Social Cohesion in Times of Uncertainty

Colloquium Resource Pack

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about Cumberland Lodge

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We are living through increasingly uncertain times that are characterised by manifold crises that range from economics to ecology, from the political legitimacy of our leaders to the social integration of the marginalised. These are times, in other words, that call for nuanced analyses that can inform meaningful action. To that end, the 2017 Cumberland Colloquium draws together people from different disciplinary and professional backgrounds to interrogate the contours and prospects of social cohesion in the twenty-first century.

The concept of social cohesion, by its very nature, is well suited to help us grapple with both the fault lines and fractures and the strong bonds in contemporary societies. A conceptual framework that engages with social cohesion is more likely to be applied in relation to conflict, unrest or threats to the social fabric, rather than in discussions of putatively harmonious societies (if such things truly exist). Thus, the recent economic, political and social instability experienced nationally, continentally and even globally sets the stage to not only call for social cohesion, but also for a dialogue that can reassess, reimagine and redeploy social cohesion as both a theoretical concept and a set of real world practices.

This resource pack has been designed to provide the diverse disciplinary array of delegates and presenters with some common starting points in terms of definitions and debates. We hope that you will treat them as jumping off points, as well as touchstones for debates during the colloquium.

The following pages provide brief, broad overviews of the concept of social cohesion, which are tailored to each of the colloquium’s core themes. Our aim here is to provide a brief basis for informed discussion and debate, and offer a series of key extracts that we hope will help facilitate understanding or simply organise thoughts. Due to the limitations of these few pages to present the complexities of social cohesion, we also provide some recommended readings (academic and non-academic, where possible) that can act as starting points if you would like to delve further.

We look forward to meeting you in September,

Matthew Donoghue, Kerstin Frie, Samentha Goethals, Sadek Kessous and Ben Whitham

The Cumberland Lodge Colloquium Organising Committee 2017
Social cohesion has gained significant popularity since the 1990s, but it is not a new concept. The roots of the concept can be traced back to thinkers such as Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist writing in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Durkheim’s most famous work focused on suicide as a result of a pathological disconnection from society and low levels of integration. This linked strongly with his work around collectivism, culture and solidarity. In *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), he argued that society was held together by a series of norms, beliefs and values that formed a collective consciousness, to which all members of that society/community were drawn. This idea influenced early social psychologists in the 1930s who understood social cohesion as a process of group building and maintenance. For them, social cohesion was about developing a clear attraction for membership of the group in question (Friedkin, 2004). Another important contribution by Durkheim was that of mechanical and organic solidarity. Mechanical solidarity was characteristic of ‘less developed’ societies, where ties were formed on the basis of homogeneity and similarity - such as can be found in more traditional and smaller societies. Organic solidarity, on the other hand, arises from a more developed division of labour, in which individuals must depend on one another’s ability to perform specialised tasks that others cannot do. Broadly speaking, mechanical solidarity is reinforced through repressive law and rules (i.e. designed to maintain traditional structures), whilst organic solidarity is reinforced through more open and co-operative rules (perhaps analogous with the development of the central pillars of liberalism).

In the past few decades, social cohesion has experienced something of a renaissance. Perhaps the most significant development in recent times is the integration of social cohesion with social capital. The most famous proponents of this ‘turn’ are James Coleman and Robert Putnam. Coleman saw social capital as consisting of social structures, facilitating social action. He characterised it as being productive: ‘making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible’. Coleman argues that it is a particularly intangible form of capital, existing as it does in relations among persons. Thus, productivity comes from strong relationships based upon reciprocity and trust.

These two characteristics are also central to Putnam’s further development of social capital in the 1990s and 2000s. For Putnam, social capital is found in networks of reciprocity and trust. Putnam furthered work on social capital by developing two forms: bonding capital and bridging capital. Bonding capital denotes a process of strengthening connections within familiar groups (e.g. age, race/ethnicity, religion etc.). Bridging capital denotes strengthening connections with groups/people unlike yourself. For Putnam, these two forms of social capital go hand in hand. A group replete with bonding capital is more likely to be able to employ bridging capital, thus strengthening society as a whole. In his most famous work *Bowling Alone: The Decline and Revival of American Community* (2000), he argues that a decline in bonding capital in American towns leads to a decline in bridging capital, thus creating a more fractured society as a whole.

The development of social cohesion as an outcome of the development and employment of social capital was enthusiastically adopted by policymakers in the UK, Australia, Canada, US and across Europe. It is, for example, a central concept in the UK Home Office’s *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team* (2001), which used the concept of bonding and bridging social capital. The report characterised ethnic groups in northern England as living ‘parallel lives’ that garnered fear, mistrust and anger, which eventually led to the ‘race’ riots of 2001 in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley.
useful extracts

In fact we all know that a social cohesion exists whose cause can be traced to a certain conformity of each individual consciousness to a common type, which is none other than the psychological type of society. Indeed under these conditions all members of the group are not only individually attracted to one another because they resemble one another, but they are also linked to what is the condition for the existence of this collective type, that is, to the society that they form by coming together. Not only do fellow citizens like one another, seeking one another out in preference to foreigners, but they love their country. They wish for it what they would wish for themselves, they care that it should be lasting and prosperous, because without it a whole area of their psychological life would fail to function smoothly. […] It is this solidarity that repressive law expresses, at least in regard to what is vital to it. Indeed the acts which such law forbids and stigmatises as crimes are of two kinds: either they manifest directly a too violent dissimilarity between the one who commits them and the collective type; or they offend the organ of the common consciousness.

