

CHAPTER NINE. TOWARDS THE POSTMODERN SOCIETY

A society made up of an infinite scattering of disparate individuals, which an overgrown state attempts to limit and restrain, constitutes a veritable sociological monstrosity.

ÉMILE DURKHEIM, *The Division of Labor in Society*

The past cannot explain or predict the future, but it can set very definite limits on change and direct its general direction.

DANIEL CHIROT, *Causes and Consequences of Backwardness*

Social structures are always structures of social norms

RALPH DAHRENDORF, *Life Chances*

In the mid-1980s, one of the prominent Polish social scientists summarized his impressions of the USA in the following way: “Crisis. Economic crisis. Social crisis. Crisis of education. Crisis of family. Crisis of everything. Crisis is giving sleepless nights to the unemployed and the soon-to-be-unemployed. Businessmen, managers and politicians” (Osiatyński 1986, 7). American sociological writings of the 1980s and the 1990s document this crisis in various domains of social life. These include celebrated books by Allan Bloom (*The Closing of American Mind*, 1987), Richard Sennett (*The Fall of Public Man*, 1974; *Corrosion of Character*, 1998), and Robert D. Putnam (“Bowling Alone,” 1995).

This period also saw the publishing of studies whose authors do not limit themselves to registering symptoms of crisis but seek to identify deeper processes transforming modern societies. In the preface to his seminal work,⁴⁰² Ulrich Beck declares that his goal was “to move the future which is just beginning

402 Within years of Beck’s book (1992), Zygmunt Bauman published *Legislators and Interpreters* (1987), while Anthony Giddens – *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991). Both strongly emphasize the claim that modernity has “exhausted itself” and entirely new forms of social action emerge. The three authors have thus determined a new framework for reflection on contemporary society for many years to come.

to *take shape* into view against the *still* predominant past” (1992, 9; emphasis preserved). He formulates a strong thesis: the modern industrial society has begun to transform into an individualized risk society, in which the distribution of risks replaces the distribution of goods. Beck’s concept of risk society gained immediate popularity as it corresponded to the subjectively experienced crisis, aptly rendering the unique sense of helplessness in the face of entangled processes that began to shape social reality. At the same time, it occluded another, theoretically more promising concept developed by Beck, namely that of structural individualization, which accounts for the consequences of the dissolution of modern social structures.

Later, structural individualization was simply replaced by individualization conceived as the fundamental feature of contemporary society. As we demonstrate in Chapter One, this concept has dominated sociological reflection on ongoing civilizational transformations, reinforcing sociology’s individualistic “bias” and consolidating its division into two unrelated variants: one analyzing “individualized society” and the other focusing on changes in social structures by referring to its own concepts that do not take into account processes of individualization.⁴⁰³ In our view, an analysis of social transformation in terms of changing forms of sociality – proposed in this book – could help close the gap between these two sociologies.

9.1 From a society of local communities to a discreet society

As we set out to show in Chapter One, the image of social life produced by sociology includes the conviction that society is basically identical with the state, the latter being – like other institutions and organizations of the “lower order” – the product of society’s “collective will,” its representation and simultaneously executive apparatus, and that social life involves individuals forming larger groups – formal or informal – which negotiate among themselves the directions of social development and goals meant to be realized by the state. All such convictions are based on analyzes of events accompanying the only historical example of radical change in social order: the transition to modernity. According to Jacob Bronowski, among these events a significant role was played by the British Industrial Revolution, forming a specific triad with the American and French Revolutions. Although he would argue that “[i]t may seem strange to put into

403 A major role seems to be played in them by the concept of civil society and social capital, though the concept of social class would be still used.

the same packet an industrial revolution and two political revolutions,” such an operation would be entirely justified because “the fact is that they were all *social revolutions*” (2011, 2513–2521; emphasis added). One could also add that all of them were the work of individuals attempting to overcome limitations imposed on them by the traditional form of sociality. However, it is important to remember that although this coincidence led to the overlapping of changes in social, economic and cognitive orders, each of these transformations was distinct and could be analyzed separately.

Therefore, if we restrict ourselves to the social dimension, what ought to be drawn from the above “packet”? This question is all the more pertinent because since the time of the three revolutions enumerated by Bronowski it has been also filled with new revolutionary events and processes: the second industrial revolution swept through the world, demographers speak of “the second demographical transition,” while means of communication have been also revolutionized. All of this is somehow linked to changes in forms of sociality, but the habit of defining sociology by indicating its distinct *object* of study makes it difficult to identify these links. Focusing on the object favors treating specific characteristics of the modern form of sociality – such as ones related to its becoming “society” and creating the concept of “nation state” in order to sustain the integration and coordination of actions – as universal correlates of socializing processes.⁴⁰⁴ As long as we keep reifying these processes by identifying them with society understood as a separate “object” of study, we shall remain unable to analyze their transformations in a *properly sociological manner*.

