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The Urgency of Defining the Social

While it is now taken virtually for granted that humans are essentially social beings, an important implication that is less likely to be acknowledged is that sociality is immanent to every instance of human affairs. The idea of the general will, a subjectivity beyond subjects, remains confusing and has been only rarely submitted to conceptual analysis. It is nevertheless presupposed whenever we consider people living among people and therefore whenever language and self-reflection are issues. The confusion engendered by this presupposition is evident in the persistence of cognates of interpersonal behavior (sharing, communicating, etc.) in accounts of collective happenings that nevertheless appear to resist application of those terms because of their scale or reach, an incurable indefiniteness of context, or an intransigent lack of clarity in the connection between agency and subjectivity. Examples are formal transactions and practices that assume a plurality of actors beyond those immediately present; economic actions that are context-dependent but essentially individuated and, in that regard, unsituated, a politics that can be expressed only within an ongoing and intrinsically volatile public medium; and discourses that take form as ongoing accomplishments in which every discursive moment mediates every other such moment, operating across and not by way of individuals. Thus, the language available for speaking generally about what people do together is inadequate to most of the examples typically given.

The fact that the word "social" remains vague explains why it has proven difficult to clarify the meanings of many of the terms associated with it without appearing to violate the sense that they have something in common. Examples are community, reciprocity, mutuality, exchange, social order, civil society, cooperation, and culture. The meaning typically attributed to each term excludes

at least one of the others. Social order and community have altogether different referents. Similarly, mutuality is typically imagined in opposition to the impersonality of exchange, and culture specifies an independent domain of normative facts for which sociality is nothing more than background.

Little can be found in the North American literature that comes close to discussing its meaning beyond what is offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s references to "social" as the ability "to be associated or united *to* others," and as a condition of being "associated, allied, or combined." Monographs as well as introductory texts familiarly refer to "relations among individuals" as sufficient to indicate the meaning of the term without any need for a formal definition. Standard usage generally assumes that sociality is a variable property of human affairs having something to do with the copresence or coming together of persons (such that they are momentarily social in the limited sense of taking account of others). Associated, related, or interacting persons are then conceived of as distinctly abiding individuals who may or may not act socially and for whom, in any case, sociality is not a necessary condition of their being human.[1]

The problem of definition arises fundamentally in regard to two different but not necessarily incompatible points of view. The first identifies the knowledge people have of others in general as a function of their inescapable inter-dependence and the corresponding abstract and inclusive sense of a "Law" engendered by an irresistible mutuality that is experienced as both immutable and evidence of freedom. The hypothesis that knowledge of one's self is a function of one's knowledge of nonspecific others suggests that it is through self-knowledge that each individual experiences something of a reconciliation of utility (which separates people as means relative to each other's ends) and justice (which brings them together as ends in regard to which no other is merely a means). The immediacy of this experience, its relation to action, need not be explicitly conscious. It lies in each person's sense that her freedom cannot be imagined outside of the realm of freedom constituted as the rule of law, Rousseau's evidence for the existence of the social contract distinct from the form of government. How, then, is reconciliation possible and what sort of experience confirms it? Is the sense of a connection between justice and utility a matter of evaluation and judgment and therefore contingent, or is it necessary, intuitive, and immediate? What preexisting relations are assumed by the idea of law consistent with the idea of freedom? What sort of freedom requires acceptance of the rule of law? Can freedom be imagined without such an idea? What sort of creatures must people be if they are to be free under the rule of law? To address these questions, we have to consider the uniqueness of human society and the kind of knowledge that corresponds to it in its uniqueness. The uniqueness of society has been traditionally understood in contrast with "the state of nature," and the relation of knowledge to society has to do with how sociality can be a basic fact that grounds knowledge and, if so, in what sense it is "basic."

The second point of view has to do with considerations of agency and the conditions under which it is possible to form a general idea of agency commensurate with the idea of "all practical purposes" (in contrast with the specifiable intentionality of separable acts directed by particular purposes). In its secular form, and at a minimum, the internal relation of sociality and agency supports the proposition that the actions of each person, by their very nature, take account of and are not merely responsive to the actions of both specific and nonspecific others. At a maximum, it supports the idea that sociality is an activity and not a state of affairs, and, therefore, that it must be *constitutionally* motivated—where motivation has to do with immanent tensions associated with contradiction, lack, aporia, or paradox, depending on the context of inquiry.

I identify the first point of view with Rousseau's account of the social contract, in which a positive disposition of the one toward the many (whether or not the many is taken to reside in the one) is a necessary condition of law. As such, it is the basis of the crucial modernist distinction between authority and power. I identify the second with Karl Marx's (1978) account of the historically specific socialization of labor characteristic of capitalist production, his notion of an ensemble of social relations in which "action" always refers to an intentionally constituted momentary event inter-dependent with other such moments, and his account of value as the meaning something socially constituted has in regard to the most general feature of all that is socially meaningful—the difference it makes among things that make a difference. I take it that both points of view preclude a reductive sociology.