Durkheim on mechanical solidarity. Pp. 60-61

What causes the individual to be more or less closely linked to his group is not only the larger or smaller number of ties that bind him to it, but also the varying intensity of the forces that attach him. It may then be that the bonds resulting from the division of labour, although more numerous, are weaker than the rest, and that the greater strength of the latter makes up for their numerical inferiority. But it is the opposite that is true. In fact, the measure of the relative strength of two social ties is the different ease with which they may be broken. The less resistant is plainly the one that snaps under the slightest pressure. Now it is in lower societies, where solidarity through similarities is the only, or almost the only one, where these breaks are the most frequent and the easiest.

Durkheim on organic solidarity. P. 102

For a variety of reasons, life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital. In the first place, networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved. When economic and political negotiation is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism are reduced. At the same time, networks of civic engagement embody past success at collaboration, which can serve as a cultural template for future collaboration. Finally, dense networks of interaction probably broaden the participants’ sense of self, developing the “I” into the “we,” or (in the language of rational-choice theorists) enhancing the participants’ “taste” for collective benefits.

When Thomas Hobbes claimed that in the state of nature, before authority arose to keep us in check, we were engaged in a war “of every man against every man”, he could not have been more wrong. We were social creatures from the start, mammalian bees, who depended entirely on each other. The hominins of east Africa could not have survived one night alone. We are shaped, to a greater extent than almost any other species, by contact with others. The age we are entering, in which we exist apart, is unlike any that has gone before.

Three months ago we read that loneliness has become an epidemic among young adults. Now we learn that it is just as great an affliction of older people. A study by Independent Age shows that severe loneliness in England blights the lives of 700,000 men and 1.1m women over 50, and is rising with astonishing speed.

Ebola is unlikely ever to kill as many people as this disease strikes down. Social isolation is as potent a cause of early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day; loneliness, research suggests, is twice as deadly as obesity. Dementia, high blood pressure, alcoholism and accidents — all these, like depression, paranoia, anxiety and suicide, become more prevalent when connections are cut. We cannot cope alone.

Yes, factories have closed, people travel by car instead of buses, use YouTube rather than the cinema. But these shifts alone fail to explain the speed of our social collapse.

These structural changes have been accompanied by a life-denying ideology, which enforces and celebrates our social isolation. The war of every man against every man — competition and individualism, in other words — is the religion of our time, justified by a mythology of lone rangers, sole traders, self-starters, self-made men and women, going it alone. For the most social of creatures, who cannot prosper without love, there is no such thing as society, only heroic individualism. What counts is to win. The rest is collateral damage.

George Monbiot in the Guardian (‘The age of loneliness is killing us’), 14/10/2014

suggested resources

- Emile Durkheim (1984), The Division of Labour in Society. Basingstoke: MacMillan (Chapters 2 and 3).
building social cohesion

Just as there is no universally accepted definition of social cohesion, there is no single accepted method of building cohesion. In fact, how to build cohesion depends not only on how cohesion is defined, but also who or what it is supposed to target (inequality, ethnic groups, or immigrants, for example), as well as the national socio-economic and political context in which the concept of social cohesion is employed. To confuse matters further, how social cohesion is worked into political/policy strategies is also eclectic: some choose to legislate for cohesion, others push to make social cohesion a consideration in policy, whilst yet others employ the concept simply as an indicator.

Regardless of the importance of socio-economic inequality in the academic literature, social cohesion in policy almost exclusively deals with cultural and ethnic inequalities. Yet this does not mean that socio-economic inequality does not affect social cohesion. For example, The Council of Europe’s strategy on social cohesion states that

social cohesion is the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding polarisation. A cohesive society is a mutually supportive community of free individuals pursuing these common goals by democratic means.

This clearly points to integration being the central pillar of social cohesion; yet suggests we must understand integration in a broader fashion than simply as an issue of ethnicity or culture.

Compare this to the UK Home Office’s Community Cohesion practitioner’s toolkit, which states that

Community cohesion is about inclusion, making the effort to find out about others, treating each other with respect and building good relations between different parts of the community. It is not just about race, but is equally about, for example, the relationships between young and old and between residents of different estates or residents within a single estate. (Home Office/ODPM, 2004)

This toolkit lays out ‘seven steps’ towards building community cohesion: Leadership and commitment, Developing a vision and values for community cohesion, Programme planning and management, Engaging communities, Challenging and changing perceptions, Community cohesion and specialist areas (e.g. combining community cohesion with specific policy areas), and Ensuring sustainability of programmes.