What granted sociology the status of a distinct scientific discipline was its concentration on the analyzes of changing forms of sociality, i.e. people’s tendency to live together in various types of communities. Therefore, instead of deliberating about the miserable condition of society – which is characteristic for today’s sociology – we propose to focus on the analysis of socializing processes, understood here as processes that turn individual behavior into the streams of coordinated collective actions. Such a change of conceptual framework makes it possible, on the one hand, to reach the level on which sociology’s basic domain of interest is situated, and – on the other – to avoid pitfalls related to the inevitable routinization of all human actions, which naturally include sociological research practices characterized by the tendency to treat society as an entity that emerges

404 The logical consequence of identifying socializing processes with a historically specific “society” is to view the currently experienced transformations of dominant forms of sociality in terms of society’s dissolution.

from the distribution of answers to survey questions. For obvious reasons, the concept of socializing *processes* cannot be reified. At the same time, it is basically irreducible, which means that it can be identified at the foundation of all kinds of structures emerging as a result of human actions.

In their daily course, socializing processes involve creation (cooperation), re-creation (socialization), and sustenance of social bonds (through rituals). These bonds can have a more “natural” or “arbitrary” character depending on the extent to which reflexivity partakes in initiating and shaping cooperation. It is possible, therefore, to assume that the share of arbitrary bonds increases along with the intensification of those changes in “cultural devices” which condition (in the historical dimension) the transformations of ways in which the human mind functions. The strength of bonds depends on the strength of emotional bonding formed between individuals and the group. This, in turn, is conditioned primarily by the course of socialization processes, which can either curb or enhance the ability to enter such relationships. We shall stress once again that emotional bonding is not synonymous with experiencing positive feelings. Its constitutive component is having an affective relation to the entire community so that this community becomes – regardless of specific feelings experienced in relation to it – an important framework for individuals.

Communities are distinguished on the basis of their specific tasks (coordinating actions) and the functions (creating common knowledge) they fulfill in organizing social interactions, not on the basis of their more particular properties. In this sense, a community could be constituted by a “primary group,” by a formal one comprised of people who are its members only in some aspect of their activities, or by a larger group of individuals who have a chance to communicate with each other, share a certain image of reality, and cooperate in order to achieve certain joint goals. Whether any specific group could be called a community is determined by empirical criteria, not ones related to classification. Today, an individual can belong to many communities, especially because many of them have an aspectual character.

The *constitutive* component of each community is cooperation and sharing a common image of reality. It is in the process of cooperation that bonds develop among individuals and common knowledge about reality is agreed upon, in consequence of which certain elements of that reality (primarily the concept of the common good and a sense of the collective “We”) begin to be considered as obvious and indisputable, in turn becoming a framework for the coordination of individual tasks and integration. It is also in the course of cooperation that mechanisms of social control are initiated – appealing to shame, guilt or pride

(Shott 1979) – at the basis of which we find emotional bonding of individuals through the community.

The coordination of actions and integration of community members necessitate creating a public sphere within each community. It serves as an area in which common knowledge is identified and sustained. In the historical dimension, these two tasks are also the beginning of two first public institutions whose emergence accompanied population growth. They would be formed by people specialized in “managing” the community (chieftains and their “administration”) and people specialized in “managing” common knowledge (priests). Consequently, institutions can be considered as a formalized *modus operandi* rooted in tasks faced by the community. Their shape and structure say a lot about the modes in which a given collectivity functions, but it needs to be kept in mind that all institutions (including those of the state) should not be considered as independent entities, but – as the sociological point of view suggests – as a means of delegating solutions to certain typical problems to specific groups, and consequently as areas where “aspectual” communities form. They also strive to survive and thus generate their own tasks and common knowledge.

Communities do not exist in isolation but they establish contacts with others in order to facilitate exchanges and share language. It is at the level of *macrodeme* that the public sphere *sensu stricte* merges, providing a space for interactions between people who did not know each other before but who accept certain rules of coexistence. The existence of such rules facilitates the emergence of three abstract “macro institutions”: the market, state and communication system. They ought to be treated as distinct *domains* within the public sphere, gathering specific types of interactions and simultaneously generating forms of order specific to them. Whereas the communal public sphere is governed by tradition and mores, in the public sphere in the strict sense, norms of coexistence begin to be ordered by formalized rules that sometimes take the shape of law.

To account for transformations of socializing processes in our *theoretical* model, it becomes necessary to include in it the *historical* consequences entailed by the three basic mechanisms we have identified as stimulating changes of human communities: population growth, intensification of communication and transformation of habitat (cf. fig. 8.1.). In the broadest terms, these consequences could be reduced to transformations of basic “units of survival” (cf. Chapter Three) in which human communities function. If we slightly modify the division proposed by Norbert Elias, one could say that these units of survival embrace local communities (including tribes), states and humanity. This division does not refer to bonds or forms of sociality, but to objectivized, historically created conditions of human existence, characterized by an increasing interdependence

of territorial units occupied by particular collectivities, and consequently by the increasing probability that events occurring at one point in the organization may affect all others.

