**society/****社会(Shè Huì)**

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| European Perspective | Matthias Middell | 19 Feb 2022 |

The concept of society is as central as it is ambiguous in the European context. This has to do with its various functions for narratives of the historical development of different European countries, but also with an intense interweaving of the intellectual processes in different countries not using the concept of society at that particular moment with the same intentions and for the same purposes. "Society" has become a constitutive concept in sociology, in which many academic systems since the beginning of the 20th century (but with roots going much further back) have focused introspection on the interactions between inhabitants and the resulting (in)equalities in participation opportunities and resource endowments. The concept of society is at the same time central to a whole range of dominant ideologies, such as liberalism, which assumes that society is largely self-governing, or Marxism/socialism, which distinguishes societies on the basis of their level of development and their subdivision (into classes, groups, and strata). In the various steams of conservate thinking, on the other hand, society has long been overshadowed by state-executed and religiously or otherwise legitimized authority, but it has also grown in importance during the 20th century.

Even before its career as a central term meaning politically defined communities, it served to describe, on the one hand, a group of dependent employees (as in German, where the term is derived from Gesellenschaft) who articulated their interests to the master and the guild, and, on the other hand, economic entities that were jointly owned or controlled by at least two people. In this context, the term went back to the 12th Century French société (meaning 'company'), which in turn was derived from the Latin societas, referring to socius ("comrade, friend, ally"). A plurality of partners has thus been just as constitutive for the understanding of society as the contractual arrangement of their relations with each other and with third parties.

In the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, and thus in close connection with the process of territorialization that was beginning at that time, the term increasingly acquired a territorial connotation and meant the totality of individuals who lived on a territory and under the authority of a certain ruler. In part, the term was thereby delimited from the privileged (clergy, aristocracy) and meant only the Third Estate, but in part it included the entire population. This intensified during the Enlightenment with the observation of foreign cultures or societies, about whose social stratification little was known. The Scottish author Adam Smith emphasized the mutual usefulness of individuals for each other as the basis for the formation of societies, which in turn went beyond the affective ties of family or clan. Society here acquired the connotation of the purposive association of individuals in pursuit of common goals (imagined by Smith as merchants selling and buying to and from each other). For many philosophers and anthropologists of the time, the formation of societies became the distinguishing feature of humans from animals, which also lived in groups but emphasized kinship relations and common defense against enemies, while human societies were characterized by a functional division of labor and thus by mutual utility out of difference. This distinction from the animal world suggested at the same time that societies differ in their level of development, which is expressed in the complexity of their relationships and the differentiation of their division of labor, from which, in turn, degrees of difference in the position of the individual members in a society derive.

In the 18th century, the profiling of the term vis-à-vis concepts such as privileged and subjects served to establish a historical narrative of the social contract (as popularized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau), by which members of society would have joined together, i.e., voluntarily limited their individuality to achieve common goals. From this basic assumption developed the idea of sovereignty of the people, which in different variants anchored the source of legitimate power in society or its representatives. In the course of the 19th century, the translation of the English society and French société into German and numerous other languages spurred the adoption of historical experience in contexts that were sometimes different from English liberalism and French experience with revolution.

The French politician Antoine Barnave had already fitted the term into the caesura thinking of the Revolution, thus establishing a tradition that understood society as a state of emancipation from the absolutism of the Ancien Régime and linked it to the concept of modernity. This was combined with the concept of civil society or "bourgeois society," which also contrasted society with the absolutist princely state, but at the same time was open to the distinction (so important in liberalism) of any kind of executive exercise of power by the state.

In Karl Marx's theories, society appeared as, in the broadest sense, any association of individuals for the organization of production and consumption, whereby he distinguished historical variants of society according to the underlying property relations: the original primitive society characterized by common property, the societies of the Asian mode of production, feudalism and capitalism, characterized by a differently shaped mixture of private property and concentration of power, and the communist society, again characterized by common property, in which, however, abundance prevailed due to the achieved high level of productivity. At the same time, Marx directed attention to the relationship between nature and society and looked critically at the transformation of nature into resources for societies (the famous and now so critically seen process of resourcification).

In the course of the later 19th century, the concept of society underwent further differentiations: The relationship between state and society was determined differently in British liberalism and France's III Republic than in the Prussian-German monarchy with its focus on efficient bureaucracy imagined as working purposefully to the profit of society, while at the same time the question of the social opening of the concept of society across the different milieus of the bourgeoisie (economic middle classes, intellectuals, aristocratic land-owners, rising petty bourgeoisie) was intensively discussed. A third dimension of differentiation revolved around the question of an affective community, which Ferdinand Tönnies (1887), for example, distinguished in his famous book on “Gesellschaft und Gemeinschaft” from a formation of societies that was solely guided by interests. Max Weber, for his part, founded a theory of socialization, which he also understood as the formation of a rational community of purpose. Georg Simmel, in turn, introduced the concept of social differentiation, taking into account the observation that society was increasingly becoming a stage for fierce disputes between milieus and interest groups, instead of standing against the Ancien Régime as a unified bloc, as in the tradition of the late 18th century. The aristocratic understanding of high society was partly transferred for example by German bourgeoisie into an identification of its own social formation and its habitus with "die Gesellschaft”, while at the same time efforts were underway, especially by socialists/social democrats and intellectuals associated with them, to open up the concept of society to include the hitherto marginalized and to revive the original idea of a comprehensive unity of all those living in a territory.

These efforts were continued after World War II with the idea of a middle-class society, particularly prominent in West Germany and meaning that class division had already faded away or were just about to be overcome so that “society” became the promise of social ascension and meant a broad offer for inclusion into an ever more generous welfare state. Evidently, this inclusion came at the price of exclusion for those not qualifying as members of this specific society.

This equation of society with the population in a given territory, which was additionally charged by the notion of the nation with which society was identical culturally and by virtue of its historical origins, endured for a long time, but already at the beginning of the 20th century it raised the question of what status the inhabitants of colonies should have in the society of the metropolis. Strategies of assimilation and integration attempted to form a bridge that would organize selective acceptance into society. Through methodological nationalism, which tied notions of society to the nation-state but generally did not open them up to the majority of inhabitants of imperial spaces and colonies, the originally inclusive concept of society increasingly became an instrument of discrimination and exclusion.

This has recently (roughly since the 1990s) been answered by various authors emphasizing the character of societies as immigration societies, while other authors have stressed diasporas and transnational communities as equally legitimate forms of society formation. Fierce disputes have erupted over this, especially with representatives of right-wing populism, who wish to reserve the concept of society for members of their own nation.

Overall, society is a more than dazzling term that has penetrated deep into everyday language use, but carries quite a few different meanings in the process.