
Backgrounder

Mapping Social Cohesion

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Our new times are sometimes heady ones, full of excitement and hope. The forces of what we call globalisation have brought new possibilities of economic well-being for many individuals, corporations and countries. For legions of others, however, these have been very difficult times. One legacy of such difficulties is fear and uncertainty. People feel hostage to corporate downsizing, chronic unemployment, and fraying social fabrics. They fear for their children's future as well as their own.

Nonetheless, any encounter with Canadians, whether at the hockey rink, in public hearings or via public opinion data, reveals little consensus about where problems come from. Nor do they agree about how to address their fears and uncertainty about the future. Indeed, as soon as choices are put on the table, diverging priorities become evident. There are even some disturbing findings that mounting socio-economic differences about values - what Ekos Research labels class divisions - are increasing. In some sectors of the population "cultural insecurity and nostalgia for 'Old Canada' are reducing tolerance and compassion". Our referendum campaigns and recent elections have seen worrying incivilities during democratic discussion of what Canada should look like in the future.

One reaction of policy communities has been to describe such patterns of fear, division and hostility, as well as the structural patterns underpinning them, as evidence of declining *social cohesion*. Increasingly, in both Canada and abroad, policy communities and ordinary citizens share a sense that "things are falling apart" and "it's just not working".

Just as democratic societies have always in the past debated how to achieve social order, we should expect to find such debates taking place in our own era of turbulence and restructuring. Some theoretical approaches identify social cohesion - defined as shared values and commitment to a community - as the foundation stone of social order. Other traditions privilege other mechanisms. Some put the accent on democracy or stress conflicting interests more than on values. There are

choices to be made. If these choices are to be informed ones, and empirically based, it is important to advance the research agenda.

Product of Our Times

Our tendency to perceive threats to social cohesion is a product of our times. The paradigm shift in economic and social policy towards neo-liberalism has provoked serious structural strains in the realm of the social and political as well as new ideologies.

Recently, the OECD engaged in its own *autocritique*. The OECD suggests, with what might seem surprising frankness, that the Organisation and its member governments share responsibility for social cohesion being on the agenda. "For over a decade, OECD countries have been committed to a cluster of economic policies aimed at encouraging macroeconomic stabilization, structural adjustment, and the globalisation of production and distribution. Although these policies have been generally successful in supporting economic growth, combating inflation and reducing current-account imbalances, there is now pressure on many governments to take stock of the longer-term societal implications that are beginning to emerge. In part this is because of a growing political disenchantment arising from the increasing income polarisation, persistently high levels of unemployment, and widespread social exclusion that are manifesting themselves in varying ways across North America, Europe and the OECD Pacific. The diffusion of this malaise threatens to undermine both the drive towards greater economic flexibility and the policies that encourage strong competition, globalisation and technological innovation."

This long quotation basically identifies a link between the paradigm of neo-liberal adjustment and the political disenchantment which plagues many countries, including Canada.

Careful monitoring of national and international statistics by a variety of observers show many trend lines going in the "wrong direction". They display (although not necessarily all of these in every country) mounting rates of income inequality and homelessness, street crime and other forms of lawlessness, intractably high rates of youth unemployment, intergenerational dependency on social assistance, climbing rates of child poverty and a disturbing slide of some basic indicators of population health. Such patterns of uneven and unequal distribution of wealth and well-being persist even when economic growth and wealth creation are back on track.

Therefore, a growing number of concerned analysts are now reassessing basic perspectives on how to foster economic development and of what constitutes economic "success". There is now a broad discussion of the dependence of economic growth on investments in healthy social relations, rather than treating social spending as simply a hostage to economic growth. Studies now uncover the cross-national statistics which provide evidence a positive correlation between measures of economic and social well-being and equitable distributions of income as well as the negative economic consequences of social inequalities. The agenda of economic development now includes, in other words, issues of social policy.