Australia has been particularly active in promoting and building social cohesion. This takes places across departments and bodies, such as the Australian Human Rights Commission and the Australian Government’s Department of Social Services. The latter expressly places social cohesion within the context of ethnic difference: ‘Many cultures make up Australian society but we are united by our commitment to Australia. Government policies and services are in place to build social cohesion’. It prioritises four areas: Civics and Citizenship, Values Education, Local Government, and Anti-discrimination Laws.

Though there are stark differences in the (nuances of these) definitions of social cohesion, there is an interesting coherence and convergence in the steps taken to build cohesion. Of course, this may be an example of policymakers learning from other real world examples, but it may equally represent a political or ideological conformity, or perhaps even a stagnation in imagination when it comes to developing culturally - and socio-economically - integrated societies.
useful extracts

Sir - Repeated studies have found that playing an instrument or singing in a choir improves a child's IQ, betters social skills and increases the chances of working hard, doing well and having a good career. There is ample evidence that music can be a potent force for building social cohesion and reducing many of the ills that beset our society. To these indirect benefits we can add the joy that participation in music - and dance - brings to people regardless of age, sex or social distinctions.

There are a number of organisations devoted to the promotion of music, singing and dance in schools: for example the Foundation for Youth Music; the Voices Foundation; Live Music Now!; the British Federation for Young Choirs; A Chance to Dance.

Yet in spite of the excellent work of these bodies, often relying on voluntary effort and charitable funding, there is still no real headway being made to reverse the disastrous decline in music activities in the state education system in Britain. One recent report found that fewer than one in 10 GCSE pupils studied music. It seems wasteful to allow such neglect to continue. Ministers are not unaware of the situation; a start has been made to provide much-needed funding.

But it has yet to be grasped that the substantial additional resources required to place music at the heart of the school curriculum would prove to be a priceless investment for the future.

The Telegraph Letters Section (25/12/2002), Building social cohesion

Promoting community cohesion involves addressing fractures, removing barriers and encouraging positive interaction between groups. It aims to build communities where people feel confident they belong and are comfortable mixing and interacting with others. Engaging and involving communities in this process can be very difficult but it is what community cohesion is all about – reaching out to different groups and communities and bringing them closer together: Which groups and communities you engage with will depend on the composition of your own area and the priorities within these. For some areas, the priority may be to bring people from different faiths or ethnic background together; for others, it may be about enabling people from different estates or areas to mix, whilst for others, it may be about helping young people and old people to get to know and understand each other. Some Pathfinders have made the point that for them it was important not to focus on race since this can sometimes create a perception amongst the majority community that they are excluded. The following gives some examples of different approaches to engaging communities.


suggested resources


- Australian Government, Department of Social Services: Settlement and Multicultural Affairs

Social identity theory posits that belonging to social groups is important for a person’s self-esteem and pride. As humans, we are social animals who define ourselves by our group memberships. As part of a natural process of self-image enhancement, most people will assign higher value to their own group than to other groups (Tajfel and Turner). That is, for instance, by believing that one’s nationality is the best, a person feels more pride in belonging to his or her country, which increases the person’s self-esteem.

Several studies in social psychology have shown that this process has the consequence of dividing one’s own group (the ‘in-group’) from others (the ‘out-group’). When the in-group’s value is increased, the value of other relevant groups is automatically decreased. This leads to in-group bias and favouritism, meaning that people prefer and evaluate others from their in-group more highly. This occurs even when no other information than group membership is given (Mullen et al.). In extreme cases, the division between groups can lead to dehumanisation and hatred. In many cases it leads to prejudice and discrimination.

Social psychologists have spent decades trying to find solutions to counter discrimination and prejudice towards out-groups. One of the most prominent approaches is based on the contact hypothesis by Allport, which states that intergroup contact can reduce prejudice. Decades of research have shown that contact is especially beneficial in situations in which the groups are of equal status, the members work cooperatively to reach a shared goal, and the contact is supported by the relevant authorities (Pettigrew and Tropp “meta-analytic test”). A meta-analysis on mediators of the effect of contact on prejudice found that contact reduces anxiety, increases empathy, and imparts knowledge concerning the outgroup members, which in turn reduces prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp “mediators”). Research has further examined the effects of different types of contact. The results suggest that in addition to direct contact, imagined contact (Crisp and Turner), vicarious contact (i.e., observed contact with an outgroup member; Mazziotta et al.), and extended contact (i.e., when a friend is in contact with an outgroup member; Wright et al.) have similarly positive effects on intergroup relations.

However, research has also revealed the boundaries of the benefits of contact. Several studies have shown that negative contact can exacerbate intergroup conflict. For instance, a study by Barlow and colleagues found that white Americans who had experienced (what they perceived to be) negative contact with black Americans expressed more racism and were more likely to avoid the out-group. The same study also found that the unfortunate consequences of negative contact were stronger than the benefits of positively valenced contact. Some researchers have attempted to predict when positive and negative contact experiences might occur. A literature review concluded that unfavourable contexts of contact are often characterised by competition, unpleasantness of interaction, general frustration by one interaction partner which is then attributed to the outgroup, and significant differences in norms or statuses of the groups (Amir). Intergroup contact is therefore not a ‘one size fits all’ solution. Nevertheless, it is a concept that is worth considering for the bridging of gaps between groups and thus the building of social cohesion.

