Post-Society

Carlo Bordoni

Table of Contents

Praise for *Post-Society*

'*Post-Society* is a concise and profound reflection on the state of our world, trying to grasp how we have slowly shifted away from modernity and how the rules that bind individuals to society have been redefined. Our confused and anxiety-ridden world needs sobering analyses of the kind *Post-Society* so illuminatingly offers.'

Eva Illouz, University of Jerusalem

'This thoughtful analysis offers glimpses into what 'the next society' might become when physical distancing is paired up with intense communication and emotions play a dominant role. Despite the voluntary submission to surveillance, the utopian hope remains that our post-social sensibilities will create a new form of collectivity – humanity.'

Helga Nowotny, Professor Emerita, ETH Zurich

'Carlo Bordoni combines courage and imagination – he opens new paths into the newer present which confronts us all.'

Peter Beilharz, La Trobe University, Melbourne

'Carlo Bordoni's new book provides a much-needed analysis of some of the latest developments in the catalogue of challenges that confront liquid modern society. Bordoni elegantly demonstrates and discusses the rise of a "post-society" as a new sort of phenomenon, which calls for public and political attention. The book highlights some of the new cleavages and chasms that begin to appear between individual and society, emotions and rationality, freedom and surveillance, power and politics. I strongly endorse this book, since, perhaps especially in pandemic

times such as the present, we do need analyses that point to some of the main challenges of contemporary society – and this is indeed what Bordoni's book so convincingly provides.'

Michael Hviid Jacobsen, Aalborg University, Denmark

Post-Society

Social Life After the Pandemic

Carlo Bordoni
Translated by Wendy Doherty

polity

Copyright Page

Acknowledgements

Introduction
After a Liquid Society

We are in transit. This is not a metaphor. After so much aimless wandering in the liquid society, we have run aground and we do not know where we have arrived. The place resembles the world we left behind, but it has certain characteristics that are new to us. Those who hoped for a return to complete social relationships and for the recovery of lost values will be disappointed.

In this new phase we can glimpse the signs of the rapid decline of modernity – signs typical of Zygmunt Bauman's liquid society, which was only a short transition, a warning of what was to happen a few years later. Again, as in the past, when we were faced with the same characteristics of uncertainty and impermanence, we needed to find solid foundations. This was because, in the first phase of liquidity, the feeling of unease and the disintegration of consciousness were perceived as being perpetual: the impression that the crisis was here to stay imposed a need to reconfigure the world to come.

Post-society is different from the liquid modern world. I refer to liquidity because it is the social condition that preceded it. Liquid modernity is a change from which there is no going back, and it should be seen as a negative development of the 'solid' social structure. Indeed, it was in liquidity that the process of destroying social ties began; but liquidity itself is subject to transformation. After an initial phase of great dispersion, we have witnessed a sort of thickening, of resilience, as if society wanted to restrain this wavering trend that was leading nowhere. The traits of

liquidity have not disappeared but have 'solidified' within the post-social; they have become endemic and chronic.

We can call this phase of resilience to liquidity an interregnum, as Bauman did, or an extreme attempt to restore lost solidity, but the name does not change its meaning. This phase is linked to the presence of sovereignism in politics, the primacy of neoliberalism in the economy, and the systematic reduction of the achievements of the trade unions and workers' rights. These are inalienable human rights, because they are closely linked to life.

Overall, the extreme phase of liquidity tried to impose limits on society, which was too mobile, and therefore uncontrollable. If we look closely, beyond the negative aspects that Bauman pointed out, the liquid society was in a certain sense free. It was free to the point of generating confusion – the point where traditional patterns of behaviour, both public and private, had broken down.

The idea of liquidity, conceived of as the last phase of modernity, contained clear signs of social unease: insecurity and uncertainty in human relationships, disintegration of solidarity, individualism translated into a frenzied search to satisfy personal interest. These signs were then accompanied by more disturbing demonstrations of unstoppable change, including the crisis of work, which is increasingly precarious and dematerialized, together with the supremacy of new technologies in communication and production processes. To all this we can add the lack of confidence in politics, which is clearly deprived of any effective power: such power has now passed into the hands of supranational entities and large financial groups.

The result was, to be sure, a society lacking in certainties and values to rely on, and for this reason elusive, flaky, devoid of prospects. The state of crisis denounced at the

time, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, was to be understood in its original sense, as a moment of choice – a unique opportunity for choice that could be settled in any way: all options were open. Reactionary forces inserted themselves into this rift and tried to use this ideal opportunity so as to bring order to a world that was unhappy and insecure. In consequence, post-society is a state of disorder provoked deliberately, with the intention of reinstating the system of domination that modernity had lost along the way.

