
Notes on the concept of social cohesion

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Just like with so many other common concepts in the social sciences, social cohesion seems like a ponderous term, weighted down by the passage of time and the tradition of thought that laid its groundwork, ushered in by Durkheim and reaching its peak with Parsons' functionalist and conservative thinking, which was hardly interested in making social cohesion the subject of empirical research, much less social and political commitment. If we solely look at this tradition, one might say that the concept of social cohesion is not very well suited to continuing discourse around social bonds in society today.

Yet it is equally inadvisable to simply toss it away because we should simultaneously highlight the line of reflection initiated by Marcel Mauss, which foregrounded gifts and reciprocity, thus valuing social bonds and commitment, a dimension that had been missing in the Durkheimian tradition. This thread has also revealed itself to be quite fruitful—not only theoretically but also practically—and brings us closer to this other one I will discuss below. And we should also note that there was a second revival in the development of the concept of social cohesion which began in the 1990s, enriching its meaning and changing its nature. Specifically, in the European Union, social cohesion has reappeared in relation to the field of public policy, and only since then has it been revisited in academia, yet even there the influence of concerns associated with the design and implementation of public policy is noteworthy.

This connection—between social cohesion and public policy—has fostered a new and burgeoning trend in the development of the concept that, as Jane Jenson notes, defines social cohesion as social capital or uses both terms synonymously. What dimension does the idea of social capital add to the pre-existing notions of social cohesion? In my opinion, it adds an essential dimension: citizens' civil commitment to the community, which takes shape via associationalism and participation.

Importantly, the main current in the theory of social capital assumes the existence of a direct connection between general trust—the variable usually used to measure social capital—and associative participation. According to this thesis, the very organisation of associationalism is what allows general trust and the quality of political life to grow. However, not all forms of association affect the generation of social capital in the same way; rather, only those characterised by being open and constantly interacting with others do. These associations shape a broad network that builds bridges between diverse individuals and groups, making it possible for private trust to transform into the perception of general trust.

This attribute, accurately associated with volunteer associations as bridge-structures that foster widespread trust, is joined by others already described in the Tocquevillian sociological tradition, which views them as fundamental factors in the stability and equilibrium of contemporary democratic systems. As the agents of civil society *par excellence*, volunteer associations are not only one of the most important ways of participating in and influencing public life, but they are also a mechanism of ongoing social exchange that tends to raise and resolve people's needs, interests and aspirations.

But associations are in no way the only form of citizen participation. Instead, the current trends show that in twenty-first century democratic societies, citizens are increasingly expressing themselves through unconventional forms of political participation. Generally speaking, this new strain is related to indignation at increasing social instability, corruption and the rise in inequality and is being developed and nurtured from the spirit of the anti-globalisation and 15M movements, along with the need to promote citizen empowerment. In fact, thus far in the century, we have witnessed the multiplication of new and not-so-new forms of political expression and participation—demonstrations, the halt of evictions, the onslaught of digital scrutiny platforms, the emergence of alternative media, the proliferation of citizen platforms to defend public services, grassroots legislative initiatives and many more—that commonly and characteristically harness the potential of the new digital communication tools—namely the Internet—for political mobilisation.

Finally, I would highlight the fact that since 2011, the multiple forms of unconventional political participation include two that seem particularly suggestive and powerful. The first are 'post-conventional' forms of political participation, such as attending demonstrations and signing petitions. The other is the (re)invention of new forms of political actions, especially those related to consumer affairs, which entail consumer empowerment within both the market and the traditional political system, given that the latter lacks the authority to deal with the emerging global risks. In this model of active citizenship, democratic participation materialises essentially in two ways: through individualised collective actions in the guise of boycotts and buycotts, or through activism in different organisations and social movements that serve as intermediaries between institutional policy and the politics of everyday life.