

Social cohesion – a post-crisis analysis

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Abstract. *Social cohesion is a complex notion, subject to various different approaches that we set out to analyse. Thus, the article presents the scientific views regarding social cohesion, both at an individual or group level and at a macro-social level. The concluding section presents the consequences for public policy of a pluralist approach to defining social cohesion, while underlining the importance of a bi-dimensional view – disparities/inequality/social exclusion and social relations/social bonds/social capital – in order to achieve a comprehensive vision of a society's social cohesion.*

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1. Conceptual framework

Social cohesion is a trait of a society based on links and connections among social units like individuals, groups, organizations and territories (McCracken, 1998). The sociologist Emile Durkheim used the notion of social cohesion as the foundation of social order and defined it as a bond created by loyalty and solidarity among individuals. Describing social cohesion is often a discussion about strengthening social relations, shared values and a common basis of relating to the world, adhering to a common identity and a sense of belonging, as well as trust among society members (Jenson, 1998).

While most of the literature analyses multiple aspects of cohesion, such as trust among individuals that make up a society or involvement in the decision making process, some aspects are found less often among the definitions – sharing common values or the economic dimension of cohesion. In fact, some authors consider a generous conceptual framework of social cohesion to have some limitations; thus, Green and Janmaat (2011) identify four difficulties with the way the notion of social cohesion is used: the normative approach to social cohesion, to identify a goal that must be reached, raises some concerns of how objective such an analysis is and ignores the potential side-effects to a highly cohesive society – social insularity and backwardness, “economic sclerosis” (Banfield, 1958, Olson, 1971 – in Green and Janmaat, 2011); using the term social cohesion to identify a set of desirable social outcomes, such as trust, tolerance, involvement in the community – characteristics that are not always correlated and do not clearly identify a framework for the analysis of social cohesion; defining social cohesion through its determinants (welfare state, equality) and/or through its consequences (quality of life, economic growth), thus limiting the scope of a broader analysis; the use of the same notion of social cohesion for different levels of analysis – national, regional, individual, interpersonal, trans-national or in the sense of social control/social bonding, i.e. a sense of belonging to a group, identifying with and adhering to its values and its norms (Hirschi, 1969).

Chan et al. (2006) identify two main approaches to social cohesion: one originating from sociology and social psychology and one that has its roots in the political discourse, the latter referring to both the analyses that define social cohesion through a means-end approach (they consider social cohesion a desirable outcome but define it through the policy goals that might, in those authors' view, realise or enhance social cohesion) and to broader analyses that

don't try to set one definition of social cohesion but rather consider the value of pluralist definitions contextual to the scope of the analysis or of the policy document that addresses it.

2. A microsocial approach to social cohesion

Jenson (1998) studies five dimensions for the concept of cohesion: belonging, participation, legitimacy, recognition and inclusion. Thus, we can define social cohesion in five ways: shared values and a sense of belonging to a community; society's ability to promote equality among individuals and to prevent marginality; patterns of participation to the decision-making process that include democratic, efficient and inclusive institutions such as political parties, unions and governments; society's capacity to mediate conflicts over access to power and resources; society's ability to mediate different political views.

Social cohesion is also considered to regard the following three dimensions: values, identity, culture that define a certain community; discrepancies and divisions: inequalities and lack of equity, cultural diversification, geographic divisions; networks and associations and infrastructure (O'Conner, 1998).

Chan et al. (2006) put forward a minimalist definition of social cohesion, justifying it by a functionality reason in the sense that any inquiry is best served by a concise and exclusive definition rather than just to equate social cohesion with a desirable or good society. Hence, they consider that:

“...people in a society are said to be «sticking» to each other only if the following three criteria are simultaneously met:

(1) they can trust, help and cooperate with their fellow members of society;

(2) they share a common identity or a sense of belonging to their society;

(3) the subjective feelings in (1) and (2) are manifested in objective behaviour.

[...]Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations.”

(Chan, J., To, H.-P, Chan, E., 2006, p. 289, 290)

For the authors, “members of society” denotes not just individuals but also groups, organizations and institutions that make up a community and the interactions within society take place on two levels: vertical (between individuals and institutions) and horizontal (among individuals and among groups within the community).

3. A macrosocial approach to social cohesion

Berger-Schmitt (2000) identified social cohesion among the main goals of the European Union, as presented in the European Commission’s reports (1996, 1997, 1998, 2000). Subsequently, the Council of Europe (2005) published a Methodological guide for the concerted development of social cohesion indicators. For these international organizations the discourse regarding social cohesion originates in the need to respond with adequate measures to the existent disparities and the social cleavages. Therefore, the constituents, the causes and the effects of social cohesion are frequently used in contextualised definitions of cohesion.

The main aspects regarding social cohesion are social inclusion/social exclusion, social capital, quality of life. The distinctions and definitions of these notions can be found in the policy documents that underpin the European Union’s actions in this respect.