In what follows, I use "sociality" and "society" interchangeably, depending on whether the emphasis is on the ongoing character of the social or on social life in contrast with its negation, though the first is the more general term. My account of Rousseau addresses how he conceives of sociality in *The Social Contract*. Thus, I do not rely on hypotheses about whether there is an overall unity to his thought, and I do not deal with writings that are said to qualify or compromise his concept of the social. Therefore, I do not consider the text from the point of view of the philosophy of politics (see Rawls 2007, 191–250). In effect, I treat it as an essay in the construction of a specific idea, which is a far more limited purpose than that of most commentators. When I enlarge on his ideas, it is from this narrow point of view and not, for example, with the aim of integrating his notion of "pity," one of his "two principles prior to reason," with the notions of a "first convention," an ambiguous expression that invokes both a norm and a coming together, and a "general will."[2] I consider the issue irrelevant to Rousseau's account of the sort of sociality that uniquely mediates the relationship between utility and justice.[3]

On the surface, Rousseau's account of the social contract appears to rely on a radical distinction between society and the state of nature distinct from the idea of human nature with which it is often conflated (see Starobinski 1988,

147).[4] Each is described as a totality such that the line between them seems perfectly clear. The difference is, then, unambiguous to any sentient creature capable of reason; and it must be if, as Rousseau seems to say, society is *chosen* over nature in a self-transforming "passage" from the one condition to the other:

> I assume that men have reached a point where obstacles to their self-preservation in the state of nature prevail by their resistance over the forces that each individual can use to maintain himself in that state; Then that primitive state can no longer subsist, and the human race would perish if it did not change its way of life. . . .
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> This passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces a remarkable change in man, by substituting justice for instinct in his behavior and giving his actions the morality they previously lacked. Only then, when the voice of duty replaces physical impulse and right replaces appetite, does man, who until that time only considered himself, find himself forced to act upon other principles and to consult his reason before heeding his inclinations. (Rousseau 1978b, 53, 55–56)

Rousseau concludes that, given what man gains from the passage from nature to society, "if the abuses of this new condition did not often degrade him below that from which he has left, he ought to bless ceaselessly the happy moment that tore him from it forever, and, from a stupid, limited animal made an intelligent being and a man" (55–56).

I take it that the "abuses of this new condition" apply neither to the social contract nor to the "primitive act of confederation" but to forms of society as achieved over time.[5] They apply to the historically articulated society alluded to by Rousseau in his essay on inequality, which depends on the exercise of particular wills and is bound to compromise or undermine the most general condition under which each person cannot but recognize the equality of all, a condition on which even the most burdensome of non-despotic states depends. In other words, the social dimension of the civil state provides all that is essentially human in the general will and the body politic, regardless of whatever happens in the course of the development of its institutions. To the extent to which this contradiction cannot be avoided, Rousseau provides something of a historical conception in which human affairs are realized only by way of a constant working through of the fundamental opposition between the particular and the general wills (in each and among all). But what matter most in these passages for my account are the contrast Rousseau draws between a basic sociality and a state of nature, the relation between the two, and the way in which the former achieves its status as a concept by its opposition to the latter. What is theoretically problematic in this is that the state of nature is explicitly identified as the absolute negation of society: the point of view of each precludes the intelligibility of the other as a condition of human life. Thus, justice, duty, right, principle, reason, intelligence, and humanness are opposed by what

they logically exclude: instinct, impulse, appetite, separate existence, inclination, stupidity, ignorance, and animality. It follows that the question of society can be raised only within society and that society provides no perspective from which nature can be understood as a totalizing condition of human life or that the mere capacity to be social (e.g., "pity") can be conceived of as a distinctively human tendency. This means that nature is not, strictly speaking, "other" to society: the latter cannot be conceived of as a solution to problems posed by the former.

This version of Rousseau's account of the social contract, as a morally significant choice motivated by insecurity, or even as one term of the "useful fiction" of society versus nature (Sherover 1974, xxi), seems to be undermined by its own presupposition. I attempt to show that the theoretically important question is not whether the relevant passages should be read literally or, what amounts to the same thing, as providing merely a useful fiction. It is not whether the narrative means what its sentences say and what its form implies but what it establishes for the phenomenology of human affairs and the theory of what is human about them, at least in regard to what it shows to be fatefully *inconceivable*. I argue that it presents a basic fact that is irrefutable from the standpoint of the reader, which, it turns out, is the standpoint of everyone, every being one is committed to describing as human.

