

Spontaneous Order & Shared Space

by James Corbett

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[Source](#)

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5RNY79uHMY>

TRANSCRIPT

Quick. What comes to mind when you think of the word “order?”

If you’re like most people, you’ll think of something related to “law and order,” an old adage connoting justice and safety in a well-regulated society. This should be no surprise; the phrase “law and order” is invoked as a type of campaign promise or motto by any [number](#) of [politicians](#) in any [number](#) of [countries](#) around the [world](#) every single day. If nothing else, it has been drilled into the heads of American television viewers for the last two and a half decades thanks to the legal drama series of the same name.

A handful of more savvy individuals will think of the phrase

“New World Order,” a political idea popularized by Bush’s now infamous [September 11th \(1990\) speech](#) but boasting its own colorful political history going back to the [post-WWI era of Wilsonian diplomacy](#) and [H.G. Wells’ 1940 book](#) of the same name.

Some may even connect it to the Latin phrase *Ordo Ab Chao* (“order from chaos”) which is a [motto of the 33rd Degree](#) of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry. ‘Order out of chaos’ is, not coincidentally, a perfect description of false flag terrorism and other methods of manipulating public opinion: create a chaotic situation so that you can impose your pre-ordained “order.”

But whether we’re talking about “law and order” or the “New World Order” or “order out of chaos,” we’re ultimately talking about the same thing: an “order” based on a hierarchical view of society where a few lawgivers regulate, proscribe, manipulate, inhibit and control the actions of the masses.

What if I were to tell you there’s an entirely different conception of societal order, one that doesn’t revolve around hierarchy but in fact specifically refutes it? Well there is, and it’s called “spontaneous order.”

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So what is spontaneous order? In a nutshell, instead of envisioning society as a pyramid ordered by rules and regulations dictated by the elite at the top and enforced on the masses by an enforcer class, spontaneous order theory posits that society best functions as a decentralized network of free individuals participating in voluntary interactions.

The concept of “spontaneous order” has [arguably](#) been around since Zhuang Zhou, the Chinese philosopher of the 4th century BC who wrote that “Good order results spontaneously when

things are let alone.” The idea was further developed in the 18th century by the thinkers of the [Scottish Enlightenment](#) and in the 19th century by thinkers like [Frédéric Bastiat](#). It wasn’t until the 20th century, however, that the theory was named, codified and popularized by Austrian-born philosopher and economist F.A. Hayek.

In one (rather long) sentence of (rather inscrutable) academic jargon, Hayek described the idea of spontaneous order [this way](#):

“The central concept of liberalism is that under the enforcement of universal rules of just conduct, protecting a recognizable private domain of individuals, a spontaneous order of human activities of much greater complexity will form itself than could ever be produced by deliberate arrangement, and that in consequence the coercive activities of government should be limited to the enforcement of such rules, whatever other services government may at the same time render by administering those particular resources which have been placed at its disposal for those purposes”

In ordinary English, Hayek’s observation is at once embarrassingly simple and mischievously profound: the social order that arises from the free choice of individuals acting to protect their own interests will be more secure and more complex than any rationally ordered system could be.

In order to see why this is so, let’s turn to the brilliant 1958 Leonard Read essay, [“I, Pencil,”](#) in which an ordinary pencil narrates the surprisingly complex process by which it is assembled and manufactured from its constituent ingredients:

“I, Pencil, simple though I appear to be, merit your wonder and awe, a claim I shall attempt to prove. In fact, if you can understand me—no, that’s too much to ask of anyone—if you can become aware of the miraculousness which I symbolize, you can

help save the freedom mankind is so unhappily losing. I have a profound lesson to teach. And I can teach this lesson better than can an automobile or an airplane or a mechanical dishwasher because—well, because I am seemingly so simple.”

The central idea of the essay is that, as seemingly simple as the pencil appears to be, *“not a single person on the face of this earth knows how to make me.”*

Why? Because the creation of a pencil is not a one or two step process of assembling materials in a factory, but a globe-spanning effort involving the harvesting of cedar in Oregon, the mining of graphite in Ceylon, the collection of Mississippi clay, Italian pumice, rape-seed oil from the Dutch East Indies and dozens of other ingredients. Each of these ingredients has to be prepared in its own way. The cedar logs are shipped hundreds of miles away to be cut, kiln dried, tinted, waxed, and kiln dried again. The Mississippi clay is refined with ammonium hydroxide, mixed with graphite and sulfonated tallow and baked at 1800 degrees Fahrenheit before being treated with a hot mixture which includes candelilla wax from Mexico, paraffin wax, and hydrogenated natural fats. The rape-seed oil is reacted with sulfur chloride and mixed with various binding, vulcanizing and accelerating agents.

As confusing as this (partial) list is becoming, it only scrapes the surface of what is really involved in coordinating the assembly of these ingredients. Think of all the people involved in the mining and transportation of the graphite for the pencil’s core. There are not only the miners in Ceylon, but those who make their mining tools, those who make the paper sacks the graphite is transported in, those who make the string for tying the paper sacks, the crews who load the sacks onto ships for transport and the crews who make the ships themselves, the ship’s captain and crew, the harbor masters and lighthouse keepers that guide the shipment to its destination and those who transport it to the factory, not to mention all those who supply these workers with food and

clothes and other necessities. And that's just the graphite.

