Jaspers, CEO of Latana, lamented: “Democracy is under threat. In many countries across the world, people feel that their governments are acting in the interest of a small elite, and economic inequality and corruption are among the biggest threats to democracy”.

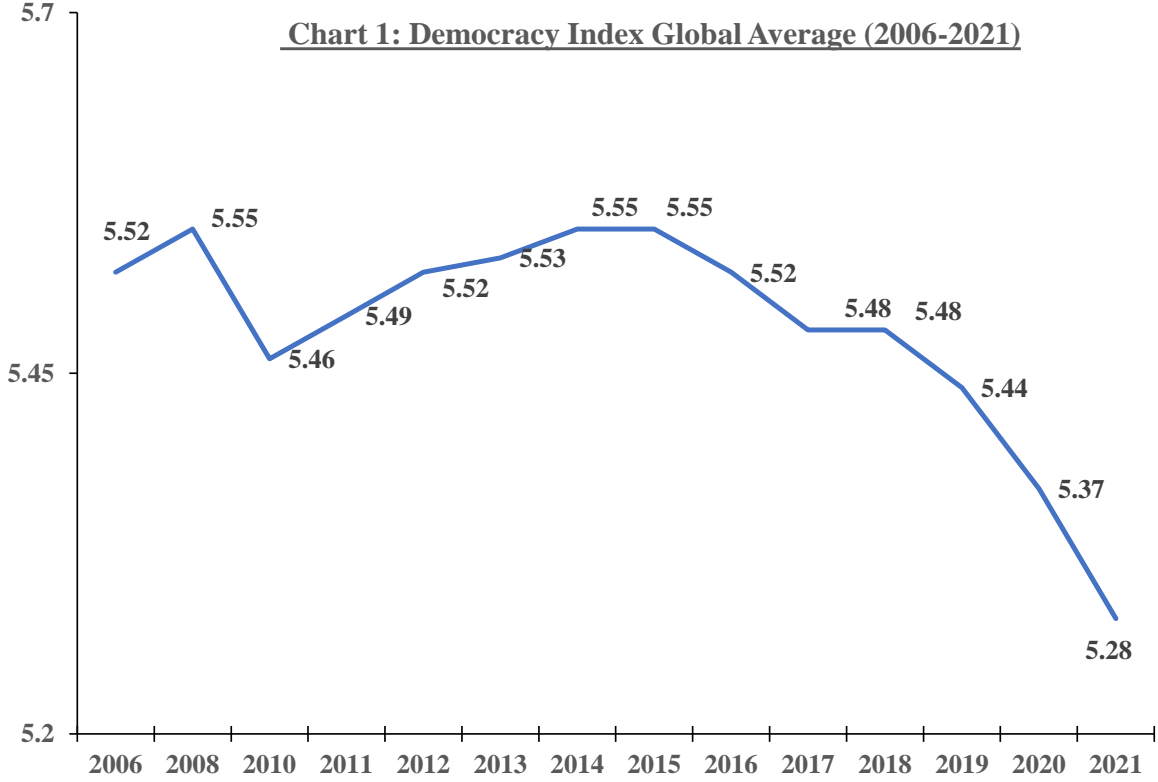
Table 2: Democracy Perception Index 2022

Country	Region	DPI Democracy Categories	N	Democracy is Important	My Country is Democratic
United States	North America	Free	1020	76%	49%
United Kingdom	Europe	Free	1034	81%	61%
Germany	Europe	Free	1045	88%	63%
France	Europe	Free	1045	85%	47%
Spain	Europe	Free	1031	86%	57%
Denmark	Europe	Free	1033	87%	70%
Sweden	Europe	Free	1040	89%	69%
Japan	Asia	Free	1025	69%	53%
South Korea	Asia	Free	1048	92%	70%
China	Asia	Less Free	1029	91%	83%
Singapore	Asia	Less Free	1032	82%	65%
Philippines	Asia	Less Free	1056	87%	75%
India	Asia	Less Free	1008	82%	70%
Pakistan	Asia	Less Free	752	80%	52%
Vietnam	Asia	Less Free	1015	88%	77%
Russia	Russia	Less Free	1043	69%	46%
Brazil	Latin America	Free	1067	88%	52%
Mexico	Latin America	Less Free	1027	85%	56%
Iran	MENA	Less Free	499	61%	25%
Saudi Arabia	MENA	Less Free	1026	66%	50%
Kenya	Africa	Less Free	1042	92%	54%
Nigeria	Africa	Less Free	754	89%	38%

Source: Latana in collaboration with the Alliance of Democracies Foundation

This apparent siege on democratic institutions is also evidenced from other sources in the literature. From 2006 to 2021, the global average for the EIU’s democracy index (see following **Chart 1**) declined from 5.52 to 5.28 over this period. Freedom House painted this gloomy picture with an article titled “Freedom under Siege” in its 2021 update: “The impact of the long-term democratic decline has become increasingly global in nature, broad enough to be felt by those

living under the cruelest dictatorships, as well as by citizens of long-standing democracies. Nearly 75 percent of the world’s population lived in a country that faced deterioration last year.” But humanity’s quest for equality, checking power abuses, and personal freedoms has not abated. The rising protests across many countries show that governments everywhere are under pressure to improve public governance.



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit (2020, 2021)

Of all public governance, global governance is arguably the most important. Presently the world is fraught with fractious politics and tension, driven by the apparent ideological confrontation between the world’s two leading powers China and the US. Still, the difference between China and the US lies mainly in their preferred means to achieving effective public governance, not basic values. If we are genuinely interested in people’s wellbeing, both should explore scientifically what institutions would best serve their interests. Given that all governments need to serve their people’s best interests, and the fact that we now live in this supposed age of

science and enlightenment, we should perform objective and evidence-based analysis as we look for the best institutional choices available to us. Only by supplanting ideology and unbridled individualism with pragmatism and altruism, can we eliminate societal ills and enhance the welfare of individuals worldwide.

At the country level, checks against power abuses through an independent press and free speech within the framework of the law, a truly independent judiciary, and institutions that guard against conflict of interests are all important soft infrastructures that have proven indispensable, as is the understanding that the public interest not only must come first but also be the only consideration in the design of public policy. The media, in particular, has significant responsibility for telling the truth all the time and educating the public about sustainable development and the Golden Rule of Reciprocity. This way, we can avoid the “we they” confrontations that Burton had lamented (Burton 1993). As difficult as it may look, a brighter future is within reach.

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