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Citation

Davies, Will. 2020. Society as a Broadband Network. London Review of Books, 42(7), ISSN 0260-9592 [Article]

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'Society as a Broadband Network'

William Davies

What is society? The most notorious answer we've been given in the last forty years was a triumphant negation, uttered by Margaret Thatcher in an interview with *Woman's Own* magazine in 1987: 'There is no such thing!' The left has ensured that Thatcher's words have not been forgotten; the right has occasionally sought to remind people of her next sentence: 'There are individual men and women and there are families.' But does anything connect those individual men and women with those families?

The term 'social' is 'the weasel-word par excellence', Thatcher's intellectual inspiration Friedrich Hayek wrote in 1979. 'Nobody knows what it actually means.' Hayek was in no doubt that patterns emerged in the behaviour of populations, and might eventually lead to a form of large-scale self-organisation. The best way of ensuring this happened was to build a communications infrastructure that would make it possible for millions of people to share information in real-time. In Hayek's view, that infrastructure was the price system of a free market. As the Covid-19 crisis was beginning to take hold in the US, the *New York Times* carried a story about an online retailer in Tennessee called Matt Colvin, who had stockpiled 17,700 bottles of hand sanitiser in order to exploit surging demand, only to have his account suspended by Amazon. Colvin's actions prompted widespread disgust. But wasn't he just responding to price signals? Or does the 'weasel-word' mean something after all?

Perhaps the boldest conceptual vision of society belongs to Émile Durkheim. In *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897), he argued that society was a 'social fact', which couldn't be reduced to matters of psychology or economics. Individuals were constrained and shaped by trends and norms that were manifest only at a macro-level. By tracking variations in the suicide rate over time and across nations, Durkheim demonstrated that its level didn't only have to do with

economic welfare or individual choice. 'At each moment of its history ... each society has a definite aptitude for suicide.'

The task of sociology, Durkheim believed, would be to study this kind of 'social fact', and its principal evidence would be statistics. Sociology, as he conceived it, was joining a political project that was already well underway (nowhere more so than in France) to analyse the nation in terms of measurable quantities: births, deaths and causes of death. Suicide was a useful case study for the sociologist, partly because it appeared on the face of it to be such a solitary phenomenon, but also because there was already plenty of international data on the topic. Not only could statistics reveal the various aggregates that make up a society, but, more important, they could identify the invisible norms binding us all together: the averages.

We are all Durkheimians now. Every day the headlines are dominated by announcements of the latest aggregates and averages from nations around the world. Statistics swirl about on social media, as people form speculations on the basis of their own mental arithmetic: what's 1 per cent of this or 15 per cent of that, and who's to say the 1 per cent isn't actually 3 per cent, and why isn't the South Korean average the same as the Italian one? But at their root, statistics are a combination of state-led data collection and probabilistic modelling. Demographic averages offer little security to the individual, unless they are accompanied by widespread solidarity and the sharing of risk.

None of this could be further from the idea of society that propelled Boris Johnson to power, and which is all but useless to him now. Brexit was fuelled by a desire for the society of a collectively imagined past, for a 'nation'. While Remainers spoke of GDP and other macroeconomic indicators, Leavers offered the cultural symbols of a community that had supposedly been dissolved by multiculturalism and globalisation, and by their over-educated spokespeople. Yes, it was about stronger borders, but just as important was the right to be proud of flags, Britain and England. Nations promise plenty of solidarity, just not for everyone. Brexit didn't need a committed Brexiteer at the helm; it just needed someone who was unapologetic about the collateral damage it would cause. A columnist with a dim regard for facts was the perfect person to execute a project whose chief aspect was imaginary.

