# On Society

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First published in 2012 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA



ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-6056-1

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Bembo by
Servis Filmsetting Limited, Stockport, Cheshire.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Group Limited, Bodmin, Cornwall.



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# *Acknowledgements*

The gestation of this book has been a long one. Some of the ideas contained here trace back to the late 1980s, when Anthony Elliott worked with the late Professor Alan Davies, the late Professor Graham Little and Dr John Cash at the University of Melbourne. The idea for an enquiry into society and the social initially arose when Bryan Turner and I first worked together in the UK during the early 2000s, at Cambridge and Bristol respectively. The actual development of a theory of society as a form of radical cultural enquiry commenced some years later, and our research has been sustained over recent years – mostly through virtual interaction, with occasional face-to-face meetings – between New York and Adelaide.

We are grateful to various friends and colleagues, some of whom read the book in part or whole and offered many valuable comments and suggestions. We must thank in particular Charles Lemert, Anthony Giddens, Robert Holton, Gerhard Boomgaarden, Nicola Geraghty, Jean and Keith Elliott, Atsushi Sawai, Masataka Katagiri, Daniel Chaffee, Eric Hsu, Anthony Moran, Kath Woodward, Sophie Watson, Peter Redman, Jack Barbalet, Fiore Inglese, Kriss McKie, Nick Stevenson, Carmel Meiklejohn, Paul Hoggett, Tom Inglis, Alison Assiter, Deborah Maxwell, Conrad Meyer, Paul du Gay, Robert van Krieken, Bo-Magnus Salenius, Jennifer Rutherford, Jem Thomas, Riaz Hassan, Constance Lever-Tracy, Peter Baehr, Tom Cushman, Jonathan Imber, John O’Neill, Chris Rojek, Simon Susen, Stephen Turner, Gary Wickham and John Urry. Dan Mendelson provided terrific research support throughout much of the project, and David

Radford assisted in the final stages with manuscript preparation and advice. An earlier version of these ideas was sketched out at a joint Flinders University and La Trobe Masterclass, and special thanks are due to John Carroll and Peter Beilharz. To underscore our major caveat in this work that the theories of structure, solidarity and creation cross and tangle in complex, contradictory ways, it was heartening to find colleagues locating social theorists in more than one (and sometimes all three) categories. We have, perhaps unsurprisingly, not been able to cover all the traditions of social thought, nor theorists, which many readers suggested. As such, there is no discussion of, say, William James, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anna Julia Cooper, Max Horkheimer, Antonio Gramsci, C. Wright Mills, Niklas Luhmann, Frantz Fanon, Immanuel Wallerstein, Judith Butler, Edward Saïd or Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick. Such a failing is, it might be argued, entirely in line with commercial requirements to write a book that isn't the size of a phone directory. Even so, perhaps we can address the work of such theorists – through the registers of structure, solidarity and creation – in some future study.

We would like to acknowledge the support of the Australian Research Council, a grant (DP0877817) from which assisted in undertaking aspects of this project. And finally thanks to staff at Polity, and also to Susan Beer for diligently undertaking copy-editing of the book.

Various aspects of the argument relating to the civil sphere in Chapter 2 appeared originally in Bryan S. Turner (2008) *Rights and Virtues*, Oxford: Bardwell, but these have been revised for this publication.

Anthony Elliott, Adelaide
Bryan S. Turner, New York and Sydney

# *Preface*

The argument of this book is disarmingly straightforward, though hopefully at once intricately layered and sociologically provocative. Our central claim is that most discourses on society – emanating from the social sciences and humanities in particular, and public political debates more generally – can be located within one of the following categories or registers: (1) society as structure; (2) society as solidarity; and, (3) society as creation. Outlining these three registers, we seek to assess the strengths and defects of various versions of 'society' and the 'social' as expounded in the tradition of social and political theory. One core aim is to reflect on how these three interpretations of society, in broader socio-political and historical terms, intersect, interlock, conflict and displace each other. Another is to consider the sociological consequences of these visions of society for the major issues of our times – ranging across politics, culture, morality and religion.