It is the transformation of basic units of survival that gives rise to “imagined communities” – the kinds of the collective “We” that refer primarily to territorial communities: “We, the Varsovians,” “We, the Catalanians,” “We, the Poles,” and “We, human beings.”⁴⁰⁵ As Benedict Anderson notes while discussing nation as an imagined community, “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (2006, 6). Preserving the “image of their communion” as well as developing an emotional bond with such a community are processes that naturally take place at the level of actual communities (especially the family), for which the sustenance of this kind of interdependence constitutes the necessary condition for effectively defending their own territory – a part of the basic unit of survival. The development of territorial imagined communities would be thus conditioned primarily by transformations of means of communication: both those related to spatial mobility and those related to interpersonal contacts.

Let us emphasize here that adopting such a perspective makes it possible to distinguish another type of imagined communities apart from territorial ones, namely “ideological” communities. We understand the term “ideology” in the way proposed by John B. Thompson, who argues that it “can be used to refer to the ways in which meaning serves, in particular circumstances, to establish and sustain relations of power which are systematically asymmetrical – what I shall call ‘relations of domination’” (2013). In other words, ideological imagined communities emerge as a result of objective social differentiation, which is rooted in transformations of sources of social strength; thus, they may serve not only to sustain power relations but also to modify them.

The first such imagined ideological communities were formed – in line with the findings of Marcel Gauchet, discussed in the previous chapter – by monotheistic religions.⁴⁰⁶ During the Middle Ages, the Church would not only legitimize

405 The primal form of such a territorial sense of the “We” seems to manifest itself in the answer “I’m a local” to the question “Where are you from?”

406 Both Judaism and Christianity were born as religions questioning existing relations of dominance. In the former case, this was political domination, while in the latter – at least initially – social domination.

existing power relations, sanctifying the reign of particular monarchs⁴⁰⁷ and providing religious justification to established social divisions, but also mobilize a supra-state Christian community to act in such a way as to change power relations in areas beyond its sphere of influence (through missionary activities or crusades). In the modern period, in turn, the consolidating community of affluent groups would develop not only the concept of “civil society” – one that undermines political authority existing at that time – but also ideas supposed to legitimize emerging social divisions, accentuating that the path to affluence is open to anyone willing to work hard (Anthony 1977). The slightly later international workers’ movements created an alternative imagined community whose aim was to put an end to unfair social relations. Nowadays, the crucial forms of such ideological imagined communities include feminism and all other variants of minority movements striving to change existing relations of dominance and subordination.

Just like territorial communities, ideological ones are also created and sustained within real communities (of work, organization, etc.). We can consider both as communities only because of the fact that they create a certain kind of common knowledge⁴⁰⁸ and the kind of bond that imposes *moral* obligations on people with respect to the community they identify with.⁴⁰⁹

407 In certain cases, and historical periods, the Church would do the opposite: by delegitimizing secular authorities, it would attempt to change existing relations of dominance and subordination.

408 Its crucial component is constituted by various kinds of “founding myths” in case of territorial communities and “myths of enslavement” or “myths of merit” in case of ideological communities questioning or legitimizing existing social order. The former term is not intended to suggest that there are no authentic, often deep and unjustified social inequalities. We merely wish to emphasize that, in the process of creating ideological imagined communities, they are invariably mythologized. The same is true for “myths of merit.” One could assume that the fundamental principle underlying contemporary differentiation is one of meritocracy, but it cannot be argued that its operation in contemporary societies is failsafe, or that people who have secured higher positions are more intelligent, knowledgeable or competent in comparison with those who have not made such careers. This would be the essence of the “symbolic violence” analyzed by Pierre Bourdieu (cf. Bourdieu & Passeron 2000).

409 The division into territorial and ideological communities (assumed here) to some degree coincides with the model developed by Paul Morris (1996) who distinguishes communities of descent and ones of assent. Membership in the former is defined by objective criteria, usually ones like place of birth or indicators of social status, and is given to the individual on the basis of social conventions. Membership in the latter,

