

On perverse emergent orders

Nona P. Martin and Virgil Henry Storr

I. Introduction

Emergent or spontaneous orders are generally looked at favorably, as many of them are socially beneficial. They are typically seen as a testament to the wisdom of crowds, the amazing capacity of humans to create complex patterns and systems without having to be made to do so by some higher authority, central planner or intelligent designer. Emergent orders rely on individuals making adjustments that are in their own particular interests in reaction to their particular circumstances. These adjustments result in an order that none of the individuals was trying to create. As Ferguson (1782: 205) famously remarked, “the crowd of mankind, are directed in their establishments and measures, by the circumstances in which they are placed; and seldom are turned from their way, to follow the plan of any single projector. Every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.”

Many of the institutions that human societies rely on are emergent orders. The market is an emergent order that is critical to the economic vitality of human societies and, when unencumbered, operates to ensure that resources flow to their highest valued use with an enviable precision and without central direction. In the market, participants receive signals in the form of price shifts which guide their responses to changes. The average consumer, for instance, does not need to be told that a citrus virus is affecting orange farms this season resulting in a smaller orange yield nor does he need to be made to reduce his orange consumption by instituting a ration on oranges and orange products. Instead, because there are fewer oranges, the price of oranges, orange juice and other orange products will increase which signals to consumers that they should buy less oranges, that is, to self ration and to use available substitutes (e.g. apples, flavored drinks, etc). The market is a phenomenal system of

feedback and self-adjustment that is in many respects the exemplar of a constructive spontaneous order.

All spontaneous orders, however, are not socially beneficial.¹ Perverse emergent orders can also arise. Like language, the common law, society itself and other positive spontaneous orders, perverse emergent orders are the result of human action but not human design. But, unlike positive spontaneous orders, perverse emergent orders cannot be said to be socially beneficial. Although these orders are arguably quite common, spontaneous order theorists have not paid much attention to them. Beyond acknowledging that emergent orders are not always beneficial, not a whole lot has been written which outlines the nature of perverse emergent orders, the feedback mechanisms which sustain them and the conditions under which they emerge.

Two possible examples of perverse emergent orders that deserve attention are (a) negative belief systems and (b) mob behavior. By negative belief systems, we mean to describe a range of shared beliefs and cultural attitudes that might hamper individual and social progress. Systems of discrimination would be one example.² Indeed, the history of mankind is littered with communities where individuals are discriminated against because of various factors such as gender, race, religion, class or ethnicity. When members of the discriminated group are less successful than members of other groups who are not similarly constrained or locked out of opportunities to better themselves, the system of prejudice is reinforced (Oliver 1989). Other examples of shared beliefs and cultural attitudes that can potentially hinder both individual and social progress abound. Members of some communities have perceptions of high power distance; these perceptions are negatively correlated with entrepreneurship and social economic growth (Hofstede 1980). Also, hard work is simply deprecated in some communities and the link between hard work and success questioned; again, these attitudes are negatively correlated with economic prosperity (Storr 2004). What is common about these negative belief systems and cultural attitudes is that they typically emerge without central direction and tend to be self-reinforcing.

Mobs can, similarly, form without direction from a central figure and, even when some individual or group is responsible for bringing the mob together, mob behavior can be and often is other than what that central figure or group intended. Non-violent protests sometimes turn violent even though protest organizers earnestly try to prevent violence. Although mob lynchings and gang brawls can be planned, they often erupt, members of the mob feeding off each other's anger until violence breaks out and grows more intense. What is interesting is that these eruptions are often "governed" by rules concerning who to target and what type and degree of violence is appropriate.

Focusing on representative cases of these two categories, this article hopes to advance our understanding of the nature of perverse emergent orders. Our motivation is twofold. First, we wish to demonstrate that the spontaneous character of a social order does not, by itself, guarantee that the order will be beneficial. Second, we wish to show the efficacy of advancing (explicit) invisible hand explanations of social phenomena that are not frequently treated by spontaneous order theorists.

The cases that we focus on are from the Bahamas, an archipelago off the coast of Florida. Specifically, we will examine *rabbyism*, a system of beliefs that is transmitted through Bahamian folklore and fiction, which we argue is perverse because of how it colors economic, political and social life in the colony. We will also look at the 1942 riot that occurred in the main commercial district of this typically quiet island paradise. This episode of civil unrest, we contend, was clearly spontaneous as no one planned the protest or the resulting violence. It was also quite orderly even though a great deal of property was destroyed. The violence was not random and the rioters were clearly governed by certain rules of conduct. Before discussing these specific examples of perverse spontaneous orders, however, we will look to Hayek for hints about the key properties of these kinds of orders.