As the OECD quote also reveals, there is a political side to the equation. All of these menacing signs in economic and structures lead to basic questions about how to foster tolerant and democratic societies. Disenchantment with politics and politicians, especially those whose policies are blamed for the negative social effects of restructuring, is on the rise. Pollsters find that the public's sense of insecurity is high, even where crime rates are in decline. Public opinion polling as

well as political behaviour display disturbing signs of anger. Citizens are less willing to defer to political elites; the Charlottetown referendum made this abundantly clear. At the same time they hunger after more democratic involvement. There is a well grounded fear that failure to respond to these hopes will push more people into the arms of radical populists, with their manichean worldviews, and of religious sectarians, who have already taken hold of the right-wing in some places. Their politics is often one of intolerance and exclusion.

There is also an ideological dimension to this paradigm shift which involves redefining the roles of markets, states and communities. Neo-liberalism privileges the market for distributing resources and power, seeks to limit the role of the state, and emphasises individual (and family) freedom as the core value.

In reaction to these ideological debates and structural strains, policy communities and social scientists seek a new vision. The social costs of relying on the market for so many decisions have provoked a widespread hunt for innovative solutions. Those who fear the high political, social and economic costs of ignoring social cohesion seek to reassess responsibilities of the major institutional complexes - the public, private and third sectors - of our modern liberal democracies.

Several Models

This is not the first time that economic and social turbulence and structural adjustment have been accompanied by attention to social cohesion within policy communities. Indeed, cohesion is a sub-category of one of the most significant debates in sociology (and indeed philosophy), namely that on *social order*.

This is, in other words, the same question that has preoccupied social contract philosophers, such as Thomas Hobbes, since the 17th century. The basic question is: in view of the constant competition between human beings for scarce resources, what makes it possible for people to live together peacefully?

Each time that rapid social change meant diversity threatened to overwhelm commonalities and restructuring menaced past political compromises, academics and policy networks explicitly addressed social cohesion.

Our times are by no means the first time that classical market liberalism has been criticised for the way it theorises the creation of social order.

Cohesion was the central concept of one of the "fathers" of sociology, Émile Durkheim. He is usually identified as the first to popularise the concept. He wrote at the end of the 19th century, in a Europe shaken by rapid social change provoked by industrialisation, urbanisation, massive immigration and population movement across the Continent, and changing social (including gender) roles. For Durkheim, a cohesive society depended on shared loyalties, which citizens owed to each other and ultimately to the state because they were bound in ties of interdependency.

If Durkheim was ultimately optimistic about social diversity and that new institutions could foster cohesion, the next wave of fundamental social change and political crisis, the 1930s, generated pessimism. Talcott Parsons, whose work is still shaping debates in the social sciences, was sensitive to what he saw as the dangers of excessive liberalism.

Adherence to the concept of social cohesion, in both its Durkheimian and Parsonian manifestations, tended to result in a focus more on values than on interests. The result was a theoretical downplaying of democratic mechanisms for resolving conflict. Governments were called on to foster consensus more than to resolve conflict.

Historically the concept of social cohesion surfaced just as people recognised the disquieting effects of rapid social change. It is not surprising, then, that in this era of globalisation eyes have turned again to issues of order, stability and cohesion. However, there are alternatives.

The first alternative are classical market liberals. Liberalism interprets social order as an unintended but very real benefit of market and other individual transactions. The values promoted are individual choice, including the freedom to choose from as many options as reasonable. The mutual respect of individual rights, guaranteed by law and respect for law, as well as the actions of persons pursuing in parallel their own interests, economic or other, are expected to generate a well-functioning society.

Recently, liberalism has become particularly popular in its Tocquevillian manifestations. Tocquevillians are impressed by the positive contribution of private association. In essence, Alexis de Tocqueville saw in the early 19th century United States forms of democratic governance coexisting with a myriad of associations designed to achieve all sorts of non-political ends. In his native post-revolutionary France he observed centralised power, few associations and little democracy. From this correlation he hypothesised that voluntary action taught people to be more co-operative. It also had effects on the wider polity, fostering democracy. A renaissance of Tocquevillian liberalism underpins current political beliefs and enthusiasms about the spillover effects of private association, such as we find in the notion of social capital promoted by Robert Putnam.

