

Talk #12 *Society*

Although societies are composed of human beings who engage in intentional action, the outcome of the combination of human actions is most often unplanned and unintended. The task for sociologists is, then, to analyze and explain the mechanics of this transformation of intentional human action into unintended patterns of social life . . .

– Norbert Elias and Process Sociology,
Robert van Krieken

Central social hierarchies are preserved or reproduced through broad patterns of acquiescence. In other words, people generally act in accordance with common social norms, even in cases where those norms run against their self-interest, their spontaneous empathic feelings, or their moral commitments. Thus, people do not generally challenge the fundamental economic principles of a system that skews the distribution of wealth to a tiny minority; they accept and even celebrate a political system that minimizes their participation and allows only marginal space for the consideration of their needs; they fight in wars that, even with the best outcome, cannot benefit them or anyone like them.

– Patrick Colm Hogan

Thea: All right. Where are we? What’s on our program for tonight?

Guy: We talked about the notion of culture yesterday. I thought we might tackle “society” next. I want to show you what it might mean to think of society as a suggestion ecology.

Thea: You know, “society” is a concept that’s always bothered me. What is a society, anyhow? It’s a word that gets used a lot without any clear idea of what it means.

Guy: From one perspective, a society is just a lot of people, doing things with, for and to one another, and thus connected to each other through a network of relationships. From another perspective, it’s a system – an entity in its own right – with coherent identity and emergent properties of its own.¹

Thea: But look: The cells of your body cooperate to keep you alive. Human beings don’t cooperate to anything like the same degree to keep society running. If we did, it would be a wonderful world. In fact, most people don’t see themselves as component parts of a coherent, functioning whole. I know I don’t, though I wish I could. I don’t feel that this society deserves much love or loyalty. I doubt that any society ever did. The functionalist view of society as a Leviathan – a kind of vast organism – exaggerates the coherence of the beast and glosses over its internal conflicts. In a politically self-serving way, one might add.

¹ See discussion of holons in Talk #6.

- Guy:** True. The functionalist perspective is often abused for propaganda's sake, both by the right and left. But remember: there's more to an ecology than cooperation, balance and harmony. Underlying its inter-dependence and systemic coherence, there's a Darwinian competition for survival. To comprise a system, there is no requirement that the component parts should love one another, or cooperate consciously, or be confined to specific inter-collaborating functions by some master designer. We can think of societies as politicious systems, and then consider how to describe and study them in systemic terms.
- Thea:** Look: I can surely see that society is simultaneously collaborative and competitive, as you are saying. It's collaborative in that the wresting of human goods from Nature requires cooperation. And it's competitive insofar as members contend to take a lion's share of the goods produced. But if our society is a system, it's a highly dysfunctional one – on the verge of wrecking its habitat and its own structure. If it's an ecology, it's on the verge of committing suicide. It's not that I have a problem with any point you're making now, but I fail to see how your paradigm gets at the issues facing society today. To begin with, why do we want a concept of society at all?
- Guy:** Not everybody does. Remember Margaret Thatcher's statement that there really is no such thing.² Against Thatcher and her ilk, many people, including me, want such a concept for its descriptive and explanatory power. Also, we want to distinguish between wholesome and destructive societies, and between sick and healthy ones. We want to be able to say that a destructive society distorts and wastes the lives of its citizens, and that a sick society is in danger of collapse or conquest because too few people feel a stake in keeping it going.
- Thea:** I'd like to make such distinctions, if you can show me how to do it. My job is only partly to help my clients adjust to society, but partly to help them insulate themselves from it when they need to and build a capability to fight it off.
- Guy:** I think you can best do that by conceiving society as a suggestion ecology that includes and influences its people much as a forest includes and influences but often kills its trees. Like a forest, society is an open system that draws resources from its environment and dumps waste-products into it. Like a forest, society is a highly politicious system characterized by simultaneous collaboration and competition amongst its members. Like a forest, society self-organizes, building structural inter-relationships, and sustaining a dynamic process of self-renewal and change. Like a forest, society cares little about the welfare of individuals, nor even consciously about its own stability to any significant extent.