II. Hayek and the properties of perverse spontaneous orders

Hayek has noted that spontaneous (social) orders have the following characteristics: (a) they can be meaningfully described as orders; (b) they are the result of human action; (c) they are not the result of human design; (d) the elements of the order follow rules of conduct; and (e) they are self-reinforcing. This list may not be exhaustive, spontaneous orders may have more in common than the five characteristics listed above, but, we contend, the above criteria are both necessary and sufficient to identify a phenomena as a spontaneous order. Each deserves further exposition.

First, a spontaneous order must be recognizable as an order. “By ‘order,’” Hayek (1973: 36) explains, he means to describe “a state of affairs in which a multiplicity of elements of various kinds are so related to each other that we may learn from our acquaintance with some spatial or temporal part of the whole to form correct expectations concerning the rest.” In many respects, an order is similar to a sentence. Like a sentence, an order is comprised of constituent elements (i.e. words). Also like the relationships between the words in a sentence, the relationships between the elements that make up an order are important and significant. Proximity and sequence matter. Just as changing the distance or arrangement of the words in a sentence can dramatically alter its meaning, changing the temporal or spatial relationship between the elements

that comprise an order can dramatically alter its nature. Additionally, just as the borders of a sentence can be demarcated (i.e. the sentence can be said to have a beginning and an end, a word can be described as being a part of a given sentence or not a part of that sentence), so too can the boundaries of an order be identified, be it concretely as in the case of a firm or abstractly/conceptually as in the case of a culture. A spontaneous order is an identifiable phenomenon made up of interrelated parts.

Second, a spontaneous (social) order is the result of purposeful human action (Hayek 1973: 37). They are identifiable and observable social arrangements and patterns that came about through the coordinated actions of self-regarding individuals. The pattern of lines that form in front of the open check-out registers at a supermarket is an example of a spontaneous order.³ The lines are the result of store managers deciding for a variety of reasons to staff certain registers during certain hours, register operators and baggers working their appointed shifts, and individual customers, having completed their shopping in that store for the moment, choosing between the possible registers (opting usually for the shortest and/or fastest moving). That the lines in front of the open registers in a grocery store tend to be of equal length is the result of the self-interested actions of various categories of individuals (i.e. store managers, cashiers and customers). Although it is possible to reify lines in a grocery store, groups, societies and other social wholes and to pretend as if they are entities that have purposes and interests, spontaneous orders are social phenomena that can not be meaningfully divorced from the self-interested albeit coordinated actions of individuals which bring them about.

Third, spontaneous orders are the result of human action but are not the result of deliberate design (Hayek 1973: 37). Stated another way, a spontaneous order is an unintended consequence of the nonetheless purposeful action of multiple individuals. This is what distinguishes spontaneous orders from what Hayek characterizes as made orders. Made orders, which may also be described as artificial orders, organizations or *taxis* are deliberately constructed by an individual or group of individuals. Think a corporation or a marching band. Grown orders or spontaneous orders are different. If an order is like a sentence, then a spontaneous order is like a sentence with no author. It is as if the words, aware of the rules of grammar, arranged themselves into a meaningful structure that conveyed a sentiment that no individual word in the sentence intended to convey. A spontaneous order is a side effect not the goal of individual human action.

Fourth, the elements of a spontaneous order follow particular rules of conduct (Hayek 1973: 43). For Hayek, the rules which govern human action in a particular context, the informal and formal institutions which exist, will have a profound impact on the kind of spontaneous order that emerges and whether

an order emerges at all.⁴ These rules, Hayek notes, can be tacit. We need not be able to articulate the rules that govern our behavior for our behavior to contribute to the emergence of an order. In fact, Hayek (Ibid: 43) claims that “man certainly does not know all the rules that guide his actions.” Hayek also notes that for an order to result it is key that the rules which govern the actions of individuals are such that, by obeying those rules, the individuals produce an order.⁵ Arguably, the rules consistent with the emergence of a social order, define and delimit our choices, reduce genuine uncertainty and, thus, enable us to act in a world where the future is not only unknown but unknowable.⁶

Fifth, spontaneous orders are self-reinforcing or self-generating. Stated another way, there must be (positive and negative) feedback mechanisms which guide individuals’ decisions and actions if the order is to emerge and survive.⁷ In the market order, for instance, profit and loss acts as a feedback mechanism. Entrepreneurs who earn profits are encouraged to continue doing what they were doing. Entrepreneurs who earn losses are, on the other hand, encouraged to stop doing what they were doing. In this way, as Adam Smith suggested, the feedback of profit and loss encourages entrepreneurs to provide the goods and services that are desired by their fellow men and discourages their offering goods and services that their fellow men do not want.

