

Discussion Paper “Social Cohesion”

In its pilot year, the 2022 Humboldt Residency Programme brought together a unique constellation of 15 individuals from academia, journalism, philosophy, and the arts to jointly reflect on the topic of social cohesion. The programme’s aim was to stimulate new perspectives on the global issue of eroding social cohesion and rising populism as well as extremism.

Bridging academic disciplinary boundaries, the two-month Residency Period in Berlin offered political scientists, journalists, philosophers, psychologists, artists, sociologists, and lawyers an opportunity to overcome initial hesitancy and engage with the others’ perspectives in depth.

Having been exposed to and engaged in debates revolving around the topic of Social Cohesion for a year led all members of the programme to review their own understanding of the concept of social cohesion, its importance, its dangers, and ways it should or shouldn’t shape societies.

For further information on the Humboldt Residency Programme visit [here](#).

With the aim of sharing the group’s key insights and inspirations, we asked the members of the 2022 Humboldt Residency Programme to comment on the following question:

What aspects of social cohesion do we need to consider that – in your opinion – are often neglected in current discussions?



Cynthia Miller-Idriss (Host)
Professor (Sociology)

“(…) a strong, socially cohesive society is one in which dissent, protest, disruption, and (some) fragmentation thrives. Social cohesion does not mean social or political life is harmonious or that everyone agrees.”

I would suggest there are (at least) three things we regularly overlook when talking about social cohesion. First, it’s essential to remember that social cohesion is not an inherent good. Strengthening social and network ties, belonging, trust, shared purpose are all things that can be used for bad ends—including antidemocratic and violent ones. Social cohesion can be weaponized and used to manipulate people into undemocratic and even violent action; we have seen high social cohesion among authoritarian leaders, far-right populists, and violent extremists. Social cohesion can be instrumentalized by states and dominant groups as a strategy to forge greater homogeneity or erase differences. All of this means that strengthening social cohesion for the broader good requires that we understand the risks of misusing it and that we need clear checks on the possibility of ‘social cohesion’ being used as a way of ensuring more compliant or ‘less different’ citizens.

Second, I argue that it is essential to acknowledge that social cohesion is an inherently normative and aspirational project. It defines a collective social good and aspires to achieve it by both promoting desired aspects and countering harmful ones. But this assumes that we have a shared understanding of what desired and harmful aspects of society are. And that—especially in this highly-polarized moment—is not completely clear. Finally, it’s important to remember a strong, socially cohesive society is one in which dissent, protest, disruption, and (some) fragmentation thrives. Social cohesion does not mean social or political life is harmonious or that everyone agrees. It does not imply we have to ‘root out’ dysfunctional or deviant aspects. It cannot be a means to erase difference, critique, or scepticism. And it cannot create an obligation to cohere to the group via assimilation or one-way integration into national ‘values.’



Meili Crizies

Doctoral Student (Justice, Law, and Criminology)

“Analysing organizational as well as interpersonal relationships within radicalized communities can offer new avenues to understanding social connections of participating individuals.”

Coming from terrorism studies, the role of social cohesion within extremist groups should receive more attention. Analysing organizational as well as interpersonal relationships within radicalized communities can offer new avenues to understanding social connections of participating individuals. This approach could provide a glimpse beyond the portrayed united front of extremist groups, for whom homogeneity and cohesion tend to play an overproportionate role.

One important space for the analysis would have to be online environments: They have the potential to foster decentralized structures and provide room for ideological, religious, and/or interpersonal disagreements. Paying special attention to such instances may provide opportunities to capitalize on fissures in social cohesion within extremist groups.



Pasha Dashtgard

Assistant Professor (Justice, Law, and Criminology)

“(…) we should be thinking about how money influences private tech companies to create and encourage conflict between the people who visit their websites and use their apps.”

There’s a tendency for us to look at online communication and recoil at the divisiveness, anger, and incompatibility of people’s interaction with each other. But it’s important to bear in mind that many, if not most, social media platforms are not merely representing how people feel, but produce and incentivize a certain type of feeling and interaction. Anger, fear, and extreme points of view are privileged in online interactions because they capture our attention and engage us emotionally – things that digital media platforms are interested in perpetuating. Hence, we should be thinking about how

money influences private tech companies to create and encourage conflict between the people who visit their websites and use their apps. This isn't to say that division and conflict haven't existed for a long time, or that there hasn't actually been more division and conflict between people than of late; but there may be reasons why this feels more visible now than ever before, and those reasons may have more to do with tech companies as well as people who stand to profit from that technology.



