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7 September 1981

Tim Lankester Esq  
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10 Downing Street  
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Dear Tim

INNER CITY PROBLEMS

At the Prime Minister's meeting earlier today, my Secretary of State agreed to circulate the attached article by Dr Edwin Brooks, the former Labour Member of Parliament for Bebington.

Copies of this letter go to John Halliday (Home Office), John Kerr (Treasury), Richard Dykes (Employment), David Edmunds (Environment), Robin Ibbs and Andrew Duguid.

Yours ever

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I K C ELLISON  
Private Secretary

Prime Minister

You wanted to  
see his paper  
by Edwin Brooks.

10/5

Whatever his geographical pretensions, the new Member of Parliament soon finds his mental map of Westminster becoming as distorted as a mediaeval Orbis Terrarum, with the Division Lobby instead of Jerusalem dominating as the first-order central place. Periodically he will advance from the Ultima Thule of the backbenches to combat the monstrous beings on the Other Side, but it is unlikely that such crusades ever help him map the real corridors of power and communication. These remain unobserved on the blessed isles of Whitehall, where mandarins converse with multi-nationals in an ecumenical rather than a Manichean spirit.

The analogy need be pursued no further to make the central point that politics is the theology of a secular society, and that the role of the professional politician serving a mass party is different in kind from that of the professional scholar loyal only to truth. The distinction implies no necessary dishonour, for students of the science of the possible are not invariably best fitted to practice the art of the possible; but an incessantly gladiatorial confrontation may ultimately undermine the rationality upon which democratic consensus rests. An excessive sense of righteousness, in other words, is ultimately as damaging to the political arcan as it is to the academic cloisters.

It would be comforting to hope that the academic in politics would thus be doubly insulated against the simplicities of a two dimensional moral world, but there is unfortunately no such guarantee. Nevertheless, if the geographer-politician does not invariably behave as befits a dispassionate academic geographer, this is not to say that his professional training does not influence his political perceptions or that there are not spatial dimensions to public policy. This chapter will therefore concentrate upon two sensitive issues which have not received the critical treatment they merit from professional geographers: first, the policies of regional subsidisation conducted by successive British governments after 1945 to combat high unemployment in the Development Areas; and secondly, the geostrategic pattern which followed the Second World War and which has decisively changed Great Britain's status as a world power.

Geographers would not dispute that these are legitimate areas of concern for their profession, and indeed they have published many valuable studies of regional policy in Great Britain and elsewhere. ( 1 ) However, it seems fair comment that most geographers have neglected the role of geopolitics and military geography in the post-war world. The Imperial Diaspora of the British, the results of which lie thick in vintage copies of the Geographical Journal, has retreated to more introverted and domestic concerns. The United Kingdom has lost an Empire and her geographers seem to have lost interest in imperialism, whether of the past or the present. Indeed, we often seem to abandon any historical perspective, rarely feeding into our models the likelihood that the recent outbreak of succession states upon the Earth's surface will prove to be as ephemeral as that other rash of succession states which appeared in the East European shatter-belt in the wake of an earlier episode of imperial collapse.

<sup>British</sup> Geographers <sup>may</sup> ~~have~~ <sup>show</sup> less <sup>complacency</sup> ~~at home~~ towards the political mores and basic strategy of regional policy, <sup>but only</sup> ~~cautiously~~, and with excessive politeness, is any fundamental critique advanced, and exceptions to the rule stem from the Marxist rather than the liberal democrat. Yet the latter has a no less urgent need to be iconoclastic, and to ask the embarrassing political questions.

#### Unemployment and the scale of delimitation of priority areas

During the last fifteen years the role of government in the United Kingdom, at national and also local level, has become increasingly decisive in physical and economic planning. At the national level there was elaboration of regional development policies which first became powerful in 1945, and which had as their primary aim the elimination of serious unemployment in any region of the country. In the 1960s State intervention in industrial location policy gained much greater impetus and massive injections of public finance to private industry came to be regarded (particularly by the Labour Party) as a perfectly proper way for central government to shoulder its responsibilities to the national economy.

At the local level the role of government became no less <sup>crucial</sup> ~~important~~ in physical planning, particularly within the urban areas of each authority. Although comprehensive planning was discouraged, or alleged to be hindered, by the anachronistic boundaries inherited from the 19th century, there was nevertheless a major programme of land-use planning, such as slum clearance and highways development, which steadily

transformed the landscape of both town and countryside.

