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"Social Cohesion, Social Justice and Democratic Resilience: Pathways through Polarization and Crisis"

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I want to start by acknowledging the unexpected and regretful fact that I am not appearing in-person tonight, as I had planned. I am tremendously grateful to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and especially to Secretary General Aufderheide for so graciously advising me to deliver these remarks virtually in order for me to be able to give an address at the White House tomorrow as part of President Biden's United We Stand Summit on hate-fueled violence. That event is in many ways a perfect reflection of the work I did this past summer on social cohesion and the prevention of violent extremism, and I am grateful for all of the protocol and technological hurdles that have been cleared in order for this to happen. I very much regret the timing and that I am unable to be with you in person tonight, which I had looked forward to.

I would also like to express my sincere thanks to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for the opportunity to serve as the inaugural Creative Lead for this year's residency program on social cohesion.

Tonight I will divide my remarks into four sections: I first review the "diagnosis" of the range of social problems we face, especially related to democracy and social justice. Second, I ask whether social cohesion is the cure for these problems—and offer a deeper interrogation of what we actually mean with the term social cohesion. Third, I offer three arguments that I suggest offer a path for thinking about whether and how social cohesion can be used for collective good. And finally, I conclude with concrete steps we might consider in order to strengthen social cohesion.

The Diagnosis

Social cohesion is roughly defined as the sense of togetherness or connectedness of any given community or society. It is being called on as a strategy across a wide range of global settings to combat a diverse set of well-documented ills: rising polarization and moral disengagement, increased support for political violence, record-breaking hate-fueled violence against a number of target groups (migrants and refugees, religious and racial minorities, women and the LGBTQI+ community, and more).

The challenges that liberal democracies confront don't stop with polarization and hate. We see rising authoritarianism and declining trust in democratic institutions. We have had increased violent terrorist plots and mass shootings. And in the US and elsewhere, we have seen significant rollbacks of rights that had been previously accepted as stable—including losses of reproductive rights and attacks on the LGBTQ+ community. Added to this is an information ecosystem that fosters problematic behaviors and

attitudes. This includes the circulation and spread of disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, conspiracy theories, and propaganda—resulting in problematic outcomes like the growth in QAnon followers to the persistent belief in 'stolen' elections or false claims about the origins of Covid-19. It also includes a broad range of toxic online subcultures that valorize, trivialize, and gamify mass violence and atrocities.

All of these issues undermine inclusive democracy at its core.

Is Social Cohesion the Cure?

Can increased social cohesion save us from ourselves?

Social cohesion is promoted as a strategy to build resilience against this wide variety of social, political, and economic problems (Fonseca et al 2019[1]). Can it work? The best answer I have is a German word that doesn't exist in English:

Jein.

Social cohesion is, in its simplest framing, a measure of societal health. As early as the late 1900s, the sociologist Emile Durkheim analyzed fraying social cohesion, describing it as a kind of interdependence between members of society and a setting with strong social capital, an absence of social conflict, and strong social bonds (Durkheim 1897).

More recently, psychologists have elaborated on the concept of social cohesion by defining it as the extent to which the people within any given society share at least three things: a sense of trust (both vertical trust, in institutions, and horizontal trust, in each other); a sense of belonging, and a shared sense of purpose (Jule Specht). Other scholars and articulations of social cohesion have tweaked but not fundamentally altered this conception—adding refinements like group ties, social networks, shared values, and shared interpretations as well as measures of well-being and reduced crime and economic disparity. The Council of Europe and the OECD offer definitions which include the avoidance of marginalization and active efforts to reduce inequality and fight exclusion.

I suggest there are three major components to social cohesion that we must consider before we can think about ways to improve it—or whether improving it will help us with the challenges I laid out above.