The question of society – its explication, constitution, reproduction and transformation – lies at the core of sociology. The question – what is society? – is probably the first question students confront when commencing the study of sociology. In a curious paradox, however, the word 'society' denotes no specific identifiable or defining quality throughout the history of sociology; indeed, the concept has long posed (and continues to pose) a profound challenge to making the work of sociology intelligible. Historically speaking, the concept of society in sociology has been largely constructed as a separate, self-enclosed territorial container of social actions and social relations. This equation

of society with territorial nation-states has functioned, as the German sociologist Ulrich Beck has argued, as a kind of ‘methodological nationalism’ – in which the discipline has been comfortable enough when examining national institutions and state borders, but embarrassed on the whole by the existence of, say, empire, colony or transnational corporations. This may well be one reason why the discipline of sociology has embraced a plurality of terms in conceptualizing ‘society’, ranging variously across ‘social practices’, ‘social order’, ‘social system’, ‘social structure’, ‘social forces’ and ‘social worlds’. In assuming that society pre-exists the social practices and social relations it constitutes, however, these various frameworks have, in the most general terms, been unable to engage the possibility of a variety of differential forms of the social and of varied societies. That is to say, the theorization of society in sociology has, perhaps predictably, (re)produced the typical institutional patterns of Western modernity.

If it is true that ‘society’ emerges as one of the most opaque, baffling terms in classical sociological thought, it has arguably proved equally troubling to our own age of intensive globalization and multinational turbo-capitalism. For one thing, it is surely a paradox of our times that, while social relations increasingly no longer neatly fit (if indeed they ever did) within the territorial boundaries of nation-states, the discipline of sociology finds itself silent or evasive about a whole range of concrete social problems affecting contemporary societies because the notion of ‘the social’ has been recently subsumed within the interdisciplinary lexicon of globalism. Of course globalization has also been debated continuously – by neo-liberals who want to push it further, as well as anti-globalists who focus on the harm it does – particularly in the context of its consequences for national societies.[1] In this connection, the common perception is that globalization erodes vulnerable

communities and corrodes national socialities. Negative public perceptions of the many problems relating to globalization have been intensified by the economic and social upheavals that have attended the global financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent worldwide credit crunch. Just as the emergence of industrialism in the nineteenth century was judged destructive of family and community, many critics today lament the erosion of a common culture and communal co-operation as a consequence of globalization. Communitarianism, as we show subsequently, has become influential precisely at the point at which community appears to be disappearing. However, the idea that we have moved from a generous world of the caring community or supportive society to a wholesale corrosion of social organization is equally a myth. Blinded by nostalgia for a bygone age, this viewpoint ignores the considerable evidence of flourishing global socialities and transnational communal loyalties. These include, to list just a few, socialities of global protest (such as Make Poverty History), worldwide socialities for the protection of human rights (such as Amnesty International) and socialities for the protection of the environment (such as Greenpeace). More recently, in early 2011, the waves of the Jasmine Revolution appeared to show the survival of social networks and communities despite years of state repression.

From one angle, it is hardly surprising that, as a consequence of globalization, multiple communal loyalties and diverse social interconnections are on the increase for contemporary women and men of the polished, expensive cities of the West. This matters because globalization brings lifestyle changes – new ways of engaging with others, relationships, work and politics – into the heart of what society actually means. Indeed, our day-to-day experience of ‘society’ seems now to have less to do with geographic location or place. In our third chapter, on creation, we explore a concept that we term Elastic Society, by which we

seek to capture the many ways in which social relations are stretched over time and space. To continue with this metaphor, Elastic Society may be thin as social networks are extended through space, but it does not automatically follow that they are fragile. Elasticity can also imply resilience and versatility.