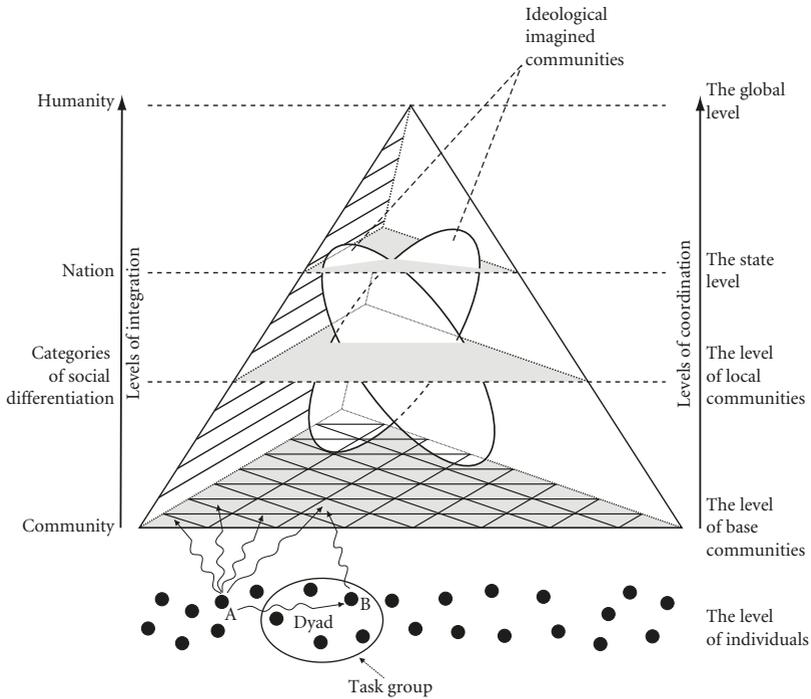


Fig. 9.1: Levels of coordination and integration in contemporary society

One could therefore say that along with the increase in the complexity of human societies, the tasks of coordinating actions and integrating individuals through common knowledge, initially realized by base communities, were not replaced but *supplemented* by creating higher levels of coordination and integration, which – through the development of imagined communities – would refer to the same socializing mechanisms as those used on the base level. The concept of society emerges, in this configuration, as yet another kind of “imagined community” – in this case, one conceived by sociologists who attempt to synthesize in one term the entirety of various relations and social affiliations.

A summary of our findings is presented in fig. 9.1. At the same time, it offers a schematic account of processes of changes in basic forms of sociality, rendered

on the other hand, is a matter of individual choice. Cf. also Morris’s interesting discussion of contemporary changes in these two forms of communal bonds.

in terms of the transition from traditional to modern and contemporary society, the last one formed in an already globalized world. These forms differ in many crucial aspects, but we shall limit ourselves here to distinguishing dissimilarities in the basic principles of organizing social order.

Traditional society was – and still is in the regions where it survives – a federation of relatively isolated small local communities that embrace entire lives of their members. Integration of this federation – in itself problematic and tentative – would rely on the loyalty of community leaders to the center, and on their members' belief in the image of the world created by religion. Within this configuration, individual sense of belonging would take as its object an unspecified spiritual community rather than any particular system, such as the state.

In Europe, this *society of local communities* began to crumble in the middle of the second millennium CE. Along with urbanization and industrialization (even proto-industrialization), individuals were “uprooted” from their “small homelands” and located in an anonymous urban space deprived of communal areas. One could therefore say that the growth of cities and the rise of an anonymous crowd formed the first image of mass society: an anonymous assembly of uprooted and unrelated people, deprived of mechanisms of integrating and ordering their actions. However, certain structures of organizing and coordinating actions did begin to crystallize and grow out of this chaos. Various aspects of these actions were separated, fragmented and subordinated to the rationale of abstract institutions and mechanisms.

The society that emerged in the course of such long yet endogenic processes could be called the *society of large structures*. Economic activities (including work) began to be organized by the market, and mighty nation states would be born along with their administrations, which were organized in accordance to the idealized principles of bureaucracy described by Weber. A robust industry based on mass production emerged, its symbol being the assembly line – the embodiment of rational division of labor and distribution of tasks. A new political “arena” was formed along with principles of democracy and political parties. Mass culture arose, as well as universal education, legal and court systems and so forth. Masses of people began to “organize” themselves as social classes, both literally (as trade unions) and in the form of distinctive subcultures and lifestyles.

The emergence and functioning of these large structures would be impossible without a specific system of coordination created by the modern nation state. Although this system could not develop without appropriate individual motivations, it could set itself free from them as soon as it was born.⁴¹⁰ To put it

410 Motives do not characterize the market but individuals. Markets or bureaucracies are not the goals or values of individuals.

differently, individual intentions have little significance in a properly rationalized system in which rationality of action is reserved for structural positions, not for individuals. Coordination of individual actions in modern states could be envisioned as an abstract and well-described organizational structure that individuals enter after meeting certain requirements and simply becoming executors of actions ascribed to particular positions.

Getting rid of engaging in the functioning of structures that are “making it on their own” (i.e. rational in themselves, whereas individuals are exchangeable – it suffices that they fit a given position), people freed themselves also from social bonds. This entailed the rise of masses of “loose” individuals who would not be connected to each other with any ties. Deprived of moral obligations to the community, they have to seek their identity and meaning of life elsewhere. This, in turn, leads to the intensification of a sense of non-authenticity and enslavement: after the ethical element was eliminated from large structures, work loses its religious dimension; it is no longer a vocation and becomes a mere way of earning money. The rebellious “mass-man” of Ortega y Gasset (1994), alienated from the civilization that determined his or her reason for existing, ultimately turns against it.

As a result of this, in the middle of the twentieth century processes of “implosion of large structures” have begun. They are evidenced, on the one hand, by counterculture, and on the other – by the spectacular economic success of small firms and the fall of some gigantic companies. However, the implosion of large structures did not lead to their disappearance but rather changed the way they function, making them invisible. This change would consist in transferring control from the sphere of internal structures to that of boundary conditions. In other words, organizations (structures) abandon strict control of internal principles of operation⁴¹¹ in favor of control over their general parameters, especially external ones, to which they are supposed to adapt flexibly. A new fashion is thus born – one for a “soft” structure.

