

The Career of Robert Moses

City Planning as a Microcosm of Socialism

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Robert Moses was the dominant figure in shaping the built environment of New York City and New York State for more than three decades, from roughly the 1930s to the 1960s. Mayors and governors feared to defy him. The public works that he was responsible for creating include Shea Stadium, the World's Fair Grounds in Queens, Jones Beach, the Triborough Bridge, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the United Nations Headquarters, the Van Wyck Expressway, the Whitestone Expressway, the Bruckner Expressway, the Henry Hudson Parkway, the Long Island Expressway, the Robert Moses Power Dam at Niagra, the Robert Moses Power Dam at Massena, the Grand Central Parkway, the Southern State Parkway, the Northern State Parkway, Downing Stadium, Astoria Pool, the Major Deegan Expressway, the Alexander Hamilton Bridge, Orchard Beach, the Throgs Neck Bridge, the Cross Bay Bridge, the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge, and numerous other roads, playgrounds, parks, and housing projects.¹ Moses exerted all of this public influence even though he never held an elective office.

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1. All historical information on Moses's career is taken from Caro 1975. We do not cite page numbers for the information we take to be generally available public facts about Moses, such as that he built Shea Stadium, in the interest of not littering the text with pointless footnotes. Only for direct quotes or for interpretations by Caro, rather than for uncontroversial facts about Moses, do we include page numbers.

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Although Moses always portrayed himself and was often portrayed by others as acting in the public interest, the history of his career illustrates his growing self-absorption; his concern with his own vision, whatever impact its realization might have on others; and his love of power for its own sake. In fact, we contend, Moses's career presents a microcosm of the "fatal conceit" of socialism (Hayek 1988).

The Errors of Constructivism

Early in his career, Moses was an ardent reformer who sincerely believed that he could rationally restructure society for human betterment. Although even in his college days a hint of the later Machiavellian Moses showed itself,² it seems clear that principle generally stood high above expediency as he launched his attempts to reform government and society.

However, even as a sincere reformer, Moses held ideas that reflected socialism's fatal conceit: the notion that because society is the result of human activity, humans therefore can restructure society in whatever fashion pleases them. F. A. Hayek calls this belief *constructivism*, or "the idea that the ability to acquire skills stems from reason" (1988, 21). Of course, because reasoning is itself a human skill, the ability to reason cannot be a prerequisite of the ability to acquire skills.

Constructivism presumes that civilization is the product of a thought-out plan (Hayek 1978, 6). According to Hayek, however, human reason always operates in the context of social institutions, norms, rules, and customs that we acquire from contact with other people and that enable us to think about and plan rationally for the future. Although our actions can influence such social entities, they are at the same time highly dependent on them. Therefore, human reason did not and could not precede civilization; rather, the two evolved together (1978, 3). Civilization could not have arisen as a planned achievement. Instead, it is a spontaneous order: the result of human action but not of human design (Hayek 1967, 96).

Moses's constructivism appeared early in his public life—for example, in his scheme devised between 1914 and 1915 to "rationalize" New York City's civil service. Moses wanted "all traces of the old . . . washed away" to be replaced by a "completely new" and "all-embracing" system (Caro 1975, 75). He hoped to measure the performance of city workers on an objective numerical scale:

All government service, he said, could be divided into sixteen categories: executive, legislative, judicial, professional, subprofessional, educational, investigational, inspectional, clerical, custodial, street cleaning,³ fire, police, institutional, skilled trades, and labor. . . . Each job could be scientifically

2. See the story of Moses's attempt to obtain funds fraudulently for the Yale swim team (Caro 1975, 2).

3. The essentially arbitrary nature of the "sixteen categories" could not be made more apparent than by the designation of "street cleaning" as a category of the same sort as "legislative."

analyzed to show its “functions” and “responsibilities.” Each function and responsibility—and there were dozens of them for most jobs—could be given a precise mathematical weight corresponding to its importance in the over-all job. And the success of the employee in each function and responsibility could be given a precise mathematical grade. These grades would, added together according to weight and combined in service records for each employee, “furnish conclusions expressed in arithmetical . . . terms.” (Caro 1975, 75)

Moses’s scheme relied on the existence of an objective measure by which one gauged the value of workers’ contributions to “the social good.” Decades before Moses proposed this plan, however, Carl Menger, a pioneer in the postclassical theory of value and the founder of the Austrian school of economics, had debunked the idea of objective values. Since Menger, economic theory has taught that value is not inherent in a good, but rather the result of the subjective significance that an agent attaches to it (1994, 116).