In short, the national emphasis on an areal approach to factor deficiencies in the economic field was paralleled at the local level by an areal approach to factor deficiencies in the social field. But the functional link between these two aspects of government was weakly recognised and co-ordination was seldom attempted. <sup>Instead, policies</sup> ~~Realities~~ have been like ships passing in the night, with little departmental pressure to form convoys.

A particular casualty of this fragmented policy-making was unemployment, which in many crucial respects (especially during the 1960s) arose more from social than from economic causes. It is true that there are semantic problems involved in this distinction, but it can also be claimed that Whitehall's structure of government responsibilities - the separate bureaucratic hierarchies of decision-makers - rests upon a deep-seated and almost automatic assumption that social and economic policies can be visualised and planned separately. Furthermore, the traditional delegation of powers to local authorities itself ensures a marked difference of emphasis and focus - as well as personalities - at the national and local scales of planning respectively.

However, such executive duality is daily confronted with the unitary responsibility of the Treasury for overall fiscal and monetary management as expressed through the major spending Departments of State. These, such as the Department of Education and Science or the Department of the Environment, in turn shape priorities and the allocation of resources at local government level. Against this background of ultimate financial stranglehold from the centre, a more explicit liaison between decision-makers at the two levels of government in the formulation of a common and social strategy would seem sensible, if only to test the extent to which classic economic problems such as unemployment might respond to unconventional social remedial treatment.

Yet in our crude regional approach to the eradication of unemployment, we have, for years, been chasing a mirage. Industrial policies for the regions should devalue unemployment statistics, and even forget them altogether in many instances. Alternatively, governments should stop trying to introduce jobs fit for workers into the regions, and instead ensure that the workers are made fit for the jobs cajoled into their locality. Regional unemployment is often less

a matter of economics - of structural adjustment, say - than of sociology and psychology; it is a problem of human resources, especially educational and cultural, measured in behaviour and social attitudes.

The emphasis should thus be switched to the individual or the small social group rather than to large regions; that is, we need a 'pointillist' technique for dealing with poverty and unemployment rather than the broadbrush regional strokes of post-war British policy. The latter, with all its simplistic anachronism, was probably a key factor in producing the crisis of stagflation which gripped the country in the early 1970s and which, by mid-decade paradoxically threatened unemployment on a more serious scale than at any time since 1945. These matters need to be put provocatively if only to dislodge the inertia of political orthodoxy (especially on the Left) towards regional policy.

~~This~~ Disenchantment with the conventional regional remedy in no sense implies that unemployment and poverty are unimportant. On the contrary, it is the continuing (often concealed) waste of human talent which should make us sceptical towards the policies of the last thirty years.

~~Respectively~~ Let us consider the conventional wisdom about regional industrial policy. Basically it ~~is~~ <sup>affirms</sup> that locational liberty must be constrained in the interests of regional equality and national fraternity. Inequality in Great Britain is conceived broadly in terms of a poor Palaeozoic North and West and a rich post-Palaeozoic South-East. The economic geography of the country is thus a modern version of the old cultural dichotomy between Highland and Lowland, with an income gradient falling steadily and sometimes steeply towards the Celtic fringe.

This peripheral poverty in the British Isles is seen as part of a wider West European pattern, with a rough symmetry between the British gradient of poverty and that which falls away to the south east, towards the Mezzogiorno. In other words, the perimeter of the European Economic Community <sup>(E.E.C.)</sup> tends to concentrate the poor, and the embryonic European regional policy has been conceived via a juxtaposition of a rich core and a poor periphery. So a model well known to students of Third World countries underlies (somewhat ironically) our approach to regional imbalance within the developed world of the European Communities. Moreover, the close correlation between the regional concentration of the poor and that of the unemployed seems to confirm this core-periphery pattern, and policies of regional assistance, including central government subsidies, are concentrically emphasised outwards.