First, social cohesion requires substantial TRUST and LEGITIMACY in both horizonal and vertical ways. Horizontal trust means that I feel I can rely on peers and other people. It requires a sense of safety, openness, kindness, and forgiveness, along with a sense of care and ability to take the perspective of others and to engage in the world with genuine curiosity. Vertical trust means I feel I can count on or believe in the institutions that make up the broader social, political, and economic structure—the government, the legal institutions, and the structures and process that underpin them, including electoral, judicial, and health care systems. It requires a sense of fairness, transparency, and overall well-being that is grounded in both material opportunity and the possibility of upward mobility (OECD 2011).

[1] Xavier Fonseca, Stephan Lukosch & Frances Brazier (2019) Social cohesion revisited: a new definition and how to characterize it, Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research, 32:2, 231-253, DOI: 10.1080/13511610.2018.1497480

Second, social cohesion requires a sense of belonging, identity, and collective or group ties. To be socially cohesive, we need, as Benedict Anderson described in his book Imagined Communities, a sense of connection and reciprocal loyalty to people whom one has never met and likely will never meet, but to whom one feels connected due to a shared geographic territory, language, or culture.

Fostering belonging, identity, and group ties requires several dimensions all on its own. The first is symbolic and real recognition and representation—the sense that I, and my group, matter. Do I see myself reflected back in the society where I live—in the faces of medical doctors and politicians, in the characters of children's literature? Do I—as a schoolchild, for example—see the adults and community leaders around me practicing and demonstrating inclusive equity? Do colleagues know the names of the cleaning staff, or the cooks in the canteen?

The second is solidary and support- the conviction that someone has my back and I'm not alone. This requires a commitment to reduce harms—including hate speech, online and offline harassment, and other forms of racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes and hate-fueled violence. It requires establishing a sense of safety and wellbeing in which each one of us does not live in fear of discrimination, harassment, or physical harm.

The third is inclusion and a lack of marginalization—I feel I am a part of this society. This requires not only a commitment to access and opportunity, but also a sense of justice and equity that is embedded in structural policies and inclusive engagement. This is structural, attitudinal, interpersonal, and cultural — rooted in rights and relationships.

And fourth, part of this sense of belonging and group ties requires that we foster a sense of obligation beyond personal or familial ties—so that each one of us has the feeling that we have a responsibility to others.

Finally, social cohesion requires a shared purpose and vision-- a sense of commitment to a common good. Such a shared purpose rests on a commitment to shared values and shared sources of knowledge and decision-making, principles and practices like the transfer of power, and a willingness to support the common good over political party or group loyalty. It also requires a sense of efficacy, social action, and the ability to engage across difference. And it relies on a sense of hope for the future, which includes both a vision of what the world might look like and a belief in social mobility and intergenerational opportunity.

All three of these categories—trust and legitimacy, a sense of group ties and belonging, and a shared vision and purpose—require a commitment to justice—which I will elaborate on more in just a few minutes. Well. That's a lot of weight for two little words to carry. Belonging, trust, legitimacy, group ties, a commitment to justice, a shared vision and purpose. Social cohesion holds a world of expectations within it.

But defining social cohesion or describing what it represents still doesn't tell us whether it—or more of it—can solve the kinds of problems I outlined earlier. To answer that fundamental question, I have to share three arguments about social cohesion more broadly—arguments I refined during rich discussions with colleagues in Berlin during the AvH summer residency.

First: 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. This happens in at least two ways. ON the one hand, social cohesion can be weaponized. We have seen high social cohesion among authoritarian leaders, far-right populists, violent extremists, and in historical settings like Germany in the 1930s, as Ronen Steinke argued in his summer residency presentation. Social cohesion and its components—trust, belonging, and a sense of purpose—can all be used to manipulate the people into undemocratic and even violent action.

On the other hand, social cohesion can be instrumentalized by states and dominant groups as a strategy to forge greater homogeneity or erase differences. We saw this in the state "community cohesion" schemes that were a part of counter-terrorism work in the UK post-9/11, for example, which targeted & marginalized Muslims and framed community cohesion as assimilation to national values. Cohesion as a formal public policy, in this case, was used to counter perceived problematic ethnic group segregation & alienation- but instead, it backfired in ways that created what Christoph Kaltwasser refers to as "social cohesion deficits"—more loss of trust and belonging.

