The Open Society

Written by F. A. Harper, as published in The Voluntaryist, April 1992.

The advantages of an open society on a world basis have been explored to only a slight degree and would seem to deserve much more thought as a solution for solving major international problems. To see its potential, one might think of how it works on a smaller scale.

I have noticed in the city where I live that the geographic location of people's homes and work have no necessary relation to the societies to which they belong. As you go down the street, one neighbor may belong to the Baptist Church, work for General Motors, help the Girl Scouts, and shop at Smith's grocery. The next one down the street may be a Roman Catholic, work for Ford Motor Company, help the Boy Scouts, but also shop at Smith's grocery. The open society is vividly in evidence as you go down the street and find out to what societies each one belongs.

The distinctive feature of this arrangement as an open society is that all these people with potentially violent differences live relatively peacefully side-by-side. This is because the open society is so open and varied that the participants leave each other alone to a great extent, certainly relative to compulsory arrangements. Trouble arises only when one tries to make another join his society against his will, or *vice versa*, or trespasses upon some of his rights. If the societies have set up their operational plans to maximize the voluntary features of the arrangement, observing rights of disassociation as well as rights of association, little conflict can arise to cause trouble.

Trouble would at once arise, however, if various sorts of compulsion, such as geographic arrangement, should be introduced into this city. Suppose the city authorities should say that all people on the north side of the tracks must belong to the Baptist Church, and those on the south side must belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Real trouble would very likely be generated. Then suppose, in addition to the religious compulsion, those on the north side of the tracks must all shop at Brown's grocery, and those on the south side of must all shop at Johnson's grocery. Troubles could multiply rapidly.

Now transfer this analysis of a peaceful community in Podunk to the entire world. Suppose we really put our minds to the problem of letting persons live wherever they wish, as long as they could buy or rent the space properly from the owner. They would not be compelled, however, to join any societal combine against their wishes; or they could join them all; or they could join a select few. They could trade at the neighborhood grocery or at any other grocery anywhere in the world. They could work for any employer anywhere in the world, if mutually desired, or they could work for themselves. For whatever society they joined, they

must meet the terms of membership, pay their required dues, and reap whatever benefits the societal arrangement offered in return.

One feature of such an arrangement would immediately be noted: no monopoly status of any society would then be possible. There could be no exceptions. Whatever any one society might be doing, anyone could at any time set up another society to try to do the same thing and do it better, attracting members away from the other.

Compulsion would not be possible in such an open world society since anyone could escape from any society which tried it and could perform its function himself, join another society doing it, or start a new society at will.

Such a societal arrangement, if opened up to the entire world as rapidly as existing monopoly segments could be induced to join, would maximize the advantage of society in benefitting from the innumerable human differences throughout the participating world. National political boundaries would disappear, to be sure, but in their places would arise whatever societal arrangements people wanted to serve the same purposes—and membership would be added as rapidly as the benefits became apparent to any person. The program would not need to await majority approval before it could start. The meaningless geographic identities of common societal interest, concerns, and presumed solutions would no longer be allowed to prevent progress in all these vital areas of social science and societal affairs. An Englishman would no longer need to be conscripted into enmity against an Irishman, merely because of the location of the two men’s homes and places of work. Cooperation to the fullest in societies of various sorts could then go on even though the people lived at a distance, for cooperation and common interest are usually not at all functions of the distance two persons may live from one another, as we know from all the things we do on this basis.

I have no illusions about being able to arrange this dream about an open society immediately, but it is something toward which to work.