Moses’s attempt to calculate “objectively” the value of city workers’ contributions is closely analogous to the socialists’ attempt to compute value in the absence of market prices. As Ludwig von Mises, a giant of the Austrian school, pointed out, rational economic calculation depends on money prices that reflect buyers and sellers’ subjective valuations in free markets ([1936] 1981, 98). Employing arithmetic to help choose between the different scarce means that might be used to reach a given end represents a great advance in the capacity for human planning. However, without the aid of money prices, making such calculations in a social context is a completely arbitrary exercise (102). Seen in this light, Moses’s entire scheme was nonsensical in that it relied on entirely arbitrary numerical assignments to provide an “objective” method of calculating a worker’s worth.

Moses’s constructivism is also reflected in the comprehensive nature of the vision—formed early in his career—of what he believed to be the optimal solution to the transportation needs of New York City and the surrounding region, which he spent his professional life trying to bring into being, with significant success. The partial list of his accomplishments given at the beginning of this article—the expressways, the freeways, the parks, the stadiums, and the bridges—suggests the scope and scale of his vision.⁴ It is a hallmark of a constructivist’s fatal conceit not only that he has a grand vision of society’s future, but also that this vision significantly affects the private lives of a great many individuals while disregarding those people’s own plans and dreams. Moses’s biographer, Robert A. Caro, was impressed that only a few people out of the scores that he encountered during his research could come close to matching “the shaping vision of how to plan the most heavily populated and densely congested metropolitan region in the world” that Moses possessed (1975, 578). How-

4. For a brief overview of this comprehensive vision, see Caro 1975, 340–43.

ever, unlike some constructivists who are *merely* visionaries, Moses acquired, over a lifetime of skillful and ruthless accumulation, the political power to impose his vision on a grand scale. As a result, he lived to witness many of the consequences of this vision, both intended and unintended.

Why the Worst Get on Top

In *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek describes why, under an interventionist economic system, “the worst get on top”: “Just as the democratic statesman who sets out to plan economic life will soon be confronted with the alternative of either assuming dictatorial powers or abandoning his plans, so the totalitarian dictator would soon have to choose between disregard of ordinary morals and failure. It is for this reason that the unscrupulous and uninhibited are likely to be more successful in a society tending toward totalitarianism” (1944, 149). Moses’s career paints a portrait of an increasingly totalitarian regime in miniature. He had seen his early, idealistic attempts at government reform come to naught. However, in the early 1920s, under the tutelage of Governor Alfred E. Smith and Belle Moskowitz,⁵ he learned how to play politics to win.

The New York City and New York State governments gradually had been restricted in their scope for effective action by a variety of special interests, especially the Tammany Hall political machine and the upstate utility monopolies. People saw their tax money being spent but few concrete results to which the government could point. In such a situation, “it is the general demand for quick and determined government action that is the dominating element . . . [and] dissatisfaction with the slow and cumbersome course of democratic procedure which makes action for action’s sake the goal. It is then the man or party who seems strong enough ‘to get things done’ who exercises the greatest appeal” (Hayek 1944, 150). Moses saw himself in just such a light, declaring: “‘The important thing is to get things done’” (qtd. in Caro 1975, 218).

Whereas previously Moses had been idealistic and unwilling to compromise (Caro 1975, 98), his approach altered dramatically under his tutors’ influence. For example, when some of his reform colleagues pointed out to him that Governor Smith was telling lies about certain aspects of state government during his 1922 campaign for governor, Moses “threw back his head and laughed at us and said, ‘Why, we know that. But it sounds a hell of a lot better this way, doesn’t it?’” (Caro 1975, 135). His letters began to contain telling phrases such as “‘You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs,’” and “‘If the end doesn’t justify the means, what does?’” (218). Certainly, the end does justify the means, in the sense that one would employ a means to help reach a particular end only if one thought that achieving that end was valuable enough to more than compensate for the cost of the means. But no end justifies taking any and all means; in particular, no end can justify the use of unjust means. Moses lost sight of these distinctions as he became more powerful, if indeed he had ever grasped them.

5. Moskowitz, a New York political activist, was an influential advisor to Governor Smith.

As his taste for power grew, Moses became highly skilled in the art of drafting legislation. He buried new authority for himself and his commissions in the arcane language of a bill, thereby hiding his true intent from politicians who might oppose it (Caro 1975, 141). For example, in writing legislation to establish the Long Island State Park Commission, Moses slipped the word *appropriation* into a clause, noting that *appropriation* would be defined as in a particular section of an obscure 1884 bill. All legislators sitting at the time Moses proposed the bill understood *appropriation* as meaning their own act of allocating funds. The archaic bill that Moses referenced, however, defined the word as meaning outright seizure of private property by the state of New York, based on a mere declaration by a state official that the property had been “appropriated” (Caro 1975, 174). Thus, Moses tricked the legislature into granting him, as president of the Long Island State Park Commission, the power to seize any amount of Long Island property he desired, up to the entirety of Suffolk and Nassau counties.