All of this means that strengthening social cohesion for the broader good requires that we understand the risks of misusing it. We need clear checks on the possibility that "social cohesion" is used as a way of ensuring more compliant or "less different" citizens, in part by supporting and giving voice to activists and advocacy groups who offer critique and concerns about the protection of civil rights. It also requires that we build in strategies to actively counter exclusion, marginalization, hate toward out-groups, lack of representation, and other social harms—including state-sponsored ones-- that polarize, divide, dehumanize, and undermine inclusive, liberal democracy.

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. There are conflicting interpretations of social cohesion among social theorists, for example, that suggest we should be very clear about whose shared values we aim to strengthen. For Michel Foucault, for example, social cohesion is part of the project of power and is something authorities use to manage and control populations (Martin 2019). For Emile Durkheim, on the contrary, social cohesion is a path to well-being and a counter to the anomie and alienation of modern society.

The reality is probably both. A highly cohesive society is one that is easier for authorities to manipulate and control. But it is also a society that has less partisan conflict and polarization.

During our deliberations this summer, Christoph Kaltwasser suggested that social cohesion is a little like cholesterol—you need some of it, but too much is also a bad thing. I think that's a useful metaphor but one that can be extended even further. We know there is "good" cholesterol and "bad" cholesterol—and perhaps the same is true of social cohesion as well. A bad kind of social cohesion, in my view, would be one that privileges blending in, submissiveness, and agreement. The good kind, on the other hand, would foster inclusive engagement and community well-being.

To get the "right" kind of social cohesion (and the right amount), I would argue, we have to foster not only trust, belonging, and purpose, but also forge justice and inclusive equity. It is impossible to trust institutions—or other people—if one is not treated fairly. I cannot feel strong sense of belonging if my fundamental human rights not upheld or if my person is not represented and reflected in social life. A shared sense of purpose requires inclusive, equitable engagement across all parts of society—including the most marginalized.

This also requires acknowledging the role of territory and entitlement. To whom does the land beyond? Who is allowed to share and is life on that territory equal? The geographies of social cohesion, I would argue, are intimately tied to national, regional, and local histories of social exclusion—including through legal segregation and enforcement of home ownership laws, school access, and other legalized inequalities in physical space in systems like Apartheid or Jim Crow.

And finally, it requires actively working to counter harms: Promoting inclusion is not enough, in other words- we must also work to counter exclusion. And it demands a rejection of hierarchies of superiority and inferiority across any and all groups within society (which ultimately dehumanize the other).

In practical terms, I would suggest that strengthening social cohesion for the broader good requires defining, specifying and identifying specific aspirational components that foster cohesion in ways that aren't instrumental for single groups– i.e., well-being, inclusion, trust, belonging, sense of efficacy and shared purpose– and creating specific interventions that improve those elements.

Finally, my third argument is that 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. Social cohesion does not mean the absence of conflict 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 skepticism. Political difference is essential to a thriving democracy. But partisan dislike and out-group hatred—is not, & undermines Goodman 2022)

But social cohesion does mean that differences do not lead to violence or to partisan or out-group hatred, dehumanization, or moral disengagement. Conflict exists, is acknowledged, is even appreciated. Differences are not only tolerated but are expected and celebrated. But conflict is resolved through dialogue and a commitment to coexistence/

Similarly, equity doesn't mean homogeneity. Social cohesion cannot create a "burden to cohere" (Martin 2019). I want to say that again because of all the things I learned and thought about during my time as a fellow this summer, it is this point that sticks with me most. Social cohesion cannot create a "burden to cohere." It is not assimilation or one-way integration into national 'values.' It cannot be a strategy to secure "us" from the threat of "them"

I would suggest there are at least two keys to doing this well. First, it is essential to interrogate and be transparent about past mistakes—in both formal (memorials, restitution) and mundane everyday practices. It is critical to have museums and monuments and make formal restitution about past atrocities, but so it is essential to have everyday practices—like the Stolpersteine across European streets—as part of the project to shape citizens' and residents' moral, ethical, and democratic engagement in the present. Such mundane and monumental acknowledgments also help forge a vision

for the future that holds space for remembrance and responsibility for the legacy of the past and its traumas and loss- while excluding shame.

