

## Chapter 10: The Nature of "Society"

### "A Big, Happy Family?"

*...There is a dark  
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles  
Discordant elements, makes them cling together  
In one society.*

—William Wordsworth

Assumptions about "society" influence many controversies. Even when they are centrally influential, however, they are seldom obvious. This chapter describes three models of society that summarize patterns of assumptions. Then it describes how to spot their hidden presence and understand their practical impact on disputes.

What exactly, is a society? Who belongs to it? How does it work? Different people propose dissimilar explanations. Understanding these approaches is essential in analyzing many disputes. To make things more manageable, what follows reduces these approaches to three basic archetypes or models of society. They are:

- the consensus model,
- the conflict model and
- the individualistic model.

Here are brief descriptions of each.

#### The Consensus Model

Most people unthinkingly embrace the consensus model of society. In this model society is assumed to be a harmonious, stable, well-integrated system resembling a living organism. Individuals are presumed to play the same sort of complimentary and interdependent roles that nerve, bone or blood cells play in the body's functioning. Supported by "society," individuals obtain their meaning and importance from it.

The consensus model emphasizes the import of stability and the desirability of common perceptions, values and morals. Maintaining the existing social order and integrating individuals into the social structure are centrally important. Social stability is essential. People or activities that do not "fit in" are "deviant," perhaps even "pathological."

"The nail that sticks up. gets hammered down."

—Japanese Proverb

The consensus model largely ignores the possibility of exploitation. By emphasizing social harmony, it obscures the likelihood that people might be competing for the same limited resources or that some gain at the expense of others..

Such assumptions can be centrally important to disputes. Here, for example, is a quotation from the highly influential *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, a report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985, pp. 5-6). See if you can spot consensus model assumptions about the nature of society. As in most controversies, they are implied rather than stated.

*"Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is one that undergirds American prosperity, security and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. ...*

*Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined efforts needed to attain them. This report . . . seeks to generate reform of our educational system in fundamental ways and to renew the Nation's commitment to schools and colleges of high quality throughout the length and breadth of our land.*

Notice the authors reify American society. They refer to it as if it were of one mind and one purpose. (See the chapter on reification) For example, the commissioners maintain that, "*Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling.*" Only in the consensus model does a society have "sight." The commissioners also speak of renewing ". . . *the Nation's commitment to schools and colleges of high quality.*" Here again, America is a kind of outsized person that makes commitments. The commissioners also refer to "*American prosperity, security and civility*" as if one American cannot be prosperous and secure, without all Americans achieving the same status. The rest of the report is written in the same manner.

Why is any of this important? Because consensus model assumptions obscure crucial issues. Which individuals have lost sight of these things? Whose basic purposes we are talking about? Is it "the Nation" which is at risk, the vested interests of a wealthy and powerful class of people, or just the well-being of specific individuals? These and similar questions are obscured.

A presidential-commission using the consensus model of society is unsurprising. People in leadership positions frequently invoke the consensus model, perhaps because it downplays, even disguises, controversial issues like differences in wealth and privilege, costs and benefits. Also, it promotes consensus and undercuts dissensus by implying that deviance, dissension or even criticism of the report are inappropriate, perhaps even disloyal.

## **Indicators**

The following are indicators that the consensus model is operating in an argument:

- **Diverse groups of people, e.g. America, are referred to as if they were of one mind and one need.**
- **Individual needs, aspirations or perceptions are not mentioned.** (See reifications elsewhere in the text.)
- **Conflicts, antagonisms and the possibility of exploitation are ignored.**

### The Conflict Model

The conflict model assumes societies are arenas in which various groups struggle for contradictory goals and compete for limited resources. Whenever a special interest group gains power, this image maintains, they try to preserve control by imposing their own values and understandings on those they exploit. This explains, claim those subscribing to the conflict model, why societies are arranged so unequally and injustice is so persistent.

"I was told that the Privileged and the People formed two nations."

