What is a society?

Thomas Hylland Eriksen
University of Oslo, Norway

For six years, from 2004 to 2010, I directed an interdisciplinary research programme at the University of Oslo, called 'Cultural Complexity in the New Norway' (University of Norway, n.d.). Comprising theologians, philosophers, historians, law scholars, sociologists, ethnologists, media scholars, anthropologists and others, the aims of the programme were to update empirical descriptions of Norway and to propose dynamic, open-ended and flexible analytical perspectives as alternatives to methodological nationalism in its various guises. As in many European countries, transnationalism is widely seen as an exceptional and anomalous phenomenon in Norway, and value pluralism is generally perceived as a challenge and a source of fragmentation. This is not only the case with the public at large, but tacit assumptions to this effect are also easily identified in mainstream social science.

Seeing Norwegian society through the double lens of value pluralism and transnational processes, we insisted on analysing the processes of migration and the ensuing cultural hybridities and new social dynamics, not as a sector of society to be compartmentalized and studied under the heading of 'minority studies', but as an integral aspect of society as a whole. In other words, studying minorities in Norway (or in any country) implied studying society as such. Accordingly, our Norwegian-language book series with Universitetsforlaget (the leading Norwegian academic publisher) included titles such as *Security*, *Freedom*, *Justice* and *Normality*; basic categories of social theory, in this context examined and discussed with a view to minority–majority dynamics, but in ways meant to be relevant for the self-understanding of society as a whole.

Social theory, and by extension social research, is ultimately motivated by a limited number of basic theoretical questions that recur, implicitly and explicitly, in the professional literature. They are being rephrased, sometimes refined, but often simply repeated in new empirical contexts. Two such basic questions are, 'What is a society?' and, by logical implication, 'What does the word *we* mean?'

Corresponding author:
Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Kulturell Kompleksitet i det, nye Norge, Postboks 1091 Blindern, 0317 Oslo, Norway
Email: g.t.h.eriksen@sai.uio.no

Foundational to the study of contemporary ethnic and cultural complexity, these questions are raised explicitly too rarely.

When the classic sociologists, from Tönnies and Durkheim to Simmel and Weber, raised the question of what a society is, they wrote against a backdrop of dramatic social transformations, namely the transition from agrarian to industrial society. In the decades around the last turn of the century, new theoretical approaches to society (and community) were necessary – it was a period of urbanization and industrialization in the North Atlantic, paralleled by, and interconnected with, colonialism in the South. Formerly autonomous tribal societies were partially incorporated in colonial empires, at the same time as millions of Europeans moved from rural areas to cities (and frequently migrated overseas). In the course of the 19th century, the industrial capitalist replaced the feudal landowner as the hub of economic processes. The migration flows, of course, went largely from countries in the north towards present and former colonies, quite unlike the situation today.

Social scientists raising fundamental questions of social cohesion today are writing amidst social transformations that are no less dramatic than what was the case a hundred-odd years ago. When the anthropologist Maurice Godelier asks, thus, in his book *In and Out of the West* (2009: 137), the simple question 'What is a society?', he inevitably writes on a background of accelerated globalization. However, although the question Godelier raises is of general relevance, his empirical vantage point is not the metropolitan areas in the north. Instead, his point of departure is his own long-term research among the Baruya, a people in the New Guinea highlands numbering a couple of thousand persons. Before the Australian–British colonization of Papua New Guinea reached the tribal area of the Baruya in 1960, they doubtless constituted a society, Godelier remarks. They were an autonomous group, which maintained regular relationships with other peoples (with whom they traded), but they were themselves in charge of the reproduction of their social, cultural and ritual institutions. Following the slow, but irreversible incorporation of the Baruya area into a modern state formation, it has become increasingly debatable whether the term 'society' is an appropriate term for their social organization. A society is not merely an aggregate of persons with certain formal characteristics in common (e.g. language or religion) or simply a state or an otherwise delimited territory. More is required for a collection of persons and families to constitute a society. Godelier (2009: 142) phrases his question like this:

> What are the connections – political, religious, economic, kinship, or other – that have the capacity to bring together groups and individuals who thereby form a 'society' (with borders that are known if not recognized by the neighbouring societies) and so fuse them into an all-encompassing whole that endows them with an additional, overarching, shared identity?

The Baruya have become integrated into a social system at a high level of scale and partly in an economic system at an even higher level of scale. They have lost

their command over 'their mountains and rivers, and their own selves' (Godelier, 2009: 142). From being an autonomous society, they have now become a 'local tribal group', which is part of a larger ethnic group (the Anga) in a region in Papua New Guinea. The state has redefined their language as a dialect. Systemic boundaries have become blurred. The word 'we' has become ambiguous and fuzzy.

This brief vignette is meant to illustrate that questions concerning the nature of society, its boundaries and the meaning of 'we-hood' are universal; and just as Godelier's analysis of changes in the Baruya area may shed light on the complexities of contemporary European societies, studies of the dynamics of identity, community and social cohesion at higher levels that focus on urban European society can have a much wider theoretical significance than usually signalled.