² See www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=106689.

society and the individual

Thea: All right. Suppose I grant that societies can be seen this way. What does that mean for us as individuals? How does it help – you or me or anyone – to lead her life, and understand the world she lives in?

Guy: It helps us see how society manipulates us with innumerable suggestions, that it claims we cannot or should not refuse, and how these turn out to be deceptive, both in their promises and their demands. Their rewards rarely live up to the glitter with which they're advertised. And people nearly always have more options than they are able to recognize, and more liberty than they are able to take. Thus, my problem becomes clear: As an individual, I have to choose amongst the suggestions on offer (the only options on the table), but avoid being played for a sucker.

Thea: Honestly, my sense is that “society” is too big a concept to be useful – to anyone except politicians and policy makers, perhaps. My experience is that no two of my clients live in the same society. We need a word that gets at the idea of a social world as it acts upon, and is experienced by specific individuals.

Guy: Let me suggest one: Years ago, when I was working in the government, we spoke of “rattling someone’s cage” – disturbing him in some way and (hopefully) prodding him into action. That image of a personal “cage” gets at the concept you want. The image of a baby’s playpen, or of a playground for older children, might be even better. These are relatively safe, predictable environments, fenced off from the rest of the world and equipped appropriately to meet the young child’s need for stimulation and a manageable domain of activity – scaled down versions of those social spaces that adults maintain for themselves and each other, convenient for specific purposes, with needed equipment ready to hand.

Thea: Oh, I like that. Which shall it be, “playpen” or “playground”?

Guy: For a useful distinction, let’s refer to an individual’s personal habitat as a playpen, and to our shared environments as playgrounds. In this usage then, a personal workspace or bachelor apartment are playpens which can become playgrounds when visitors arrive. In our home, your desk and our daughter’s room are playpens for individuals, while the living room and dining room are common playgrounds. A bed is a playpen when you sleep alone, but it becomes a playground when you sleep with a friend.

Thea: Whether you play or just go to sleep?

Guy: Either way. The idea is just that of shared, suitably equipped, convention governed space. My point is that we live nearly our whole lives in such spaces insofar as we are not wild animals who live in Nature as we find it.³ The distinction between playpen and playground merely comments

³ For a discussion of society as a project aimed at improving on nature see Felipe Fernandez-Armesto’s book, *Civilizations*.

on the flow of suggestion in such spaces: In a personal habitat, the suggestions in a playpen are stigmergic. The baby bats her toys around, and responds to the stimulation they provide. In a playground, inter-personal communication is often more important than that between the individuals and their shared environment. You could speak of solitary and shared living space if you prefer. The words we choose don't really matter.

Thea: The words you're using are fine. Just tell me: How do they relate to the concept of society as a whole?

Guy: A playpen is a subset of the world appropriated or assigned for personal use. My desk, my laptop computer . . . even other people to the extent we can think of them and use them as reliable role players. A playpen has to be built or claimed, and must often be defended in some way against undesired encroachment. Most people have several, separate playpens like their home, their desk and cubicle at work, their car – whatever. You can be consigned to a playpen by others, as when a prisoner is locked in his cell. But typically, playpens are socially recognized and respected. You would avoid infringing on another person's playpen. When you do so, you are expected to make amends, or at least say "Excuse me!" To infringe deliberately and without apology or proper amends is very rude, and there may be serious consequences – perhaps a fight, a lawsuit, or a criminal prosecution.

Society as a whole constrains the playpens you can set up around yourself, and issues strong suggestions on how you should do so. It also makes nasty suggestions about you to others, when it does not approve of your playpen.

Thea: Now what about playgrounds?