The sudden spread of Covid-19 helped to speed up the change and made it necessary, given the tragic nature of the pandemic and the immediacy and urgency of the need for security, continuity, and reconversion. This acceleration has imposed an unimaginable rhythm on a process that had already begun because of the crisis of modernity but would have taken longer to complete. It also interrupted the interregnum, that unstable period of time interposed between liquid modernity and the new social system still in its embryonic phase, forcing it to reveal itself, at least provisionally.

What happens now, after liquid modernity and after the interregnum? According to some observers, and the sociologist Alain Touraine is one of them, a disturbing prospect of 'desocialization' – the end of the social – awaits us. We could, then, call it 'post-society', this new time that looms. Post-society is a condition in which the multitudes prevail, the mode of social relations changes, and the relationship between the public and the private is altered. Here is a brief description of its characteristics:

- gradual move away from individualism, autonomy of the masses;
- social distancing, rejection of physical contact;

- remote relationships – weak ties predominate;
- the public sector absorbs the private and universalizes it;
- voluntary submission to social control;
- re-evaluation of the emotions, cyberempathy;
- completion of the process of globalization, but only in relation to trade and cultural–informational exchanges;
- sedentariness, smart working, less inclination to travel;
- primacy of online commerce, decline of the traditional shop;
- elimination of nation-states, which are replaced by non-political supra-national collaborating bodies and service agencies;
- regionalization of states, dominance of local politics;
- greater human–machine interaction.

Post-Society is a non-academic analysis of society in the aftermath of the pandemic. The title, with an apocalyptic quotation from Alain Touraine, draws attention to a future in which social ties will change significantly. The basic idea is that the individualism of recent years will not disappear as a result of Covid-19, but will take other paths, trying to adapt to the situation. In the meantime, the premises of Bauman's liquid society are disappearing, being replaced by new, more solid roots. Such roots are represented by the need to 'create community', albeit a remote one.

But we are still in transit. We can see here some trends that are worth looking at in greater depth – re-evaluation of the emotions and voluntary submission being among them. The two central chapters of the book are devoted to these aspects.

Emotions take on a primary function, not only through exposure on social media but because they have been freed from that 'repression of emotionality' that characterized modern society, which used to consider them an obstacle to the development of civilization. Indeed, today we speak of a 'sociology of emotions'.

The other characteristic of our time is voluntary submission to surveillance for reasons of health and personal security. This is a complete reversal of the traditional defence of privacy. The acceptance of a subtle form of control, induced by the use of smartphones and computers, is increasingly fostering a conscious need for reassurance. In addition to it, the practice of social distancing imposes new rules in proxemics and encourages long-distance relationships.

Control is perhaps the dominant element in the new development. This is a peaceful submission to control, willingly accepted in the name of security, which liquid modernity was no longer able to guarantee. We have moved from undesirable and oppressive control to voluntary and even desirable control.

***

It is clear that we find ourselves in conditions very similar to those that preceded the formation of modernity in the period between the end of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century: we are *in statu nascendi* ('in the process of being formed'), to use Max Weber's famous characterization of charisma – that is, we are in a state of particular exceptionality, which preludes the affirmation of a new time.

In every epochal change, the keyword is always fear: it is the oldest feeling in the world to determine social action, together with a sudden acceleration of events and the race for survival of the species. Fear (Bordoni 2017) is a state or

condition of stress in which humanity finds itself thrown in conjunction with particular historical events, which threaten the very integrity of society and can cause epochal changes.

Why is the re-evaluation of emotions not in contradiction with the new, post-social condition?

We have to start from a preliminary observation: it concerns the need to distinguish *humanity* (the main characteristics of the human being) from *sociality*. Up until now it has been taken for granted that one encompasses the other, since the human being is implicitly a social being and, as such, is determined by his or her relationship with others. This concept is sound and corresponds to the reality of the facts, but it is rather imprecise and confused, as if it had been accepted uncritically in all its complexity.

In this shapeless structuring of everything that appears to be linked to sociality as humanity, the need to differentiate the two components has never surfaced. Sociology itself, as a humanistic science that emerged from the heart of modernity to interpret its signs and changes, could only unite the human element with the social one, fusing them together in a single behavioural scheme. But now that the time of modernity appears to be definitively over after the 'long goodbye' characterized by the phenomenon of liquefaction, it finally seems that a distinction has to be made – namely one that pays heed to the substantial differences that have emerged in the social context.