Watching Johnson at recent press conferences, flanked by the government's chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, and its chief scientific adviser, Patrick Vallance, you saw a man struggling with his every instinct. For decades a mischievous smirk, a joke here, a hair-ruffle there, have been enough to make newspaper editors, interviewers, *Have I Got News for You* audiences and

cabinet colleagues putty in his hands. Now the man who hoped to be remembered for having Got Brexit Done is suddenly forced to take charge of managing a lethal epidemic. (Even so, he can't quite shake the habit of a lifetime. On a conference call with the CEOs of sixty manufacturing businesses, urging a collective effort to produce more ventilators for the NHS, Johnson reportedly referred to the plan as 'Operation Last Gasp'.)

The imagined community of Britain or England is on hold for the foreseeable future. While Britain shifts hesitantly onto a 'war-footing', the cultural and economic divides that split the nation in two in the summer of 2016 have been suspended, save for the self-separation of a privileged few who are able to escape to a remote island or hunker down in the country pile for a few months. The generational divide is the one that still counts above all, but it appears in a very different light now compared with just a few weeks ago.

What is society, then, to the likes of Whitty and Vallance, the men whom Johnson is said to be obeying so loyally? Ultimately it is a network, made up of billions of interconnected nodes. You can try to impose a nation on this network, as Donald Trump has done with his travel bans and his maniacal effort to buy a vaccine for exclusive use within the United States, but networks are governed by mathematical, not sovereign, laws. Society conceived as a network isn't about aggregates or averages, but is a complex system through which trends, behaviours, memes, information and infections travel. There is nothing distinctively human or political about the laws of networks: as dots on a vast network map, we are no different from slime mould or animals – we become a herd.

This worldview also has a long intellectual tradition, dating back to Durkheim's contemporary and critic Gabriel Tarde. From this perspective, society is a pattern formed from billions of interpersonal connections. Understand the micro-social networks – families, schools, pubs, workplaces and so on – and, with sufficient computational firepower, you can build up an image of the macro-system that emerges. In the 1930s, the social psychologist Jacob Moreno pioneered the mathematical study of social networks (initially known as 'sociometry'), developing primitive maps and models of how interpersonal connections produce larger systems. With advances in software during the 1970s, the field of 'social network analysis' was born at the intersection of sociology, psychology and computer science.

Viewing the world in terms of networks was all the rage in the 1990s. Manuel Castells's *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996) provided the most ambitious sociological account of why networks had become the dominant organisational form of the age. The concept of the network seemed

suited to the densely integrated, multipolar world of globalisation. Airport bookshops filled up with titles promising to tell you all you needed to know about 'emergence', 'power laws' and 'virality' in the network age, with Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* (2000) at the top of the pile. The sudden enthusiasm for these ideas was partly a side effect of the internet's arrival in everyday life, but also a reflection of their individualist foundations. Society, to a network theorist, is what emerges after everyone is left to go about their own private business. Thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Gladwell agreed with Thatcher up to a point: there is no such thing as society – there are nodes and there are links.

The injunction emerging from this worldview is that we should recognise the disproportionate potential of the small and marginal changes that often go unnoticed. The micro and the macro are brought together in a new and unpredictable intimacy. There is some ground for paranoia here. Networks can be completely overhauled by minor events that begin on their fringes. As the economist Branko Milanović recently tweeted, 'the most influential person of the 21st century (so far): A Hubei farmer'. Gladwell's book became required reading for market researchers, who unleashed new techniques of 'viral marketing' and 'coolhunting'. This deference to the macro-potential of micro-changes also lay at the heart of 'nudging', the term coined by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein for scarcely noticeable government interventions that alter individual behaviour with minimal effort, cost or constraint, but significant social benefit. One of the best-known examples in Thaler and Sunstein's *Nudge* (2008) is the flies painted on urinals in Amsterdam's Schiphol airport: men unthinkingly aim at them, reducing the amount of urine that ends up on the floor.