More and more, women and men are getting involved with communities – and developing new kinds of sociality (both face-to-face and online) – in non-traditional ways: participating in online voluntary networks, setting up community blogs or creating visions for sustainable futures, rather than just joining established political parties.[2] We have to recognize the paradox that anti-globalism is the basis of a worldwide community that is itself a product of the globalizing forces that it opposes. Such global changes, we argue in this book, present sociology with a fresh challenge. If it is to engage adequately with transformations in the scope and structure of society, it must develop an integrated and comprehensive theorization of the social at every level of social theory. It cannot simply recount nostalgic narratives of the corrosion of society, because the critics of these global developments have also to recognize the new forms of the social that are emerging from these crises around the environment, the climate, and the city. That said, nor can sociologists remain silent about a whole host of vital political issues which challenge contemporary societies – from migration to marginalization, and multiculturalism to militarization. Here sociology needs to chance its arm. In the age of the Internet, for example, will off-line communities contract continuously as online social relations expand? With the world's population expected to reach around nine billion people by 2050, what kind of social relations are most likely in the major mega-cities? Against the backdrop of people living in sky-high, multiplex apartments and with work carried out online, will sociality

be eroded or renewed? This book seeks to open up such a line of sociological enquiry and to outline new theoretical perspectives for the critique of contemporary societies.

Our book is intended for students as an introduction to debates about society in the social sciences, but also for general readers who might find the topic interesting. This necessarily means we tread a precarious line between specialist debate and broad-brush presentation. We hope that some of the more demanding parts of the book do not come at the cost of lack of accessibility; if any such difficulties arise we would like to think this is partly a consequence of certain current trends in social theory which tend towards obscurantism or jargon, rather than to our presentation of the post-societal turn in social theory itself. In the end, our aim has been to engage sociological thinking about society with the most urgent global issues of our times.

# *Introduction*

The golden age of ‘society’ is long dead. The foundational sociological perspectives on society developed by Ferdinand Tönnies, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx and Georg Simmel – while still clearly of immense conceptual importance to the discipline of sociology – have been seriously challenged by the communications revolution and the world of intensive globalization. In our own time of corporate downsizings, out-sourcing, leveraged buyouts, just-in-time deliveries and gated communities, can we still read classical sociology with some intellectual benefit in order to understand the contours and consequences of twenty-first-century society? The Internet world is perhaps equally problematic for more recent social theorists, such as Talcott Parsons, Erving Goffman, C. Wright Mills and Alvin Gouldner. Their perspectives on industrial capitalism were of outstanding value, but, we now face a deeply disturbing issue – is the very foundation of society as such changing so rapidly and so deeply that we can no longer draw fully and comfortably from the legacy of sociology? Many of their ideas on ‘society’ remain of incomparable significance, but our purpose in what follows is to acknowledge the extent to which society has changed in the the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. To be more precise have the social changes of the last half century rendered the idea of society in American sociologist Talcott Parsons’s *The Social System*[1] of 1951 wholly obsolete? Why, for example, has the notion of ‘society’ come in our own time to appear so problematic? Is it the case that society is no longer a vital

preoccupation of the contemporary age? There is certainly no shortage of contemporary critics of 'society'– whether, say, theorists of globalization who see in the advent of the global electronic economy the dissolution of nation-state based societies, or postmodernists who promote a view of sociality that is progressively particularistic rather than 'society' writ large, which is viewed as repressively universalistic.