Notice, however, that none of the characteristics described above are by themselves sufficient to warrant our viewing spontaneous orders as socially beneficial or harmful. Hayek seems to have been aware of this. Merely stating that individuals are governed by rules, Hayek (Ibid: 45) writes, would leave “character of the resulting order very indeterminate and by itself certainly would not be sufficient to give it a beneficial character.” Similarly, when defending the beneficial character of the market order, Hayek relies not just on the spontaneous character of that order but argues that it also serves our ends “by increasing the prospects or chances of every one of a greater command over the various goods (i.e. commodities and services) than we are able to secure in any other way” (Hayek 1976: 107). Additionally, “the cosmos of the market ... serves the multiplicity of separate and incommensurable ends of all of its separate members” (Ibid: 108).

In addition to acknowledging that spontaneous orders can be socially harmful, Hayek also gives us some insight into how we might identify socially beneficial spontaneous orders. “For the resulting order to be beneficial,” Hayek (1973: 45) argued, “people must observe some conventional rule, that is, rules which do not simply follow from their desires and their insight into relations of cause and effect, but which are normative and tell them what they ought to or ought not to do.” Although Hayek is perhaps right that all beneficial orders are in fact brought about by the actions of individuals obeying conventional rules, the existence or nonexistence of normative rules which

curb desires and shape perceptions do not by themselves determine whether the resulting order is beneficial or non-beneficial. Recall that during the American Reconstruction members of lynch mobs followed conventional rules which discouraged their feeling compassion for their fellow human beings and encouraged their meeting any transgression of the color line with sharp reprisals.

Still, there is something to Hayek's instinct to turn his attention to the rules that govern the elements of an order to determine its nature. The rules which led to the creation and survival of the order and the nature of the feedback mechanisms that are at work within the order have a lot to do with whether the resulting order will be beneficial or not. If in a market, for instance, the feedback mechanisms were opposite than they in fact are, if entrepreneurs were not rewarded for serving their fellows but were instead punished, then it is unlikely that a beneficial spontaneous order would emerge (i.e. one that increased our prospects). Similarly, if the rules in some society did not protect private property but abrogated it, then an order where the powerful laid claim to all the resources rather than one where resources flowed to their highest valued use is likely to result.

In the following sections we will examine two concrete examples of perverse emergent orders (i.e. socially harmful spontaneous orders). Special emphasis will be placed on the ways that they meet the criteria outlined above for designating a social phenomenon as a spontaneous order, special attention will be paid to the rules and feedback mechanisms which led to the emergence of these perverse orders.

III. Spontaneous social violence

Episodes of social violence are, undoubtedly, perverse spontaneous orders. That they can erupt spontaneously without there being a central planner and often without a central leader or figure is perhaps obvious. They are clearly the result of human action but not human design. That they are self-reinforcing orders where elements are governed by rules is perhaps not as obvious. Social violence, however, rarely involves indiscriminate violence; it is usually aimed at the persons or property of members of particular groups. Stated another way, social violence is rule-governed.

Consider, for instance, a riot. Lang and Lang (1968: 122) have defined riots as "collective disturbances" which "can be fruitfully viewed as spontaneously shared collective defense, i.e., a collectively sanctioned defense against demoralization through the spontaneous coalescence of individual reactions in a distressing situation." Indeed, the fact that a riot is a collective disturbance should not mask the fact that it is the result of coordinated but

individual action. Riots are the result of the “spontaneous coalescence of *individual* reactions in a distressing situation” where “*members* of an aggrieved population act directly and coercively to assert certain norms against established authority” (Lang and Lang 1968: 122). In stressing that they arise spontaneously, Lang and Lang are also confirming that human design is not driving this group response to either a member of the group or the group as a whole being wronged. Although planned, peaceful protest is possible, riots are evidence that authorities or group leaders are sometimes simply unable to stop these violent, collective moves to express despair and seek redress. As Piven and Cloward (1978: 37) write, “organizers and leaders cannot prevent the ebbing of protest.” The “ebbing of protest” is not the result of “the purposive effort of leaders and organizers” (Ibid). At best, “they can only try to win whatever can be won while it can be won” (Ibid).

