

59

Society

Glenn Hendler

"Society" is a keyword used in both academia and everyday life to refer to forms of human collectivity and association. These forms may be organizations with specific agendas (the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; the Society for Creative Anachronism) or they may be delimited by an ascribed characteristic such as national affiliation or social class (American society; high society). High school students discuss society in social studies classes; colleges offer majors in sociology; and many universities organize their faculties into social science, natural science, and arts and humanities divisions. In political discourse, "civil society" is distinct from the state, yet "social welfare" programs are often portrayed as an expansion of state power, if not an avatar of "socialism." We "socialize" freely with others, but we are also "socialized" into normative patterns of behavior shaped by larger legal and political institutions. Debutantes and queers both "come out" into society, though the former do so as budding "socialites," while the latter become part of a subcultural "social formation" organized through implicit and explicit sexual norms.

What these complex and contradictory usages have in common is their reference to a structure, a principle or set of principles that organize human diversity into identifiable collectivities. As Raymond Williams (1983, 291) notes, "society" thus names a generalization ("the

body of institutions and relationships within which a relatively large group of people live") and an abstraction ("the condition in which such institutions and relationships are formed"). Crucial to both of these meanings is an attempt to think through and beyond the idea that the individual is the sole agent and object of action. This mode of thought rubs up against the long tradition in the United States of construing society as a static entity that represses or limits the individual, as in Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1841/1990, 151) claim that "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members." Emerson here represents society as an impersonal structure that produces "conformity" by enforcing conventional "names and customs" on the otherwise free (white and male) individual. This commonsense notion greatly simplifies the processes through which individualities and subjectivities are formed. One of the tasks of any research that takes society as its object is to recognize that the dynamic of "individual" and "society" is fraught with complexity. Such work starts from the premise that individual agency is socially constructed even as the world is made and transformed through individual and collective social action.

This dynamic has been latent in the term throughout its etymology. "Society" and "social" both derive from a Latin word for companionship or fellowship, a connotation that persists most clearly when one speaks of "socializing" with friends. Writers have long commented on human association, casting collectivity in terms of the *polis*, the body politic, or the commonwealth, to name only three of the more familiar

terms. But it was only in the eighteenth century that thinkers began to study society systematically. This new focus on the social as an object of analysis can be traced to the French, Scottish, and American Enlightenment, particularly in the works of *philosophes* such as Voltaire and the Baron de Montesquieu; “Common Sense” philosophers David Hume, Adam Ferguson, and Adam Smith; and Anglo-American political radicals such as Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and William Godwin. In the early nineteenth century, these theorizations of society were increasingly mapped onto concrete populations, institutions, and activities by classical sociologists such as Henri de Saint-Simon and August Comte. Saint-Simon proposed that “man” could be understood using a methodology modeled on the natural sciences and called “social physiology,” while it remained for Comte to name the “science” of “sociology,” to systematize the predetermined stages through which all societies developed, and to draw an analogy between societies’ development and that of organic, usually human, bodies. Comte argued that the sociologist, like the physical or natural scientist, could produce knowledge about society that would allow technocratic elites to maintain social order while simultaneously advancing human progress (Hall and Gieben 1992; Gulbenkian Commission 1996; Wallerstein 2001).

The question remained to what purpose such social knowledge would be put. Comte’s technocratic leanings prefigured the increasing prevalence of positivistic research methods across the social sciences. Positivism treated social actions and relations as tak-

ing place within a relatively stable system or field organized through predictable laws. Aided by increasingly complex forms of statistical analysis, the pursuit of these laws often resulted in normalizing forms of knowledge since exceptions to social patterns could be treated as deviations from the norm, in both the moral and the statistical sense (Poovey 1998). Although the term “statistic” shares an etymology with “state,” both governmental and nongovernmental organizations quickly learned to deploy statistically generated social facts to support their arguments and legitimate their existence (P. Cohen 1982). For instance, in 1855 New York’s city government hired William Sanger to produce a statistical study of prostitution (Stansell 1986). Temperance and antislavery activists similarly relied on statistics and social analysis to bolster their claims, thus emerging as the first of many “social movements” that saw society itself as a system that required transformation. In each of these cases, the production of social facts served to constitute widespread practices—vagrancy, prostitution, drinking—not as individual moral failings, but as social problems. As deviations from social norms, such activities became sites both of governmental and (quasi-governmental) intervention and of political struggle among diverse social agents and movements (Foucault 1991).