Sociality has undergone a different and divergent process; to use a term borrowed from aesthetics (as much as from chemistry and psychology), we could say that it is now sublimated. In sublimation, especially as understood in psychoanalysis, the perversion, that is, the act of straying or turning away (*vertere*, 'turn round') from the right path, occurs as a result of an inability or impossibility to continue

along the predetermined path, be it the right, the known, or the predictable one. In response to this proven impossibility, an alternative path is generated – unknown, sometimes even surprising or unusual, but also intriguing, precisely because it goes beyond the limit (*limen*, 'threshold') of what is normal, usual, or known.

If we were to think of a sociality different from the modern one, we could say that it is a sublimated sociality, in the sense that it is experienced differently but no less present, no less substantial, and no doubt combined with human sensitivity at a higher level. It is as if the emotions (a characteristic feature of humans) received an impulse from the change that gave them a lot of weight in the new condition of society, as if the emotional (human) component had slowed down during the last phase, that of liquid modernity. We were in fact aware of this, if we consider that liquefaction entailed instability, insecurity, and egoism.

What happened in this relatively short period of time to bring about such a vast paradigm shift, and to do it with such unpredictable speed?

The emotional component in humans is being re-evaluated. The sensations and feelings received from another person are not enough; the other person needs to be part of a whole, and relationships are built more extensively through the other and beyond the other, whose identity has no value except as a representation of the collective that determines the recognition of the self.

It is here that the main characteristic of an unprecedented post-social sensibility manifests itself, in the form of a long-distance relationality that operates in a virtual environment, without any physical contact, but not without a great capacity for communication. This is a new, post-social condition, which can well be captured by the phrase 'more humanity, less sociality'.

1
From Social to Post-Social

1.1. The Isolation of the Global Citizen

When we speak of a post-social condition, we do not mean the end of society – its disintegration, or the dispersion of the social bonds that had hitherto held it together. The post-social is the unprecedented and therefore never before experienced prospect of proxemic diversity, accompanied by an individualistic culture, innovative working conditions, advanced mechanization, massive use of new technologies, new information systems, and new ways of consuming.

These actions and behaviours, some of which have already been in place for a long time while others are in the process of being implemented, all share the same common denominator: the isolation of the individual. The individual's progressive loss of openness to the outside world is mitigated through the availability of enhanced technological mediators, and these are so complex and empathic that they themselves become the object of a privileged relationship.

Smart working and distance learning are not emergency methodologies, introduced only to be put to one side once the health crisis is over. In fact they have been used before, and in the absence of any emergency situation. Already in the last decades of the past century, working from home was considered an innovative measure, designed to save resources and time, to concentrate services when people's

physical presence in the workplace was not necessary, and to make one's working time more flexible.

In education for instance, training, degree, and specialization courses have been held online for years, first through television, then through sophisticated digital platforms that allow carrying out all the necessary teaching, from lecturing to interacting with students and correcting their exam papers and theses. This is nothing new, then – just an abrupt shift from optionality to prevalence. It should be noted that these innovations do not entail any additional costs for employers or end users; on the contrary, they produce considerable savings and economic benefits for all those concerned. But they do this at a psychological and social cost. In fact distance learning, as a substitute for face-to-face teaching, has raised many doubts and objections precisely because of the isolation it forces young people into, a feature that accounts for its reduced educational effectiveness.

There is no condition of normality to be restored, no return to the former status quo. Those ways of life have been erased forever. As in all great divisions, there is no going back. The unexpected we have to deal with is now part of the reality we are constantly facing. Past experiences are no longer useful: they have lost their factual value and must be relegated to history, as documents of our past.

In point of fact the new digital technologies, just like postmodern practice, have taught us to dispense with experience, to reject the heritage of a culture, the modern one, and to do so under the illusion that this culture no longer belongs to us, that it ceased to be useful because technological progress and knowledge are evolving so rapidly that we cannot keep up with them. This gives rise to insecurity: I'm talking about the insurmountable state of

anxiety generated by not finding points of reference or values in which we could believe.

Everything had to be experimented *ex novo*, as if history had started again from the beginning and needed new certainties; but this time round they are short-term certainties, disposable knowledge, to be used once or twice at the most, because it has an expiry date, just like any other consumer product.

This conviction that one is not being able to rely on past experience has actually given us a sort of learning experience, a course to prepare us for the complexity of a future that is still nebulous and uncertain. Perhaps such a future cannot be planned or mapped out precisely because it lacks any sign of continuity with the present, and therefore does not even constitute a minimum to work on.