Rioters act out of anger in response to disappointments and frustrated hopes. Riots take place when ordinary life is interrupted by structural breakdowns, when expectations are not met, when pressures from without bear down too egregiously or when a combination of all these factors occur (Piven 1978). They are, ultimately, an attempt by members of an aggrieved population, to have their grievances heard and their problems redressed when all other avenues for airing their issues and seeking redress have been exhausted or appear closed off. As Lang and Lang (1968: 122) argue, the probability of violence emerging as “the spontaneously sanctioned collective form of defense” against demoralization is increased if “institutionalized channels for the expression of grievances are ineffective or when they are, or seem to be, lacking.”

The 1942 riot that occurred on Bay Street, Nassau, Bahamas beautifully illustrates these points.⁸ On June 1, 1942, a large group of disgruntled laborers demanding higher wages marched to Bay Street, the main commercial district and the political center of Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas. About a month earlier, an American contractor had opened two construction sites to build operational training bases on the island. Although these sites employed several thousand unskilled and minimally skilled workers at a time when unemployment in the colony was extremely high, the workers were nonetheless upset when they discovered that their wages were to be pegged at the local rate rather than the higher rate that was typically paid for foreign projects. Increasing frustrations, they discovered that Americans working on the project were paid as much as ten times more to perform the same tasks. They were also told when they inquired about the discrepancy that the American firm wished to pay them more but that the government forbade them from doing so. Union petitions to the colonial government, a small demonstration at the main worksite on Sunday, 31st May, 1942, and a larger protest at the same site

on Monday morning, 1st June, 1942 went for naught. Following the Monday morning demonstration at the worksite at Oakes Field, the angry crowd carrying sticks and stones marched to the Colonial Administration Offices and Parliament Building on Bay Street.

Instead of receiving a satisfactory response, however, the crowd received what they perceived as a threat from the Attorney General who cautioned them that it was important to keep up their reputation as good workers or the project would, he implied, have to import foreign workers (Eric Hallinan, Russell Commission 1942: 510-511).⁹ Rather than frightening the crowd into standing down, this threat only enraged them. One of the workers threw a bottle through a nearby window and, without anyone issuing a command, the rest of the crowd marched down Bay Street “smashing as they went” (Oswald Moseley, Russell Commission 1942: 266). They broke storefront windows and looted stores. The crowd was eventually pushed back into the “over the hill” area, a settlement where poor black Bahamians resided, but Bay Street was left in shambles. The *New York Times*, for instance, noted that for days after the riot, “scenes in the Bay Street business section were reminiscent of a tropical hurricane, with storm shutters covering gaping holes in windows and doors” (*New York Times*, June 4, 1942).

This riot was in no way an orchestrated, top down affair. As a matter of fact, the union that ostensibly represented the workers was, at least in its current form, newly created and it was the first time in Bahamian history that a union represented both skilled and unskilled workers. Charles Rhodriquez, a dry goods merchant, was instrumental in reviving a defunct union that had been started by Percy Christie years earlier. A.F. Adderley served as its legal council. Bertram Cambridge, a musician and hopeful politician, was also one of the union organizers. Although widely respected, these leaders were somewhat out of touch with their membership. The evening before the riot, for instance, Rhodriquez, Adderley and Cambridge met with the Colonial Secretary, John Hughes, and assured him that there was nothing to worry about. Further, the morning of the riot, both Cambridge and Adderley met with groups of workers but were caught completely off guard when the riot actually occurred. Additionally, in the immediate run up, during and after the riot, the authorities tried in vain to identify a leader amongst the crowd but were unable to find one. The authorities were also hard pressed to find anyone, even amongst the rioters, who was not surprised by the riot. The riot was not even imaginable by many. Etienne Dupuch, a newspaper man with sympathies to the plight of Blacks in the Bahamas stated, “The riot came as a complete surprise to me. I never thought that our people could be agitated to the point of rioting because they have always enjoyed the enviable reputation of being patient, docile and law-abiding” (Etienne Dupuch, *Russell Commission*, 301).

Similarly, J.P. Sands, a member of the White ruling elite, spoke for many when he said, "I thought that everybody in the island was quite happy until about 8 o'clock on June 1st" (J.P. Sands, *Russell Commission*, 293).

This uprising was for the most part a collective response to a wage dispute but it did have racial undertones. In 1942, the Bahamas was controlled politically and economically by a group of wealthy, white merchant politicians known collectively as the Bay Street Boys. Most of the population, however, was black and poor. When the workers began marching to Bay Street, bystanders not associated with the project simply joined in so that by the time they arrived at Parliament Square the crowd also included women and children. Men, women and children who were not associated with the project participated in the unrest and the looting. The march and the riot, then, became an outlet for a variety of frustrations with the social order that existed in the Bahamas during that period.