Guy: With playgrounds, the situation is more complicated, because the playground is already a miniature society. Playgrounds have to be negotiated with others; and, once in place, are constitutive of our social identities. As are playpens, for that matter – especially at the beginning of life when just find ourselves in them, without a say in how we got there. But with playgrounds, social negotiation is of the essence, while playpens are solitary.

Thea: All right: Now that you have these concepts, what do you plan to do with them?

Guy: I want to use them to get a handle on the relation between a society and its persons, and between the person and his or her roles. I want to avoid the chicken-and-egg question of whether the person is created by his roles and relationships, or the other way round. I want to see person and relationships as arising jointly in the negotiation and maintenance of these structures.

Thea: If I see where you're going, your point will be that human animals are

created and born through the familiar biological process, but that each new person, her parents and the name they give her, her basket or crib, her home, and everything that comes to her . . . all these things evolve together. The person as such does not exist, nor is anything “hers,” except as she lives with them and uses them, and is confirmed by others in doing so.

Guy: That’s it. It may sound paradoxical, because our daughter was already a person to us even before she was born. But to herself, not yet! A social identity accrued to her only gradually as became involved in relationships with people and things, and as she came to be aware of those relationships and learned to set a value on them. The crib we bought her did not become her crib until she bonded with it and made it hers – just as she made herself your baby in accepting the identity we offered her, and bonding with you.

My point is that social identity depends on such bondings and unbondings, which occur with everything around us. To the extent we respond to the suggestions that something affords, it becomes a part of us – a feature of a playpen and a source of social identity. On this account, even animals with private nests, burrows, pair bonds or staked out ranges and hunting grounds, enjoy a degree of social identity vis-a-vis others of their kind.

Thea: On this way of thinking, the concept of “identity” gets opened up and spread across a landscape of relationships with people and objects. Literally you are constituted as a person by your relationships – and nothing else. The car we pay for, maintain and drive is not just a car. It is our car – making a contribution to our identities as individuals and as a family. And you are my man, (not just a man). And I am your woman.

Guy: I surely hope so, and it’s good to hear you say it.

Thea: OK. Where does this get us as amateur sociologists?

Guy: It gives us means to analyze our family (should we wish to) as a social entity – a structure of relationships not only amongst its various members and non-members, but with the house, neighborhood and city we live in, the work we do, the money we make, the books we read, the stuff we talk about – with all the things, important and less so, that furnish our social identities and make us who we are. We can talk not only about these things in themselves, but about the suggestions we draw from them, and the ways we negotiate the uptake and implementation of these suggestions.

And then, because we can now describe a family in such detail, we have means to make a very rich comparison of ourselves to other families, and to frame and test hypotheses about families of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, income levels, and so forth, as sociologists do. I think it gives a much richer view of the individual as a social actor: neither game player nor role player, but embedded suggester, responding autonomously to the suggestions it receives. This may be

what is needed to help social science get off the ground. Or not. At least, it will eventually teach us that something more is needed.

Thea: But how does one think in these terms? How does it help us guess what another person is likely to do? If I think of you as a role player, I will expect you to behave toward me in various husbandly ways. If I think of you as a rational agent, I can take what you and Dennett call an intentional stance,⁴ and make a shrewd guess at your intentions from my knowledge of your beliefs and wishes. But as an embedded suggester, you might be capable of anything! Who knows which suggestion might get the run of your brain and body because it “seemed like a good idea at the time”?

Guy: It’s true that any suggestion at all might strike my fancy. People really are unpredictable to that extent. It’s no weakness but a strength that this theory can recognize that fact and work with it. At the same time, it can say that we are usually rather predictable because suggestions “from left field” are discarded most of the time. Most of the time, we can be counted on to behave like good role players, barring strong temptations and opportunities to the contrary. At which point, fidelity to role is tested – and may prove wanting, alas.

In a given situation, this theory might help you decide whether the individual is more likely to follow the suggestions of role, or of immediate desire or of long-term self-interest. It tells you that he might do any of these, depending on which suggestions are strongest, which in turn will depend on the suggestions of his temperament, his social history, and his immediate social situation. As the notorious Milgram and Zimbardo experiments have shown.⁵ Are you familiar with them?