Julia Elad-Strenger
Professor (Political Psychology)

"What are the limits of diversity that we can or should accept to promote social cohesion, and who shall define the group's values and goals upon which cohesion should be based?"

I would like to raise two points that we should consider when talking about social cohesion. First, I believe it is important to look at social cohesion as a two-sided coin: We often focus on cohesion as the "force that brings people together", but we must remember that it always leaves someone out, depending on our chosen definition. When we focus our definition of cohesion on a shared identity ("oneness"/homogeneity), shared values or goals, or a common vision of society, those who do not share with us these values, goals, or identity are not included within the boundaries of our "cohesive group".

In other words, every inclusion implies exclusion. This leads me to the second point: What is required of us to foster social cohesion, and are we willing to do what is required? Effectively fostering and maintaining cohesion requires us to limit diversity – to exclude, and even silence or delegitimize certain views or people who may threaten our cohesion from within or from without. In addition, fostering and maintaining cohesion may require us to give up some aspects of our complex identities and worldviews to ensure our place within the cohesive group, and to protect the group from internal conflicts. Hence, the question I think we should ask ourselves is the following: What are the limits of diversity that we can or should accept to promote social cohesion, and who shall define the group's values and goals upon which cohesion should be based?



Lea Kuhar
Independent Researcher (Philosophy)

"I suggest we (...) focus on how to create new community spaces in existing society where people can form new social bonds that render the existing difference between them obsolete."

I think that too often the question of how to achieve social cohesion is limited to the question of how to bring together the different parts of society that already exist and which appear to be incompatible with each other. I suggest we instead focus on how to create new community spaces in existing society where people can form new social

bonds that render the existing difference between them obsolete. This raises the important question of how to define these new social bonds and how to define “the common” in general. What is it that people have “in common”? And most importantly, does it have to be precisely defined before it can be practised? I do not think that there is a single definition of the common and I do not believe such a definition should be determined once and for all. It should rather be reinvented over and over again through different kinds of common social practices.

In my opinion the constant reinvention of different forms of being in common is the crucial moment for the practices of social cohesion. Practices of this kind necessarily need a utopian moment at the core of their vision. This means that the search for these new social practices should not be limited to the so-called rational frameworks of what is achievable in existing societies or what is bound to the currently prevailing logic of profit. Instead, we should demand the impossible in the sphere of everyday social life, where our actions are becoming more and more individualised, in the sphere of nature, which is being progressively destroyed by the logic of constant economic growth, as well as in the sphere of virtual life, which is increasingly destroying its potential for creating new forms of common spaces.



Richard Mole
Professor (Political Sociology)

“If we want to live in societies in which different identities and beliefs are accepted, we need to understand diversity not as a threat to social cohesion at the macro level but as an opportunity to create cohesion at the meso level of society.”

One question that is perhaps not given due attention is whether homogenous or diverse societies are more conducive to social cohesion. While homogeneity may intuitively seem more likely to produce cohesive societies, we must bear in mind that appeals to adopt a particular identity, adhere to certain social norms, or accept specific social structures as the best way to make society function smoothly for the benefit of all, may actually mask attempts by elites to entrench their privileged position within society and control economic and political power. Any form of social cohesion which seeks to homogenise society and stifle conflicting views should therefore be treated with suspicion. This version of society and social cohesion may have been possible in the past when societies were more ethnically homogenous and minorities did not seek official recognition or representation. However, those days have gone.

If we want to live in societies in which different identities and beliefs are accepted, we need to understand diversity not as a threat to social cohesion at the macro level but as an opportunity to create cohesion at the meso level of society. To facilitate interaction between the different identity groups, however, it is also important to promote cross-cutting rather than reinforcing ties between citizens. We should then perhaps think about social cohesion less as an endemic quality of societies at the macro level – as this is all but unattainable – and more as an ‘event’ in the sense that cohesion can be established at particular points in time, at particular levels of society, and along particular axes.



Mala Pandurang

Professor (Postcolonial Studies, Diaspora, and Gender Studies)

“It is important (...) that educators make a conscious attempt to guide young adults on how to critique received discourses on – amongst others – race, class, gender, religion, and caste, which are often understood as a given ‘truth’.”

Social cohesion in broad-based terms can be considered a mechanism for interconnectedness which stresses co-existence and acceptance of difference. It is important to ensure that educators create safe spaces on campuses where students can debate and discuss issues on conflicts that arise in the absence of such acceptance. These conflicts are often a result of how we are taught to perceive those who are different from us by our education system and religious instruction. Our attitudes toward acceptance – or rejection – of the ‘other’ largely stem from cultural discourses that we absorb while growing up, ranging from children’s stories to television serials, from tales told by grandparents to popular culture.