The “implosion of structures” has also involved class structures.⁴¹² The new “middle class” emerged – one embracing most of society and deprived of a homogenous, bourgeois character. It is impossible to characterize this class using criteria such as affluence, profession or education because it would include

411 We mean here principles that manifest themselves in clear hierarchies of power, distributions of positions, regulations, etc., which are often identified as sources of inefficiency in organizations and the origin of “vicious circles” in bureaucracies.

412 In sociology, this is accompanied by a departure from the concept of “class” in favor of “social stratification.” The latter signifies a softening of the criteria of social divisions.

professionals, small-time proprietors and wealthier workers. The upper classes include both high-level managers and large-scale proprietors. The lower class begins to be formed – to an increasing degree – by immigrants. A *discreet society* is born.

The term “discreet” refers to several key aspects in the contemporary organization of social life, ones often discussed in theoretical accounts of the postmodern society. Among them we find: the invisibility of structures, which increasingly often assume the shape of processes initiated by slight changes in parameters and controlled by small groups (for instance, decisions about discount rates taken by managements of large financial institutions); their fluidity (global mechanisms do not form any clear organization despite constituting elements of processes that affect almost everyone); “discontinuity” (since structures take the form of process, they break into a series of “discreet” units); and finally, pluralism (right next to the giants, various small structures would appear: NGOs, small political parties, firms and local communities). The rise and popularization of the internet has intensified communication, invariably leading to what Castells (2001a) has called the “globalization of flows” of all values that can be expressed electronically. Capital as well as contemporary businesses and corporations cease to be tied to a particular place, while the time needed to communicate has shrunk to a “permanent present.”

The “globalization of flows” also includes transformations of relations formed among people. After all, structural individualization does not lead to the complete disappearance of social ties but changes the basis on which they are formed: they begin to be organized around actions constituting a mere pretext for being-shared-with-others, such as shopping, clubbing or attending mass events. Public space ceases to serve the goal of generating common knowledge and becomes the domain in which emotions and sensations are shared, while communities created through this process acquire a “neo-tribal” character (Maffesoli 1996) or become “peg communities” (Bauman 2001b) that serve merely to “hang” individual identity on a “peg” offered by a specific activity.

Can we consider today’s “discreet society” as the seed of a new form of social organization – of a mythologized postmodernity whose shape many attempt to grasp in their predictions about the future? Not exactly, since – as can be gleaned from table 9.1. – the basic parameters of the discreet society differ both from those characterizing the modern society and those ascribed to the post-modern society – ones we have reconstructed from descriptions contained in many studies. In fact, it would be an exaggeration to speak – as far as the discreet society is concerned – about a different *type* of organization of social life, and especially about a different *type* of *sociality*. After all, we deal here, on the

Table 9.1. Basic parameters of various modes of organizing social life

	Traditional society	Modern society	Contemporary society	<i>Features ascribed to postmodern society</i>
Type of social organization	society of local communities	society of large structures	discreet society	<i>society of regional communities</i>
Dominant type of community	tribe	nation	“neo-tribes”	<i>humanity</i>
Means of symbolic integration	religion	ideology	mass culture	<i>individual rights</i>
Main principle of actions	survival	maximization of profits	consuming sensations	<i>sustainable development</i>
Dominant type of order	social	economic	political	<i>harmonious amalgamation of orders?</i>
Aim of socialization	community	position	objects	<i>people</i>
Mode of social control	culture of shame	culture of guilt	culture of “being yourself”	<i>culture of authenticity</i>
Identity-determining division	US-THEM (aliens)	US-THEM (others)	ME-THEM	<i>ME-US</i>
Dominant type of relations	“natural” bonds	relations	influences	<i>bonds based on acknowledged interdependence</i>
Dominant type of motivation	“natural will”	“arbitrary will”	“arbitrary will”	<i>“reflexive will”</i>
Significant others	elderly as carriers of tradition	moral authorities	experts, idols	?
Positioning of common good	in relation with nature	in relation with other imagined communities	fragmentation of common good	<i>in relations with other regional communities</i>

one hand, with a form of organization that, in its basic properties, can be identified with the modern society (with large structures still playing a key role, albeit they are oriented today at controlling boundary conditions), while on the other – with no signs allowing to ascertain that this form could develop such a mode of integration that would correspond to a global level of coordinating actions.

It would be possible to go further and claim that the contemporary “discreet society” is characterized by a high level of social *disintegration*, involving the breaking down of social order and the appearance of what Durkheim has called social anomie, both on the “local” level of countries where processes of transformation have developed to the highest degree, and on the global level of the entire world. In the case of the former, disintegration affects the basic elements of modern form of sociality (one that has dominated so far): the image of the world based on the vision of cooperating social classes, which negotiate the direction of social development within the framework of democratic state institutions. Significant limitations have been imposed on welfare state mechanisms (some even speak of a hasty dismantling), which previously allowed the state to overtake communal functions and then became the basis for structural individualization. Finally, the increasing complexity of modern social life has led to the emergence of a series of phenomena collectively known as “ungovernability.” It manifests itself in a general loss of approval for political leadership, intensification of political radicalism, weakening of traditional political parties, development of new social movements, rise in crime rates, related reprivatization of security means and so forth (Hausner 2002).