Scholars that study riots find it hard to give more than very general preconditions as causes for them. And, even then, "there has been no agreement as to what is decisive in causing outbreaks of violence" (Grimshaw 1960: n3 109). One reason it is so hard to pinpoint the cause of outbreaks is because, like the 1942 Riot in Nassau, each of them is context driven. In many ways, the 1942 riots were similar to others that occurred in the Caribbean a few years before it in St. Kitts, St. Vincent, Barbados and many other British West Indian colonies. Like those riots, this riot began as a labor dispute. However, the Bahamian riot was less violent than these earlier riots elsewhere in region. In St. Kitts and Barbados, for instance, there was indiscriminate looting and violence against property and people (Bolland 1995: 116). But, the violence in the 1942 Riot was not indiscriminate; such shops as those owned by "the Speaker of the Assembly and the wife of one of the white Project supervisors were almost gutted, but the shoe store owned by Percy Christie, the white would-be labor organizer, was left untouched" (Morton Turtle, *Russell Commission* 1942: 97). Although there was great deal of animosity that was clearly and loudly expressed, the rioters did not attack any whites while the riot was on Bay Street. One of the Bay Street Boy's, for instance, reports walking down Bay Street at the height of the riot without being molested (Roland Theodore Symonette, *Russell Commission* 1942: 490). There were rules under which the rioters operated.¹⁰

There was also a feedback mechanism at work during the riot. Rioters signaled to one another which stores they should leave untouched and which stores to loot. Beyond signaling, rioters would actively protect certain stores, forming blockades and turning away their fellow rioters. For instance, as Percy Christie reports, "eight to ten men with arms interlocked" protected his store from looters (Percy Edward Christie, *Russell Commission* 1942: 17).

The 1942 riot, however, was in some respects “a momentary outburst” (Saunders 1990: 119).¹¹ Perverse emergent orders, we should recognize, can survive much longer than a few hours. Socially harmful norms and practices, for instance, so can survive for centuries. So can harmful values and beliefs.

IV. Values and beliefs

The rules on which spontaneous orders rest can be divided into two broad categories. They can be formal, codified systems of rules, regulations and laws (e.g. constitutions, contracts and religious precepts and sanctions) which can be deliberately designed and improved. Or, they can be informal systems of rules and conventions (e.g. traditions and social norms) which, like other spontaneous orders, are the result of human action but not human design.

The cultural systems which individuals draw on as they negotiate the social world undoubtedly emerge spontaneously. As Geertz (1973) has explained, a cultural system is comprised of a “world view” and an “ethos,” which mutually reinforce one another. As he describes, “a people’s ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects. Their world view is their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order” (Ibid, 127). According to Geertz, there is a definite, symbiotic relationship between the values that a people hold and their beliefs about how the world really works. The ethos is only “intellectually reasonable” to the extent that it represents “a way of life implied by the actual state of affairs which the world view describes” (Ibid). Additionally, the world view is only “emotionally acceptable” to the degree to which its “image” of the “actual state of affairs” represents “an authentic expression” of the “way of life” required by a people’s ethos.

A people’s folklore is one arena where a people’s ethos and worldview confront and mutually reinforce one another. As Dundes (1971) writes, folklore, which includes myths, legends, storytelling, songs and images, is a source of both folk ideas, “basic premises” that are “the building blocks of worldview,” and folk values, the “normative postulates” that inform our moral judgments. Through the telling of folktales, adults socialize their children, teaching them about their community’s values and beliefs. Still, socializing the young is not the reason and certainly not the main reason that parents tell folktales to their children. Stated another way, the enculturation that occurs is an unintended consequence of telling these stories. These tales are told mostly

as entertainment. There is, however, a feedback mechanism at work. The tales that resonate, the tales which the old remember from their youth and teach to the younger generation, are the tales that convey that community's values and beliefs. What is more, the tales that get told and retold in a particular community shape the values and beliefs which come dominate.

Bahamian folktales are, thus, a valuable source of insight into Bahamian identity and culture.¹² Although *talking ol' story* is a less popular activity than it once was in the Bahamas, the Bahamian storytelling tradition, as Glinton (1993: 13) argues, was once a rich one. B' Rabby is the main character in the folktales of the Bahamas. He is a thief, a con artist, and a confidence man who uses his cunning to get his way and to get out of hot water. B' Rabby also routinely gets the better of his stronger compatriots, including B' Boukee, B' Rabby's friend and favorite target, B' Whale, B' Fox and others, by outsmarting them or tricking them into doing his bidding. Indeed, B' Rabby, who is called Brier Rabbit in the folktales of Black communities in the United States, is the "archetypal hero-trickster character" (Kulii 2001: 46). He has much in common with the Jamaican trickster-hero Anansy, as well as, the "two major tricksters of Africa," Ananci, the spider of the Ashanti and Ijapa the Yoruba turtle (Kulii 2001: 46). Like these figures, B' Rabby, using only his wits and his wiles, is able to avoid every pitfall, hurdle every obstruction, escape every trap, and prevail in every bet and battle.