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1 “Examination of data from a number of independent studies of the same subject, in order to determine overall trends.” Definition taken from: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/meta-analysis
The present argument postulates that the reason for this behavioural and evaluative intergroup differentiation is to be found in the need of the subjects to provide order, meaning and social identity to the experimental situation; and that this need is fulfilled through the creation of intergroup differences when such differences do not in fact exist, or the attribution of value to, and the enhancement of, whatever differences do exist.


1. Individuals strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity.
2. Positive social identity is based to a large extent on favorable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant outgroups: the in-group must be perceived as positively differentiated or distinct from the relevant outgroups.
3. When social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals will strive either to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or to make their existing group more positively distinct.


Prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e., by law, custom or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups.


Moreover, although we observe variability in the magnitude of contact–prejudice effects across different intergroup contexts, the relationships between contact and prejudice remain significant across samples involving different target groups, age groups, geographical areas, and contact settings. These results support the recent extension of intergroup contact theory to a variety of intergroup contexts, beyond its original focus on racial and ethnic groups. In sum, our meta-analytic results provide substantial evidence that intergroup contact can contribute meaningfully to reductions in prejudice across a broad range of groups and contexts.

suggested resources


Even in the costly aftermath of the Second World War, the arts were high on the public agenda as part of the effort to rebuild. So much so that in July 1945, following German surrender in May, Britain’s most prominent economist, John Maynard Keynes, founded the Arts Council of Great Britain. The Arts Council’s aim was to sponsor the production of national and regional art that, in Keynes’s words, would ‘make London a great artistic metropolis’ and allow ‘the different parts of this country’ to ‘learn to develop [dramatic and musical and artistic life] characteristic of themselves.’ For Keynes, a state-sponsored programme for the arts would not only bring both tourists and money to Britain but would ease social tensions within regional communities, drawing people together under the common banner of local culture.

Twenty-first-century Britain is, however, at a distant remove from the nationalising spirit of 1945. Since imposing economic austerity measures, the British government has been making cuts to public spending that have frequently fallen on arts and culture. Recent years have seen the closure of public spaces – libraries, galleries, theatres and museums – that functioned as sites of community life. In their absence, the prevailing logic has favoured the private over the public, commercial over community spaces.

This history paints a pessimistic picture of the place of art in society, albeit one that stresses the urgency of the colloquium’s present discussion. Before claiming, however, that art might remedy the ills of an atomised society, it is important to reflect on the relationship between culture and society. This is not necessarily to disprove Keynes’s hypothesis but to understand the extent of its scope and potential. This chapter outlines some of the many different positions on art’s relationship to society in order to inform conversation throughout the culture and cohesion stream about the place of art in projects of social cohesion.

autonomous aesthetics

It is common to hear that art is socially remote, that it offers an escape from reality.

“After a day at work, I like to relax with some easy watching.”

“The best books take you into another world.”

“I like to lose myself in music.”

In these examples, the appreciation of the formal and stylistic features of artworks - their aesthetics - releases people from the drudgery of the “real” social world of work, politics, strife and struggle. Such a view, however, calls into question the place of politically committed art that seeks to engage with real world politics. Why would someone appreciate art that offers little or no escapism? Equally, what can escapist fantasies reflect, if not existing social structures? Lastly, the question of cultural value is important, as emphasised below by the most vocal proponent of aesthetic autonomy, Harold Bloom. For some, culture must be lightweight and lowbrow to be therapeutic, whereas for others art is only effective when it sophisticatedly wrestles with challenging human, political or philosophical themes. Should an art in service of social cohesion have popular appeal or be aesthetically sophisticated? And are these categories mutually exclusive?
President Clinton’s inaugural poem, by Maya Angelou, was praised in a *New York Times* editorial as a work of Whitmanian magnitude, and its sincerity is indeed overwhelming; it joins all the other instantly canonical achievements that flood our academies. The unhappy truth is that we cannot help ourselves; we can resist, up to a point, but past that point even our own universities would feel compelled to indict us as racist and sexist. I recall one of us, doubtless with irony, ‘We are all feminist critics.’ That is the rhetoric suitable for an occupied country, one that expects no liberation from liberation. Institutions may hope to follow the advice of the prince in Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*, who counsels his peers, “Change everything just a little so as to keep everything exactly the same.”

Unfortunately, nothing will be the same because the art and passion of reading well and deeply, which was the foundation of our enterprise, depended upon people who were fanatical readers when they were still small children. Even devoted and solitary readers are now necessarily beleaguered, because they cannot be certain that fresh generations will rise up to prefer Shakespeare and Dante to all other writers. The shadow lengthens in our evening land, and we approach the second millennium expecting further shadowing.

I do not deplore these matters; the aesthetic is, in my view, an individual rather than a societal concern.

**instrumentalised arts**

In contradistinction to aesthetic autonomy, many people keep the spirit of Keynes’s original Arts Council alive by asserting that the arts serve a vital social function. This view suggests that there is an instrumental value to culture as it both educates people and structures and enriches social life generally. Such a claim risks asserting, however, that art is little more than a tool. Does culture retain its effective power if it is treated as a means to an end? Does this reduce art to a sophisticated form of propaganda? Or can culture accommodate a variety of functions that are both aesthetic and social?


