Identifying the Links: 
Social Cohesion and Culture

Jane Jenson

Université de Montréal

Abstract: The notion of social cohesion is widely used to discuss current economic, social, and political situations. It lacks a clear definition, however. This article’s first section reviews some of the ways that social cohesion is used, while cautioning against falling back into nostalgia for a supposedly “golden age.” A second section provides a discussion of the reasons why social cohesion is on the agenda in a time of globalization and neo-liberalism. The third section briefly raises some links between social cohesion and culture. The final section, by way of conclusion, raises the following two queries: How can social cohesion be maintained? Can there be “too much” social cohesion?

Our new times are sometimes heady ones, full of excitement and hope. The forces of what we call globalization have brought new possibilities of economic well-being for many individuals, corporations, and countries. For legions of others, however, these have been very difficult times. One legacy of such difficulties is fear and uncertainty. People feel hostage to corporate downsizing, chronic unemployment, and fraying social fabrics. They fear for their children’s future as well as their own. Since September 11th, 2001 these fears have intensified, as threats to security have reached into North America.

Any encounter with Canadians, whether at the hockey rink, in public hearings, or via public opinion data, reveals little consensus about where problems
come from. Nor do they agree on how to address their fears and uncertainty about the future. Indeed, as soon as choices are put on the table, diverging priorities become evident. In some sectors of the population, “cultural insecurity and nostalgia for ‘Old Canada’ are reducing tolerance and compassion” (Ekos, 1995, p. 17).

One reaction of policy communities has been to describe such patterns of fear, division, and hostility, as well as the structural patterns underpinning them, as evidence of declining social cohesion. Increasingly, in both Canada and abroad, policy communities and ordinary citizens share a sense that “things are falling apart” and “it’s just not working.”

**What is it?**

Invoking social cohesion in this way does not, however, indicate what social cohesion is. Nor does it indicate why social cohesion might be considered a good thing. Nor is there a prescribed direction for change. Social cohesion may be invoked by those who call for a “return to the past,” or it can be a call for progressive reform. It can be, in other words, a profoundly ambiguous notion.

Like John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the absence of social cohesion is deplored. It is most often discussed in terms of threats. There is a great deal of concern that even in those places where the economy is working well and polities are functioning according to the rule of law and democratic principles (such as in North America or Europe) social cohesion may not be as healthy as it should be. Three examples illustrate this:

- World Bank: Using the terms social capital and social cohesion synonymously, the World Bank noted that “increasing evidence shows that social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable. Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society—it is the glue that holds them together.”
- Council of Europe: The Council of Europe’s Committee for Social Cohesion asserts that social cohesion is an essential condition for democratic security—divided and unequal societies are not only unjust, they also cannot guarantee long term stability. (cited in Jenson, 2001)

Thus social cohesion is a critical concept but not necessarily a forward-looking concept. It can be used to attempt to establish a link to a lost moment of social harmony. It may even be nostalgia for something that never existed (Pahl, 1991). However, social cohesion can also be used to imagine a more positive future, one which seeks new patterns and innovation. It is this version which has the most use for thinking about the links between social cohesion and culture, but care must be taken not to fall into the trap of nostalgia.
Social cohesion is rarely defined explicitly, but there have been some efforts to develop a working definition. Sharon Jeannotte (2000) provides the working definition of social cohesion used by the Social Cohesion Network within the Government of Canada: “Social cohesion is the ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity within Canada, based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among all Canadians” (p. 5). As she also notes in her review of the thinking about social cohesion done by the European Union, the Council of Europe, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD):

The first and most counter-intuitive finding of this review of social cohesion in the European Union, the OECD and the Council of Europe is that none of the three has an explicit or even widely accepted working definition of the term “social cohesion”. This finding is surprising because the term is widely quoted in policy documents published by all three organizations and is, in fact, used to justify a wide range of research and policy interventions. Yet, few attempts have been made, until very recently, to clarify what the organizations mean by “social cohesion”. (Jeannotte, 2000, p. 5)

However, a review of the literature undertaken first in 1998 (Jenson, 1998) and then updated by, *inter alia*, Alaluf (1999), Jeannotte (2000), and Beauvais & Jenson (in press), allows identification of four common traits of the literature on social cohesion. First, social cohesion is a process rather than an end state. For example, for the Council of Europe (2001), “a strategy of social cohesion refers to any kind of action which ensures that every citizen, every individual, can have within their community the opportunity of access” to meeting their basic needs, to progress, to rights and protection, and to dignity and self-confidence (p. 5).