Consider, for instance, the tale of *The Cane Field* (Hurston 1930), also called the *False Message: Take My Place* (Finlay 1925) or *Getting the Other Fellow to Take Your Place* (Cleare 1917). In the tale, the "sweet-talking" B' Rabby gains free access to the best sugar cane on a large sugar cane plantation by tricking the daughter of the plantation owner. This went on everyday for weeks, every morning the girl would let B' Rabby into the field thinking she was following her father's orders and every evening she would return to let a stuffed B' Rabby out of the field. After a while, however, the girl became suspicious of B' Rabby and asked her father about it. The plantation owner, angered by Rabby's deception, hatches a trap. An unwitting B' Rabby returned the next day using the same con that had worked so well for him in the past. This time, however, instead of releasing him in the afternoon, she left him tied into the field and went to get her father. When they returned, they put a tied up B' Rabby in a large pot and went to fetch some hot water. Just as they were walking away, however, B' Boukee, B' Rabby's best friend, arrives on the scene. Playing on B' Boukee's dim wittedness and his greed, B' Rabby convinces B' Boukee that the plantation owner was preparing a feast. B' Rabby offered B' Boukee his place at the meal. B' Boukee agreed at once. He set B' Rabby free and climbed in to wait for his meal. When the farmer and his daughter returned, instead of

bringing a feast, they showered the anxious B' Boukee with a vat of scalding water.

The B' Rabby in this tale is the classic trickster-hero figure. He is an excellent liar whose "sweet talk" both gets him what he wants and gets him out of trouble. He lies to the farmer's daughter, convincing her to let him eat the best cane in the field, and, after he's caught, he lies to B' Boukee, convincing his friend to take his place in the trap. While cunning is celebrated as a virtue in this story, however, greed is also deprecated as a dangerous vice. These are frequently linked in B' Rabby tales.

The celebration of cunning and the deprecation of greed can clearly be seen in the tales of *B' Boukee, B' Rabby and the Sheep*, as well as, *B' Boukee, B' Rabby and the Cow*. In the first story, B' Boukee and B' Rabby go out one night to steal sheep. B' Rabby chose a sheep that he could manage. B' Boukee, however, was so greedy that he went after the biggest of sheep. Unfortunately for B' Boukee, the sheep that he chose was not a sheep at all but a lion. The lion chased B' Boukee home. B' Boukee quickly ushered his wife and his children onto the roof out of the lion's reach. B' Boukee's smallest child could not keep up. He lost his balance, fell and was eaten by the lion. B' Boukee's second child also lost his grip and fell to a painful death at the hands of the lion. The same fate befell B' Boukee's last child and wife. Finally, B' Boukee himself fell off of the roof. Although he fought the lion, he was eventually subdued and devoured by the beast. Notice that in this tale, B' Boukee was not punished because he was a thief; his partner Rabby was also a thief who escaped unscathed. Rather, B' Boukee's greed was the ultimate cause of his downfall.

B' Boukee's greed also puts him at risk in *B' Boukee, B' Rabby and the Cow* but, in this tale, B' Boukee is able to use cunning to escape his fate (and win high praise from B' Rabby). One day a hungry B' Rabby was walking through a field and came across a cow. He walked up to the cow, smacked the cow on its rump and said the magic words. At once, the hind parts of the cow opened up and in jumped B' Rabby with a pot and a knife. B' Rabby cut away enough meat to fill his pot, said the magic words again and exited the cow. Later when B' Boukee asked him where he got the meat, B' Rabby told him, taught him the magic words but warned him not to cut the cow's heart. B' Boukee quickly ran to the pasture, found a cow and followed B' Rabby's instruction. He slapped the cow on his rump, said the magic words, went inside and began to fill his pot. He quickly filled his pot but, instead of stopping and leaving, the greedy B' Boukee kept cutting. He eventually cut into the heart of cow. The cow fell down dead trapping B' Boukee inside.