The arts were also seen an important way of enriching the experience of life. Respondents argued that the arts can be life-enhancing and life-affirming, uplifting, fulfilling and nourishing. They valued the fact that the arts have the power to engage and to provoke an emotional or intellectual response. Respondents felt that the arts bring beauty to the world and talked of the arts’ ability to inspire and to provide a refuge from the mundane, the commercial and the work-focused reality of everyday life. They also saw the arts as an important source of enjoyment, pleasure and relaxation.

In addition, many respondents felt that the arts can have powerful applications in other contexts and can make an important contribution to achieving a wide variety of social outcomes and benefits. Respondents talked about the role of the arts in education and the importance of engaging young people with the arts. Others spoke of the contribution the arts can make to health and wellbeing, to regeneration and the economy and to creating community cohesion. The role of art in politics was also discussed, with a number of respondents valuing the ability of the arts to make society fairer and more inclusive and the contribution it can make to strengthening democracy by ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to have their voice heard.
cultural capital and social capital

In opposition to the positive outlooks of both instrumentalists and autonomists, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that cultural appetites are not for escapism from but for an unconscious need to belong to social groups. He claimed that acts of cultural distinction yield forms of cultural capital that are analogous to forms of economic capital. In the same way that wealth might secure positions in elite social spaces so too do acts of cultural distinction. For example, I might seek to impress work colleagues by recommending a new play. The money I spend on exclusive theatre tickets is converted into cultural capital by my intellectual appreciation of the play. I can then deploy that cultural capital through the recommendation as social capital. This serves to improve my social standing in the workplace to advance my career, thus improving my earning potential and justifying the original economic investment of buying the theatre tickets. According to Bourdieu, therefore, culture structures social groups but it does so only for each member’s individual benefit.


It has been seen, for example, that the transformation of economic capital into social capital presupposes a specific labor, i.e., an apparently gratuitous expenditure of time, attention, care, concern, which, as is seen in the endeavor to personalize a gift, has the effect of transfiguring the purely monetary import of the exchange and, by the same token, the very meaning of the exchange. From a narrowly economic standpoint, this effort is bound to be seen as pure wastage, but in the terms of the logic of social exchanges, it is a solid investment, the profits of which will appear, in the long run, in monetary or other form. Similarly, if the best measure of cultural capital is undoubtedly the amount of time devoted to acquiring it, this is because the transformation of economic capital into cultural capital presupposes an expenditure of time that is made possible by possession of economic capital. More precisely, it is because the cultural capital that is effectively transmitted within the family itself depends not only on the quantity of cultural capital, itself accumulated by spending time, that the domestic group possess, but also on the usable time (particularly in the form of the mother’s free time) available to it (by virtue of its economic capital, which enables it to purchase the time of others) to ensure the transmission of this capital and to delay entry into the labor market through prolonged schooling, a credit which pays off, if at all, only in the very long term.
The sociology of culture

The account above may seem persuasive but it does not address the artist herself. This line of thought, however, leads to profound and challenging questions. Can meaningful art be produced if it is only a supplement to social policy? Why do artists produce art? What is art? These are questions that are not necessarily easily answered (though much can come from their discussion).

The Marxist cultural critic Raymond Williams offered one possible response to some of these queries. For much of his career, Williams worked at the University of Cambridge during a period in which its scholarly practice was more in line with a tradition that read literature as removed from the social. Contrary to this view, Williams asserted that ‘a sociology of culture’ should not only be concerned with the operation of institutions but also with culture’s formal features: its artistic and literary technical make up, whether that is words, colours, sounds or movements. For Williams, however, ‘the reduction of the social to fixed forms […] remains the basic error.’ (129) This is to say that, contra Bloom’s later claims, artistic appreciation is not where readers escape the social but is instead a place where the personal and the social interface in ways that are never fixed or stable but rather are complex and subtly changing. Williams coins the term ‘structure of feeling’ to illustrate this point: through their ‘structures of feeling’, cultural works reveal to us not only institutional structures and ‘formally held and systematic beliefs’ but also ‘meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt’. (132) Following Williams, then, through a careful analytical reading of culture, it offers unique forms of social knowledge that are not fixed, individualist, strictly instrumentalised or exploited for personal gain. It is important to ask, however, if this knowledge is practically applicable in arenas of policy by providing a deeper historical understanding of changes in discourses of social cohesion or if it is resigned to a principally academic field of inquiry.

Extract: Raymond Williams, ‘Structures of Feeling’ (1977)

Practical consciousness is almost always different from official consciousness, and this is not only a matter of relative freedom or control. For practical consciousness is what is actually being lived, and not only what it is thought is being lived. Yet the actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms is not silence: not the absence, the unconscious, which bourgeois culture has mythicized. It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become a fully articulate and defined exchange. Its relations with the already articulate and defined are then exceptionally complex.