Consider the following critical voice on the concept of society, a critic chosen more or less randomly from the vast treasure trove of 'anti-society' literature. The 'category of society', so our critic reflects, 'is merely a term of convenience'. Whereas 'the term "society" was once supposed to fix bounds', designating an internally integrated unity, it in fact functions as 'merely an indefinite range of partially or wholly articulated associatings'. In the face of such sociological particularism, our critic goes one step further – in lifting sociological deconstruction to the second order. Society 'makes itself known to us in the form of incessant repersonalizations of persons'. We say 'society', but what we really mean to underscore are 'provisional co-operatings'. We say 'society', but what we mean to say are 'the rearrangings of arrangements'. 'Society' (read: a social situation or condition) is, in fact, the upshot of 'individualizings'. Who, exactly, is this critic? The voice sounds like an example of postmodern deconstructionism or a 'micro' theorist of everyday interaction? Hardly. In fact the author of these sentiments was American sociologist Albion W. Small, and his reflections on the imprecision of the concept of society date to 1912 – from an article published in *The American Journal of Sociology*.[2] While in our own time the discourses of postmodernism and globalization present themselves as troublesome for the concept of society, let us note from the outset then that 'society' – both as an

analytical category in social science and as lived experience – has long caused conceptual strife.

This immediately raises a first-principle question: What, exactly, is society? Perhaps the one thing that can be said with some confidence is that there is remarkably little definitional consensus over the use of this word. We might note in passing that other social sciences have problems with fundamental concepts, such as ‘scarcity’ in economics or ‘power’ in political theory. However ‘society’ appears to suffer most from presuppositional chaos. Indeed, as we will shortly examine, leading social thinkers (both classical and contemporary) have used the term ‘society’ with abandon; we might almost say promiscuously. That said, Raymond Williams, a key figures in the founding of the discipline of cultural studies, in his authoritative *Keywords* reflects: ‘Society is now clear in two main senses: as our most general term for the body of institutions and relationships within which a relatively large group of people live; and as our most abstract term for the condition in which such institutions and relationships are formed.’[3] Historically speaking, the relationship between the generalization and the abstraction has shifted dramatically, as there has been a rich diversity of social conditions in and through which societies are constituted, consolidated or closed. We can perhaps best grasp something of this diversity if we consider the following compilation of usages to which this most complex word has been applied:

> Undoubtedly society is a being, a person.
> *Émile Durkheim*

> Society exists only as a mental concept; in the real world there are only individuals.
> *Oscar Wilde*

> Society exists where several individuals enter into interaction.
> *Georg Simmel*

Society is a masked ball, where every one hides his real character, and reveals it by hiding.
*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

To regard society as one single subject (*Subjekt*) is to look at it wrongly, speculatively.
*Karl Marx*

A civilized society is one which tolerates eccentricity to the point of doubtful sanity.
*Robert Frost*

A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in.
*Greek Proverb*

Society is produced by our wants and government by our wickedness.
*Thomas Paine*

Man was formed for society.
*Francis Bacon*

A society is a type of social system, in any universe of social systems, which attains the highest level of self-sufficiency as a system in relation to its environment.
*Talcott Parsons*

Society is a continuous chain of role expectancies and behaviour resulting from role expectancies.
*Joseph Bensman* and *Bernard Rosenberg*

The social only exists in a perspective space, it dies in the space of simulation.
*Jean Baudrillard*

The modern political domain is massively, in totalitarian fashion, social, levelling, exhausting.
*Julia Kristeva*

A society is a cluster, or system, of institutionalized modes of conduct.
*Lord Anthony Giddens*

There is no such thing as society; only individual men and women and their families.
*Baroness Thatcher*

There are a number of points that might be noted about this list of definitions. For one thing, some of these definitions view society positively, others negatively, some are clearly

ambivalent while others dismiss it entirely. The more positive of these definitions see society as an indispensable medium for the production of social relations, emphasizing the benefits of interpersonal relationships and the potential gains from intercultural communication. In this sense, society is viewed in a largely technical way, as a process that facilitates not only the constitution of identity and elaboration of forms of thought but also the reproduction across time and across space of social interactions (think, for example, of family life across generations) and of social institutions (think, for example, of schools, hospitals or churches). Some of these definitions, however, view society pejoratively – as the inculcation of false beliefs, mythologies or ideologies – and thus emphasize the role of economic and political forces in various forms of human exploitation. Others view the notion as just sheer escapism, a collectivist fantasy in the face of individualist realities. Tracing the semantic shifts at play in these academic and public-political definitions of society is one of the aims of this book.