As far as the global order is concerned, the status quo reached towards the end of the nineteenth century began to undergo significant transformations already in the years preceding the Second World War, and was completely dismantled in the 1960s. Globalization processes, which accelerated towards the end of the twentieth century, were expected by some to create a new mode of integration. However, they still affect only the “material” dimension (economy, ecology, risk). Nothing seems to indicate that they could embrace symbolic and political aspects of life on earth in any foreseeable future. People still inhabit different worlds, with globalization only deepening these differences instead of eliminating them. At the same time, however, thanks to intensification of mass communication, they begin to know more and more about each other. These various worlds – not only from starving Africa to the wasteful USA but also from entirely marginalized enclaves of poverty to relatively slim elites that “rebel,” as Christopher Lasch argues (1994), against taking responsibility for the fate of their societies – begin to constitute frames of reference for each other: they have to be taken into account while considering one’s own society. Moreover, migrations that assume mass character begin to have specific consequences rightly identified by Roger Scruton (though put in somewhat emphatic terms): “People are being brought into connection who have no real way of accommodating one another, and the spectacle of Western freedom and Western prosperity, going hand-in-hand with Western decadence and the crumbling of Western loyalties, is bound to provoke,

in those who envy the one and despise the other, a seething desire to punish” (2002, 83).

It can be easily noticed that social and political conflicts have intensified in recent years, while state and international institutions are losing their ability to mediate and discipline. We also observe the exhaustion of those resources in the human habitat which rose to such prominence in the twentieth century, particularly the entire infrastructure of social institutions responsible for coordination and peaceful cooperation of individuals within the state, which the civil society (one that emerged at the threshold of modernity) furnished with the task of sustaining the form of sociality which it itself created. The current revival of interest in the eighteenth-century concept of civil society seems directly related to the ever more acutely felt limitation of the possibility to recreate that form of socializing interpersonal relations which provided the foundation for both modern society and sociology as a discipline studying that society. To put it more emphatically, contemporary works referring to the concept of civil society are basically desperately conjuring up the very idea of social integration in the face of the currently progressing disintegration of Western societies.⁴¹³

Moreover, the invariability and permanence of the capitalist form of economy – basic argument of those arguing that we deal with a continuation of modernity as the dominant principle of social organization – seem to be closer to wishful thinking rather than an adequate account of reality. This concerns not only processes described in Chapter Six – i.e. ones leading from organized to disorganized capitalism, which themselves cause many changes in social structures – but also, or even primarily, the change of the main source of generating profit. It is no longer production and sale, but time required by global circulation of capital. As

413 Such distribution of emphasis – one that completely differs from the eighteenth-century sense of power, which permeates considerations on the subject of the budding civil society – is observable both in empirically-grounded accounts that demonstrate what consequences the lowering of civic engagement can have for the functioning of democratic states (cf. e.g. Putnam 2000), and in conceptual analyzes that have a clearly projecting character. The latter also emphasize the necessity for society as such to reconstitute its autonomy from the state, regain its ability to decide about itself – something it lost temporarily due to the state overtaking most communal tasks and functions. This has been articulated by Edward Shils, who claims that “[t]he idea of civil society is the idea of a part of society which has a life of its own, which is distinctly different from the state” (1997, 292), and by Jeffrey Alexander (2002), who explicitly alludes to Durkheim’s tradition by distinguishing the civil society as an area that is analytically (and to a certain extent empirically) separate from the areas of politics, economy or religion.

Manuel Castells writes, “time is critical to the profit-making of the whole system” (2001a, 466). This is so not only because profits from trans-border financial flows depend on “the *speed* of transactions” (465; emphasis preserved) but also because “a significant and growing number of financial transactions are based on making value out of the capture of future time in present transactions, as in the futures, options, and other derivative capital markets” (466). Castells lists many negative consequences of that shift, including “the destruction in the collective experience of societies of the deferred-gratification pattern of behavior, in favor of the ‘quick buck’ common ideology [...] and the fundamental damage to the social perception of the correspondence between production and reward, work and meaning, ethics and wealth” (467).

The guarded optimism inspired by scholars such as Marshall McLuhan (1962), who heralded the coming of “global village,” or more contemporarily Arjun Appadurai (1996), who emphasizes the potential inherent in new, transnational communities emerging thanks to the development of means of communication (both symbolic and spatial), has been largely suppressed in recent years when it turned out that these new forms of communal life can also take the form of global terrorism. The belief that a postmodern society would hatch, offering a new form of social integration that could embrace entire humanity, is basically kept alive today solely by the conviction that people *must* acknowledge the fact that it is humanity as such – not individual societies enclosed within the boundaries of nation states – that currently constitutes the basic unit of survival. Risks analyzed by Beck have a global character now and no nation state can appropriately deal with them on its own.