—Benjamin Disraeli

While the consensus model stresses communal balance and harmony, the conflict model emphasizes imbalances and disharmonies. Conflicts between groups are understood to be unavoidable. Inequalities are inevitable; as is coercion used to maintain dominance. Hostility, change, and instability are presented as the natural order of things.

It becomes apparent how important assumptions about society are, if we consider how different *A Nation at Risk* would be if it were written from a conflict perspective. The first paragraph would read something like this

*"The wealth and privileges of America's power elite are at risk. The once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation of the corporations they control is being overtaken by international competitors. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is one that undergirds the power elite's prosperity and security. We report too that while the privileged can take comfort in how our schools and colleges have further reinforced fundamental inequalities of opportunity for personal development and economic reward in the United States, the educational foundations of this system are presently being eroded by a rising tide of resentment, resistance and alienation that threatens the very repression and domination that fosters and perpetuates privilege.*

This is how differently the same situation can be understood when conflicting assumptions about society are brought to the table.

Like the consensus model, the conflict model relies on reifications; but the conflict model reifies oppositional societal groups rather than the whole society. There are the "privileged" and the "underprivileged," the "advantaged" and the "disadvantaged," the "bourgeoisie" and the "proletariat," the "power elite," and the "the poor." Such classes of people are depicted as of one mind with one set of needs.

Those seeking reform, change, even revolution, usually employ the conflict model. By accentuating differences in wealth and privilege, costs and benefits, it stimulates dissatisfaction and discontent.

### Indicators

Here are some indicators that the conflict model is operative in a dispute:

- **Individuality is submerged in reified antagonistic classes or groups.**
- **Oppositional terms are applied as labels.**
- **Class conflicts and antagonisms are emphasized.**

### The Individualistic Model

The individualistic model of society stresses the importance of individual differences. Rejecting reifications like "America," the "ruling class" or the "working class," proponents of this view argue that individual differences are the prime consideration. Reifications should be reduced to the relations and actions of distinctly different individuals. References to things like "America's needs," as in the consensus model, or the "power elite," as in the conflict model, obscures the most important issue of all — namely, which particular person's needs, or wants, are really at issue.

"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away."

—Henry David Thoreau

Let's return to *A Nation At Risk* and see how it might read from an individualistic perspective. Notice how different, even awkward, this is when compared to the two previous versions. That is because the individualistic model requires the elimination of reifications.

*"Certain people in our nation are at risk. Some U.S. corporations are being overtaken by foreign competitors. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of this situation, but it is one that undergirds the prosperity, and security of these particular Americans . We report to those of you who are interested that while some of us take pride in what schools and colleges have historically contributed to the well-being of these U.S. citizens, the educational foundations of that well-being is presently being eroded. That threatens these particular people's comfort and standard of living. ..."*

The individualistic model stresses that particular persons benefit and pay the costs. Individualistic model partisans insist that reifications won't do. No class or category of people are really that much alike.

### Indicators

Suspect the individualistic model is operative in a dispute when:

- **Reifications are challenged with demands for specifics.**
- **Individual differences are the focus of attention.**

## **The Two Step Procedure**

Having defined three models, now let's put them to work. Here is a two step procedure for analyzing controversies in terms of assumptions about society.

**Step 1) Identify the model(s) of society assumed by disputants.** This requires deducing the usually implicit definition by using the descriptions and indicators previously provided.

**Step 2) Restate key portions of each disputant's argument using language appropriate to the models of society *not* favored.** This spotlights key issues that are otherwise ignored. (This is the procedure followed in analyzing *A Nation at Risk*..)

There is no need to decide which competing image or model of society is "right." Just be aware of assumptions about society disputants bring to the table and that the argument looks entirely different when competing judgments are substituted.

## **Chapter Highlights**

Suppositions about "society" are often important in analyzing controversies. Even when such suppositions are pivotal to the argument, however, they are seldom conspicuous. This chapter explained how to identify these assumptions and spelled out what they conceal.