Raising the question of society's boundaries and its substance in our kind of society inevitably has to take migration and the global information society into account. Transnational processes, instantaneous global communication, complex identifications and divided loyalties, demographic shifts and value pluralism are some key terms. In such a situation, some classic sociological concepts are still useful, while others may deserve to be described as 'zombie concepts' (Beck, 2009): They continue to circulate, but no longer contribute to enlightenment. Before proceeding, one must ask if 'society' is such a concept.

In his popular 1981 textbook on cultural anthropology, Roger M. Keesing defined (a) society thus:

> **Society**: A population marked by relative separation from surrounding populations and a distinctive culture (complex societies may include two or more distinctive cultural groups incorporated within a single social system). (Keesing, 1981: 518)

Note the caveat 'relative isolation'. Anthony Giddens, in his no less widely read 1993 textbook on sociology, defined the concept of society as follows:

> **SOCIETY:** A society is a group of people who live in a particular territory, are subject to a common system of political authority, and are aware of having a distinct identity from other groups around them. Some societies, like those of hunters and gatherers, are very small, numbering no more than a few dozen people. Others are very large, involving many millions... (Giddens, 1993: 746)

Like Keesing, Giddens emphasizes physical separation from the surroundings. Keesing's formulation 'two or more distinctive cultural groups' is theoretically dated, however, because complex societies contain many borderline cases, frontier areas and overlapping or hybrid cultural worlds. Giddens's phrase 'a distinct identity' is conceptually better, but needs to be checked against diverse empirical realities. Indeed, much current research on complex societies and their internal dynamics of inclusion and exclusion indirectly responds to general phrases of this kind, although the theoretical implications are too rarely spelled out.

As the readers of *Ethnicities* are well aware, many have proposed new terminologies tailored to help conceptualize the current era, partly replacing the 'zombie concepts' of old in the process. Among the most radical bids is John Urry's proposal to replace the term 'society' with 'mobility' (Urry, 2000). What if, he reasons, we study social life through a lens of mobility rather than stability? The result would doubtless be quite different from a conceptualization (still common in social science) assuming, almost in an axiomatic way, that stable societies are the stuff that social life is made of. At the same time, however, much would be lost if the concept of society were relegated to the dustbin of history, because it is an empirical fact that people all over the world seek stability, continuity, security and predictability (Eriksen et al., 2010), often by defending or creating spatial belonging, border demarcations and collective memories anchored in particular places (Connerton, 2009). What has been 'disembedded' is, in a multitude of ways, 're-embedded'.

Less revolutionary, but still quite radical attempts to renew the conceptual apparatus of the social sciences can be found in works by, inter alia, Beck (2009), Bourdieu (1977), Bauman (2000), Castells (1996–98) and Giddens (1991), who have suggested terms such as the global network society (Castells), globalized risk society (Beck), multidimensional social spaces (Bourdieu) and the era of reflexive modernity (Giddens) in a series of attempts to conceptualize the social in a time characterized by accelerated change and fuzzy boundaries.

Culture varies in a continuous way; it easily flows across boundaries. Social identities, on the other hand, are in theory fixed; either you are inside, or you are outside. It is partly, and perhaps primarily, in the interstices between the cultural flows and the bounded identities that answers to the question 'Who are we?' (and, by implication, 'What is a society?') need to be put forward. In this very lack of isomorphism between the social and the cultural, there is potent fuel for identity politics as well as a fertile ground for researchers intent on uncovering some new dimensions of the social and refining concepts of society. In ethnically complex societies, majority language often slips into 'us versus them' usage, while on the other hand the compass of national identities continues to widen and expand. There is fundamental uncertainty and disagreement in European countries (and elsewhere) over the content and compass of national identities, ranging from the French debate over 'national values' to a heated debate in Norway some years ago about the meaning of the word 'Norwegian' (*norsk*).

In a sense, it is time to start afresh. One cannot a priori take for granted which centrifugal and centripetal institutions and processes are at work in contemporary complex societies. Individuals and groups are likely to be socially integrated in some respects and disintegrated in others. Different parts of society and culture change at different speeds. The task at hand consists in nothing less than identifying which social and cultural processes contribute to that sense of cohesion required for a territory and/or an aggregate of persons to constitute a collectivity that may meaningfully be spoken of as a society. In this endeavour, the study of ethnicity,

including inter- and intragroup dynamics as well as everything that takes place in the shifting frontier zones, should claim its privileged place.

References

Bauman Z (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
Beck U (2009) *World at Risk*. Cambridge: Polity.
Bourdieu P (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Castells M (1996–98) *The Information Age*. Vol. 3, Oxford: Blackwell.
Connerton P (2009) *How Modernity Forgets*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Eriksen TH, Bal E, Salemink O (eds) (2010) *A World of Insecurity*. London: Pluto.
Giddens A (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge: Polity.
Giddens A (1993) *Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity.
Godelier M (2009) *In and Out of the West: Reconstructing Anthropology*. London: Verso.
Keesing RM (1981) *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective*. Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
University of Norway (n.d.) CULCOM. Available at: www.culcom.uio.no.
Urry J (2000) *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*. London: Routledge.