## Society: An Obsolete Term?

Society, certainly the notion of it and perhaps even the social reality to which it once referred, is now dead. Or so argue some of its more strident and prominent critics. Yet the notion of society, as sociologist Charles Lemert has brilliantly traced out, had long been in trouble.[4] This much is evident from the article mentioned earlier by Small, as detailed in his eloquent musings on the imprecision of the concept of society in 1912. In our own time, this strife of imprecision has been lifted up a gear, into a fully blown obsolescence. This we might date to French sociologist Jean Baudrillard’s proclamation in the 1980s that society had dissolved into the hyperreality of simulacra. In more recent

years, it is perhaps Ulrich Beck who best captures the alleged redundancy of the term: society today is just a ‘zombie category’, a ghostly word spoken from the mouths of individualized agents. An emerging consensus, at any rate, seems clear: ‘Society’ – just a fading memory.

The death of society; the end of the social; the fragmentation of the social system; the implosion of sociality – it is evident that society has become an unfashionable topic in contemporary debate. Or, more to the point, society is fashionable only if it appears with the coda of a farewell. One interesting sociological point here is that the unfashionable nature of all things societal appears to have gone global – an anti-society sentiment is now wall-to-wall, as it were. The current displacement of the concept of society in both academic and public discourse is equally evident from the political Left and Right. Conservatives lament that modern society is invariably coterminous with collective disorder, cultural discord and moral breakdown. One highly reactionary version of this conservatism extends the bleakness so far that the notion of society is emptied of all significance – rendered void, null. Perhaps the best known instance of this neoconservative lexicon which we have already quoted is former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s 1987 assertion that ‘there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families’.[5] Many liberals, to be sure, share this anxiety of any contamination of the individual by the (collective) social form. The American political scientist Robert Putnam seems to assume that every year brings with it increasing alienation, isolation and societal fatality as men ‘bowl alone’, while sociologist Richard Sennett speaks disapprovingly of societal ‘corrosion’ as a consequence of the impact on jobs and identities of the new economy. If modern society leads us to ‘bowl along’ this is because we hanker after a bygone societal era in which the

interpersonal fabric of self and other was harmoniously sewn. At its starkest, there is, probably inevitably, a highly nostalgic imagination at work in many portrayals of our contemporary social decline. Political theorists like Hannah Arendt are fond of pointing out that in the classical world there really was no word for society as such and the *polis* was not dependent on a wider sphere of social connections. Society, on this view, has beat a steady, shamefaced retreat from its previous lofty, Olympian height in the face of various political forces – which run all the way from capitalism to globalization, from multiculturalism to post-feminism.

In equal measure, the abandonment of the notion of society now looms large in various versions of social and political thought that assert radical credentials. For post-structuralists, the very idea of society smacks of closure, determination, and metaphysics. Indeed, the term is largely discarded altogether in postmodernist thought. French social theorists, notably Jean Baudrillard, have declared the implosion of society into ‘hyperreality’. For various feminists and post-feminists, society as a concept is too masculinist, functioning as a kind of patriarchal signifier repressive of femininity and the Other. Meanwhile, for the political Left in general, it is a notion too closely linked to the dead-ends of liberalism, the complacency of the welfare state, and one certainly out of kilter with radical global assertions for political emancipation.

The wholesale rejection of the concept of society is, we believe, one very good reason for writing about it. Why have so many authors, on both the political Left and Right, along with cultural conversatives and progressives, declared the notion of society dead? Why are social theorists wary of using the term at all? And should society – as both theory and reality – now rest in peace? Can a robust defence of the concept of society be mounted, through a radical and controversial social theory? Or should society just be

dissolved into the social/sociality couplet of contemporary critical discourse?