Learning a new method, like any other preparation for change, suggests that the new society we are moving into after the pandemic – and, at least in appearance, in its aftermath – is not an irremediable break with the recent past but rather something that evolved from it. It is its natural continuation, obviously after a transitional phase: the interregnum that Bauman spoke of. This is the necessary inertial time before the leap forward. It is the same time that elapses between the moment when the trigger of a gun is pulled and the moment when the shot is fired. The difference is that, in the social sphere, that brief moment of inertia is diluted into months or years, such that it feels like an eternity and the explosion never seems to happen.

The interregnum leads us to think of an individualized society and of the very liquefaction of social relations, a process that has opened up a world of possibilities and exchanges: distances have been shortened, we communicate in real time, and we already have a preview

of what awaits us in the post-social world. It is important to realize that the new condition we are about to experience is not modernity. It is not liquid modernity, not the second or third modernity, and not even hypermodernity, because there is nothing 'hyper' in it, no augmentative or superior quality, which this prefix of Greek origin suggests, that could be a refinement of or an adaptation to the complexity of the present. Modernity spent itself in the extreme attempt to rationalize the world, which proved to be disastrous when, by intensifying the drive for rationality, it bypassed the emotional and sensory component of the human being.

Nevertheless modernity could not have done otherwise, since the demand for rationalization is inherent in the very principle that inspired modernity since its inception and that Max Weber rightly pointed out to us, at the beginning of the twentieth century: disenchantment with the world. Disenchantment means elimination of any irrational, magical, or emotional presence that might in any way hinder, or just influence, the practice of economic and interpersonal relations, including relations with formal institutions. This is what makes modernity perfectible and guides it unequivocally towards progressive improvement and unalterable, stable structures whose reliability is needed for the realization of long-term projects.

For years now there has been talk, from scholars such as Maffesoli, Morin, and others, of a re-enchantment of the world that, more than a return to the origins, appears to be a legitimate recognition of the human qualities that have so far been sacrificed on the altar of efficiency and progress. At the same time, by recovering the emotional area in a wider operation of re-enchantment, we have confirmed the end of our relationship with modernity. It ends for the reason explained here, as well as for many other reasons that may appear insignificant in the eyes of those who hope

for a re-establishment of the *status quo ante* but that, taken together, assume the weight of an epochal change. It is epochal because modernity has indeed come to an end, and that type of society has ended with it.

1.2. From Society to the Individual

In a 1987 interview for *Woman's Own*, Margaret Thatcher said: 'There is no such thing as society. There are only individual men and women, and there are families' (https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689). In this she anticipated the conclusions of Alain Touraine, the greatest living French sociologist. Touraine has dedicated a book to this idea, which represents the summation of his thought and an extreme effort to understand modernity. It is a provocative work – starting with the title, *La fin des sociétés* [*The End of Societies*] (Touraine 2013) – in which he denounces the destruction of social institutions such as the city, the school, the family, and democracy itself.

The fiscal crisis and the state's difficulty in managing the resources needed to enable the social institutions to function create a separation between resources and cultural values. Thus the institutions begin to lose their content and we can speak of the end of the social – or, better, the end of societies – so much so that civil rights are prioritized and social rights are undervalued.

Is it, then, possible to reconstruct social control over the financial economy? Touraine argues that it is cultural values that replace institutionalized social norms, as they are against the logic of profit and power. These are real ethical values whose origin is extraneous to social organization, and their universal content is so strong as to place them above the laws, almost like a natural right that belongs both to the Christian tradition and to the spirit of the Enlightenment. In this epochal destruction, only the

subject survives, that is, the individual who is no longer a 'social subject'.

The return to individualism was the leitmotif of postmodernity, with its reference to the loneliness of the global citizen caused by the loss of the values and ideologies on which modernity had built its certainties. Looking at today's society, which is increasingly made up of individuals in search of an identity and fascinated by the limitless yet precarious opportunity to build relationships online, we are often under the impression that we are dealing with Spinoza's multitudes rather than with the people of a nation.

Touraine, however, does not seem to believe in multitudes but rather in the power of the individual, a central figure who takes possession of every right, even that of being above the law. This is in breach of an ancient pact between the individual and the nation-state signed four centuries ago: the pact forged an alliance in which individuals gave up part of their prerogatives of autonomy and freedom to the sovereign in exchange for some fundamental certainties. This is when modernity was born – in the second half of the seventeenth century – with Hobbes' monstrous Leviathan, on which Touraine has worked at length, starting from his fundamental *Critique of Modernity* (1995). But it is above all in his next book, *A New Paradigm for Understanding Today's World* (2007), that Touraine began to expound the theses on the disintegration of the social fabric that would lead, with lucid and implacable determination, to his *La fin des sociétés*.