It is important therefore that educators make a conscious attempt to guide young adults on how to critique received discourses on – amongst others – race, class, gender, religion, and caste, which are often understood as a given ‘truth’. A useful tool of intervention is to use select narratives in the form of essays, speeches, short stories, films, and poems that can work towards sensitizing students to conflict-based experiences other than their own. Emotions evoked in a creatively powerful manner will touch the humane within us. A discussion of the biography of Martin Luther King Jr or the letters of Mahatma Gandhi, for example, can be used to learn about the philosophy of nonviolence and the need to reject revenge as a motive for collective reactions. Short stories and poems from all regions of the world can offer insights into race, ethnicity, gender, and religion in a manner that mere statistics and qualitative analyses cannot.



Gayatri Parameswaran

New Media Journalist and Documentary Maker

“Simply put, social cohesion to me is a glue that holds society together.”

Simply put, social cohesion to me is a glue that holds society together. Sometimes due to specific and peculiar factors and events, this glue may lose its adhesive qualities and certain parts of society may break away. It is really interesting to observe, understand and study the factors that either bring societies together or polarise them. Some of these aspects are religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, economic class, and more.

For the period of the Residency Programme my focus was the war in Ukraine and the question of national and cultural identity. Vladimir Putin has justified the invasion by repeatedly denying the existence of a unique Ukrainian identity. Ukrainian regions of

Luhansk and Donetsk — that border Russia and are home to a Russian speaking majority – came under fire and are still being bombed as I write this. The war on Ukraine certainly has historical roots going back to the fall of the Soviet Union, further back to World War II and even beyond. In the case of this conflict an important aspect of social cohesion – that of complex collective identities based on ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and national lines – has been neglected. That has brought us to the point where we are currently witnessing a war in Europe.



Christa Rautenbach
Professor (Law)

“Social cohesion in the South African context acknowledges that past injustices must be healed and offers a new version for the future that embraces difference.”

What is the role of law in achieving social cohesion in a world where the focus is on difference, conflict, discrimination, and inequality? I approach this question within my context coming from South Africa, a country where a white elitist group used the law to divide societies along racial lines, driven by the belief in racial superiority and fear of losing jobs, language, and culture. As a result, they made laws to prevent different racial groups from living and developing together, and non-compliance led to punishment.

Now we live in a political situation where the laws are used to reverse the consequences of apartheid. Most notable is the broad-based black economic empowerment legislation aimed at economic transformation and the economic empowerment of certain racial groups. Furthermore, social cohesion is more than just getting along or receiving equal treatment. Because of our historical baggage, social cohesion will look different from elsewhere. Social cohesion in the South African context acknowledges that past injustices must be healed and offers a new version for the future that embraces difference.

Law is strategically employed to transform a divided society into a cohesive one but always with retribution at the forefront. The outcome is not always fair, but the law does not promise fairness. On the contrary, it lays down norms of justice, a social utility that people and institutions must use to create fairness. This process refers to the social value of the law. Law was used during apartheid to structure society into a segregated one, and now it is used to restructure society into a cohesive one. Obtaining a socially cohesive society where diversity is the norm rather than the exception is an ongoing project. Will we ever reach this ideal? I hope so; the opposite is unthinkable.



Christóbal Rovira Kaltwasser

Professor (Sociology and Political Science)

“Given that tensions between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ are at the heart of the crisis of democratic representation that many countries are experiencing today, it is crucial to examine how social cohesion is affected by disputes at the elite level that can have spill over effects at the mass level.”

When thinking about social cohesion, most normally look at bonds between members, how much agreement exists within the people, and whether citizens can talk about their disagreements without major problems. Although this entry point is very important, one also needs to consider the elite level, particularly to examine if there are different opinions within the establishment and if these can be articulated without conflicts. Quite a number of countries in the world are characterized by the presence of an establishment that is very homogenous in sociological terms: a limited number of well-off people who live in unique urban areas and attend highly selective educational institutions. Despite this internal homogeneity, the elite often adopts very different positions on hotly debated topics such as economic preferences and moral issues, so that it is highly polarized, hindering its capacity to reach agreements that are desperately needed to master many of the challenges that contemporary societies are experiencing today.