Even as these positivist forms of social knowledge were being instrumentalized by various state and non-state political organizations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sociology was gaining institutional status as an academic discipline. Herbert Spencer, the leading purveyor of “Social Darwinism”

(another extension of an organic metaphor into society, this time analogizing the history of societies and races to the evolution of species), published *The Study of Sociology* in 1894. Among the earliest practitioners of sociology in the United States were Lester Frank Ward and William Graham Sumner, both of whom were influenced by Spencer. The first course with “sociology” in the title was taught at the University of Kansas in 1890, and the first Sociology Department was initiated at the University of Chicago in 1892. Emile Durkheim and Max Weber were leading figures in a similar institutionalization at European universities. Sociology developed an extra-academic presence as well. Opened in 1913, the Ford Motor Company’s “sociological department” provided aid to the company’s poorest workers, though only after requiring regular “home visits” to ensure that a worker’s domestic life was “worthy” of support and that the mostly immigrant workforce was being properly “Americanized.” Here again sociology normalizes social behavior, this time by linking normativity to productivity.

The analysis of society was nowhere limited to one particular discipline or methodology. Nor did many of the major social theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries consider themselves sociologists. Variants on the word “society” appear today in the names of several disciplines and subdisciplines that cut across the boundaries of sociology as a field, including social history, social psychology, social work, and social theory. At the same time, the overarching rubric of the “social sciences” suggests that society remains a meta-category capable of organizing the study of markets

(economics), governments (political science), and individuals (psychology) into a conceptual and institutional singularity. Of course, these objects of study are not really discrete things: An economic theory that ignored the importance of the state in constructing and maintaining markets would be impoverished at best, as would a theory of the individual that neglected the roles of markets and governments in shaping human agency. For this reason, much energy in the past few decades of social theory has gone toward critiquing conceptions of society as a totalized system, wholly structured and determined by a subsystem—the economy, for instance—that is treated as if it were external to the social. One influential thread of this critique has taken place in the languages of structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction, including Ernesto Laclau’s argument about “the impossibility of society” (1990, 89–92) and Cornelius Castoriadis’s claim that society is “not a thing, not a subject, and not an idea” but an “imaginary institution” (1997, 207).

Many similar critiques of society as a concept derive from debates on the left, which range from intellectual tendencies described as neo- and post-Marxist to welfare-state policy analysts and grassroots community organizers. But they also resonate with attacks from the opposite end of the political spectrum, such as British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s (1987) famous and often-repeated claim that “there is no such thing as society.” The similarities between this type of statement—predominant in the United States at least since Ronald Reagan’s presidency—and neo-Marxist arguments for “the impossibility of society” are largely

superficial. Theorists like Laclau and Castoriadis take aim at reductive understandings of social causation in which an economic “base” (conceived of in Marxism not as a “market,” but as a “mode of production”) provides the foundation for any explanation for “superstructural” social and cultural phenomena. In contrast, the neoconservative position mobilizes a reductive understanding of the market as an isolable, self-regulating subsystem to argue against the extension of state power into social realms where “politics” does not belong. As such, neoconservatism is a theory of society in the classic sense: It argues for a particular way of differentiating various social realms and justifies its differentiation by claiming that each realm operates by identifiable laws. To quote Thatcher again, while society does not exist, “[t]here are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.” In this formulation, the social is reduced to individual and familial interactions, implicitly governed by the market. The family here joins the list of naturalized figures—the body, the market, or the evolution of a species—that stand in for the entire social field (Barrett and McIntosh 1982).