In the end it is truly mind-boggling to contemplate just how complex the production of one simple little pencil actually is. Surely no one person could even itemize and keep track of all of this activity, let alone direct it all. And yet it happens. The "simple" little pencil sitting on your desk is proof of that.

The lesson of Read's essay is that, counter-intuitive as it may seem, extremely complex operations not only require no single organizing authority but in fact don't even permit one.

As interesting as this idea is, so far it is still largely an economic (and academic) one. Yes, granted, the creation of various finished products from their constituent materials can be a complex process. And yes, granted, there isn't a single person who coordinates each and every worker in each and every part of that process. But what does this have to do with the ordering of society itself? We might not need a group of people to direct the making of pencils, but surely we need to regulate the complex and often dangerous activities we engage in as a society, don't we?

Well let's look at another example from our daily life. Statistics show that driving a car is one of the most dangerous activities that we engage in every single day, and few people could contemplate the idea of removing traffic lights, speed limits, lane markings and other basic regulations from the streets. Surely the rules of the road are what keep traffic flowing smoothly and prevent accidents, aren't they?

Surprisingly, the removal of various traffic restrictions have not only been tried time and again in cities across the world, but they have consistently been shown to lead to safer streets with reduced commute times with happier drivers and pedestrians. How is this possible?

As I pointed out in a [recent video](#) on my website, the concept of “spontaneous order” is one that has been demonstrated time and again on the roads of various cities around the world.

The example I highlighted in that video—that of Portishead in the UK, whose [experiment in removing traffic lights](#) from a key junction was so successful that they decided to make it permanent—is just one of many examples of a road design ideology known as “[Shared Space](#).”

Relying on the principles of spontaneous order, Shared Space advocates like the late Dutch traffic designer [Hans Monderman](#) postulate that making the roads “riskier” in fact made them safer. Rather than having everyone negotiating with the impersonal and inflexible rules of the road (signs, lights and markings), roads without such regulations require people to negotiate with the other people around them directly. Instead of seeing other road users as mere obstacles between themselves and the next green light, drivers are now forced to see and interact with other road users as actual humans. As crazy as the idea sounds, it has been implemented in a number of towns across Europe, from Ipswich in England to Ejby in Denmark to Ostende in Belgium and Makkinga in Holland, and the result has been a [dramatic decline in accidents](#). It seems that drivers, when left to negotiate with others for space on unrestricted roads, can act like adults, and a type of order emerges from those negotiations.

But what about the “hard cases?” It’s one thing to talk about order on the roads, but another thing to talk about order in a society where there are robberies, assaults, rapes and murders occurring on a daily basis. Is it possible to imagine any way of dealing with these types of problems other than how they are dealt with under the current system? Can we replace legislatures and court systems and law enforcement “authorities” with a decentralized, non-hierarchical system of justice? And if so, what would such a system look like?

Here again the problem may only seem like a problem because we have been conditioned to believe that the current system of laws, courts, and police are the only forms of justice imaginable. This system revolves around the idea that “law” is whatever is written down and voted on by legislators, gavelled down by judges or attested to by police. It promulgates the idea that getting offenders to pay money to the state or locking them in cages for prescribed amounts of time are the only possible conceptions of justice for their crime.

Opposed to this is the idea of a restorative justice system in which victims and communities are brought into dialogue to help determine how best to deal with offenders. What if the victim of a robbery (and the community as a whole) would actually benefit more from confronting and dialoguing with their offender than they would from putting him in a prison cell for x number of years?

Again, although the idea might seem counter-intuitive, restorative justice processes [have been shown](#) to leave victims with less post-traumatic stress and less longing for revenge against their offenders, and leaves violent offenders less likely to re-offend than traditional court trials. The process has been used to great success literally all over the world, from the [violent slums of urban Brazil](#) (where murder is the principal cause of death for those under the age of 25) to [Hawaiian prisoner rehabilitation programs](#) to [troubled English schools](#).

From the economy to the roads to the justice system, there are ways to imagine a society where central planners and glorified “lawgivers” are not needed in order to maintain “order.” This is not to say that we can transition from a highly centralized society to a completely decentralized one overnight. We have been conditioned our whole lives to interact with others around us through the laws, rules and procedures of our highly centralized society. It will take much deprogramming for us to re-discover how to interact with those around us as fellow

human beings. But it can be done.

In effect, we are on the brink of a transition from a youthful society that relies on “mommy government” and “daddy policeman” to govern our every interaction to an adult society that is discovering it can order and govern itself. It will not be an easy process, nor will it be a utopian one; there will always be law-breakers and those who go against the order of society. But we must understand that the idea that those disorderly elements can only be dealt with by ceding more of our power to centralized authorities is exactly what has led us to the brink of economic and societal collapse. Sometimes the best way to govern is not to govern at all.

The funny part is humanity has known all of this for thousands of years. Just read the [57th Chapter](#) of famed Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*:

*Do not control the people with laws,
Nor violence nor espionage,
But conquer them with inaction.*

For:

*The more morals and taboos there are,
The more cruelty afflicts people;
The more guns and knives there are,
The more factions divide people;
The more arts and skills there are,
The more change obsoletes people;
The more laws and taxes there are,
The more theft corrupts people.*

*Yet take no action, and the people nurture each other;
Make no laws, and the people deal fairly with each other;
Own no interest, and the people cooperate with each other;
Express no desire, and the people harmonize with each other.*

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