Thea: Vaguely. They came up in one of my courses, I recall. The Milgram experiment showed up a human willingness to hurt other people out of obedience to authority. Zimbardo’s experiment was even nastier. It showed the tendency of people placed in a position of power over others to push that power to sadistic extremes of abuse and degradation.

Guy: That’s right. I needn’t go into the details here. They’re easily available on the Web, if you want to refresh your memory. Zimbardo’s experiment was played out for real at Abu Ghraib – that infamous prison in Iraq. The point I want to make is that suggestion theory can account for these behaviors (and for those at an opposite pole of heroism and human goodness) much better than role or self-interest can. In general, methodological individualism – the habit of reducing collective action to the choices of rational, utility-maximizing individuals is over-emphasized in North American social science. It’s useful and interesting to see how far that game-theoretic approach can go toward explaining group choices and behaviors. But I think it’s mistaken to

⁴ In Talk #3.

⁵ See www.LuciferEffect.com.

insist that group effects do not exist, or are of negligible importance. Indeed, that preference for reducing group effects to the rational choices of individuals, congenial as it is to the ideology of our capitalist society, might itself be seen as a group effect – a prime example of what social psychologists term normative conformism – conformism arising out of the desire to be liked or accepted.

Thea: There's a dilemma here, I think. One would like to acknowledge those group effects – and the inter-connectedness and mutual dependency of people on one another. "No man is an island," as John Donne said. Yet, to acknowledge this truth and take it seriously must pose a serious threat to civil liberty and freedom. Every nasty totalitarianism, whether on the left or right, begins by affirming the reciprocal interdependency and obligation of citizens to one another, and moves on from there to assert the logical priority of society over the individual, and the irreducible debt of each individual to society and the state. From there it's only a step to some form of "Führer prinzip," and the notion that it is sweet, proper and glorious to die for one's country. While killing lots of people from other countries in the process.

Guy: I couldn't agree more. That's a point I need to be careful about. Just as Darwinism was easily misunderstood and twisted into "social Darwinism," so the concept of an "ecology of mind" can easily be misunderstood to subordinate individuals to the group – or, in practice, to a self-serving elite and leader.

Thea: Are sure that's a misunderstanding?

Guy: Yes, because the individual's dependence on others – and on suggestions from others – does not detract from his autonomy as an evaluator and negotiator of competing suggestions. In growing up, we learn to take responsibility for the ecologies of suggestion in our own heads – learning that we are, after all, their owners, and that we must live with their consequences. Learning to be empowered by the suggestions we receive, rather than hypnotized by them.

Thea: In your story, the individual is primarily a negotiator, it seems: internally, a negotiator amongst the competing suggestions she receives; externally, a negotiator of playgrounds created and shared with others. Negotiation of some kind is happening everywhere you look.

Guy: That's an interesting perspective – and a useful one. There's been a lot of research on negotiation that social science could co-opt and use for its own purpose. Also, the interplay between power and problem solving in any negotiation process corresponds nicely to the dual aspect of suggestion as a possibility and a spell.

Thea: How do you mean?

Guy: Well, as we saw early on, a suggestion both raises a possibility and casts

a little “spell,” prompting the recipient in its direction. Correspondingly, the negotiation process is a problem-solving exercise that creates value for its participants. But it is also a competition to distribute value among participants according to their bargaining power. So we could say the negotiation process is both cognitive and coercive, in the same way a suggestion is.

You might liken the negotiation to a game of go,⁶ conceiving each suggestion as a stone laid down – adding to the pattern created on the board, but planned to influence that pattern to one’s own advantage. As in a go game, negotiation gets started out of the need for commonly understood arrangements on a common playing field. The negotiation, like the go game, turns the playing field into a shared playground. One important difference is that the values at stake in real-life negotiations are not fully specified in advance. In a go game, the players fight for territory, and there is only a fixed amount to share between them. In a real negotiation, the game is not zero-sum. Value may be created through cooperation, and new values – derived from the players’ life-situations – may be discovered. Or conversely and tragically, value may be destroyed as the players fight each other for a larger share.