# Images of Society

‘Society’ is widely regarded as one of the most fundamental words in public life and politics. In ordinary usage, the term ‘society’ is intricately bound up with images of a collective, common identity. ‘Society’ here implies value consensus, and as such serves as a kind of ‘sorting device’ for grasping connections and differentials of social norms between different societal types. When a person in ordinary conversation remarks, for example, that Japanese society is more formalistic and polite than American society, it is evident that the notion of society is imagined to distribute properties of a common identity to its inhabitants. Unsurprisingly sociology, as ‘the science of society’, has a particular and special interest in the concept and the reality. Sociologists have sought to grasp this internally integrated unity associated with the term ‘society’ through various terminological innovations: some speak of society as a ‘bounded complex’, some of ‘societal totalities’, while others refer to the fixed boundaries of ‘social systems’. Yet if the term ‘society’ calls forth images of highly integrated unities or the ‘systemness’ of social integration – the idea that a society displays fixed boundaries which provide for a collective unity, one which separates that society off from other societies – it also is suggestive of disinterested interaction, rationalized relationships and some degree of alienation. If society means an integrated social system, it also signifies social association in the widest sense – and very often this latter sense of society is glaringly at odds with the former one. Émile Durkheim, in forging the central theoretical dimensions of French sociology, spoke of ‘the

division of labour' as the dominant pattern of social interconnectedness in modern societies – in a standpoint which remains suggestive of the ambiguous tension between social association on the one hand and societal unity on the other within the overarching concept of society.

When examining the idea of society in contexts of everyday life and ordinary usage, we find five broad standpoints (no doubt, more could be isolated), some of which reflect the imprint of more intellectual evaluations of the term in social, cultural, political and philosophical thought – of which more shortly. First, society can be equated with 'high society': to be part of society means having the 'right' social connections, or knowing the correct way to interact at a major public event. This is an understanding that symbolically equates society with status, style and the signifier of 'civilization'. A second understanding of society is one which underscores everyday living. Society just *is* that domain in which cultural issues of identity play out, where the search for self unfolds, and where ideologies of progressive self-development take hold. In this understanding, society is conceived as primarily a container for the self. Society is basically what goes on in everyday life. A third position on society is inspired by the spread of industrialization and modernization, in which society emerges as a thoroughly material process in which differentiation, division and domination come to the fore. Society thus is abstract, always with the upper hand over its varied human subjects. In this approach, the emphasis is on social determinism – society triumphs over individual agency. A fourth related understanding meshes society with the sacred. Against a backdrop of the aesthetic and ascetic twinned, society in this understanding can be religion, nationalism, the erotic, ethnicity, and the like. In this framework society is resolutely utopian, forging an imaginary reconciliation between the trials of social association on the one hand and the most fundamental

questions of human existence on the other. Finally, a fifth understanding of society – in the sense of ordinary usage – has more recently emerged around globalization, new information technologies and the Internet, as well as postmodernism and 'Third-Way'-inspired politics, whereby society becomes cosmopolitan through and through. In this perspective, some affirmatively speak of a global democratization of society, while other sceptics lament the cultural spread of global capitalism.

If the term 'society' is fundamental to public political discourse, it is also foundational to the social sciences in general and the discipline of sociology in particular. Etymologically speaking, the very emergence of the term 'society' is bound up with the ambiguity or doubleness of collective unity on the one hand, and generalized social association on the other. 'Society' is commonly awarded its first socio-political usage in 1531, where according to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* it designated 'association with one's fellow men'. Indeed one of its original meanings, which predates the origins of sociology and returns us to ancient Greece, is 'association', or the cultivation of community. Aristotle, in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, specifically contrasts human community or association (*koinonia*) – as foundational to the politics of a 'society of citizens' – with the private individual or household (*oikos*). This aspect of the associational nature of the social is very important. As we will see subsequently these references to the Greek meaning of 'society' and 'politics' becomes controversial at a later stage. We have already referred to the controversial political ideas of Hannah Arendt who argued that 'society' is in fact 'mass society' and alien to the Greek world which elevated the political over the social. At any rate, from the ancient Greeks onwards society was conceived as a kind of civic form or associational bond, referring interchangeably to economic relations, cultural relations or political relations. Prior to the Enlightenment,