This process can be directly observed in the history of a language. In spite of substantial and at some levels decisive continuities in grammar and vocabulary, no generation speaks quite the same language as its predecessors. The difference can be defined in terms of additions, deletions, and modifications, but these do not exhaust it. What really changes is something quite general, over a wide range, and the description that often fits the change best is the literary term ‘style’. It is a general change, rather than a set of deliberate choices, yet choices can be deduced from it, as well as effects. Similar kinds of change can be observed in manners, dress, building, and other similar forms of social life. It is an open question – that is to say, a set of specific historical questions – whether in any of these changes this or that group has been dominant or influential, or whether they are the result of much more general interaction. For what we are defining is a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period. The relations between this quality and the other specifying historical marks of changing institutions, formations, and beliefs, and beyond these the changing social and economic relations between and within classes, are again an open question: that is to say, a set of specific historical questions. The methodological consequence of such a definition, however, is that the specific qualitative changes are not assumed to be epiphenomena of changed institutions, formations, and beliefs, or merely secondary evidence of changed social and economic relations between and within classes.
At the same time they are from the beginning taken as social experience, rather than as 'personal' experience or as the merely superficial or incidental 'small change' of society. They are social in two ways that distinguish them from reduced senses of the social as the institutional and the formal: first, in that they are changes of presence (while they are being lived that is obvious; when they have been lived it is still their substantial characteristic); second, in that although they are emergent or pre-emergent, they do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action.

Such changes can be defined as changes in structures of feeling.

**suggested resources**

social cohesion and business

The mainstream view of the role of business in social cohesion would be that described by Oketch, *Corporate stake in social cohesion, 2004, p.6*:

Economic organizations are one of the ‘four pillars’ that support the objectives of social cohesion in all societies (Heyneman, 2002), but this is only possible when they make profits...Profit is essential for business expansion, leading to the creation of more jobs, which in turn lead to increased savings and better economic times. Households and by extension societies are known to enjoy high levels of cohesiveness when they face less economic and budgetary constraints… [yet] A cohesive society is one which accommodation of conflicts in well managed by its institutions, both private and public, but the ability of both private and public institutions to manage conflict is drawn from their legitimacy and trust from the people.

This theoretical perspective has influenced an important body of literature in the field of business for peace which emphasises how:

- business can contribute to a sense of community and enhance social cohesion (Dworkin and Schipani 2007; Fort and Schipani 2004; Spreitzer 2007). Management theorists are perhaps most familiar with the notion of contributing to a sense of community as it is embedded within the literature on CSR (Aguilera and Rupp 2005; Davies et al. 2003; Freeman and McVea 2001). By taking all stakeholders into account, rather than just owners of the firm (Freeman 1983), businesses can obtain their “social license” to operate in a foreign country (Gunningham et al. 2003). This is especially important for reducing operational risks in conflict-sensitive regions (Oetzel and Getz 2012). Milliken et al. (2015) also note the importance of incorporating employee voice into management of companies in conflict affected regions as an important way to enhance the sense of community’. (in Katsos and Alkafaji, *Business in war zones, 2017, p.3*)

In the last couple of decades, however, the legitimacy of business, particularly globalised enterprises and the global economic order they sustain, have been significantly questioned. Struggles for corporate responsibility and accountability to tackle the negative social, environmental and economic impacts of multinational corporations have led to the development of a vast array of new standards and regulations from mainstream Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and corporate sustainability to global policies, such as the UN Guiding Principles on business and human rights, and more recently national legislations on modern slavery (e.g. UK Modern Slavery Act 2015). But, besides these accountability challenges, business has also become a central partner in public-private partnerships with international organisations involved in development (e.g. Sustainable Development Goals) and humanitarian responses (e.g. UN Global Compact Business for Peace).

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These struggles, new forms of corporate regulation and public-private initiatives are both reactions against and engines of the global neoliberal political-economic system. They have led to theoretical reconsiderations of the legal nature, models and purpose of business. Lawyers, business ethicists and management scholars in the fields of business and human rights, corporate governance, and business for peace have challenged the theory of business as the unique economic and profit-making organ of society, exempt of any political or social roles or responsibilities. They have highlighted the changing and diverse economic, political and social roles incumbent on businesses as they integrate human rights responsibilities, become involved in sustainability programmes, and operate in conflict or weak governance zones.

Management scholars Palazzo and Scherer, (Politicized role of business in a globalized world, 2007, p.906) developed their theory of political CSR by reflecting on the blurring of the,

“the borders between political and economic activities…because, particularly multinational corporations, come under the political pressure of NGOs and some of them, as a reaction, have already started to operate with a politically enlarged concept of responsibility.”

In law, Muchlinski, (Implementing the new UN corporate human rights framework, 2012, p167) describes how,

“The introduction of a responsibility to respect human rights and of the due diligence mechanism may result in certain reforms of corporate organization… a departure from a shareholder based corporate governance model towards a more stakeholder based model… the development of human rights compliance systems, and managerial structures to achieve this, might go beyond "enlightened shareholder value" and become a feature of a reformed "civil corporation"… informed by the dominant social discourses of the twenty-first century such as environmentalism, feminism and human rights.”