Thea: I’m intrigued by your point about the playground as a source of values. Outside the therapeutic encounter, we normally think of values as completely personal or cultural – beyond discussion. They couldn’t be, of course. But there’s something approaching a taboo against asking why people want the things they want.

Guy: Of course, our playgrounds can’t be the only source of value. The organism, with its physique and temperament, makes its desires known. But if you start from an assumption that human bodies are much alike, then our playgrounds, and life history of playgrounds, must be the major source of difference in our attitudes and values. In these existential playgrounds we not only experience emotions, but learn to expect them: the feelings of satisfaction, mastery, frustration and so forth. And it is these expectations of pain, pleasure and emotion from recognized situations in our playgrounds that form our values and attitudes.

Thea: With an implication that we see other people primarily as less or more reliable role players in our playgrounds?

Guy: To some extent. But most of us also learn to see others as individuals in their own right, with their own playpens, and their own agendas for us. Always, we look at people with this double vision: as game players in their own playpens, and as role players in ours. A nice example might be the negotiation of space on a highway. Insofar as other drivers stay in their lanes at the speed of the traffic, we have no reason to think of them as counter-players – just as so many objects in our space. Insofar as we know them to be willful, erratic people like ourselves, we practice

⁶ A complex board game with very simple rules, invented in China over three thousand years ago. See <http://senseis.xmp.net/?GoHistory>.

defensive driving to negotiate the highway's common use.

Thea: And of a driver who does not conduct his side of this tacit negotiation with due respect, we say: "He must think he owns the road!"

Guy: Yes. Kant thought we should treat people as ends, and never as means. In fact, we treat each other all the time both as means to our ends, and as separate individuals with ends of their own; and it is only because, and to the extent we do this that civil society is possible. If we could not use others as role players in our playpens, there would be no society. If we saw each other only that way, as sociopaths do, there would be that permanent war of Hobbes – of all against all. Civil society comes about to the extent that we are willing and able to negotiate a public space as its playground.

civil society

Thea: Civil society. That's a phrase one hears a lot these days. What does the concept mean, really? What is "civility"? What is "civil society"?

Guy: Many definitions have been attempted, with a general idea of distinguishing the voluntary and spontaneous association of individuals from transactions conducted under the state's authority.⁷ Literally, the word "civility" means "behavior appropriate to the city." I think of it as a kind of default culture that allows strangers to come together, to explore any tastes or interests they might have in common, and to develop relationships and specialized cultures based upon these. It begins with a climate of trust, usually protected by a Hobbesian sovereign, that allows people to walk in the streets, buy and sell in the marketplace, and meet together for their own good purposes, with little fear of being robbed or killed. It comes to include all the little customs associated with public behavior – the way we dress for various occasions, the way we do (or do not) queue up at bus stops, the way we do (or do not) hold doors for one another, or step aside to let one another pass. It sets a limit on smoking around non-smokers, the volume at which we play car radios, and generally on behaviors that encroach on the personal space of others. Under such conventions, society can then segment itself for different occasions, still without formal control by anyone, granting safety for specialized institutions and cultures to flourish.

⁷ Here's one definition, from the London School of Economics: "Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups." See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_society.

Thea: This civil culture may be very weak – may scarcely exist. It may not have evolved yet. Having evolved, it can break down. Or may become contentious to a point where you need laws and formal procedures to defend it.

Guy: Social historians have shown all these processes at work. In Europe, for example, from the Renaissance until the First World War, norms of “good manners” and “civilized” behavior evolved at court, in business practice, and in aristocratic and then in middle-class homes. After the world wars, and then abruptly in the sixties a new ethic of individualism began to erode the norms of civility in middle-class society. Those norms today seem vague and weak compared with middle-class norms at the end of the 19th century.