Creating and maintaining social cohesion requires attention to social bonds of solidarity. Second, and as a result, social cohesion involves a definition of who is “in” and who is not, to whom members of society owe solidarity and those to whom they do not. The borders of social inclusion and exclusion are therefore often analyzed within a framework that deploys the concept social cohesion.

Third, social cohesion is considered to require and be based on shared values. But, as the references to the three international organizations above also indicated, threats to social cohesion can also come from the patterns and structures of income and resource distribution, as well as from social patterns such as those which foster or undermine social capital. Therefore, even if many define social cohesion in terms of values and collective identities, that is, the feeling of belonging to a community, whether local or national, many discussions also see social cohesion being related to economic institutions and especially one central institution of modern societies: markets. One can ask about any institution, such as a market: Who has access and who is excluded? Who has effective opportunity and who is marginalized from full participation?

Finally, the fourth characteristic of this literature is that it tends to devote very little attention to the conflicts which are inherent in any pluralist society and the mechanisms for their resolution. It pays insufficient attention to the strengths and
weaknesses of institutions for conflict resolution, particularly democratic ones. While social cohesion resulting from social capital has been increasingly analyzed, the same cannot be said of the institutions of political democracy. This is especially disconcerting because the declining legitimacy of democratic institutions is often invoked as an indicator of problems of social cohesion.

These four characteristics of the discussions and literature on social cohesion allowed us to identify five dimensions to the concept (Jenson, 1998):

- belonging ... isolation
- inclusion ... exclusion
- participation ... non-involvement
- recognition ... rejection
- legitimacy ... illegitimacy

**What's new?**

Why is social cohesion under discussion at this moment? One argument is that the tendency to perceive threats to social cohesion is a product of our times. The paradigm shift in economic and social policy towards neo-liberalism has provoked serious structural strains in the realm of the social and political as well as new ideologies (Council of Europe, 2001).

An examination of this paradigm shift allows us to see that certain dimensions of social cohesion are more closely linked to economic adjustments, while others are clearly political. Nonetheless, in both cases there are threats to the sense of belonging. In one case it is the sense of belonging which comes from participation in economic activity and enjoying social and economic rights of citizenship. In the other case, a sense of belonging to a political community might be menaced by a lack of legitimate institutions for managing pluralism, or reduced access to meaningful participation.

Therefore, a growing number of concerned analysts are now reassessing basic perspectives on how to foster economic development and of what constitutes economic “success.” There is now a broad discussion of the dependence of economic growth on investments in healthy social relations, rather than treating social spending as simply a hostage to economic growth. Studies now uncover the cross-national statistics which provide evidence of a positive correlation between measures of economic and social well-being and equitable distributions of income as well as the negative economic consequences of social inequalities. The agenda of economic development now includes, in other words, issues of social and cultural policy (Jeannotte, 2000; Beauvais & Jenson, in press).

Overall, then, we now find conversations that seek a corrective to the negative social effects of structural adjustment policies and the strict neo-liberal ideology. The social costs of relying on the market for so many decisions have provoked a widespread hunt for alternatives (Council of Europe, 2001). Some leaders in the private sector as well as the public sector, people on the right as well as the left of
the political spectrum, and in Canada as well as abroad, are all looking for innovative solutions to growing social and political problems.

This is not the first time that economic and social turbulence and structural adjustment have been accompanied by attention to social cohesion within policy communities. Each time that rapid social change has meant diversity threatened to overwhelm commonalities and restructuring menaced past political compromises, academics and policy networks have explicitly addressed social cohesion. Indeed, cohesion is a sub-category of one of the most significant debates in sociology (and indeed philosophy), namely that on social order. This is, in other words, the same question that has preoccupied social contract philosophers, such as Thomas Hobbes, since the seventeenth century. The basic question is: In view of the constant competition between human beings for scarce resources, what makes it possible for people to live together peacefully?