and specifically the formative years of sociology in France, there was still no conceptualization of society as a reality *sui generis*. It is perhaps ironic – given the idea that the word 'society' was alien to the classical way of understanding the relations between state and citizen – that 'sociology' is a combination of the Latin 'socius' (fellow or more expansively friendship) and the Greek 'ology' (or study of). Critics of the discipline often humorously claim that it is essentially confused in combining two separate worlds. More generously, we might say that sociology has a transcultural disposition to combine worlds.

If the word 'society' encodes momentous historical transformations – that is, a set of fundamental institutional changes that unfolded throughout Europe in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period – it also reflects a series of ideological tropes. These ideological tropes have been understood, received, reproduced and reconfigured in various versions of social thought, ranging from classical sociology to contemporary social theory, and extend to core conceptual distinctions between the meaning of societies, social systems, social relations and the social. Society in some versions of classical sociology, for example, functions as an encoding of the universal; the 'societal totality' is that which scoops up the individual within a large associational relationship in which social contract rather than blood relationship is central. In clearly demarcating territorial boundaries and forms of associational locale, society thus works to refine within each of us its cult of common identity, value consensus, and a progressive sense of historical development. In classical sociology, the word 'society' traces within its semantic contours a distinctive set of economic transformations from European feudalism to market capitalism, from traditional state sovereignty to a system of interlocking, demarcated nation-states. However, as the very word implies an ambiguity between societal unity and social association, society can distil the outlines of

societal totality only at the gravest of costs to genuine cultural accord. A rift between society and community is thus opened, but also nostalgically encoded. As the German thinker Ferdinand Tönnies argued in his classic *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, '. . . society is only a transitional and superficial phenomenon'.[6] Society is realized through indifference, hostility and cool market relationships; its breeding of impersonal, instrumental relationships can thus be sharply contrasted with the more spontaneous, integrated forms of social association in small-scale communities.

Tönnies's contrast between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* is an ironic one, although this point has been often missed in the social sciences. For many standard sociological textbooks, Tönnies is invoked (if at all in the contemporary period) primarily to underscore that instrumental, impersonal relationships of large-scale modern societies have replaced traditional, hierarchal relationships of small-scale communities. Those that have drawn upon Tönnies's ideas to make this sharp sociological contrast are, it must be said, partly correct. In presenting a dichotomous conception of social change, Tönnies did emphasize that communities encompass tradition whereas societies constitute modernity. The battle between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, he argued, represents a 'tragic conflict'.[7] However the emergence of society, and its recoding of community, is not for Tönnies a wholesale movement in which the latter is fully eclipsed by the former. Community is still with us; the development of modern, large-scale societies makes the search for community, in some ways, more pressing than ever. Clean divisions between society and community are but intellectual projections; the two, in fact, criss-cross, intersect and dislocate. We should also recognize the fact that Tönnies saw both of these as processes rather than static conditions.

This is, perhaps, what Tönnies refers to when he writes 'the essence of both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* is found interwoven in all kinds of associations'. And yet – however interwoven – Tönnies does present community as spontaneous and society as mechanical. While we will be critical of Parsons at various points in our reflections that follow on the theory of society, we should note at this stage that in his final study of American society towards the end of his life, Parsons made exactly this point – combining both community and association in his *Societal Community*, in which he sought to capture the ways in which these two dimensions can be incorporated into a single social system.[8]