~~Seen~~ Seen in this way, the regional problem of the E.E.C. is not unlike that of modern Brazil. In both cases there is a relatively rich and affluent core, in the E.E.C. along the Birmingham-Milan axis and in Brazil along the Rio-Sea Paulo axis, with a hinterland of relative poverty to which growth industries are unlikely to go without persuasion or coercion. As an extension of the analogy, Merseyside <sup>would</sup> ~~might~~ therefore <sup>correspond</sup> ~~be compared~~ to an Indian Reserve in the Amazon basin, given protected status for the sake of its impoverished, culturally backward and unemployed or underemployed natives. Regional policy is in both cases a form of income redistribution, involving a horizontal transfer territorially rather than (as with a progressive tax system) a straightforward vertical transfer between social classes. Again, there is a parallel between the Brazilian paternalistic wish to bring assistance which might launch poor Indians upon sustained economic growth and the expressed intention of successive British governments since the war that the Development

Areas should eventually succeed in sustaining themselves independently after the period of infant industry protection.

However, any analogy between Merseyside and the Xingu Indian Park has several flaws. In particular, the Indians are ethnically homogeneous, with all members of the group facing similar cultural handicaps in coming to terms with the rich Brazilian core. Merseyside, by contrast, contains internal zones of affluence which compare favourably with those in the more prosperous regions of the European industrial heartland; and this sub-regional diversity should make us question whether blanket regional subsidies and other protective devices are the right way to help the 'poor Indians' within the wider Merseyside community.

The Whitehall apologist might reply that the planned diffusion of affluence from the growth region to the non-growth region via broad national strategy should trigger off a secondary impulse and encourage local diffusion of wealth and job opportunity to the weaker members of the assisted region as a whole. But we <sup>might legitimately</sup> be sceptical <sup>of</sup> such benign <sup>outcome;</sup> ~~the~~ ~~assumed~~ ~~that~~ ~~there~~ ~~are~~ ~~too~~ ~~many~~ ~~frictions~~ ~~hindering~~ the transmission of wealth and opportunity within a society of manifestly unequal members. Instead of subsidies filtering down to the deprived, or benefiting them in the long run by social osmosis, the spoils tend to go to the rich sectors within the assisted region, thus reinforcing the earlier <sup>plea for a</sup> ~~more pointed~~ ~~rather~~ than a broad-brush treatment in remedying economic inequalities.

At the heart of the Government's problem is the explanation of unemployment itself, and of the poverty and degradation which it provokes. Why are people unequal in this index of social success, and what can be done by environmental measures to overcome their possibly related handicaps of inequality, including those of heredity?

When politicians discuss the eradication of unemployment, they often seem to have an image of a pool of mobile labour in which float individuals of identical specific gravity. An investment in a region generates ten thousand jobs, say, and since all men are presumed to be equal this is held to off-set unemployment of similar size. This <sup>naive</sup> approach was seen during the early 1960s on Merseyside, when local politicians equated the number of jobs about to be introduced by the motor industry with the number of those unemployed. Presumably the only difference they detected between the employed and the unemployed was that the former happened to be in work and the latter out of work, and they assumed that the dole queues would contract in direct ratio to the expansion of jobs. This proved an extremely glib assumption.

But before examining why some people remain unemployed, we should critically examine the familiar statistics of 'unemployment'. Are the published figures of people out of work a meaningful scientific indicator of regional economic imbalance, distress or poverty? Indeed, what precisely does measured unemployment show? Here admittedly there has been a dawning realization by some decision-makers that published unemployment statistics are a very imperfect indicator of economic malaise; for the figures omit concealed unemployment and fail to reveal the short-time working or lack of opportunities for overtime which play havoc with family incomes. (2) They are equally useless in revealing the extent to which workers are in jobs which offer them, even in the best of times, a miserable wage little better than the State benefits they might draw as recruits to the army of the unemployed. In any case, poverty and frustration are not simply the product of lack of work as such but rather of the absence of jobs which are enriching in the fullest sense.