To better understand any dispute ask:

- What, if any, assumptions are made about the nature of "society?"
- How would the argument be altered if competing assumptions were correct?

## **Other Related Chapters in This Text**

3, Reification	9, Nature of Consensus	18, Why Disputes Continue
6, Name-Calling	12, Criteria and Authority	
7, The Logic of Disputes	16, Weighing Benefits	

## Keywords for Further Data Base Search

<i>Gemeinschaft</i>	open system	sanction
moeity	equifinality	<i>Lord of the Flies</i>
<i>Gesellschaft</i>	social control	<i>Emile</i>

## Test Yourself

See if you can identify the model of society implicit in each of the following quotes. In the appropriate boxes briefly note your reasoning. The first case example provides a model.

CASE EXAMPLE	Individualistic	Conflict	Consensus
1. "In a civilized society we all depend upon each other, and our happiness is very much owing to the good opinion of mankind." Samuel Johnson, quoted in Boswell's <i>Life of Samuel Johnson</i>	No, it emphasizes importance of group.	No, it does not imply conflict between groups.	Yes, emphasis on interdependence.
2. "American schools had to maintain the illusion of democracy in a society where the increasing agglomeration of wealth in the hands of the few was rendering negligible the political power of the many." Nasaw, <i>Schooled to Order</i> . (What model of society is Nasaw taking for granted?)			
3. "Human life in common is only possible when a majority comes together which is stronger than any separate individual, and which remains united against all separate individuals. Freud, <i>Civilization and Its Discontents</i>			
4. "Society looks to higher schools for assistance in understanding its own problems and for light upon the principles underlying their solution." Agatho Zimmer, FSC, " <i>Changing Concepts in Higher Education Since 1700.</i> "			

<p>5. "Society is always trying in some way or other to grind us down to a single flat surface." Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. <i>The Professor At the Breakfast Table</i></p>			
<p>6. "Human life in common is only made possible when a majority comes together which is stronger than any separate individual and which remains united against all separate individuals." Sigmund Freud, <i>Civilizations and Its Discontents</i>.</p>			
<p>7. "Ein Volk; Ein Reich; Ein Fuhrer!" Nazi unity motto meaning roughly, "One people, one empire, one leader."</p>			
<p>8. "The Party sets itself the aim of concluding the task begun by the October Revolution of converting the school from a weapon for the class domination of the bourgeoisie into a weapon for the destruction of this domination." Nikolai Lenin</p>			

**Suggested answers**

<b>CASE EXAMPLE</b>	<b>Individualistic</b>	<b>Conflict</b>	<b>Consensus</b>
2. "American schools had to maintain..."	No, because of the reification	Yes, conflict is emphasized	No, conflict emphasized
3. "Human life in common is..."	No, indicates individuality negative	No, antagonisms not even hinted	Yes, stresses need for agreement
4. "Society looks to higher ..."	No, utilizes reification	No, no hint of conflict	Yes, reifies "society"
5. "Society is always trying..."	No, even though favors individual, because "society" reified.	No, conflict is between individual and society, not antagonistic classes	Probably, society is reified and demand for conformity emphasized
6. "Human life in common is ..."	Definitely not, individualism negative	No, as above, conflict is between individual and society	Probably, society is reified here too and demand for conformity emphasized
7. "Ein Volk; Ein Reich..."	Definitely not; "Volk" and "Reich" are reifications.	No; no conflict between three components	Yes, society is unity of people, empire and leader
8. "The Party sets itself the aim of..."	No, "party" and "bourgeoisie" reified	Yes, conflict a central theme	No, individual disappears in reifications

## Chapter Review Sheet

1. Describe the chapter briefly in your own words.

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2. What are the core ideas developed in this chapter? If more than one, list them in order of their importance to you.

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3. Briefly explain the importance to you of your first choice.

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4. Briefly describe a scenario in which you could apply one of the ideas from the chapter to improve your professional practice.

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5. Connect this chapter to at least one thing you already know.

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6. Suggest one way to make this chapter more effective.

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