What society is he announcing the end of? Might we think of modern society, or perhaps postmodern society, since Jean-François Lyotard and Gianni Vattimo had already declared the death of modernity? Or could it be Bauman's liquid society, drained and evaporated as it is by the

ethical, economic, and social upheavals of a financial system that has escaped the control of politics and is on a collision course with industrial capitalism?

It is more likely that we are facing the end of a certain type of society rather than the end of all societies, period. We have witnessed irreversible changes, followed by the greatest 'great divide' of the pandemic; and it does not matter much whether these are described as 'liquid modernity', 'postmodernity', or 'hypermodernity'. What is essential is that they have altered our behaviour, our social, economic, and political relations, our culture and communications, and the relationship between the state and its citizens. In this context, the role of the subject, which Touraine sees as emerging, plays a decisive role.

As early as 1978, Jean Baudrillard feared the end of the social, as he related it to a natural evolutionary process – 'It could be said that the social regresses to the same degree as its institutions develop' – and, above all, to the objective responsibility of the media (Baudrillard 1983: 66). Baudrillard argues that, while the media appear to promote socialization, 'deep down they neutralize social relations and the social itself'. When he brought this indictment on the desocializing potential of the media, the Internet had not yet been created – let alone social media, which were to come a quarter of a century later. Yet he had already understood the threat that they presented, if misused: 'At the other extreme, our "society" is perhaps in the process of putting an end to the social, of burying the social beneath a simulation of the social' (1983: 67).

Desocialization, therefore, has a long history: it starts long ago, in Durkheim's feared 'anomie', and passes through postmodernity and the insights of Baudrillard and Touraine, to end up, in all its gravity, in the period of pandemic crisis, when the simulation and virtualization of relationships are

forcibly combined with the physical distancing practised to avoid contagion.

<center>***</center>

So when I talk about the end of society, I do not mean the end of social relations between individuals, or between them and the institutions. I mean rather a delegitimization of those bureaucratic systems and rules that no longer meet the requirements of democracy, equality, and freedom to which people aspire. It is a sort of ethical rebellion against the rigidity and anachronism of the social norms that govern contemporary life. Its 'narratives' are being challenged, starting with the idea of democracy.

Democracy is a multifaceted concept, which constantly changes meaning according to the period of time and the type of society. The original ancient Greek meaning of 'rule by the people' (*dēmos* 'people', *kratos* 'power') could take on even a negative undertone in Pericles' fifth-century Athens, since it incorporated a form of what we may call today oppression against minorities. From that classical usage we have moved on to the recognition of democracy as the preferred – almost the ideal – form of government. Despite Rousseau's misgivings about representation, democracy – government of the people, of the will of the majority – has been passed down to us after continuous transformations and revisions made necessary by changing political and social conditions – up until Marx's classist interpretation. Around the same time it was reinterpreted by Alexis de Tocqueville (1835–40), who imported from America the most up-to-date idea of democracy as the recognition of equal rights and obligations for everyone.

With Touraine, we find ourselves faced with yet another adjustment of focus. After *La fin des sociétés*, he continued his analysis of modernity in a subsequent volume, *Nous, sujets humains* [*We, Human Subjects*] (Touraine 2015), in

which he gives a decisive twist to the idea of democracy, making the 'human subject' take priority in all rights. This affirmation may seem to be a simple reinforcement of a widely shared principle, but in fact it conceals a substantial shift, namely from the rights of all humans, conceived of as a group, to the universal right of single individuals, regardless of the context in which each one lives.

Through this updating and adapting to the new social trends of valuing the individual, Touraine's position changes the very idea of democracy, granting the subject the importance that they had hitherto been denied, or rather that had been (partly) recognized since antiquity but lost with the passing of time. This is an important conquest (or reconquest): it puts an end, once and for all, to a long process of re-evaluation of the subject set in motion by the ideas of Husserl and Heidegger at the beginning of the twentieth century – a process that continued through Sartre and Derrida and reached us in the form of the Indignados, Occupy Wall Street, and Arab Spring movements and the 1977 massacre of the demonstrators in Taksim Square in Turkey.

Like Stéphane Hessel, who sees these movements as fuelled by indignation, Touraine treats them as a resource and defines them as ethical–democratic. They are not revolutions, he observes, but 'flashes of vigorous subjectivation, incapable of transforming themselves into political organization and strategy'. While revolutions lead to civil war and terror, subjectification 'is first and foremost a liberation' (Touraine 2015: 23).

In opposition to these stand the 'social anti-movements', which emerged from the failure of the nationalist aspirations of states that had been subjected to the experience of colonialism or economic and cultural dependence on the West. Social anti-movements prefer to