Cohesion was the central concept of one of the “fathers” of sociology, Émile Durkheim. He is usually identified as the first to popularize the concept. He wrote at the end of the nineteenth century, in a Europe shaken by rapid social change provoked by industrialization, urbanization, massive immigration and population movement across the Continent, and changing social (including gender) roles. For Durkheim, a cohesive society depended on shared loyalties, which citizens owed to each other and ultimately to the state because they were bound in ties of interdependency.

If Durkheim was ultimately optimistic about social diversity and that new institutions could foster cohesion, the next wave of fundamental social change and political crisis, the 1930s, generated pessimism. Sociologist Talcott Parsons, whose work is still shaping debates in the social sciences, was sensitive to what he saw as the dangers of excessive liberalism (Pahl, 1991). He considered it to have contributed to the political tragedies of Europe before 1945. Parsons treated society as a system, composed of interdependent subsystems, held together by shared values reproduced by socialization. In Parsonian functionalism, conflict was “dysfunctional,” deviant, and pathological. Therefore, he sought the mechanisms fostering consensus.

Even such a schematic overview of two earlier moments of multiplying diversity and economic uncertainty permits three remarks. The first is that historically the concept of social cohesion surfaced just as people recognized the disquieting effects of rapid social change. It is not surprising, then, that in this era of globalization eyes have turned again to issues of order, stability, and cohesion. The second remark is that adherence to the concept of social cohesion, in both its Durkheimian and Parsonian manifestations, tended to result in a focus more on values than on interests. The result was a theoretical downplaying of democratic mechanisms for resolving conflict. Governments were called on to foster consensus more than to resolve conflict. A third remark is that there has never been complete agreement that social cohesion should be privileged over other values or other ways of creating social order.
Alternative theoretical perspectives have always competed with those based on social cohesion. Other social and political theories, with equally long pedigrees in politics and academe, have identified other mechanisms to foster social order. These differences have by no means disappeared.

The first alternative, already prefigured in the presentation of Durkheim and Parsons, are classical market liberals. Liberalism interprets social order as an unintended but very real benefit of market and other individual transactions. The values promoted are individual choice, including the freedom to choose from as many options as reasonable. The mutual respect of individual rights, guaranteed by law and respect for law, as well as the actions of persons pursuing in parallel their own interests, economic or other, are expected to generate a well-functioning society. Without going into further details, the core of the liberal position can be summarized as being that a well-functioning society is generated as a by-product of private behaviours.

Recently, liberalism has become particularly popular in its Tocquevillian manifestations. Tocquevillians are impressed by the positive contribution of private association. In essence, Alexis de Tocqueville saw in the early nineteenth-century United States forms of democratic governance coexisting with a myriad of associations designed to achieve all sorts of non-political ends. In his native post-revolutionary France he observed centralized power, few associations, and little democracy. From this correlation he hypothesized that voluntary action taught people to be more co-operative. It also had effects on the wider polity, fostering democracy. A renaissance of Tocquevillian liberalism underpins current political beliefs and enthusiasms about the spill-over effects of private association.

Neo-Tocquevillians, such as those who follow Robert Putnam’s (2000) search for the conditions fostering social capital, privatize the creation of social order. They leave it in the domain of markets, families, and other private networks and institutions. A well-functioning democracy thereby becomes a by-product of the operation of private institutions, such as singing groups and bowling leagues.

The third long-standing tradition is one which reserves some, albeit never exclusive, responsibility for creating social order to the institutions of collective choice, that is, to democratic institutions (see Alaluf, 1999). In these theories, the legitimacy of democratic institutions is central to the maintenance of social order. This third location on the “sustaining social order” map is occupied by versions of democratic socialism, post-1945 Christian democracy, and positive liberalism. All of them, but for different reasons, view social order as the result of an active government, a well-functioning, productive economy, and democratic public institutions dedicated to overseeing the whole.