For Durkheim, by contrast, the problem is the reverse: society is not, in fact, impersonal and mechanical, but constitutive of moral individualism and integrative of social relations. Just as Tönnies believed that modern, large-scale societies are characterized by mechanical social relations and a kind of utilitarian individualism, so Durkheim held, inversely, that modern societies are generative of unifying forms of solidarity and advanced forms of moral individualism. Durkheim is thus, in effect, suspicious of Tönnies's conviction that only life in small societies can be morally sustaining. Durkheim opposes this melancholic nostalgia, which strips the present of its utopian vitality, noting that 'there is a collective activity in our contemporary societies which is just as natural as that of the smaller societies of previous ages'.[9] It is one of Durkheim's many original theoretical moves to question the notion that tradition and social forms of the past are necessarily to be celebrated. In a striking sociological interpretation, modernity for Durkheim turns the tables on mechanical social relations of the past, reconstituting a more expansive experience of community which is specific to large-scale, modern societies. In bridging the gap between society and community in this way, Durkheim is able to identify new

forms of solidarity which are specific to modernity – that which he sees as the upshot of a socially developed division of labour and operationalized through what he termed the 'conscience collective', the collective conscience or consciousness. Of course, Durkheim's view of the possibility of recuperating the social was seriously damaged by the advent of the First World War, the rise of aggressive militarism and the slaughter of a whole generation of young French men, including his son Andre Durkheim. Modern mass warfare demonstrated only too well the destructive force of modern society.

The problem of defining 'society' has exercised many of the best minds in contemporary sociology. To take just one example, the American sociologist Robert Nisbet – who wrote so powerfully on the issues of community, conservatism and authority – offered an interesting reflection on the recent history of society.[10] Nisbet observed that, through much of the twentieth century, there had been both a negative and a positive definition of society. The negative perspective emerged in comparison to the idea of 'community'. Whereas society was loose, impersonal, mechanical and transitory, community was seen to be rooted in permanence, authority and intimacy. Nisbet acknowledged that this contrast had its intellectual origins in the work of Tönnies, namely the distinction between community and association. The second positive meaning, however, was situated in a contrast with the power of the sovereign nation-state. For many writers, society was the site of individual freedoms and liberties, but these were all too easily expunged by the intervention and growth of the modern bureaucratic state. One example was to be found in the work of the American philosopher and educationalist John Dewey who, in *The Public and its Problems,* had warned against the inroads of the state in the machine age on small communities.[11] Pluralists like the British political philosopher

J. N. Figgis thought that freedom, depending heavily on the survival of voluntary associations, community and civil society was severely compromised by the growth of the state. In general Nisbet concluded that the majority of writers believed that modern society was in a state of crisis. The principal challenge to society was the development of the totalitarian state in both fascism and Communism. He concluded by claiming that the great question for his generation was whether the countries of the former Soviet Union could throw off the shackles of bureaucratic regulation and party domination to become free and vibrant sites for the renaissance of society.

Such dichotomous conceptions of social change – contrasting 'community' with 'association', 'community' with 'society' or 'tradition' with 'modernity' – served to drive the topic of society to the grandest of narratives in the social sciences during the twentieth century. The story of what this does to the social sciences themselves is one of our concerns in this book, a story we trace from Tönnies and Durkheim through Talcott Parsons and Erving Goffman to British sociologist Anthony Giddens and French-Bulgarian feminist sociologist and philosopher Julia Kristeva. In the current preoccupation with the 'death of the social', however, another (perhaps equally mystifying) conception of dichotomous social change is at work. This twenty-first-century conception of the obliteration of the social is, by turns, terrifyingly traumatic and euphorically utopian. In a world of do-it-yourself identities, online connections, gated communities, networked associations, widening inequalities, enforced migrations, the displacement of populations from war-torn regions, and government-outsourced private military contracts, it seems difficult enough to find a trace of the logic of 'society' at work anywhere. Society has become 'liquid' in the words of Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, without shape or form. The social is now thought of as being elastic, when social connections are stretched through time