From a business ethics perspective, Wettstein (Normativity, ethics and the UN Guiding Principles, 2015, p.171) stresses that,

“business ethics scholars in particular have argued since at least the 1970s (see Carroll et al. 2012) that the nature of business is not merely economic but inherently social (see, e.g., Ulrich 2008: 377). The very idea of business, as Richard De George claims, is a social question and “one that must be answered in a social context” (2010: 5). The social responsibility of companies, then, is not to be understood as merely referring to external effects of business activity but as deriving from its purpose as a social institution; as social institutions, they are not merely providing goods for payment but must be guided by “a vision of real-life practical values,” that is, by an “idea of value creation which aims to make a genuine contribution to the quality of life in society” (Ulrich 2008: 410–411).”

These theoretical discussions grapple with aspects of the role which business can play in social cohesion. They do this by defining and observing the intersecting responsibilities businesses have taken on (or are expected to take on) for the environment, socio-economic justice and sustainable development, employment, health, human rights and labour rights, governance, conflict, peace, etc. In doing so, they also outline the ‘business case’ to gain or sustain legitimacy, and the moral imperative for business to integrate deeper social and political roles and responsibilities. What these debates do not engage with yet, is how these newly defined roles and responsibilities not only create further social expectations of business, but also expand its reach in the social fabric, normative and governance structures of the various locales where they operate.
Some studies and recent calls by civil society have started to provide both theoretical insights and empirical illustrations of challenges facing businesses to achieve legitimacy, and the positive role and responsibility they have in creating the conditions for social cohesion, or in tackling both the corporate behaviour and broader politico-economic structures undermining it.

Many participants in Katsos and Alkafaji’s research (*Business in war zones*, p.9), for instance, explained that,

“building social cohesion is used as the essential tool for business to enhance peace. One participant described social cohesion as a “trust bridge” between and among communities that business is a key component in building. Another interviewee put it even more bluntly: “peace [in Iraq] is not predicated on the economy only. Peace depends on whether there is social cohesion in a society, and that’s the main problem with lack of peace that we try to address [in Iraq].” Most interesting about the perception of social cohesion as a primary peacebuilding tool in business’ toolbox was that those who believe in social cohesion thought it was the most important role for the private sector in Iraq.”

Toby Webb, Founder of Innovation Forum (*The role of business in social cohesion and domestic terrorism, 2016*), calls for a rethink of the role of business in social cohesion and domestic terrorism in response to the terrorist attack in Nice, in 2016. He invites businesses to engage with,

“vulnerable societies… communities which surround them and buy their products and services… those at the bottom of the economic pile, who live, work and can help identify better than anyone, the vulnerable who need help, or the truly dangerous individuals who cannot be negotiated with. This could be by connecting those groups with supporting community workers, activists, and leaders who can bring about change, and backing new approaches to community and economic empowerment, in a number of different ways’ to tackle inequality, and the sense of structural exclusion and disadvantage.”

Phil Bloomer, Executive Director of Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (*It’s in our hands to fight the rise of blame and bigotry, 2016*), explains that there are,

“many reasons for the rise in chauvinist nationalism around the world. But the loss of any popular sense that globalised markets deliver on their promise of shared prosperity and shared security is a powerful factor’. As the architects of globalised markets, business and governments have a central role to play ‘to reshape them to deliver more for the common good if they are to be sustainable. If our societies want to cleave to principles of freedom, human dignity, and fairness, then markets will have to demonstrate they can deliver these values.”

The considerations above ask us to reflect upon some important questions in this stream: In what ways do businesses, as core economic, social, and political actors in society, influence, enhance or disrupt social cohesion around their operations, in their global supply chains, through their relationships, in their organizational culture, and/or by creating alternative models of enterprise? What stakes do they have in cohesive societies in and around their organisations?
suggested resources


In 2016 Dame Louise Casey published her government-ordered review into ‘integration and opportunity’ in the UK. The context for the publication of such a review could hardly have been more timely. The referendum on EU membership, the murder of a sitting MP by a far right extremist, and the wider global context, including the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, were widely interpreted as evidence of increasingly polarised and divided societies. But the Casey Review was seemingly preoccupied with a single aspect of integration and opportunity in the UK: the place of British Muslims.²

The pre-eminence of British Muslims as the target community for both cohesion and security policies in recent years is now well documented.³ What started as a concern with securing populations from the threat of terrorism in the post-9/11 era has, especially in the post-7/7 period of UK policy-making, become the ‘securitisation’ of a much wider range of social policies and issues in relation to British Muslims. In 2015, primary school children in the 22% Muslim borough of Waltham Forest were asked to complete a ‘social cohesion survey’ which, it transpired, was funded by the EU’s Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism Programme. In 2016, David Cameron suggested that the ‘traditional submissiveness’ and failure to learn English of Muslim women are causes of radicalisation to be addressed by policy.

