
The quest for a new analytical perspective

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1. More questions than answers

Based on the work performed by a team comprising members of the IEC's Philosophy and Social Sciences Section, acting in conjunction with a series of outside partners, the *Informe sobre la cohesió social a la Catalunya del segle XXI* (Report on Social Cohesion in Twenty-First Century Catalonia, IEC, 2020), which I had the honour of coordinating, left many unanswered questions. This is not a criticism; in fact I actually think it is a good sign. I always tell my students that any research should begin with a question which will prompt many more if it is answered properly. And this is certainly true with our research.

However, the dissatisfaction at the end was not due to the fact that any research can always be taken further with more time and more resources; instead, it had to do with the very conceptual core with which we had worked. The fact that the team members, experts in different disciplines, had examined the notion of 'social cohesion' or 'social fracture' with an emphasis on different dimensions of the social reality was not only expected; in fact, a multidisciplinary group had been assembled for that very reason. And, indeed, each author examined the notion of cohesion from a diverse range of dimensions, like inclusion and equality, legitimacy and participation, and recognition and belonging, to cite just a few of the positive ones, and inequality, exclusion and mistrust, to cite some negative ones. But this was not a problem either.

The issue that I believe remained open was the one addressed in the debate session discussed here: how should we rethink the very idea of social 'bond', or of 'cohesion' or 'belonging', if you prefer, in a society like today's? How should we rethink the notion of inclusion when it entails using social media? How should we deal with political participation given phenomena like

post-truth and disinformation? And how do we identify the processes of identity recognition within the framework of this burgeoning paradoxical logic of the clash between globalisation processes and local claims and ethnic or gender identifications?

As a professor of epistemology, I have always been strongly committed to critically reviewing the conceptual frameworks that we use in the social sciences. Indeed, I have often had the impression that the models we draw from, constructed at a given point in time, lag far behind the new complexities posed by today's society. And this may well be the case with the very notion of social cohesion or social bond. On the one hand, it is clear that we are grappling with increasingly complex societies that are more diverse and more open, and therefore that are changing more quickly. On the other, we have witnessed the advent of social media, with its sophisticated instruments that enable intense interactions at many levels. James Altucher is right when he suggests that it is essential to distinguish between the social revolution *before bandwidth* and *after bandwidth* in order to grasp the new world we are facing. Plus, social media is guided by algorithms that we users are unaware of, even though they lead us to certain types of responses to perceptions of reality which are anything but objective facts. It is not difficult to see that both things are radically overturning the old mechanisms that facilitated cohesion or produced social ruptures. Thus, the fact that the old, familiar mechanisms are retained but being developed under new determinants that have yet to be thoroughly studied—confirmation bias, risk aversion, learned helplessness, the spiral of silence—poses a real challenge that requires in-depth revision.

2. So, what are we talking about?

Therefore, we are left with many unanswered questions if we want to know precisely what we are talking about when we say cohesion, bonds or belonging. One of the first epistemological obstacles may stem from the politically positive connotation of the term 'cohesion' and the negative connotation of 'fracture'. Beyond whether it makes sense for the social sciences to start with this type of value judgement, the question is nonetheless legitimate, even in the political terrain. Are all forms of cohesion positive and all forms of fracture negative? The response is a rotund no. Ultimately, the quest for cohesion at any cost could justify anything from authoritarian governments to xenophobic policies which seek to exclude outsiders in order to guarantee that cohesion.

Nor is it clear what the sphere of cohesion should be, whether the neighbourhood, the city, the country, the nation or the state. Is it possible for there to be cohesion in a neighbourhood but fracture at the city or state level? Or perhaps the opposite: national cohesion and fragmentation on more daily levels? In any case, there are diverse cohesions, and they could well be contradictory depending on the sphere chosen. Moreover, without seeking to be exhaustive—this is not the place for it—we could also ask which fractures are opposed to which cohesions, that is,

if there are any fractures that stem precisely from rivalries that prompt cohesion, as in sport. Nobody would say that the Olympics fracture the world because states are competing against each other with high doses of rivalry!

In particular, I believe that we could say that we are in the early days of studying the effects of social media on the mechanisms of bonding and indifference, social cohesion and social fracture. And we are only just beginning to explore new conceptualisations and analytical methodologies that even before they gain solid ground are thwarted with the introduction of new applications and platforms and their new algorithms. On this point, we in the social sciences must learn how to work in conjunction with computer engineers and designers of social media platforms or we will never manage to capture the social changes taking place with our classical tools.

For all these reasons, in this debate we enlisted the collaboration of an anthropologist, Josepa Cucó; a geographer, Oriol Nel·lo; and a sociologist, Avi Astor, in order to address the issue in a multidisciplinary fashion from three different angles: relational, territorial and structural. And the outcome was extraordinarily positive, albeit not conclusive. We have to keep working in this direction not only with urgency and rigour, but also with flexibility.