A second alternative is one which reserves some, albeit never exclusive, responsibility for creating social order to the institutions of collective choice, that is to democratic institutions. In these theories, the legitimacy of democratic institutions is central to the maintenance of social order. In the social policy thinking of post-1945 Western Europe and Canada, social order rested on a guaranteed basic dose of economic equality and equity. These came from full employment as well as redistribution via programmes to ensure opportunity (such as public schooling) and to cover the ordinary risks of life in an industrial society (insurance and pensions for unemployment, old age, child rearing, sickness, and so on).

From this perspective, public institutions have a central role to play, one that is exclusively theirs. It is through law and democratically arrived at collective choices that conflicts among different group and individual interests should be resolved. Private mechanisms of decision making are never eliminated, but neither can they substitute for democratic government when it comes to making collective choices and achieving collective goals.

Some of the Issues which Remain Unresolved in the Research Agenda of Social Cohesion.

How to foster social cohesion?

The central finding of the available studies of social cohesion is that institutions - public as well as private - are crucial for limiting threats to social cohesion. The findings about causation are clear. A

cohesive society is one in which accommodation of socio-economic conflicts is well-managed. Social cohesion will be at risk only if differences are mobilised as grounds for conflicting claims and then management of such claims is fumbled. Thus, social cohesion is fostered by careful and sensitive management of mobilised differences (or cleavages) of all sorts - cultural, linguistic and economic. All of this leads to the conclusion that we need more attention to institutions, their practices and ideas.

What does social cohesion do?

Many researchers are asking about ways to foster social cohesion. However, we might ask a different question. We might, as does some research, focus on what social cohesion does? Why would anyone want to guarantee its existence?

In questions formulated this way, interest turns to the consequences of social cohesion for something. For some people, attention is on the effects of social cohesion on individuals' or families' "health", in the broadest sense. It might literally be their health. Or it might be a more abstract measure of health and well-being. In other cases, the goal is to uncover the effects on social cohesion on economic performance. Right now we have more hypotheses than hard findings. Therefore, a research agenda is there to be filled.

What is the impact of social cohesion on individuals' health and well-being? What is the impact of social cohesion on communities' health and well-being? What is the impact of social cohesion on economic performance?

Can social cohesion be a threat to social cohesion?

Can citizens' identities be both varied and multiple, without threatening social cohesion, or is adherence to a single national identity necessary? Are the mechanisms and institutions needed to create a balance between social justice and social cohesion in place?

The cohesion of modern societies depends on institutions' capacity to recognise and mediate politicised diversity. Normative conflicts organised around class, ethnic, religious, linguistic and national claims are the familiar stuff of everyday politics. Thinking of social cohesion this way eventually leads to the following seemingly silly but nonetheless perfectly legitimate question: can social cohesion be a threat to social cohesion?

If social cohesion is a characteristic of a community, a community-level phenomenon, the matter of borders and limits is always important. Cohesion depends on establishing the boundary between members of the community and those who are not members. These boundaries can reflect any number of decision rules, only some of which meet other tests of a liberal democratic society. As Julie White of the Trillium Foundation once noted, "like 'the little girl, with the little curl' in the old poem, communities, when they are good, are very, very good. And when they are bad, they are horrid". Communities are not only "bad" when they lack internal ties, when there is not sufficient interpersonal contact and caring, when values are not widely shared and identities are pluralistic. Communities and countries may be very, very bad if they are exclusive and only inward-looking.

Cohesive communities can suffer from "too much bonding". One can be made only too aware that one is "not from the neighbourhood" and therefore an object of suspicion, that one is "not from the

old gang" and therefore an outsider. A basic challenge for conversations about social cohesion is to identify the mechanisms and institutions that can create a balance between social justice and social cohesion. Those that can value and promote fairness and equitable outcomes across all dimensions of diversity. Communities and countries that successfully strike this balance will have the capacity to act, together and democratically.

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