

A REPLY TO GEORGE SOROS' SPEECH AT THE BUDAPEST CONFERENCE OF OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS, JUNE 1997

INTRODUCTION

1. The central question posed in Soros' speech is: "What should the core or integrating principle be of the mission of an Open Society foundation?" Because he continuously explores this question in changing circumstances, in various contexts, (Eastern Europe, USA, Africa), he can, rationally and/or intuitively, identify projects which he believes support or undermine the concept of an Open Society. On that basis, he feels comfortable giving or withholding funds. He also now, knows and works with people whom he trusts, to pursue the ideal of an Open Society on the same rational and/or intuitive basis as he does. But, what happens when he and they are gone? Will the money be well spent? How will they prevent infighting, bureaucratization, goal displacement, etc., undermining the ideal of pursuing an Open Society? How can one ensure that clarity of purpose will be maintained in the missions of Open Society Foundations?
2. In this sense Item 1 on the agenda, i.e. Mission, is really the only problematical point. All the other items (2 - 8) are of a technical, organisational or practical nature and systems and disciplines can be put into place to cope with them. However, it is extremely difficult to have common clarity of purpose on problems of "governance", "sustainability", "feedback mechanisms", "program evaluations" etc., if there is not to some extent, common clarity of purpose as to what the mission is. As Soros says: "the limiting factor was not money, but the ability to put the money to good use."

AVOIDABLE DEFINITIONAL DILEMMAS

1. Perhaps the dilemma is not as serious as it may appear. It is not uncommon that the actual pursuit or content of a mission may change substantially over

time from what the "originator", "prime mover", "founding father" had intended. After all, it is a core philosophical principle that human knowledge or understanding is fallible and finite; that one cannot, once and for all, decide what meaning or context to give to values such as "democracy", "market economy", "governance" or "open society" in a given historical context. One can give a timeless/abstract definition of such values but their concrete manifestations will always induce debate and argument. It cannot be any other way. To demand or expect that this debate end, or be stopped, is to also fundamentally contradict the ideal of an Open Society. Soros himself has made this point many times.

2. Soros says: *"As long as the spending was driven by a sense of mission I had no problem. But once it was driven by budgets, I had to ask, was the money spent on worthwhile causes?"* This is either code language from which the uninitiated are excluded, or the sentences do not make normal sense. A budget is an instrumental entity drawn up to pursue some end - a mission. It is not easy to talk of a budget without a mission, however modest both may be. The relationship can become problematical if either the mission becomes unclear, or the budget is inadequate, or non-existent, or both.
3. I would suggest that for Soros, the mission became unclear because he gave an exclusive historical context to the idea of an Open Society and which initially drove his philanthropy. He says: *"When I established the Open Society Fund in 1979 I defined its objectives as helping to open closed societies; helping to make open societies viable and fostering a critical mode of thinking. In terms of these objectives "our mission was crystal clear. I did not need to explain what I meant by an Open Society. People understood it intuitively". That is no longer the case. During the Soviet regime, the concept of an Open Society stood for the West, but after the collapse of the Soviet system it became apparent that the West did not necessarily stand for the concept of an Open Society. So what is the relevance of the concept to the current situation?"*

4. An answer to this question, which does not have to stretch the bounds of credulity, would be to say that the ideal of an Open Society was a mission pursued by human beings long before "the West" or "the USA" was a twinkle in the eye of nation states to be born. If one insists that it be given a fixed historical content, then to pursue the ideal of an Open Society is to try to "become like America". This certainly was not what people had in mind when they fought against colonialism, slavery, tyranny, apartheid, etc.
5. It seems therefore, essential to define the mission of an Open Society Foundation in such a generic and abstract manner that it allows for sensible interaction and debate between Foundations operating in Eastern Europe, the USA and Africa, or anywhere else for that matter. There has to be a continuing debate on the relationship between the abstract ideal and the concrete projects being pursued or supported by a particular Foundation. By means of this debate we develop greater clarity of purpose in our mission, which in turn, helps us to grapple with problems of governance, sustainability, feedback etc.
6. Another point that has to be borne in mind, is that a Foundation that pursues the ideal of "an Open Society" by definition has to be a generic Foundation, i.e. it does not have a specific or particular focus within society, e.g. human rights, education, rule of law, media, but has society itself as the point of reference in which these particular or specific foci play an integrating role in promoting an Open Society. That is why, unless we have clarity of purpose about our mission, it is going to be very difficult to get matching funds to sustain Open Society Foundations when George Soros' money runs out. Donors must know what they are getting their "teeth into". In this sense it will always be easier to get matching funds for specific projects of an Open Society Foundation, e.g. human rights, rule of law etc., than for an Open Society Foundation itself. Consequently it is far easier for a project of a Foundation to become self-sustaining or institutionalised in society, e.g. Central European University, than

the Foundation itself.

7. It is very difficult to escape from the conclusion that at its very centre an Open Society Foundation is a "grant giving institution". This is simply so because George Soros initiated it as such in pursuit of the ideal of an Open Society. His idea of the concept may have changed because of changing circumstances and his own intellectual grappling with such changes. But to say that "I am opposed to endowing them" ("grant giving institutions"), and would rather support institutions that "take on an existence of their own", (e.g. Central European University") is to confuse the role of a Foundation (grant giving) with the projects it supports (beneficiaries). This is precisely the dilemma that will confront a future donor when he/she has to decide "Do I give my money to an Open Society Foundation" (what is it?); Or to an organization that teaches maths, science and technology. Unless an Open Society Foundation can give a clear and compelling reply to what its mission is, and that by definition, it is a generic foundation covering a wide range of projects which it funds and oversees better than any other Foundation, the Open Society Foundation in whatever shape or form, dies when George Soros' money runs out, or when he decides.

8. Finally, before proposing a mission for an Open Society Foundation, a word needs to be said about the concept "society" itself. It is fashionable to associate the concept of society with that of a nation-state, i.e. a geo-political entity with defined citizens as members. However, the nation-state is currently under pressure from external forces of globalization and internal forces of fragmentation. Therefore, whereas the nation-state could be our reference point for an Open Society, it need not be an exclusive one. It could also refer to a region consisting of a plurality of nation-states, e.g. Commonwealth, European Union, Eastern Europe, SADEC, OAU etc., or an identifiable area within a nation-state, e.g. a federal state or province.