Making Sense of Collectivity
Ethnicity, Nationalism and Globalisation

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Introduction:
The Idea of Collectivity

Mark Haugaard and Sinjiša Malešević

The concept of collectivity is the basis for the sociological enterprise as defined by both Durkheim and Weber. This insight is premised upon the idea that society is more than the sum of its parts. Contrary to the assertions of Margaret Thatcher, once individuals are in interaction with one another (as they invariably are) they contribute to the creation of collectivities which both transcend and supersede the interacting agents.

The process of collectivity creation can be either intentional – resulting in the creation of groups and organisations, or unintentional – resulting in social systems where collective membership and ends are more diffuse. In this instance the term social system should not be interpreted in a structural-functionalist sense but rather as an area of social life characterised by a loosely defined ‘local’ social order. The difference between intentionally and unintentionally created collectivities is essentially one of scale. At one end of the scale there are specific groups created for the purpose of collective goals, while at the other end of the spectrum there are large complex systems which are almost entirely the consequence of the unintentional effects of intentional action. In the centre of the scale there are collectivities which are a hybrid of intentional and unintentional action, organisation and system. The paradigm instance of such a hybrid is the nation state, which is both an intentional construct (as in nation building) and, simultaneously, a political creation which presupposes foundations in culturally constituted societies that have come into existence through forces which nobody controls or directs. Indeed, one of the central legitimating claims made by nationalists is that nations just ‘are’, that is, they exist simply as the unintended consequence of actors reproducing their local collective system of meaning and identification. The actual form which collectivities take can be multiple, including, starting at the intentional end: athletic associations, corporations, nation states, empires, tribes, ethnic communities, civilisations, etc. Indeed, the contemporary
claim that we are entering a global era is a claim to the effect that the
globe itself constitutes a collectivity – a collectivity which is super-
seding the nation state. While the global collectivity is largely at the
unintentional-effects end of the spectrum, it is also, like all collect-
ivities, partly a hybrid; there are agents (largely an elite group) who
embrace the global vision of the world and who act upon it.

The concept of collectivity can be analysed at three levels: in its
generality; in its particularity; and in terms of derivative concepts.
The first concerns problematising the idea of collectivity itself – what
is a collectivity? The second is centred on the analysis of particular
collectivities – nation states, empires, global communities and so on.
The third has to do with concepts which only make theoretical sense
relative to collectivities (either general or specific) including, for
instance, identity and culture.

At the general level, a collectivity is a bounded area of social order
which is reproduced and recreated by actors who have a sense of
membership of that social order. Collectivites are subsets, or special
forms, of social systems. What distinguishes collectivites from social
systems in general is that the latter do not necessarily presuppose a
conscious sense of membership. Social life is made up of many over-
lapping social systems that are routinely reproduced without a sense
of membership as a prerequisite, for instance: all the minor social
conventions which constitute part of the predictability of routine
interaction form part of the ‘local’ cultural system, words are part of
language systems, and any minor economic exchanges contribute
to the re-creation of economic systems. An actor going into a shop
and saying ‘Could I buy a pound of sugar, please?’ is contributing to
the reproduction of four systems (the Anglo-Saxon cultural conven-
tions of politeness, the imperial system of weights and measures, the
English language, and the capitalist economy) without, necessarily,
having any sense of membership of these systems. In contrast, col-
lectivities are social systems which entail a sense of membership –
the nation or the ethnic community. Using Marxist terminology, it
is possible to compare a social system to a class-in-itself (a class
without class consciousness) and a collectivity to a class-for-itself
(one with class consciousness) – it should be noted that within the
general category of collectivities, groups or organisations are the
subset which are most definitively classes-for-themselves.

In general, social order is largely reproduced through tacit
knowledge. This tacit knowledge is termed ‘habitus’ in the work of
Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1990) and ‘practical consciousness’ knowledge
in Giddens (Giddens, 1984) – we will use the terms interchangeably. This knowledge is vast and complex in its extent. While routine interaction presupposes that most of our knowledge of social life remains a practical habitus-type knowledge, this knowledge is not insulated, or hermetically sealed, from our discursive knowledge. If a foreigner asks for the 'correct' way (i.e. the norm according to the 'local' social system) of addressing a shopkeeper or using a particular word, it is possible to give a relatively accurate discursive answer. However, the 'local' may have to think hard in order to formulate an answer, and this 'thinking' is essentially a process of conversion, or translation, of practical knowledge into discursive consciousness knowledge. While conversion is possible, smooth routine interaction presupposes that most of our knowledge of social life remains practical consciousness – which explains why it is that it is possible to pass a written examination in a foreign language while simultaneously being unable to speak it with any degree of fluency when confronted with native speakers.