In the social policy thinking of post-1945 Western Europe and Canada, social order rested on a guaranteed basic dose of economic equality and equity. Redistribution could come from social policy to be sure, via programs to ensure opportunity (such as public schooling) and to cover the ordinary risks of life in an industrial society (insurance and pensions for unemployment, old age, child rearing, sickness, and so on). But the other major mechanism for organizing equi-
table and even egalitarian distribution was an economy in which people earned enough to support themselves and their families. From this perspective, citizenship goes far beyond nationality. It is also the expression of ties of social solidarity, located in citizens’ rights to fundamental liberties, via civil rights, to democratic participation, via political rights, and to social and economic rights. From this perspective, public institutions have a central role to play, one that is exclusively theirs. It is through law and democratically arrived at collective choices that conflicts among different group and individual interests should be resolved. Private mechanisms of decision-making are never eliminated, but neither can they substitute for democratic government when it comes to making collective choices and achieving collective goals.

This brief inventory of theoretical approaches is meant to be indicative, not exhaustive. The goal of this short section is simply to remind us of two things. The first is that only some theoretical approaches identify social cohesion—defined as shared values and commitment to a community—as the foundation stone of social order. Other traditions privilege other mechanisms. Some put the accent on democracy or stress conflicting interests more than values. The second reminder is that just as democratic societies have always in the past debated how to achieve social order, we should expect to find such debates taking place in our own era of turbulence and restructuring. There are choices to be made. If these choices are to be informed ones, and empirically based, it is important to advance the research agenda.

Social cohesion and culture
Given these characteristics of the discussion of social cohesion and its multi-dimensional character, it is not surprising that it has been embraced by a variety of institutions working on cultural matters. In particular, the links between social cohesion and cultural diversity have come to the fore. An important focus is on societal diversity as a factor potentially undermining social cohesion, as well as treating social solidarity as well as common values as constitutive elements. There is also an emphasis on the effects of globalization and other large trends, as well as on government actions and strategies.

For example, the Council of Europe’s important contributions to thinking about diversity and social cohesion identify globalization’s new technologies as factors promoting mobility, both real and virtual. Globalization fosters shared ideas of a common world culture, at the same time as it contributes to diversity. Population movements, in particular, raise challenges of integration.

There is a significant difference, moreover, in the way this threat is appraised, as compared to the economic restructuring associated with globalization. The literature that analyzes social cohesion as a consequence of economic change tends to focus almost exclusively on threats. In contrast, the literature addressing diversity as a factor affecting social cohesion tends to see both positive and negative potential. It also tends to emphasize the role of values, institutions, and practices.

For example, the Council of Europe’s document, Diversity and Cohesion: New Challenges for the Integration of Immigrants and Minorities, assesses the
consequences of cultural diversity for social cohesion, both within and among European countries. With changing demographic realities, diversity may provoke negative reactions, but it is also a strength (Council of Europe, 2000). Thus, "on the occasion of its 50th anniversary in 1999, the Council of Europe reiterated its commitment to promoting cohesion and solidarity and combating racism, xenophobia, political, cultural or religious intolerance and discrimination against minorities. It also expressed the will to build on the community of culture formed by a Europe enriched by its diversity, confident in its identity and open to the world" (p. 9).

The argument takes off from the notion that integration of immigrants and national minorities is one of the pillars of social cohesion. It identifies policies that will promote inclusion. Diversity in this context refers to a pluralism of values, lifestyles, cultures, relations, and languages across and within European societies. The report makes a strong causal argument:

Acceptance of diversity and the interaction between cultures foster harmonious relations between people, enrich their lives and provide them with creativity to respond to new challenges. It is not the denial, but rather, the recognition of differences that keeps a community together. Without a respect for differences, communities may turn in on themselves, ultimately leading to their disintegration, decline or disappearance. (p. 11)

The challenge is to find the balance between homogeneity and diversity.

The European Commission (2001a) makes a similar argument about cohesion and how changes can be expected after enlargement, and suggests proposals and options. In a recent report, the Commission claims that bringing together 500 million people in a united but never uniform Europe is a real opportunity. Accordingly, Europe needs a policy that will maintain cohesion and add value for the resolution of the most serious problems. Therefore, policy needs both a new direction and a new vision. The Commission intends the report to provide a practical contribution to launching a wide-ranging debate on this subject.