Moses’s thirst for power led him to abandon his early reformist principles with a speed that stunned some of his former, less politically pragmatic colleagues (Caro 1975, 172). He came to hold the rule of law in contempt and once boasted: “*Nothing I have ever done has been tinged with legality*” (Caro 1975, 220, emphasis in original).

Moses used the power he acquired against those least able to resist him and least likely to help him in the future. For example, while choosing the route for the Northern State Parkway through Cold Spring Harbor, he shifted his planned route south several times. The first move came when his relative, Otto Kahn, donated \$10,000 to the park commission to have the route moved to the south of his private golf course. A handful of wealthy estate owners managed to get the route moved farther and farther south until finally it crossed the land of a struggling farmer, James Roth. At that point, Moses would not be budged. The parkway route would ruin Roth’s farm by slicing it in two and covering his most fertile soil with asphalt. “For men of wealth and influence, he had moved [the parkway] more than three miles south of its original location. But James Roth possessed neither money nor influence. And for James Roth . . . Moses would not move the parkway one foot” (Caro 1975, 277–79).

Through most of his career, the personal financial benefit that flowed to Moses from this sort of rent seeking was surprisingly small. Indeed, as he and his wife approached old age and his wife’s health declined, he became so concerned about their finances that he schemed to take control of the 1964–65 World’s Fair to supplement his income (Caro 1975, 1115).

However, Moses gained enormous nonpecuniary benefits from his positions, including perhaps most important the political power to impose his will on and to realize his vision in the world’s greatest city. Indeed, part of his fatal conceit was his determination to have his way in spite of the enormous economic disruption that doing so would cause. Still, we do not doubt that Moses believed that the ends he

envisioned for millions of people *did* justify the unscrupulous means he used to achieve them.

Although Moses attempted (usually successfully) to portray himself as the champion of the people against the special interests, his concept of “the people” was cramped. For example, he decided that “colored people” would have access to only one city pool in New York.⁶ At other pools that might attract nonwhites, Moses made sure that only white lifeguards and attendants worked, and he kept the water temperature low because he believed that “[Negroes] don’t like cold water” (Caro 1975, 513–14).

Moreover, Moses’s constructivism led him to see the workings of urban society in a methodologically holistic perspective in which averages and aggregates, not purposeful individual agents, are the basic units of analysis. This perspective leads analysts to treat “the people” and their lives as statistical in nature and to set statistical goals such as so many square feet of parks per person or so many miles of paved road per car. Thus, for example, where some thinkers who are more methodologically individualist, such as the pathbreaking urbanologist Jane Jacobs, distinguish between slums that successfully meet the needs of poor people and slums that do not, Moses and his ilk viewed all slums as the same. Moreover, the “rational” response to the existence of slums is always the same: slum clearance and urban renewal. Jacobs, in contrast, appreciates that “real people are unique” and that, “severed from their relationships, they are destroyed as effective social beings—sometimes for a little while, sometimes forever” ([1961] 1992, 136).⁷ Like Hayek, she sees the city as a spontaneous order that emerges as the unintended consequence of individual interactions at the street level.⁸

Unintended Consequences

Although some unintended consequences reinforce the beneficial aspects of spontaneous urban orders, others disrupt them. The attempt to replace spontaneous social orders with constructed ones always produces results unanticipated by the constructors because the rules and principles with which rationalist planners hope to replace an unplanned activity are always “mere abridgements of the activity itself; they do not exist in advance of the activity” (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, 121).

For example, Mises contends that interference with market prices “produces results contrary to its purpose . . . it makes conditions worse, not better, *from the point of view of the government and those backing its interference*” ([1949] 1998, 758, emphasis added). Ikeda points out that the “unintended consequences” of interven-

6. For Moses, “colored people” meant blacks, Puerto Ricans, and probably various other nonwhites.

7. Compare Hayek’s critique of the use of statistics in central planning (Hayek 1948, 83).

8. For more on the relation between Jacobs’s ideas and those of Austrian economics and of libertarian political philosophy, see Callahan and Ikeda 2003.

tions are a ramification of the knowledge problem highlighted by Hayek because the multiplicity of possible responses to the intervention by individuals results, for various reasons, in “radical ignorance” of what the outcome will be or indeed has so far been (1997, 100–102). Public officials’ almost inevitable response to having their intentions thus frustrated is to demand even more political power to deal with the very problems that their prior interventions created, and they typically get it (Ikeda 1997, 91–151). This dynamic is evident in the outcome of Moses’s public policies.