Second, I would suggest it is critical to have structures and practices that promote a culture of healing. I think often of the Japanese art of Kintsugi, in which broken pottery is repaired with lines of gold, showing scars as beauty and demonstrating that a healed object can be both stronger and more beautiful than it was in its original form. Finding ways to ensure healing from trauma, including through forgiveness and empathy, is essential for social cohesion.

My final argument, then, is that strengthening social cohesion for the broader good requires acknowledging and validating dissent and opposing views while also promoting strategies for co-existence and healing.

In conclusion, let me summarize three principles I would suggest that we need to follow in order to strengthen social cohesion for the collective good, in ways that creates mainstream resilience to anti-democratic and extremist forces.

First, we have to strengthen social cohesion in ways that promote vertical and horizontal trust, promote coexistence across differences, strengthen representation, and foster a sense of inclusive belonging.

Second and relatedly, we must ensure that the idea of “cohesion” is not instrumentalized for one (dominant group) only. Cohesion cannot mean one-way assimilation or create a “burden to cohere” for any particular individual or group, and it must allow for a shared sense of purpose to advance that also gives space to dissent and difference.

Third, efforts to strengthen social cohesion cannot only focus on positive goals, but must also actively work to counter harms, reducing exclusion, countering marginalization, and inoculating against propaganda & tactics like scapegoating, fearmongering, conspiracy theories, and manipulative rhetoric that undermine inclusive, thriving democracies. We have to work to counter the things that undermine social cohesion: polarization and cleavages driven by us-vs-them thinking and partisan politics that call for loyalty to party over a commitment to a common good; exclusion, and a sense of loss/precariousness.

None of this can be achieved through the law or through public policy alone. It requires holistic engagement, including through the interpretative arts, humanities, and broader civil society. We need storytellers, historians, philosophers, and psychologists to be engaged—which is one of the reasons I was so pleased that the Alexander von Humboldt’s residential cohort included a filmmaker, a poet, two journalists, and a lawyer alongside academics across a wide range of disciplines. In short: this kind of social cohesion requires a deep and rigorous commitment to interdisciplinarity and integration of the humanities and the arts with policymakers, educators, and public health experts.

In conclusion, since I am at heart a practitioner and an educator, I leave you with six concrete steps to strengthening social cohesion:

1) Find ways to foster dissent & critical thinking alongside a shared commitment to knowledge and expertise. Research shows that adding a single “rebel” to a group creates greater creativity and enhanced performance in groups (UM study). Dissent,

critical thinking, and argumentation drives innovation and is an important check on the possible harms that "too much" social cohesion can bring.

2) Commit to ongoing interrogation of past mistakes in formal and mundane ways (*Stolpersteine, not just Holocaust Memorial*)

3) Center inclusion and representation in ways that allow every member of a community to see themselves reflected back in the society where I live, and to witness adults and community leaders around them practicing and demonstrating inclusive equity?

4) Identify specific components related to trust, belonging, purpose, inclusion, etc. & pilot measurable interventions with tactics we can test (perspective-taking, critical thinking). Be transparent about results so others can emulate and adapt what works by using lessons learned

5) Build in structures & practices to continually reflect & change. This requires acknowledging ambiguity (ability to share differing interpretations)

6) Foster hope—give communities the ability to have a vision of a desired future worth striving for.

In the end, I suggest that the social cohesion we want is one that is to both inclusive and disruptive. One that is not instrumental for one group only– such as by aiming to 'integrate' and 'secure' the dominant group against perceived threats from the 'other.' It is a cohesion that acknowledges and heals from the past while offering a vision for the future to which people embrace and commit. It promotes concrete steps toward inclusive equity, respect and coexistence, real and symbolic recognition, but also actively works to counter harm.