But any academic quibbles about the meaning of unemployment pale into insignificance compared with the passions aroused by that term which politicians refuse to utter in polite company - the 'unemployable'. It is understandable that social workers should be reluctant to use the term and flay those who lack similar scruples; for once we label a person in this derogatory fashion, his self-image may become so downcast and defeatist that the label is retrospectively validated. Nevertheless, we must recognize that there are people within our society who are incapable of holding down jobs (at least of the sort which modern technology creates) for more than a short time at best. We have no difficulty in adjusting to this disconcerting fact when we consider those overtly handicapped, physically or mentally. The autistic adolescent or the youngster suffering from spina bifida clearly fall into the category of unemployable, or employable only in a sheltered environment. In such cases it is seen as 'progressive' for local authorities to provide sheltered workshops, special transport facilities, or one-to-one ratios between the handicapped children and their teachers. In short, we admit the reality of a class of people for whom paternalistic policies are a pre-requisite of survival itself. The analogy drawn earlier between our own society of inequality and that of the Brazilian Amazon remains valid. 'Backward' Indians also require protection if they are not to be swept aside by those with greater competitive skills.

But in our society we do not create such 'reserves' for other than the overtly handicapped or the anti-social. We then call them hospitals for the sub-normal, H.M. Prisons, Borstals or Approved Schools. Such places of refuge or incarceration are part of the fabric of our society but we rarely see them as a particular territorial version of the old socialist <sup>precept</sup> ~~principle~~, 'to each according to his needs'. Yet when people in all their rich variety respond to free locational choice, a general sifting mechanism manifests itself territorially in terms of individual

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probability. We are familiar with this process in migration studies,  
<sup>where</sup> we expect to find that the typical migrant is younger, more  
ambitious, more able and more risk-taking than the non-migrant.  
Especially we know about worsening dependency ratios and the growing  
proportion of the elderly, the infirm and the ill-educated within the  
areas from which the more mobile have fled.

This process of territorial sifting is also taking place within  
sub-regions, conurbations and, particularly, the inner city, which is  
<sup>generally</sup> being abandoned by the mobile and foot-loose owner-occupier.

In other words, social vertical sifting is translated into  
geographical horizontal sifting. This phenomenon is common to those  
societies such as the British which have no legal restrictions upon  
social and/or territorial mobility of the sort found in the rigidly  
stratified societies of antiquity or those of contemporary communist  
states such as the Soviet Union or China. In democratic open societies  
where equality of opportunity has become a political canon, any real  
community of the unequal is made impossible by a process which encourages  
those with superior skills to escape the unwelcome proximity of their  
less well-endowed neighbours. Areas evacuated by the socially mobile  
eventually become the preserve (rather than the statutory Indian reserve)  
of the socially immobile, a territorial sump for the rejects of merit-  
ocracy.

In the United States this process has gone even further than in  
the United Kingdom, with the inner city relegated to the bottom of the  
intra-urban hierarchy as the refugee (or tacit concentration) camp for  
the drop outs, drug addicts and various others - not least the unskilled  
Blacks - perceived to be 'inferior' by the pace-setters of society.  
Thus the core-periphery contrast which, at the macro-regional level, is  
common to both Western Europe and Brazil, has become inverted at micro-

regional level within the cities of the developed western world; the residential core is surrendered to the poor while the suburbs become the home of the rich. Of course, this is a highly simplified and schematic depiction of a complex urban reality, ~~which is not~~ <sup>not</sup> but it is <sup>not</sup> misleading to identify such a broad pattern of intra-urban sifting within a conurbation such as Merseyside.

Closer inspection shows that the inner city 'swamp' is but one example of a set of deprived sub-regions of which others may be found severed and possibly quite remote from the inner city proper. The council estates bordering Liverpool are akin to Indian Reserves, in that a paternalistic authority has created a legally distinct environment of rented and subsidized housing for those too poor or insecure to move into the world of owner-occupation. Within such areas of the initially deprived further sifting occurs once the educated children of formerly disadvantaged parents climb the social ladder. In time this continued winnowing of social chaff within decaying neighbourhoods produce the urban equivalent of the astronomer's black hole - a region of total collapse. For example, in the North End of Birkenhead <sup>a group of high rise</sup> council flats built in the late 1950s to replace the former slums had themselves degenerated by 1975 to the point of no return and were having to be evacuated completely.

In this urban situation a version of Gresham's Law operates. Bad families drive out good, making it more and more difficult to attract the type of tenant who could improve the squalid neighbourhood image. Such cycles of degeneration have already run their course (to eventual demolition) in several American cities, e.g., St. Louis, and they seem likely to remain endemic to liberal meritocratic societies.