However, such convictions seem to be poorly grounded in reality because currently existing human collectivities fundamentally differ in many respects: their social strength (i.e. the ability to secure means for survival or expansion), the character of overarching social organization (hunter-gatherer societies coexist alongside agricultural, industrial and post-industrial ones), and political solutions (coexistence of probably all historically identified forms of government). Another difference concerns “collective representations” meant to sustain integration and mobilize communities: both representations of intra-group relations (religious Integrism vs individualized society based on the acknowledging of individual rights) and representations of inter-group relations (multiculturalism and international cooperation vs nationalism and defense of sovereignty).

One could thus say that, although the globalized world keeps transforming under the influence of “flows” that encircle it – as suggestively described by Castells (2001a) – it seems unjustified to expect that this process will itself generate a *global* form of sociality in which humanity would become the superior

“imagined community.” Instead, there are reasonable grounds to fear that these “flows” could turn into a gigantic and uncontrollable *tsunami*.

9.2 What comes after modernity?

Regardless of the level we choose to start describing the contemporary society, it seems clear that the organization of social life is undergoing intense transformations in all of its dimensions. What is more, most of these changes have a destructive rather than a constructive character. They manifest themselves primarily in the disappearance of previous institutional forms rather than in the emergence of new ones. As we have demonstrated, the contemporary family has lost most of its primary functions and its existence becomes increasingly reliant on an emotional sense of self-fulfillment among individuals. Work is becoming a rare good. It has also ceased to position individuals in social space. Institutions characteristic for modern public space are losing their ability to produce common knowledge, which has been undergoing fragmentation, giving rise to a series of aspectual and incompatible worldviews created within the framework of online communication.

The scope and depth of the currently experienced transformations evidently indicate that we have entered a period of formative transition.⁴¹⁴ Although the “discreet” society still carries numerous characteristics of the modern one, its most prominent feature is not related to processes of change or crisis but to ones involving the destruction of the basic pillars supporting the former social order. One could even argue that, just like in the case of the transition to modernity, the dismantling of old (i.e. modern) forms of sociality appears to be a necessary stage preceding the emergence of new ones. At the same time, we should remember that one vital feature of changes accompanying the transition from one form organizing social life to another is their abrupt character (although the process would be stretched in time) and non-cumulative nature (Nisbet 1972): a new social order does not emerge from prior slight changes and mutual adaptations occurring in various areas of social life, but rather from the chaos of preceding actions that are the outcome of – on the one hand – a decreasing efficiency of earlier forms of sociality, and on the other – the search for new forms that would be better suited to the changing reality. This causes the periods of formative transition to display a high degree of anomie.

414 From among a number of different dates marking the beginning of a new era we have chosen the 1970s as the period when new phenomena have begun to manifest themselves in a distinctive way.

Already at the beginning of the 1980s, Ralph Dahrendorf would write about the contemporary society in the following way: “Anomie has become an element of the lives of many and notably of those who are still on the way of becoming full members of their societies; the teaching of history is reduced; the church becomes a christening and burying institution; mobility is a higher value than local loyalties; many families have cracked or frozen” (1981, 42). Dahrendorf sought the causes of these transformations in the downfall of a specific type of social bond linking individuals to groups they find important because of the meaning such groups give to the place they occupy in society, obliging them to remain loyal.⁴¹⁵ In his view, contemporary society is characterized by an immense increase of choices, accompanied by the dissolution of the kind of bonds that would guide these individual choices, to which he refers with the term “ligatures.” As he argues, in contemporary societies “the reduction, and ultimately destruction of bonds has been accompanied by, and perhaps been responsible for, an increase of choices up to a point; but from this point onwards choices begin to lose their meaning because they take place in a social vacuum, or better perhaps, a social desert, in which no known co-ordinates make any direction preferable to any other” (31–32).

One consequence of the increase of choices at the cost of the dissolution of bonds involves – as Dahrendorf claims – the currently observable transformations of society. They would unveil gradually since the reduction of ligatures “began by extending the importance of achieved social positions but in the end it turned against all ascribed positions, whatever their basis. For some, being a Christian begins to mean not having any distinctive faith; women’s liberation begins to mean that there must be no social difference between men and women; ‘grey panthers’ demand the abolition of old age as children’s liberationists have demanded the abolition of childhood. [...] The destruction of ligatures in significant parts of some societies has begun to lead to a reduction of complexity which in turn involves a decrease in life chances: the choices themselves disappear which a modern society was meant to offer to all” (36).⁴¹⁶

415 Such groups could include local communities, professional circles, homeland, ancestors, etc. Although Dahrendorf does not articulate this explicitly, the context of his discussion would indicate that he means groups with which the individual would strongly identify, embracing their norms and values.