The next day the owners of the cow saw that the cow had died and commenced to butcher and skin the animal. When they cut the cow open to

take out the innards, B' Boukee saw his opportunity and jumped free so quickly that they did not see him exit the carcass. He was completely covered with the guts of the cow. When confronted, however, he lied and told the crowd that while they were butchering the cow they had thrown the cow's innards on him as he was innocently walking by. He complained so long and hard that they gave him half the cow to placate him. He took the gift and went on his way. When B' Boukee told B' Rabby the story, B' Rabby congratulated him for his quick thinking and craftiness. Unlike in the earlier tale where B' Boukee was chastised for his foolishness or made to suffer because of his greediness, in this tale B' Boukee's cunning triumphed.¹³

Rabbyism refers to the set of ideas and values which are transmitted through Bahamian folklore and more recent Bahamian cultural products. Cunning is not only how the successful get ahead but is an admirable quality. It is much higher on the totem pole than honesty and hard work. Greed is not only a character flaw. Rather, greed is also a dangerous vice that can place you in jeopardy. During slavery and under colonialism, the trickster hero at the center of the B' Rabby tales who used his wits to "get one over" on those stronger than him was a useful model for a people who were denied their agency and independence. In a post-slavery, post-colonial context, however, B' Rabby is arguably not a positive role model. Even so, as Storr (2009) has argued elsewhere, the folk values and ideas that were transmitted through Bahamian folktales are still given voice in more recent Bahamian cultural products. And, *Rabbyism* still competes with other cultural systems available to Bahamians.

How is it that perverse emergent orders, like *Rabbyism*, can persist? It turns out that a people's cultural system can be quite resistant to change. Cultural habits tend to endure and are actually quite difficult to alter. This is not to say that cultural systems are static but rather to stress that slow, incremental transformations are more likely than quick, drastic revolutions, even in the face of extreme exogenous shocks. In other words, a society's belief and value systems are path dependent. "In spite of a total change in the rules," North explains, "many aspects of a society" tends to persist (North 1990: 36). "Cultural traits," as he writes, "have tenacious survivability" (North 1990: 45). As a result, it is quite possible for social institutions to persist which are not socially beneficial. Culture, North (1994: 364) explains, embodies "the cumulative experience of past generations," but "there is no guarantee that the cumulative past experience of a society will necessarily fit them to solve new problems."

The Bahamas' folklore tradition developed at a time when Bahamian blacks were profoundly oppressed. The folk ideas and values that are transmitted through Bahamian folklore spoke to the experiences of Bahamian

blacks during slavery. Unfortunately, the end of slavery did not change their social position all that much; Bahamian blacks remained at the bottom rungs of the social ladder. After emancipation in 1832, the former slaves were forced into apprenticeships which differed from slavery only in name. After the apprenticeship system ended, the “truck and barter system” kept black Bahamians in economic servitude. Although blacks were a majority of the Bahamas’ population since the middle of the 17th century, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that Bahamian blacks gained political control over the colony.¹⁴ Given this history, it is not surprising that they would celebrate a figure like B’ Rabby, who successfully employed cunning and trickery as both offensive and defensive weapons when confronting stronger foes.

Much of the Bahamas’ economic history also reinforced the folk ideas and values that are transmitted through the B’ Rabby tales, particularly the notion that “trying to get something for nothing” was a surer path to economic success than “working hard” (Storr 2004). Indeed, several extralegal activities have flourished in the Bahamas. Throughout the 18th century, Bahamians were involved in ship wrecking, an activity where participants lured ships to dangerously shallow waters (sometimes by means of false lighthouses and signals) so that they could “salvage” its cargo once the ship crashed against the coral reef. Further, during the United States Civil War, blockade running to smuggle guns and other needed supplies to the South was a favorite activity. Similarly, during Prohibition Era, many black and white Bahamians participated in rum running. Several of the wealthiest and most powerful families in the Bahamas gained their fortunes participating in these illicit activities. *Rabbyism* as a way of seeing the world, then, not only proposes an explanation of why the individuals engaged in these industries are so successful it also allows the Bahamians engaged in these activities to justify their activities.

V. Conclusion

Spontaneous or emergent orders are not always socially beneficial. Cultural systems that are no longer suitable given our current challenges and riots, for instance, are arguably perverse emergent orders. The recognition that perverse emergent orders are possible has several important implications. Most importantly, it reminds us that judgments regarding the nature of spontaneous orders (i.e. is it socially harmful or socially beneficial?) cannot be decided by pointing to the fact that a particular order emerged spontaneously. Social good and bad are normative not positive questions. Where spontaneous order theorizing can help is by focusing our attention on the rules which lead to the emergence of an order and the kinds of activities that are encouraged and discouraged by those rules.