Thea: Well, it seems clear that civil society is under stress these days. Why is that, do you think?

Guy: Chronic war, long and bitter historical memories, polyethnic cities, huge discrepancies of income and the scramble to get ahead must be part of the explanation. But in simple fact, the world’s cultures are no longer insulated from one another by distance and slow communications. They inter-penetrate and enrich and vex each other. Of course, they evolve by doing so – but the process is not an easy or a comfortable one, especially for people who expect economic loss, as well as loss of identity from the globalizing changes, and feel resentment accordingly.

Governments and multinationals look to social science for advice on how to sell their products and manage their people’s discontents, while ignoring an all but universal consensus that social fabrics around the world are fraying badly.

social science

Thea: Is there even such a thing as social science? So far as I can see, there isn’t yet. There are university departments and projects studying various aspects of social life but no coherent, unitary science of society as such.

Guy: That is true. Until recently, we lacked the unifying conceptual framework for such a science, but I believe that is no longer the case. I see the eD paradigm as what’s been missing. With a new way of understanding order and change as outcomes of a bottom-up, self-organizing process, and with a solid grounding in human biology, the knowledge that various faculties have already collected about “Man in society” begins to comprise a coherent structure.

Thea: You think so?

Guy: Yes, but with two large reservations: First, the numerous specific questions and areas of study will continue to require different methodologies and angles of vision. As knowledge grows it becomes more specialized. This is inevitable in any area of study, not just social science. Second, much more than most fields – except yours, perhaps –

the social sciences will remain theaters of conflict for various political concerns and causes. Until war, racism, sexism, and all forms of economic exploitation are no longer issues – no longer painful memories even – people will seek to draw intellectual ammunition from these sciences, and the scholars themselves will enlist on opposing sides.

Thea: Don't hold your breath!

Guy: I know better than that. I expect social science to remain deeply contentious until people learn to negotiate their conflicting concerns and interests instead of fighting about interpretations.

It remains the case that for all we know about human societies, all the information that's been collected, and all the books that have been written, even those who really want a comprehensive social theory have lacked the tools to build one. I think these tools are now available – along the lines we've been discussing.

Thea: For those who can accept your eD paradigm.

Guy: Admittedly. The reception of these ideas has been mixed. Many sociologists have questioned whether an evolutionary approach to social change is valid, or whether it adds anything useful.⁸

Thea: But you think it does.

Guy: Yes. Provided we are careful in formulating its key concepts, and resist the temptation to spin sociological ideas into ideology, I think the eD approach has much to offer. Deployed with due caution, it is a strong paradigm for social phenomena as for so much else: framing issues of cultural stability and change in terms of a self-organization and ecology; providing a conceptual language to describe the “pull” and reconciliation of competing suggestions on persons, groups and organizations; linking our contradictory views of social actors as dutiful role players or self-interested game players. Seeing ourselves instead as needy human suggesters who live by evaluating,, responding to and internalizing the suggestions we receive.

Thea: Even with these strengths, given the contentiousness of its subject matter, what real knowledge can social science offer? I know the same question can be raised about my own field. But psychology, at least, can be practiced and applied in an open market. Whether as therapist or client, you get to choose the style and the ideology that suits you. By contrast, the market for social research (apart from oddball intellectuals like you) is comprised of large corporations and government agencies with products and programs to design, sell and evaluate.

Guy: We “oddball intellectuals” may be the only real market for authentic social science. What the organizations want is not disinterested

⁸ For example, see Anthony Giddens' discussion in his book *The Constitution of Society*.

knowledge, but more like a technology – to help them deal with their various publics and with their own personnel. I think this manipulative technology will backfire, because the clever people using its methods are outsmarting themselves: The long-term effect of their manipulations will be to make society ungovernable, as people become aware that they are being systematically herded and hoodwinked, and thus increasingly suspicious of what their leaders are telling them. The signs of this are everywhere. It's already happening.