His traffic projects often had devastating unintended consequences on the neighborhoods in their vicinity. Jacobs describes the process by which a highway constructed through the heart of a neighborhood could destroy it and the adjoining neighborhoods by creating a “border vacuum,” an area rendered lifeless and ultimately unsafe by the lack of people venturing across it ([1961] 1992, 257–69).

Moses managed to kill a number of neighborhoods in just this way. As a consequence, many of them were redlined for urban renewal. For example, the construction of the Henry Hudson Parkway transformed the quaint, villagelike Bronx neighborhood Spuyten Duyvil into “a formless, shapeless mass of high-rise apartment houses” by slicing it in half (Caro 1975, 565). The same parkway also destroyed the last forest in Manhattan and the last freshwater marsh in the whole city (564–65). The Gowanus Parkway, another Moses project, wreaked havoc on the neighborhood around Third Avenue in the Sunset Park area of Brooklyn (522).

Moses’s public-housing projects were equally plagued by unintended consequences, again of a kind described by Jacobs ([1961] 1992, 392–401). As she points out, the wealth of most residents of lively but poor neighborhoods is found not mainly in private holdings but in the personal satisfactions that arise from informal public networks and affiliations—for example, from participating in school and church activities, from being a good neighbor, and from keeping an eye on the street. These networks emerge when people see public spaces as places in which they can safely engage in informal contact. Such spaces must have a variety of interesting uses so that they attract significant numbers of people at many different times of the day. Slum clearance and urban renewal à la Moses bulldozed many such “slums” (that is, communities where poor people live) as well as the social relationships that made the people who lived in them social beings. High-rise “skyscrapers in a park” cut residents off from each other and made districts monotonous border vacuums that attracted only the kind of people who didn’t want their activities noticed and thus repelled everyone else.

Those displaced from their homes, because they were poor, tended quite naturally to migrate to the most attractive nearby neighborhoods, but this migration typically created overcrowding, disrupted social networks, and undermined the liveliness that had existed previously in those neighborhoods, making them prime candidates for the federal bulldozer. According to Caro, Moses’s urban-renewal policy was “creating new slums faster than it was clearing old ones” (1975, 976), another example of the unintended consequences of public policy creating a demand for yet further intervention.

Even the traffic alleviation that Moses sought while damaging neighborhoods with highway projects was not achieved: an unintended consequence of the new highways was an increased amount of driving (Caro 1975, 563–64, 897–98, 911–12). New parkways on Long Island, intended to solve the problem of access to Long Island parks “for generations,” instead solved it “for about three weeks” (515). Once again, the constructivist response to these problems was to push for the state and federal governments to build even more miles of highway to relieve the seemingly relentless problem of traffic congestion. In addition, by artificially stimulating the creation of suburban developments, such highway building contributed to the current calls for “smart growth” and a “new urbanism” intended to contain the urban sprawl often attributed to unfettered capitalist development. The advocates of New Urbanism hope to repopulate America’s dwindling downtowns through more rational urban designs that counteract the allegedly centrifugal forces of the “free market.”⁹

Conclusion

The career of Robert Moses, which had a tremendous impact on the day-to-day life of tens of millions of people, presents a paradigmatic example of the fatal conceit of constructivist planners. All of the major pitfalls of constructivism pointed out by Hayek, Mises, and other critics of interventionism—unintended and unwanted consequences, the inability to calculate rationally what means to apply to achieve an end, the abandonment of ordinary morality, and the extreme disregard for the wishes of those whose lives are being planned—appear in sharp relief in that career.

There is no evidence that Moses ever studied seriously the constructivist political writings of V. I. Lenin or the hyperrationalist architectural theory of the urban planner Le Corbusier. Indeed, Moses was bluntly anticommunist and, except perhaps in his youth, had no patience with academic pursuits that did not directly aid in “getting things done” (Caro 1975, 471). Yet the United States has had perhaps no more devoted practitioner of constructivism in politics and in architecture than Robert Moses, a man who prominently displayed so many of its conceits.

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9. For an appraisal of these issues, see Ikeda 2004 and the symposium of which that paper is a part. See also O’Toole 2000.

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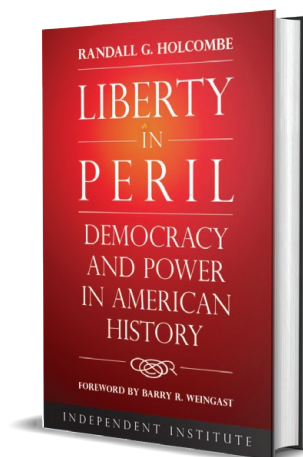
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