While collectivities presuppose a sense of membership, what constitutes the essence of that membership, and the sense of collectivity, may largely be practical consciousness knowledge. As argued by Jenkins (Chapter 1), nation states are possibly some of the most clearly defined forms of collectivity – they are bounded in space by geographical borders, in time by history (independence, constitution day, etc.), and there are rules of membership in the form of criteria for nationality. Yet on close examination, what constitutes the defining criteria of, for instance, Danishness (to use Jenkins’ example) is relatively discursively obscure. Not only does it entail discursively readily available official bureaucratic criteria (birth certificates etc.) but there is also a complex array of practical consciousness knowledge that constitutes the essence of ‘Danishness’ – for instance: a special relationship to the flag, and a shared knowledge of myths, legends, stories and histories.

When analysing particular forms of collectivity (the second level), it is important to bear in mind that while nation states are the most obvious forms of collectivity in the modern world, collectivities are not synonymous with nation states. Nation states are a form of collectivity which is of relatively recent origin. In Eisenstadt’s chapter (Chapter 2) we are introduced to Axial civilisations, which constituted a form of collectivity that endured for longer periods than nation states (yet?) have. As has been pointed out, if the globalisation thesis is to have any substance, it is a claim to the effect that
the globe itself constitutes a form of collectivity. The image of the ‘global village’ implies a sense of collective membership. Between the national and global levels, the European Union is a new form of collectivity in the making. However, while the discursive criteria of ‘Europeanness’ exist bureaucratically, the practical consciousness knowledge of ‘Europeanness’ is less developed (Eurosceptics would say not developed at all!). In this instance (and more generally so in the case of large collectivities), practical consciousness knowledge is considered more significant than discursive criteria to the essence of collectivity membership. While bureaucratic criteria may be a necessary condition for ‘Europeanness’ the absence or presence of practical consciousness knowledge of ‘Europeanness’ is central to the falsification or verification of the hypothesis that there exists a European collective identity.

Because small intentionally created collectivities are created for particular purposes (organisations) they tend to be different from larger collectivities in a number of respects. Firstly, due to the fact that they owe their existence to definite objectives which lend meaning, hence legitimacy, to their existence as collectivities, the essence of collective membership tends to be less mysterious. Consequently, appeals to practical consciousness knowledge is of less significance to the definition of membership and the constitution of the collectivity. However, this is not absolute; even in highly instrumental organisations appeals to ‘local’ habitus may not be entirely absent (the ubiquitous knowledge of what constitutes a good ‘team player’) and attempts are frequently made to create local practical consciousness knowledge through company social events, weekend activities, personality development courses and so on.

The second significant contrast between organisations and other forms of collectivity is the tendency of the larger less well-defined collectivities to place some mysterious, quasi-sacred, element at the core of the collectivity. It is for this reason that civilisations, nations and ethnic groups frequently claim primordiality. This substitutes for the telos, or ultimate end, of an organisation. A tennis club exists to promote tennis, a computer company to sell computers. A nation does not have an ultimate end that justifies its existence in the same instrumental way. So in order that it may itself become an end, the nation may claim to embody something that transcends the merely arbitrary practical contingencies of everyday life. The nation state exists in order to preserve this primordial essence – the ‘destiny of a people’ or the ‘spirit of a nation’ becomes the ultimate end for the
nation state. Again this is not absolute; ‘civic nationalists’ claim that their membership does not entail such transcendental claims. However, it is subject to debate whether or not civic nationalism, in anything approaching a significantly pure form, actually exists as a social force in the modern world – the United States is frequently cited as an example of civic nationalism but when one reads and hears George W. Bush’s constant references to the United States as ‘God’s country’ there is a clear sense of sacredness which is inconsistent with the principles of ‘civic nationalism’. As Hall argues and documents well (Chapter 7), civic nationalism does not automatically translate into civil nationalism, just as its ethnic counterpart can equally take a hostile and exclusionary form.