David Cameron's government, hungry for a new political idea but reluctant to rock any ideological boats, was quick to seize on 'nudges', along with its 'Big Society' vision of volunteering and social enterprise. What these things had in common was a dedication to moral and civic responsibility that didn't require much of the state in either a fiscal or a regulatory sense. With a few tweaks here and there, society would be magicked into being, without costing any money or requiring any central planning. 'There is such a thing as society,' Cameron said. 'It's just not the same thing as the state.' The Behavioural Insights Team (often known as the 'nudge unit') was born in 2010, before being spun off as an independent company in 2014.

It is unclear precisely how much influence the nudge unit has exerted over Britain's response to the pandemic, but there has been widespread unease with the government's comparatively relaxed approach. At first, its policy seemed heavily dependent on behavioural

insights that warned against making drastic interventions too early, for fear that 'fatigue' would set in and people would drift back into social contact. In an interview with BBC News on 11 March, David Halpern, the psychologist who runs the nudge unit, made the alarming claim that the government was deliberately allowing infections to spread, so as to create 'herd immunity' among the young and healthy majority of the population, who could maintain regular working and family lives. Uniquely among governments around the world, the UK government appeared to be taking the view that you can't defend society by obliterating social connectivity.

The government and its advisers came in for plenty of criticism for this laissez-faire approach, implicitly from the World Health Organisation, and explicitly from the *Lancet* and numerous prominent epidemiologists. Many believed that it was complacent in the extreme to rely on social network modelling and behavioural science, when epidemiological science suggested that the correct response was to enforce a complete shutdown of all social gatherings. With schools and public venues of all kinds still open, #BorisTheButcher began trending on Twitter and the allegation circulated that Britain was putting its economy above the lives of its citizens. While government experts were weighing up the various emergent side effects of government action (who looks after a doctor's children once the schools are closed?), much of the public just wanted the government to act.

Its stance appeared to shift radically within a few days of Halpern's interview, with the publication of a report by the Imperial College Covid-19 Response Team, which has been advising the government. The report confirmed what critics had been saying, that the only way of avoiding catastrophic loss of life and the swamping of the health system (its modelling had the demand for intensive care beds peaking at eight times' capacity) would be to minimise social contact wherever possible. But it also warned that the only guaranteed way out of a broad social lockdown was a vaccine, which is probably at least 18 months away. You can blame a decade of Conservative administrations for the low level of intensive care beds and ventilators available in this country (compared to similar economies), and you can blame capitalism for the fact that most people depend on wages to live, but there was a certain sociological frankness in the nudgers' judgment that a society such as Britain's (whose state has sought to outsource, marketise and incentivise at nearly every opportunity over the past forty years) couldn't be suddenly switched off without dire consequences for human welfare.

With Britain heading towards a shutdown, lasting who knows how long, it will quickly become evident how difficult it is to sustain society without everyday sociality. The triumph of the

Thatcherite and Hayekian vision meant that we ended up with a 'flexible' economy in which a large number of people are entirely reliant on the near-term vagaries of the labour market for their day-to-day survival, with neither savings nor state guarantees to provide any back-up when that market crashes. Wages, rent, credit card repayments and everyday consumption are locked into their own 'just-in-time' supply chain, which is stressful enough even when it's up and running. Having spent decades overhauling the welfare state to promote a more entrepreneurial, job-seeking, active populace, driven by an often punitive conditionality, Britain has little to fall back on when the most urgent need is for everybody to stay at home. The class divide between rentiers (those who accrue income without having to do very much) and the rest has immediately grown starker.

As everyone looks around anxiously in search of their ultimate backstop, we are witnessing a collision between rival ideologies of society. Communities look desperately to the state, while the state looks hopefully to communities. Who's to say how many desperate young men, seeing the impotence of both, will instead turn furiously to the 'nation' as their last resort? If there is one institution that has stood as the symbol of society throughout most British people's lives, it is the NHS. Nobody expects the safety net that it provides to hold adequately over the next three months. At some point something new will be born, for better or worse. Until that moment, society is a broadband network.

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