Growing awareness of this problem led in the 1960s to the creation of Educational Priority Areas in the inner parts of various cities in Great Britain. <sup>(3)</sup> Again, this is not unlike the special help given by the Indian Foundation in Brazil for education within tribal reserves. The difference, however, is that in Great Britain such areas of social priority have emerged as a consequence of territorial withdrawal by the more affluent, whereas in Brazil the reserves occupy areas which are ~~penetrated by~~ <sup>penetrated by</sup> rich interests anxious to ~~develop~~ <sup>develop</sup> natural resources. <sup>(4)</sup>

But before pursuing this train of thought, let us return briefly to the measures used to tackle unemployment in Great Britain. The growing scale of state intervention and subsidy was defended by the argument that the under-used labour resources of the assisted areas would, when fully mobilized, encourage higher national production. Full employment policy was integral to the re-structuring of regional economies which would eventually lead to a maximizing of economic growth.

Unfortunately this optimism has not been vindicated. Post-war unemployment has remained far below the level of this inter-war period but there has demonstrably been no British equivalent of the 'German miracle'. Instead, a disappointing rate of economic growth steadfastly accompanied 'full employment' (in the sense understood by Keynes and Beveridge), suggesting that central government had a poor return on the regional subsidies and locational restraints deployed to hold the unemployment rate below the level of 3-4 per cent.

The situation in the early 1970s became dangerously worse, combining a Keynesian rate of full employment with (at best) zero economic growth and unprecedented inflation. <sup>(W.A.P. Marner, 1974)</sup> <sup>(5)</sup> The sharp deterioration reflected global conditions to some extent and was found in all industrialized countries, but its exceptional severity in the United Kingdom marked the culmination of a process of economic decline extending

over decades and even generations. It seems likely that the gathering post-war crisis in the United Kingdom was due less to minor fluctuations in a full or overfull employment rate than to the overmanning, the gross inefficiencies, the managerial incompetence, the built-in overtime working and the antiquated adversary confrontations which beset the country. To put it bluntly, and to paraphrase a Labour politician who committed a *hara-kiri* by so accusing the farmers, governments have too long feather-bedded senile industrial invalids and given a particularly cosy and enervating bolster to the Development Areas in particular. Unwillingness to accept so-called high unemployment in the regions has enabled inefficient sectional interests to pull out the begging bowl rather than to set their own houses in order and, by political blackmail, to perpetuate their failings at the expense of the taxpayer and consumer. This action remained politically realistic as long as the latter could nevertheless expect rising real income each year, but vanishing national buoyancy will inexorably shrink disposable income. The resulting 'scissors' crisis of penal (and politically impracticable?) taxation will undoubtedly be a challenge to the art of the *democratically* possible.

In this deteriorating situation a redoubled call for increased regional subsidies will doubtless be heard. But before treading that beguiling path, we should consider whether intensification of past policies may make the underlying condition worse rather than better. At the very least, we should ensure that there are parallel changes in labour's ability to respond to the new job opportunities which such subsidies and intervention stimulate.

The frictional problem involved was seen on Merseyside with the arrival of the motor industry. Far from the new jobs nopping up the unemployed, the labour was mainly poached from old industries incapable of offering such high wages. One example was the Liverpool Corporation

his service, which was permanently weakened by the hemorrhage suffered. <sup>(6)</sup> Such demoralized enterprises were henceforth unable to carry on efficiently, incapable as they were of offering the high wages which the motor industry could pay good 'employable' labour. The arrival of the motor industry in effect shuffled the available hands, leaving the registered unemployed - particularly the unskilled - facing an even worse situation than hitherto in that potential employers were increasingly hard hit by the income expectations generated locally. In short, the multiplier effect was upon wage inflation rather than the unemployed.

If this is the effect of subsidizing growth cuckoos in the regional nest, one is tempted to suggest that money might be better spent subsidizing the unemployed to stay on unemployment benefit. Less cynically perhaps, could we extend the concept of sheltered workshops to the long-term unemployed and/or the unemployable? Protective segregation has become a method of helping the overtly handicapped (e.g., the Remploy system or the Grenfell formula) and it might offer constructive help to the more insidiously handicapped who would otherwise stay on the scrap heap permanently.