Seen in this light, it is possible to argue that elites can sometimes be quite similar in terms of their socioeconomic background and yet adopt very conflictive positions. Therefore, scholars and practitioners interested in social cohesion should try to analyse not only the mass level, but also the elite level and the interaction between these two levels. Given that tensions between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ are at the heart of the crisis of democratic representation that many countries are experiencing today, it is crucial to examine how social cohesion is affected by disputes at the elite level that can have spill over effects at the mass level.



Angela Saini

Journalist and Author

“Unless we can forge societies committed to providing a dignified standard of living for everyone, regardless of their circumstances, it’s impossible to expect social harmony.”

My work as a science journalist focuses on how we think about human difference, particularly around questions of race and gender – both important aspects of the social cohesion puzzle. But for me, the most neglected area of discussion is poverty.

We underestimate the degree to which external pressures, such as economic depression, conflict, climate change, and food supply shortages, have on people all over the world. These days, not just the very poorest are affected, but even otherwise middle-class households that would have previously expected their standards of living to increase over time. Much of what we are witnessing in terms of the rise of populism and far-right

nationalism is being driven by economic stresses on people at a time of deep and growing social inequality. In countries like the UK, the life expectancy gap between the rich and the poor is rising. Food banks, once rare, are now everywhere.

Unless we can forge societies committed to providing a dignified standard of living for everyone, regardless of their circumstances, it's impossible to expect social harmony. A person who has too little to eat, who can't afford to house or clothe their children, who is too frightened to go to a doctor because of medical bills, is desperate and vulnerable. Our first step must be to limit individual vulnerability – and in so doing, prevent the social alienation that pushes people to the margins.



Alexander Stagnell

Postdoctoral Researcher (Rhetoric)

“Should the aim of democracy be to create cohesion and consensus within a society, or should democracy be based in the idea that it offers a non-violent way to manage dissent in society by letting the majority decide - even though this decision might deepen existing conflicts?”

One issue when discussing notions like social cohesion is its inherently positive metaphorical connotations. Just like everyone would support ‘good schools’ or ‘a reasonable government’, most people immediately appreciate a notion like social cohesion since its imagined opposite, ‘social division’, ‘social strife’, or even ‘social conflict’, is implicitly understood as negative for society. To alleviate these issues, it is important to reflect upon how the question is formulated. When we simply accept the antithesis set up by a metaphor like social cohesion, we also receive a certain set of already defined problems - in this case, that society's ills are the effect of too much conflict, strife, or division.

Therefore, I would encourage a discussion on a more basic level; not what might be done to foster social cohesion or what aspect of social cohesion has been neglected, but what other visions for society we could imagine - and what problems they in turn imply. This could include questions such as: Should the aim of democracy be to create cohesion and consensus within a society, or should democracy be based in the idea that it offers a non-violent way to manage dissent in society by letting the majority decide - even though this decision might deepen existing conflicts? Can cohesion be achieved in a given society, or are there necessary divisions - for instance when it comes to conflicting interests between different groups - that politics must find another way of dealing with? If democracy requires dissent and opposing interests, meaning that conflict - at least with words and arguments - is unavoidable within a democratic order, how can we understand the problems of society today?



Nikola Tohma (Kavasová)

Postdoctoral Researcher (History and Migration Studies)

“(History) tells us that social cohesion is a goal hard to reach but worth all the effort, because it guarantees the survival of our societies.”

There are many topics that we perceive as a challenge or a threat to social cohesion and that dominate the public debate. We can hardly complain about having little information on social inequality, gender imbalance, racism, extremism, and other persistent issues. What is missing is a broader discussion on social cohesion as an ideal we should strive for. What is the social glue that connects us despite our differences? How do we effectively apply the cure to observe some results? Moreover, how can academic research contribute to social change? Can we inspire individuals to take a break, detach themselves from their viewpoint, empathize with other people’s stories and rethink their positions?

From my research perspective, historians should never give up pointing to historical cases that highlight (in)tolerance and can serve both as a source of inspiration and a deterrent. History never repeats itself, and the relevance and applicability of the lessons learned are limited. Nevertheless, history does not merely describe past realities. It provides a long-term reflection on human behaviour. It makes us understand people’s motivations and strategies.

What does history teach us about social cohesion? It tells us that social cohesion is a goal hard to reach but worth all the effort, because it guarantees the survival of our societies. It also suggests that the character and content of social cohesion change dynamically, just as our societies change. We might consistently target similar values, such as peace, harmony, and justice. However, the social conflicts and the manners we use to address them gradually transform. We should remember that improving social cohesion is a never-ending process, a thankless job that does not pay off for those who occupy themselves with it, yet one that is crucial to pursue.