416 Obliteration of all differences stemming from social affiliations would mean that individuals become “pure,” i.e. not determined by any coordinates of social identity, which could provide a basis for making choices. If my decisions are unaffected by the fact that I am a man or a woman, a child or an old person, a Catholic, a Pole, a liberal, etc., then what could help me orient myself in social space? Merely biological drives or psychological moods.

The dissolution of social bonds was both cause and effect of those changes occurring in areas of economy, politics and society, which paved the way for processes of structural individualization and gave rise to the “discreet” society. Therefore, calls for reconstructing community have become the fundamental reaction to the directly experienced increase of social anomie. As Paul Morris observed in the mid-1990s, “[e]veryone, but everyone, is for community. Our politicians, of the old and the new, Left and Right; our political philosophers; our religious leaders; our modern and postmodern theorists appear to share little but their pious promotion of ‘community.’ The demands on us to (re)create community are incessant and ubiquitous. We are besieged by calls to support community: our local community; our regional community; our national community; the European Community, and the international community” (1996, 223).

From a sociological perspective, such calls are merely attempts to put a spell on a reality that we no longer control. Referencing the mythologized community, they entirely disregard the fact that communities are not intentionally willed into existence by their members but rather constitute the effect of being-shared-with-others, rising out of cooperation based on shared beliefs, norms and aspirations. Thus, the dissolution of bonds experienced today stems not from people’s “reluctance” to join communities but from the collapse of those beliefs, norms and aspirations that integrated their actions into some kind of social organization subordinated to the achievement of some higher goal.

For traditional societies this higher goal was to sustain and recreate the order established by ancestors or gods, whereas for modern societies it was progress. These kinds of goals provided a framework for individual desires and actions. In the former case, individuals would be rewarded by joining their ancestors or being saved, while in the latter – by achieving individual success. Salvation or success could be (theoretically) earned by everyone insofar as they would conform to norms constituting a particular axiological order. At the same time, this caused individual aspirations to legitimize the system and become part of processes aiming to reproduce it.

The collapse of the idea of progress in the twentieth century created an axiological void that could not be filled with calls to recreate community. The rapid growth of anti-system concepts has not been accompanied so far by the emergence of any idea or image that would prove capable of integrating individual actions so as to facilitate the emergence of new, global social structures. One could only indicate that the category of humanity as a potentially higher imagined community would demand – on the one hand – accepting its internal diversity, and on the other – remodeling our relationship with Earth as our global habitat, one on which the survival of humans depends. Although at the current

stage of the formative transition period it seems highly unlikely that any such idea or image could be created (and accepted), one needs to remember that it would have seemed equally improbable to predict, at the beginning of the transition to modernity, that the Protestant ethos rooted in the idea of predestination could later evolve into an idea of a success that everyone can achieve.

It seems equally impossible to predict what shape the new forms of sociality might take. Just like sixteenth- or even seventeenth-century intellectuals could not imagine a social order without monarchy, distinct social estates sanctioned by tradition, and dominance of religion, we also find it challenging to imagine how today's social structure might change, how decisions affecting larger collectivities would be made, and what would be the arguments justifying individual actions. At best, we can assume that it is highly probable that the forms of organizing social life, which will emerge at the end of the postmodern transition, are bound to be entirely different from those that we consider to be obvious today.⁴¹⁷

We might also recall the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, who pointed to the frantic search for ways to reconstruct community as a key characteristic of contemporaneity: "*Society* was not built on the ruins of a *community*. It emerged from the disappearance or the conservation of something – tribes or empires – perhaps just as unrelated to what we call 'community' as what we call 'society'. So that community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is *what happens to us* – *question, waiting, event, imperative* – *in the wake of society*." He concludes by arguing that "[n]othing, therefore, has been lost, and for this reason nothing is lost. We alone are lost, we upon whom the 'social bond' (relations, communication), our own invention, now descends heavily like the net of an economic, technical, political, and cultural snare. Entangled in its meshes, we have wrung for ourselves the phantasms of the lost community" (1991, 11–12; emphasis preserved).

417 The scope of possible solutions is determined here, on the one hand, by achieving full social integration on the global level, which would necessitate (as the model adopted here requires) creating new, global mechanisms of integrating and coordinating individual actions, and on the other – by the fragmentation of the world into areas occupied by communities not necessarily based on nations but characterized by distinct forms of sociality, ones fighting or ignoring each other. One example of such a solution is provided by Mormon or Amish communities, which coexist in American society with individualized communities of the West and East Coasts as well as with more traditional communities of the interior states, although each community of this kind has to occupy a separate, self-governed territory.

One only needs to remember that setting oneself free from the social bond that has laid at the foundation of the modern society does not entail the emergence of a “sovereign individual” who would shape his or her aspirations and actions in the course of free reflection, entirely liberated from any social influence. Whether we like it or not, we are the “product” of those forms of socializing individual actions in which we participate and which we sometimes initiate ourselves. Perhaps, the point is rather to start developing a new type of bond in the globalized world by engaging in activities that would aim to solve that world’s problems, thus creating a new framework for being-shared-with-others – the indispensable condition for the existence of any human community.