This contrast of types of ultimate ends mirrors Tönnies’ distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Tönnies, 1963) and Durkheim’s analysis of mechanical and organic solidarity (Durkheim, 1933). In both the former (*Gemeinschaft* and mechanical solidarity) the membership of the collectivity is less discursively conscious and has sacred elements which the latter do not – *Gesellschaft* and organic solidarity take place because of instrumentally rational needs to collaborate. Implicit in the former there is also a claim to the effect that the self is not constituted as an individual who ‘chooses’ collectivity membership based upon any utilitarian calculation to find the most efficient means to realise a particular end, but the self is constituted externally through membership of the collectivity. In this way the meaning of self gains a foundational essentialism, possibly an aura of sacredness, from association with the collectivity. This rarely articulated premise lies at the core of many identity claims. As argued by Malešević (Chapter 8), this makes the concept of identity deeply problematic as a source of sociological analysis – in itself it explains nothing because it is a reified concept the occurrence of which is in itself in need of scientific explanation.

The analysis of identity brings us to the third level where we analyse particular social phenomena inextricably associated with collectivities. While identity has reference to the being-in-the-world of individuals, it is not the unencumbered self of methodological individualism which is being referred to. Rather, it is the encumbered self of collectivities: individuals who are defined by their membership of ‘ethnicities’, nations, and so on. Consequently, the concepts of identity and collectivity are inextricably tied to each other, one being inexplicable without the other.
As we have seen, collectivities presuppose large areas of practical consciousness knowledge or habitus. In essence this is a culture. Of course the word ‘culture’, as Bauman reminds us (Chapter 6), has two usages, the anthropological meaning and the other ‘elite’ usage which has reference to some form of distinction. The former refers to the habitus or tacit knowledge of a collectivity and to the visible manifestations of such collective consciousness (artefacts and customs). This practical consciousness knowledge makes interactive agency possible and is a key ingredient in making collectivities more than the sum of their parts. The latter usage of the term refers to the practice whereby social actors hierarchically order the tacit knowledge of different groups within society – as in the assertion that ‘so-and-so is a cultured human being’. This usage implicitly presupposes the claim that there is a collectivity of people within the larger collectivity, whose local culture is superior to that of others. Looking at identity and culture together, an identity claim is, in many instances, also a cultural claim to the effect that those who share identity also share culture – local culture is what makes them different.

The chapters in this book all seek to analyse the concept of collectivity in its generality (what are collectivities?), in its specificity (how are nations constructed? how is a particular collectivity changing?) and/or address manifestations of collectivity (in particular, identity and culture). Accordingly, the chapters are grouped within this threefold classification. At the general level: in Chapter 1, beginning with Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Simmel and Mead, Richard Jenkins takes us back to the sociological basics of the concept of collectivity. He argues that the use of the collectivity in current social and political theory either tends to take it for granted as a given or fall back on the attenuated, diffident model of the collective. To counter these prevailing views, Jenkins sketches an outline for a new concept of collectivity that goes beyond the more-than-sum-of-the-parts understanding and interpretation of societies and cultures. For Jenkins, collectivities are not ‘things’ that ‘just happen’, nor are they primordial entities that ultimately determine the course of individual action. They are symbolic complexes that emerge in social interaction, which occasionally can be objects of individual manipulation. Their boundaries are flexible and constantly reproduced through social interaction. Collectivities are generated through shared knowledge, common behaviour and ‘established and recognised ways of doing things’ (p. 19), that is through institutions. But most of all, collectivities are always
meaningful (to individuals involved in the processes of social interaction) and material (in institutions, in patterns of interactional behaviour, and in the substance of individual human beings).

In Chapter 2, S.N. Eisenstadt puts forward a particular theory of collectivity based upon his research into Axial civilisations. He firstly develops an analytical framework for the study of the construction of collective identities and then provides a comparative and historical analysis of how collectivities have been developing in pre-modern societies, in Axial age civilisations, in non-Axial civilisations such as Japan, and in the modern era. Eisenstadt argues that the construction of collectivity is, like the construction of political and economic power, an autonomous and fundamental constituent in the construction of social life. The processes of collectivity construction are seen as universal and omnipresent in all known societies and civilisations throughout history. Collectivities are historically built and reconstructed around certain fundamental but recurrently changing thematic blocs tied together with the notion of primordiality. According to Eisenstadt, the incessant construction of collectivity has a foundation in the continual reconstruction of primordiality (around such themes as ethnicity, race, language, kinship, territory, generation or gender) which is articulated differently in different Axial civilisations. Because these articulations tend to be specific and relatively unique to particular civilisational circles Eisenstadt concludes that humanity’s answer to primordiality, even in modern times, does not have a single form but emerges in multiple ways.