Spontaneous order theorizing can also offer a fresh perspective on perverse emergent orders like social violence and negative systems of beliefs. In orders where spontaneity and human action are obvious (e.g. riots) it forces us to pay attention to the rules that govern their emergence and the feedback mechanisms at work which promote their being self-sustaining. In orders where the rules which govern their emergence and the mechanisms by which they sustain themselves (e.g. cultural systems), it forces us to pay attention to the notion that these orders are of human action but not of human design.

A critical question not explored above is whether it is possible for a perverse emergent order to survive unless it is nested within a societal order that is largely beneficial.¹⁵ Stated another way, are perverse emergent orders self-destructive? Or, can they, contra Hayek's claims regarding cultural evolution, persist? Or, are they like parasites that need a viable host if they are to survive? This was arguably the case with both of the examples that we offered above. The 1942 riot occurred within a social order that had problems (i.e. hampered market, restricted access to opportunities) but was in other ways well functioning, especially if you think of colonial Bahamas as a part of a significantly larger British empire. Similarly, *rabbyism* is a prominent but, arguably, is not the dominant cultural system in the Bahamas. It competes with other cultural systems available to Bahamians which stress working hard regardless of obstacles (Storr 2006). Still, this remains an open question that should be explored.

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Notes

¹ See Whitman (1998), Caldwell (2000) and Angner (2004) for discussions of Hayek's theory of cultural evolution. Although these authors disagree on whether Hayek intended his cultural evolution to have normative implications, all agree that Hayek acknowledged that undesirable spontaneous orders are possible. de Vlieghere (1994) offers an opposing view.

² 'Sharing' as a way of life in hunter-gatherer societies would be another. As Hayek (1979: 162) writes, although critical at one stage of development, "these habits had to be shed again to make the transition to the market economy and the open society possible."

³ This is an example of a simple spontaneous order. Spontaneous orders, however, can be considerably more complex. In fact, a key virtue of spontaneous orders is their ability to achieve complexity.

⁴ As Hayek (1973: 44) explains, “To put this differently: in a social order the particular circumstances to which each individual will react will be those known to him. But the individual responses to particular circumstances will result in an overall order only if the individuals obey such rules as will produce an order ... This need not mean that the different persons will in similar circumstances do precisely the same thing; but merely that for the formation of such an overall order it is necessary that in some respects all individuals follow definite rules, or that their actions are limited to a certain range.”

⁵ For example, “if the rule were that any individual should try to kill any other he encountered, or flee as soon as he saw another, the result would clearly be the complete impossibility of an order in which the activities of the individuals were based on collaboration with others” (Hayek 1973: 44). Rather, the order that will emerge given this rule will be one based on fear and violence.

⁶ See Lachmann (1971) for a discussion of institutions and how they serve as points of orientation that reduce uncertainty and facilitate action.

⁷ Positive feedback loops work to promote the growth of an order and negative feedback loops work to ensure its stability.

⁸ See Martin (2007) and Martin and Storr (2007 and 2008) for extended discussions of this riot.

⁹ Eric Hallinan, the attorney general of the colony explained “that they [the American contractors] had intended to bring in laborers from America and as our laborers had done so well, I appealed to them not to spoil that record” (Select Committee 1942: 29).

¹⁰ Martin (2007) argues that a system of paternalism existed in the Bahamas during that era and that this explains the particular rules which governed the rioters.

¹¹ In Martin and Storr (2008), we are critical of this view and argue that the riot was not merely a momentary outburst but was the first sign of a popular political movement in the Bahamas.

¹² See Storr (2008) for a detailed discussion of the folk ideas and values that are transmitted through Bahamian folklore.

¹³ As with many of these tales, the authors remember hearing different versions as children growing up in the Bahamas. However, there are several scholarly articles that relate these tales. The stories recounted here can be found in Edwards (1891 and 1889) and Parsons (1928).

¹⁴ As Saunders (1990: 112) writes, “racial tension was an underlying cause of the riot. Bahamians suffered severe discrimination at home. In fact, until the late 1950s, blacks were barred from all hotels, were not allowed in some restaurants, movie houses and were only allowed to enter some churches by the rear door. Certain schools did not accept black children and many business firms were closed to them as places of employment.”

¹⁵ We are grateful to Frederic Sautet for alerting us to this issue. We should confess, however, that it was never our intent to challenge or affirm Hayek’s claims regarding cultural evolution. Our goal was to take seriously Hayek’s hints that perverse emergent orders can exist and to explore what they would like. Our secondary goal was to see if it was useful to apply Hayekian-style insights to the study of these perverse orders.

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