The rationality of learning by doing

The year is 2022. A time of great turmoil and change. Members of countless societies face special challenges. Securing justice into the future will be no easy task. Professor Robson investigates how members of societies can better secure justice, offering a fresh approach to this perennial social problem.

EXPERIMENTS IN LIVING
Why and when should societies change their structures? How easy is it to do so? Which pathways of change, if any, should citizens pursue? How can societies try different ways of organizing themselves, without creating harm from the risk associated with social experimentation? Should people try, say, living off-the-grid, en masse, to avoid the potential harms of technological over-reliance? Should communities move toward more collective ownership or more individual ownership? What inhibits individuals and societies from making improvements, if and when improvements ought to be made?

These are the sorts of questions that Professor Robson addresses. He expands on the work of theorists, such as John Stuart Mill and Robert Nozick, who argued for experimenting with different ways of living to morally improve lives and social institutions. Taking this proposal beyond theoretical reflection, Professor Robson evaluates the value, risk, and rationality of such experimentation, and considers how social and political innovation is achievable within the basic constraints of functional political traditions.

RATIONAL CONSTRAINTS
Professor Robson explains that trying different social and political systems enables people to identify and implement social and legal arrangements that are improvements by the lights of justice. These kinds of ‘experiments’ can help to show whether a particular kind of political system improves people’s lives and societies. Quite importantly, members of other communities can observe and learn from the experiments and experiences of others. Professor Robson examines the potential for an approach to trying new ways of living that rationally balances potential risks and rewards. He points out that there are often weighty risks that can be prohibitive – at times quite rightly – when implementing social experiments on a wide scale without first understanding the benefits and harms that could accompany such experimentation. For this reason, many individuals are likely to be unwilling to try new ways of living in community and new social institutions. What Professor Robson calls the ‘Prudential Rationality Constraint’ (PRC) inhibits people (for better or worse) from trying experiments that might benefit them. These principles include, for instance, risk aversion and loss aversion. Many people are fundamentally reluctant to engage in activities that could cause them to incur losses, and this is a significant barrier to experimenting with new social arrangements. The PRC arises because people want to protect their own interests in the short term and overall, even if experimentation is better for most or all in the long term; so the PRC is a powerful constraint on people’s willingness to experiment. Essentially, this means that people are only likely to do so when there is an incentive or motive to try new social and political systems. People are likely to weigh the costs and benefits of new approaches and will want to consider the usefulness of an experiment.

Professor Robson explains that, in addition to prudential rationality, which impedes experimentation (sometimes justifiably, sometimes not), there are other principles that influence and deter people from engaging in social experiments. These principles might include, for instance, risk aversion and loss aversion. Many people are fundamentally reluctant to engage in activities that could cause them to incur losses, and this is a significant barrier to experimenting with new social arrangements. The PRC arises because people want to protect their own interests in the short term and overall, even if experimentation is better for most or all in the long term; so the PRC is a powerful constraint on people’s willingness to experiment. Essentially, this means that people are only likely to do so when there is an incentive or motive to try new social and political systems. People are likely to weigh the costs and benefits of new approaches and will want to consider the usefulness of an experiment.

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Professor Robson addresses fundamental questions of social progress and how societies can experiment with different political and social systems without unduly disregarding tradition. This experimentation enables individuals and groups to learn how to better secure justice and improve society more generally. However, it also requires overcoming constraints associated with rationality, which prevent people and communities from taking the necessary risks to forge better ways of doing and living. Incantivating innovation through entrepreneurship is one way of systematically establishing risk-acceptable pathways toward improvements in justice.

Professor Robson explains that examples abound in history of moderately risky experiments, which people try, and learn from, all the time. These more moderate experiments usually still operate within the fundamental rules of a society, and so need not challenge those rules. Moderate experimentation thus can enable societies to progress without being exposed to the potential large downsides of radical experiments.
that may cause social instability and wide-scale social harm. While many may be reluctant to experiment with new processes, experimentation is fundamental for progress and learning about new ways of living and doing that better secure justice. So a key question is how to encourage and incentivize moderate experimentation.

**ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION**

Professor Robson says that to overcome the constraints of the PRC, societies have long used public and private strategies for incentivizing experiments in living. Diverse strategies will appeal to different groups depending on their prior views on questions of political morality. For example, laws can be and have been modified to encourage experiments in living by introducing limited liability for entrepreneurs designing new products, which can benefit people while reducing the risk associated with product development. Limiting liability can encourage innovators to take the necessary risks to safely test ideas that can add value to society. In addition, Professor Robson argues that there are many examples of entrepreneurial success stories involving social experiments that have much improved people's lives. For example, medical tourism leverages innovative entrepreneurial health schemes to help people access better medical care than what is ordinarily available to them. And an example of an innovative civic experiment is the proposal for a state-provided minimum income, federalist systems in which social and political experiments can originate at local levels and be replicated elsewhere or higher up if successful.

Only a small number of intrepid individuals are required to take the measured risks needed to improve societies.

Why and when should societies change their structural hierarchy in a directed and mindful pathway of change? If any, should citizens pursue?

**References**