But the problem is more deep seated than simply coping with the so-called unemployables. Even more fundamental is providing jobs fit for human beings. In other words, the need is not simply for jobs as such, like the dead-end employment which so many children enter after school, <sup>(N.Y.E.C., 1974),</sup> but for jobs which permit spiritually satisfying as well as materially affluent lives. (7)

It is appropriate in this connection to recall the Educational Priority Area concept, <sup>which seemed to offer a</sup> ~~more~~ promising approach to the wider social and environmental problems of which unemployment statistics may be only a crude symptom. In short, politicians should aim for the protection and

Abilitation of vulnerable human beings, particularly in those areas where the socio-economic problems of tomorrow are daily being nurtured in the homes of today. Delinquent parents create delinquent children, while a delinquent peer group can equally deform the children of a neighbourhood throttled by the pressures of anti-social conformity. Sub-cultures of the socially alienated form and grow like malignant tumours. What constructive thought arises is quickly stifled by the squalor, the frustration and even the depravity of a social situation in which child, family and community are debased.

Politicians tend to minimize this problem of the urban ghetto, perhaps because of its highly sensitive implications, genetic and racial as well as social and economic. As an example of current coyness, we may recall the decision of the Labour Government of 1966-1970 to defer the higher school leaving age, a socialist 'betrayal' which led Lord Longford to resign from the Cabinet in disgust. Yet when the age was eventually raised it provoked such a breakdown of discipline in many schools that compulsory attendance has since been honoured more in the breach than in the observance. Hordes of children now roam the streets of Liverpool when they should be at school, and truancy has reached epidemic proportions in some neighbourhoods. As a result of this breakdown of the legislative intention (notably in the very areas where its benefits were mainly intended) we have a situation worse than before. At least in the bad old days children who left school at fifteen could go into a new job legally, whereas today an employer is unable to hire them until they reach the statutory age of sixteen. As a result many semi-literate and anti-school youngsters wander the streets, virtually encouraged to drift into a criminal sub-culture because they see how easy it is to break the law. Yet few politicians have yet faced up to the disciplinary implications of a collapsing law and order in the gang patches of their constituencies.

Earlier reference has been made to the tax payer's subsidy to industries moving into the Development Areas to rectify marginal and often unimportant inequalities in unemployment rates. Meanwhile, as this money continues lavishly to be poured into company coffers, social rehabilitation in the cities is starved for funds from both national and local sources. Expenditure on the scale current in regional industrial subsidies would, if spent on social development within our cities, transform the economic situation in a decade. Instead of a few hundred pounds being doled out for an urban aid scheme, we should be thinking of expenditure running into tens of millions of pounds to revitalise the battered neighbourhoods and derelict sub-regions of the conurbations.

The reality is parsimony and a grudging attitude to the quality of urban life. Expenditure on new housing in down-town areas has often been nullified by the persistence in adjacent streets of vast tracts of desolation, dereliction and squalor, hardly calculated to lift the spirits or the expectations of the children growing up in such so-called renewal areas.

This advocacy of social priority spending is not just a sentimental plea. On the contrary, much of the answer to unemployment itself should be sought in the inner city and other islands of the deprived. A zonal approach to welfare may have some defects, in that areal remedies risk missing the strictly deserving. But if the areal approach to rehabilitation is open to objection within the relatively small urban sub-region, it is far more objectionable when applied in a blanket fashion to regions on the scale of current Development Areas.

In advocating a 'pointillist' approach to government subsidies the <sup>aim is to find</sup> ~~the~~ a more effective, individually refined approach to social and economic planning. Local government, despite its <sup>mid-seventies</sup> reform ~~reform~~, still fails to meet this challenge adequately,



For the new Metropolitan Districts are too big for the voice of the deprived (and often inarticulate) communities to be heard effectively. Nevertheless, it would help if the planners and politicians could be persuaded to see the linkages between varying endowment, opportunity, educational status and income within their recognised 'problem areas'. Geographers have an instinct for such synthesis, and the techniques devised for showing the multi-dimensional spatial geometry of the city might yet have political value in discouraging the single factor approach. But as the Marxist might ruefully say, a grasp of the dialectic does not automatically produce a steeled revolutionary, and it is equally likely that principal components analysis will not by itself promote the egalitarian society. That, however, raises a quite different sort of principle.

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