Moving to the second level: in Chapter 3, John Rex outlines a general theory of ethnic relations. He argues that as yet there is no systematic interpretation of ethnic phenomena the analysis of which would include the historical and geographical variety that ethnicity takes or the stronger connection between the macro- and microlevels of analysis. Rex provides a skeleton for an integral theory of ethnic relations that links ethnicity in small communities, larger ethnic groups (‘ethnies’), ethnic nations, modernising nation states, minority nationalisms with the establishment of empires, post-imperial situations, transnational migrant communities, as well as with the social and political problems confronting modernising nation states in managing minority nationalisms and migrant ethnic minorities. Rex also revisits the arguments put forward by primordialists and instrumentalists and analytically compares this debate to the classical sociological distinction between Gemeinschaft and
Gesellschaft. He explores the way in which the modernising nation state and pre-existing forms of communal bonding have become subordinated to the purpose of the state's rulers.

In Chapter 4, Mark Haugaard theorises the motivational causes of nationalism. Building on his work on power, Haugaard aims to explain how and why nationalism is associated with modernity. Starting from the striking paradox of nationalism as an essentialist ideology that operates very successively in the environment of instrumentalist modernity, Haugaard aims to go beyond Gellner's account of nationalism to identify why nationalism has such a powerful appeal to many. He argues that nationalism is a modern form of collective Gemeinschaft which answers ontological needs created by the uncertainties of modernity and its attendant power structures. Nationalism draws its appeal from the individual's necessity for continual reification. As Haugaard puts it: 'The desire for ontological security by avoiding either the potential infinite regress of arbitrary meaning or the interactive failure of nonconfirming structuration is an internal force which feeds the ideological cravings for a nationalist primordialist certainty' (p. 136). Haugaard argues that in contemporary society agents find themselves in the contradictory position of being caught between the demand to create themselves reflexively and the pressure of simultaneously being socialised within state-sponsored disciplinary regimes.

In Chapter 5, Gordana Uzelac offers an alternative interpretation of nation-formation by drawing on the main assumptions of realist social theory as developed in the work of Margaret Archer. She argues that most theories of nationalism suffer from the fallacy of 'conflationism', that is they conflate structure, culture and agency. Gellner's modernist account of nationalism was criticised as an example of 'downwards conflation' since it reduces agency to structure and culture, while van den Berghe's sociobiological theory of ethnic nationalism as well as Hobsbawm's theory of invented traditions are rebuked as examples of 'upwards conflation' since both approaches reduce culture and structure to agency. Uzelac argues that realist social theory with its theoretical and methodological tools provides not only a good basis for the critique and reassessment of existing theories of nationalism but more importantly a nucleus for a new and more comprehensive theory of nationalism that focuses on morphogenesis, or on an analytical history of the emergence of a nation.

Bridging levels two and three, in Chapter 6, Zygmunt Bauman analyses the relationship between the newly emerging global col-
lectivity (globalisation) and the creation of corresponding cultures. Bauman starts with the historical origin of the concept of culture, which from its inception stood for two different, but with the birth of modernity rather complementary, processes – the hierarchical ordering in relation to meeting an aesthetic ideal (to be more cultured) and the collective difference of groups (culture as a distinct way of living). With the birth of the nation state these two understandings of culture have amalgamated into the concept of ‘national culture’ which became perceived as clearly demarcated, homogeneous, stable and tied to a specific territory. According to Bauman, globalisation is dismantling this image of culture; cultures are now perceived more as ‘hybrids’, products of ‘creolisation’, patchworks of different elements. Globalisation does not create ‘global culture’ but rather ‘globality of culture’ (‘worldwide “virtual travel” and worldwide display of locally born forms of life’, p. 175) Globality of culture sets the new key choices of contemporary life: opting between cultural variety and variety of cultures, that is between multicultural (individualist) and multicommmunitarian (collectivist) policies. Bauman finds both options deeply problematic, arguing that ‘what is needed is to optimise the conditions under which choices are made’ (p. 179).