For those who identify diversity as an important factor, cultural policy is often the key tool available, both for counteracting negative effects and achieving positive ones. The European Union is, however, an exception to this generalization. It tends to link diversity to territory, and therefore to focus on economic policy (see, for example, European Commission, 2001b). As Benjamin Hempel (1999) writes about Canada, however,

[the role of the concept of social cohesion in cultural policies is in some ways double-edged. As a conceptual framework for government initiatives in culture, it is clearly related to the goal of achieving greater unity among increasingly diverse (supra-) national citizenry. At the same time, it should not all be seen as synonymous with the purpose of strengthening a clearly defined monolithic (supra-) national identity. Focusing on social cohesion must essentially imply that government policies act to ensure the continued integration of various marginalized groups into the civic community. (p. 4)
For Sanjin Dragojevic, Canada is a leader in using cultural policy to manage the relationship between diversity and social cohesion. According to Dragojevic (2001), Canada treats cultural policy and social cohesion as intimately related. In Europe, “on the contrary, the notion of the term is mainly understood in its pragmatic dimension related to issues like economic problems and their reflection on culture and social communication, the question of unemployment and its consequences, as well as measures related to cultural diversity and social marginalization” (p. 1; see also Jeannotte, 1999).

Concluding remarks
Social cohesion is receiving a lot of attention in the world of cultural as well as economic and social policy. Therefore, I will conclude this brief article by returning to a theme raised in the introduction, that is to some of the limits of the concept, whether applied in the area of culture or other realms. There are two major issues to consider.

Issue #1: How do we maintain social cohesion?
A central finding of the available studies of social cohesion is that institutions—public as well as private—are crucial for limiting threats to social cohesion. The findings about causation are clear. A cohesive society is one in which accommodation of socioeconomic conflicts is well managed. Social cohesion will be at risk only if differences are mobilized as grounds for conflicting claims and then management of such claims is fumbled. Thus, social cohesion is fostered by careful and sensitive management of mobilized differences (or cleavages) of all sorts—cultural, linguistic, and economic.

All of this leads to the conclusion that more attention be paid to institutions, their practices, and their ideas. Ultimately, we must be able to distinguish among institutions, identifying those which are performing well because their practices are encouraging participation and they are successfully recognizing and mediating difference, as well as generating a sense of belonging.

Issue #2: Can social cohesion threaten social cohesion?
The cohesion of modern societies depends on institutions’ capacity to recognize and mediate politicized diversity. Normative conflicts organized around class, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and national claims are the familiar stuff of everyday politics. Thinking of social cohesion this way eventually leads to the following seemingly silly but nonetheless perfectly legitimate question: Can social cohesion be a threat to social cohesion?

If social cohesion is a characteristic of a community, a community-level phenomenon, the matter of borders and limits is always important. Cohesion depends on establishing the boundary between members of the community and those who are not members.

Cohesive communities can suffer from “too much bonding.” One can be made only too aware that one is “not from the neighbourhood” and therefore an object of suspicion, that one is “not from the old gang” and therefore an outsider. Therefore, the first question arising is whether attempts to increase social cohe-
sion by insisting on the need to share values may not actually reduce the space for viable compromise in pluralist modern societies. More concretely, is adherence to national identity necessary (see also Pahl, 1991)? Or, can citizens’ identities, including their national identities, be both varied and multiple, without threatening social cohesion?

Another danger is that social cohesion becomes too limited a focus, if one is concerned about total community health, or the country’s well-being. It is also necessary to be sensitive to permeability, that is, the capacity to be open. Historically, practices fostering openness have been much less prevalent than fostering cohesion. The stranger is a very common figure in traditional communities, just as is the outcast. Networks organized around exclusivity have been the bane of social reformers for at least a century. Modern history can be read as a long series of struggles to supplant the exclusiveness of private networks based on family and wealth. The goal of a wide variety of political movements was to install norms of equity, justice, and non-discrimination as the rules of economic, political, and social discourse.

Therefore, a basic challenge for conversations about social cohesion is to identify the mechanisms and institutions needed to create a balance between social justice and social cohesion. Such mechanisms and institutions would be ones which continue to value and promote equality of opportunity and fairness across all dimensions of diversity, while simultaneously fostering the capacity to act together, collectively and democratically.

References