Social exclusion is a side of the first dimension of social cohesion. With the increasing efforts to diminish social exclusion within the European Union, the notion of social cohesion was brought to the public’s attention and the European Commission funded a series of studies and analyses relating to poverty and social exclusion. Social exclusion can be understood as deficiencies in the functioning of the following systems: the democratic and legal system that promotes civic participation; the labour market, which promotes economic integration; the welfare system, which promotes social inclusion; the family and community system that promotes interpersonal bonds.

Regarded at an individual’s level, social exclusion denotes low welfare (economic disadvantage) and inability to participate in the social life (social and political disadvantage). As a society trait, social exclusion refers to a deterioration of social cohesion related to the institutions’ rules for distributing wealth.

The notions of social cohesion and *quality of life* are strongly connected and there are a number of ways to analyse this relation.

First, one must consider that although social cohesion can be regarded at a macrosocial level, it is manifested in individuals' behaviour and attitudes. Social cohesion is based on the social capital created through social bonds and it is set, maintained and experienced through individuals. However, when we consider a community's social cohesion, it implies aspects regarding real-life cases and are therefore components of a individual's quality of life.

Secondly, one's quality of life can be directly influenced by social cohesion elements, as cited in many empirical studies and it is explained through the impact of social capital on the economic or other welfare dimension. Conceptually, social exclusion seen as a process originated in inadequate functioning of institutions manifests through a relative deprivation of individuals.

A third approach to the relation is the opinion that social cohesion impacts one's quality of life in all aspects. Social cohesion can be regarded as a societal attribute experienced in everyday life, be it through perceived inequality or through the social climate at the workplace, at school or in relating to neighbours, hence relating to the individual's quality of life. Such a view considers social cohesion an inherent part of the life of every member of society and it is a plea for a general approach of the quality of life concept, referring not only to the individual attributes of a life situation but also to the societal characteristics. In this regard, quality of life is one of the main goals social cohesion policies.

The notion of *social capital* is another dimension that can be used to describe a society's cohesion. This notion includes aspects like density and quality of links and interactions among individuals and groups, shared feelings regarding trust and involvement as a consequence of a common set of norms and values, a sense of belonging and solidarity that is fundamental to a society's internal coherence (McCracken, 1998, Jenson, 1998, O'Conner, 1998): "The social capital of a society includes the institutions, the relationships, the attitudes and values that govern interactions among people and contribute to economic and social development. Social capital, however, is not simply the sum of the institutions which underpin society; it is also the glue that holds them together. It includes the shared values and rules for social conduct expressed in personal relationships, trust, and a common sense of «civic» responsibility that makes society more than a collection of individuals. Without a degree of common identification with forms of governance, cultural

norms, and social rules, it is difficult to imagine a functioning society.” (The World Bank, 1998)

There are studies that regard social capital as one dimension of social cohesion. Thus, in the proposal for measuring social cohesion, Berger-Schmitt (2000) considers that social cohesion implies two distinct dimensions of social outcomes: reducing disparities, inequality and social exclusion and strengthening social bonds, links and interactions, the latter including the constituents of social capital.

In the working papers of the World Bank the notion of social cohesion takes precedents over the one of social capital as it is believed that social capital can be confusing when translated to a social science study since many of the characteristic of capital in the traditional sense are not applicable. Hence, the World Bank uses social cohesion distinctly from social capital.

The World Bank’s experts rely on a specific conceptual framework to implement social cohesion. Thus, social cohesion is seen both as a driving force for political change and as a mechanism that consolidates the democracy embedded in a society’s institutions. Social cohesion is also a contributor to the effectiveness of the rule of law and makes armed or social conflicts less likely. Functional, effective institutions are both determinants and resultants of social cohesion and that has an impact on the economic well-being of a society (Easterly, et al. 2006).

4. Consequences of a pluralist approach to social cohesion

Policymakers regard social cohesion beyond its social or political implications. International institutions such as The World Bank, OECD and the European Union are also concerned with the economic returns of a highly cohesive nation and take into account the importance of social determinants of economic growth. Thus, for the European Union, social cohesion is largely concerned with unemployment, poverty, exclusion and reducing development disparities. As a general overview, economic and social cohesion of the social structures in the European space means analysing aspects with regards to income distribution disparities, population below the poverty line, social exclusion (through income, discrimination with regards to access to goods, access to education, cultural services and civic implication). The Council of Europe’s approach to social cohesion includes issues regarding the democratic principles and human rights, be they civil, political, social or economic.

The structural changes subsequent to globalization and the social consequences of the current economic crisis raise a series of issues concerning the deepening cohesive cleavages and regarding social cohesion as a process rather than a state of affairs broadens the horizon for public policy to complement the tradition welfare economic policies with measures aimed at promoting trust and solidarity; thus, the principles of social economy: „solidarity, responsibility, freedom, equal chances for all organization members, the interweaving of member interests with general interest and participation of all to the decision taking process, in a democratic way” (Vírjan, 2012) may become relevant.

To conclude, we can state that cohesion among a system’s elements is what underpins the system’s efficient functioning and in order to have a comprehensive view of a society’s social cohesion one must take into consideration two dimensions: disparities/inequalities/social exclusion as well as social relations/social bonding/social capital.

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