Like “public,” “community,” “civilization,” and other keywords that point to collective human experience, “society” is often described as being in decline. What is different about this declension narrative is that “society” has real enemies, people and political tendencies that work explicitly against the more radical and progressive tendencies inscribed within the concept. The notion of society is also diminished in

the social sciences themselves to the degree that they premise their investigations on rational choice theory, the assumption that society is best understood as an aggregate of individuals intent upon maximizing their interests. A strong argument can be made that the ascendancy of neoconservative politics and neoliberal economic policy in the United States and elsewhere is a response to a decrease in the persuasiveness and affective force of major categories of collectivity such as nation and class, and a concomitant reduction of the sense of solidarity that such “social imaginaries” could at least potentially produce (C. Taylor 2004). In such a context, Thatcher’s claim that individuals and families are the only bases for human association can come to seem depressingly plausible, and even inevitable. This is also the context in which some progressive social movements have narrowed their political ambitions by portraying normative forms of collectivity and association such as marriage and the nuclear family as the best and only means of effecting social change (Warner 1999; Duggan 2004b).

In American studies and cultural studies, “society” is currently a much less lively and debated keyword than “culture.” This represents a shift from the early history of these fields, each of which originally emerged as an attempt to cross the boundary dividing the social sciences from the humanities and to resist deterministic and totalizing understandings of the social. One of the questions American studies was designed to answer concerned the vexed opposition between the “individual” and “society,” and one early sign of the field’s legitimacy was the extent to which

this opposition subtended high-level scholarly projects, more middlebrow arguments, and even high school and college curricula. Foundational and field-defining texts determinedly placed “society” on a par with “culture” as key terms. Williams’s original *Keywords* bore as its subtitle *A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* and had its inception as an appendix to his *Culture and Society, 1790–1950*. Even texts instrumental in the American studies turn toward issues of subjectivity still identified the “social” as a causative force, as is evident in the title of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s *Social Construction of Reality* (1966). Though they privileged “culture” as worthy of analysis—as a corrective to an excessively mechanistic Marxism, and as definitional of their object and method of study—their emphasis on culture was nearly always a means of accessing the more difficult but fundamental subject of society.

The most promising recent tendencies in American cultural studies approach the question of the social in terms that work to avoid the risk of determinism and totalization embedded in the concept. Instead of studying “society” as an object, they tend to view the social as a process. Stuart Hall (Hall and Gieben 1992, 7) has argued that “modern societies [have] a distinctive shape and form, making them not simply ‘societies’ (a loose ensemble of social activities) but social formations (societies with a definite structure and a well-defined set of social relations).” One aspect of that structure is the differentiation into distinct realms—the economy, politics, and culture—that the modernist social sciences have both documented and

reified. Yet rather than naturalizing these realms as objects of analysis, the notion of social formation is meant to keep in mind “both the activities of emergence, and their outcomes or results: both process and structure” (ibid.). This analytic development has its counterpart in American cultural studies scholarship that treats crucial social categories as historical formations: sexual formations, class formations, and, most influentially, racial formations. Avoiding the tendency to view race “as an essence, as something fixed, concrete, and objective,” as well as the “opposite temptation to imagine race as a mere illusion” or ideology, Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994, 54–55) define racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.” Only a mode of analysis that can keep these elements in play as a dynamic process can address the questions of structure and agency raised by the concept of society.

Beyond academia, some of the most successful political movements since the end of the Cold War are reviving the concept of society as the basis of a critique of capitalist globalization and neoliberalism. The reemergence of the socialist left in Latin America has included the electoral victories of the Movement Toward Socialism Party in Bolivia and Hugo Chavez’s “new socialism of the twenty-first century” in Venezuela. Both countries seem to be undergoing more than political change; the introduction of subaltern indigenous perspectives into the political process is also producing significant shifts in national and transnational social imaginaries (Aronson 2006). And