At the third level: in Chapter 7, John Hall gives us a model whereby we analyse the tolerance of nationalism and difference. Contrary to widely held belief that plurality and difference are necessarily good, he argues, distinguishing between ethnic, civic and civil nationalisms, that some level of cultural homogeneity is a necessary precondition for political stability and economic prosperity. For Hall, cultural difference has to be limited by a degree of commonly shared values to ensure that belonging to a particular culture remains much more a matter of free will than a group right over individuals. Focusing on the examples of American society and the history of nationalism in Europe, Hall aims to demonstrate that in each case the building of the state or nation was accompanied by fierce resistance to difference. To get to where it is now, a united Europe had to go through processes of ethnic cleansing and forced homogenisation, whereas the United States was conceived as, and remains, a giant melting pot that discourages genuine cultural difference (accepting form at the expense of true cultural content). The rest of the world may have more luck in this respect but, as Hall concludes, civil nationalism and the recognition of real diversity will be extremely difficult to achieve.
In the final chapter, Siniša Malešević assesses the analytical strength of the concept of ‘identity’ by tracing it back to its prior mathematical meaning. He argues that ‘identity’ is conceptually a weak notion allowing for either vague and all-inclusive or reified and excessively inflexible use. The conceptual deficiencies in defining and understanding the notions of ‘identity’ and ‘ethnic identity’ are reflected in the quality and type of the research strategies used to assess empirical claims to ethnic identity. Using the examples from his previous work, Malešević illustrates how such a conceptual aloofness directly creates deep methodological problems when attempting to operationalise and employ this concept in empirical research. The final part of the chapter sketches some possible historical and sociological reasons why the concept of identity has acquired such a hegemonic position today, both inside and outside academia. Malešević argues that ‘identity’ has filled the vacuum created by the departure from the historical scene of three other master concepts – ‘race’ (after the collapse of Nazi project), ‘national character’ and ‘social consciousness’ (with the end of the Cold War). In the contemporary environment of dramatic social, political, economic and cultural changes, ‘identity’ has become an umbrella term for anything and everything, a short cut for avoiding proper explanation.

Taking an overview, the task of making sense of collectivities is a subject which lies at the core of sociology, anthropology and political science but which, because it is so central, is all too frequently taken for granted. With the exception of works on nationalism – which is only one form of collectivity – there are few, if any, contemporary works dealing with this subject.

Part of the legacy of the classics – Marx, Durkheim and Weber – is to argue that modernisation entails a move from traditional collectivities to ones dominated by economically rational criteria of efficiency and instrumental logic. Since Gellner and Anderson’s analyses, nationalism has been taken seriously but largely within the paradigm of modernisation as an outcome of the rationalising logic of industrial capitalism. Given the rise of essentialist nationalism and religious ‘fundamentalism’ and of resistance to the neoliberal discourse of globalisation, this perception is no longer tenable. Traditional societies were held together by social forces that entailed loyalties transcending the merely instrumental, and so, too, are contemporary collectivities. In this work, we analyse what it means to make sense of collectivities in a way which takes account of this need for new conceptual tools.
References
1 Different Societies? Different Cultures? What *are* Human Collectivities?

*Richard Jenkins*

Among the goals which sociology and its cognate disciplines have set themselves, the theorisation of human collectivity, the quest for a working understanding of that sense of a ‘more-than-the-sum-of-the-parts’ which is the distinctive reality of the human world, stands out as particularly elusive. Since the claim to be able to penetrate the mysteries of human collectivity – groups, organisations, societies, cultures, or whatever – is arguably sociology’s main intellectual distinguishing feature, this may also be the most important item on its agenda. In the guise of the individual–society debate, in its many guises, this difficulty continues to haunt sociology and social theory, without resolution or working consensus in sight.

A discipline whose practitioners cannot agree on the ontology of their fundamental subject matter might be thought to be in poor shape. What, exactly, is the nature of their – or our – problem in this respect? It boils down to a simple difficulty, rooted in the observable realities of the human world. In our everyday lives we participate, as embodied individuals, in a world which is populated by other embodied individuals, who are easy to see, to touch, to taste, and so on. They are tangible, three-dimensional, distinct from each other, and very material. They act, they speak, they eat, they copulate, they dance, and so on. Collectivities, however, are much less visible or tangible. They do not ‘act’ in the same way. Other than in the shape of their constituent individuals, they do not eat or copulate or whatever. Thus in a number of respects collectivities have a distinctive ontological status; they simply do not exist in the same way that individual humans can be said to exist.

In *which* respects? Most obviously, with the exception of small face-to-face collectivities, such as families, friendship groups, sports teams, or military regiments, for example, a collectivity’s individual members – if the roll can actually be called with any accuracy, that is – are hardly ever, and in many cases never, to be found gathered