It is perhaps telling that the section of the Casey Review dealing with ‘community cohesion’ leads straight into a section on the government’s ‘counter-radicalisation’ strategy, Prevent. This policy has been deeply controversial, and whether we agree with its principles or not, recent terrorist attacks (and those the security services claim to have preemptively thwarted) suggest that it is less than fully effective. It has even been suggested that Prevent may in fact jeopardise both security and community cohesion:

The Prevent agenda was announced in October 2006, and the ‘Preventing Violent Extremism Pathfinder’ initiative commenced in April 2007. From the moment it started to be implemented, experienced Youth Workers, Community Workers, and other local authority officials [...] were flagging Prevent up as not only highly problematic in itself but flatly contradictory to the community cohesion agenda they were attempting to develop locally, often through highly-imaginative pieces of work. [...] Prevent seemed to have forgotten all the concerns that the 2001 riots had crystallised, and which the Cantle Report had identified, around both increasingly racialised community identities and relations, and policy’s failure to address that, as well as the well-documented problems of previous approaches to tackling racist extremism in white communities.

Paul Thomas (2012), Responding to the threat of Violent Extremism: Failing to Prevent.

² In Casey’s 199-page report, ‘Muslim’ / ‘Muslims’ are mentioned 249 times, and ‘Islam’ / ‘Islamic’ / ‘Islamist’ a further 100 times. This can be contrasted with just 35 mentions of ‘Christian’ / ‘Christians’ / ‘Christianity’ and only 23 mentions of ‘Jew’ / ‘Jews’ / ‘Jewish’ / ‘Judaism’.
³ See ‘Suggested Resources’ below for relevant literature.
The blurring of community cohesion issues - including immigration, integration, religion, culture, and language - into issues of security has been comprehensive in policy and media debate. This has been especially evident in the invocation of ‘security threats’ by those opposed to offering asylum to refugees during the migration ‘crisis’ of 2014-present. A (post)colonial legacy is evident in debates, with migrants framed as threatening and fundamentally ‘other’. The Algerian revolutionary and anti-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon once wrote that ‘the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man's reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms’. When David Cameron spoke of a ‘swarm’ of migrants, or Katie Hopkins of migrants as ‘cockroaches’, or for that matter, when the Casey review refers to some mosques as ‘breeding grounds’ for radicalisation and terrorism and Michael Gove insists we must ‘drain the swamp’ of extremism, they seem to invoke the coloniser’s mix of fear and revulsion in the face of the colonised. That anxieties over security and the place of British Muslims should dominate the cohesion agenda today is perhaps less surprising when placed in this colonial context.

Against this backdrop, we ask participants to consider how the politics of (in)security around issues such as (counter-)terrorism, (counter-)radicalisation, crime and immigration shape prospects for cohesion today.

useful extracts

But the biggest threat that we face comes from terrorist attacks, some of which are, sadly, carried out by our own citizens. It is important to stress that terrorism is not linked exclusively to any one religion or ethnic group. [...] Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that this threat comes in Europe overwhelmingly from young men who follow a completely perverse, warped interpretation of Islam, and who are prepared to blow themselves up and kill their fellow citizens. [...] Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. 

David Cameron (2011), Speech to the Munich Security Conference.

The UK faces a range of terrorist threats. The most serious is from Al Qa’ida, its affiliates and likeminded organisations. All the terrorist groups who pose a threat to us seek to radicalise and recruit people to their cause. [...] We now have more information about the factors which encourage people to support terrorism and then to engage in terrorism-related activity. It is important to understand these factors if we are to prevent radicalisation and minimise the risks it poses to our national security. [...] There is evidence to indicate that support for terrorism is associated with rejection of a cohesive, integrated, multi-faith society and of parliamentary democracy. Work to deal with radicalisation will depend on developing a sense of belonging to this country and support for our core values. [...] We remain absolutely committed to protecting freedom of speech in this country. But preventing terrorism will mean challenging extremist (and non-violent) ideas [...] At present the greatest threat to the UK as a whole is from Al Qa’ida and groups and individuals who share the violent Islamist ideology associated with it.

The connection between violent Islamist terrorist groups and Islam, while rejected by many Muslims, has also increased public attention and awareness of more regressive attitudes in some minority religious groups, and the abuse of religious codes like Sharia law. These attitudes, and the behaviours that stem from them, suggest support in some groups for the inequalities and harms addressed in this review and increase the sense of separatism and divergence from modern values. [...] There is a substantial network of political Islamist groups – often describing themselves as advocacy and human rights organisations – which have developed and promoted narratives and a sense of grievance that attempt to undermine Western values and, by frequently accusing the state of persecuting Muslims and the Islamic faith, have sought to set Muslim citizens apart from the rest of society.

Dame Louise Casey (2016), *The Casey Review: A Review into Integration and Opportunity in the UK*.

Europe, including the UK, is facing a huge challenge arising from the number of refugees and migrants reaching levels not seen since the Second World War. [...] In the context of the current intense security threats to EU countries, it is clearly in the interest of all countries for there to be effective security checks at EU external borders. Although the measures taken by the UK since the Paris attacks are welcome, no country can expect to be able to protect its borders alone against those who wish to do harm. The UK needs its European neighbours, and the countries on the EU external borders, to take equally rigorous steps. Terrorists do not see national borders as a barrier to their barbarism and people with illegal or lethal intent will continue to try to find ways through any security system.


suggested resources


- Mary J Hickman et al. (2011), *Suspect Communities? Counter-terrorism policy, the press, and the impact on Irish and Muslim communities in Britain* (London: London Metropolitan University).