Few commentators today hold Rousseau to the strictly literal meaning of his account, which is that at a particular time, humans in a state of nature came together in a "first convention" that performs the norm on which it depends, choosing to enter into association with others whom they could not have known in advance or learned to trust, and with whom there was no nontrivial motivational basis for active identification. It might be argued that the propensity of human beings to pity instances of their kind provides such a basis, but whether or not it does is not crucial to my project. In any case, I am not convinced that the argument is valid. Rousseau does not form a *concept* of pity in the *Second Discourse* in the same way that he forms a concept of sociality in *The Social Contract*, though he includes it as one of the two principles prior to reason (Rousseau 1997, 152–153). Unlike the other principle, that of concern for oneself ("well-being and self-preservation"), pity *disposes* man in a state of nature only in the negative sense of inspiring a natural repugnance in us "to see his kind suffer" (152). It does not otherwise initiate active concern. One purpose of Rousseau's discussion in the *Second Discourse* is to provide a sufficient reason to reject a negative view of humans in their "natural state" and the consequences of that view. It is in that respect a part of the argument of *The Social Contract*. But it seems to me that his concept of sociality is formed no less independently of what he says about pity than of what one might say about opposable thumbs or any other species-specific property that is not in itself positively motivating.

This basis of sociability (plus concern for oneself) may appear to be part of both the substance and limit of natural law. However, it does not describe the positive inclination required by sociality—that is, by an active relation with others in contrast with the mere capacity to participate in or to be drawn into such a relation. It does not show how indifference gives way to concern and anticipation. From this point of view, "pity" effectively stands for Rousseau's denial that humans are naturally hostile and cruel and, therefore, that they can live together only under an absolute ruler or a tyrant. If it signifies anything more, it is the capacity of humans to identify at a pre-social level with others of their kind, though it might be difficult for them to determine what is and is not their kind. Since there is no way to specify what this capacity would look like in nature, and there is every reason to accept Rousseau's claim that indifference is more characteristic of one toward another in that state, it seems that pity is not theoretically relevant to his concept of society. Again, as I read the *Second Discourse*, pity is not the sort of concept one would need if it were to signify more than a capacity (against the view Rousseau attributes to Thomas Hobbes)—namely, a disposition. If it is a disposition, it can show itself as relevant to the formation of society only if other conditions give it motivational focus or connect it to some socially necessary disposition. It seems to me that these conditions are outlined in the argument of *The Social Contract* and nowhere else.

In any case, the interpretation that characterizes the narrative of transition to the first convention as a useful fiction begs the question of why the narrative is there in the first place. Why might such a fiction be necessary to Rousseau's theory? Perhaps it is what the narrative does to the reader in the course of reading that allows us to appreciate its significance; and what it does is prove something basic to the possibility of being certain about what is human about human affairs and therefore of knowing those affairs under that aspect. I try to show that the use of the narrative becomes intelligible and effective when read as an allegory intended to demonstrate the "truth" of society beyond a reasonable doubt, which is to say the truth of the claim that society is founded on an equality among people that cannot be compromised (for any practical matter). It turns out that this, and not the fact or fiction of an agreement, accounts for the continuity of society across circumstances and generations. It is in this regard, and not in regard to what is ostensibly gained by individuals in forming society, that defining sociality takes on its theoretical urgency for proponents of the Rousseauian point of view.

The idea of an asocial state of nature cannot provide for imaginable conditions of human life. It follows that everyone capable of reading Rousseau's text, everyone able to consider the social aspect of life, is already implicated in a relation of some sort with a virtually unlimited plurality of unnameable others—that is, with others in general. To be societal in this way, to be *of* society through and through, is to be able to imagine that whatever can be said about

society can be denied *but to be unable to imagine how the completion of that negation could support human life*. The negation would certainly include the denial of language and, therefore, its own possibility. As a result, what it signifies, if it signifies at all, can be imagined substantively only if it does not correspond to a negation. Therefore, it does not signify.

To negate the idea of a universe in which every instance of intentionality is social, to deny all that it could possibly be and not just to deny what has been said about it, is to suggest that there is a referent but, at the same time, to make it impossible to conceive of one. If language is a systemic feature of that universe and its meaningfulness, it alone provides for the possibility of referring, naming, describing, and negating and, therefore, for the sort of positive imagination that intends things that might or might not exist (the sorts of things about which beliefs can be judged plausible or not, or true or false). This implies that the negation of society cannot be imagined positively either *through* language or as *supporting* language and that the sort of imagination necessary to entertain a notion of society plus its negation is impossible without a language in which speaking is spontaneous and meaningful—that is, without society. To claim otherwise would amount to saying that there is a world that must but cannot be conceived of as humanly livable. It would be to say that the life world in which the relevant sort of imagination is inconceivable can be imagined from within a life world in which the *absence* of such imagination is inconceivable. At issue is whether a belief that human life can exist as human without society can be sensibly formulated and, therefore, whether society can be defined intelligibly according to such a condition. The problem is that the lack of a definition of sociality makes it difficult to resist the temptation to identify society as the complete negation of its complete negation, as when *it* is said to account for law and order, rights, obligations, and so forth, in contrast with the putative effects of its total absence. Society as the negation of its negation appears substantively as the negation of chaos, and as protection against that possibility. But since such a capacity cannot arise from within the chaos of indifference, the characterization begs the question of how society should be defined as something that can provide a solution to a chaos that does not allow for even a hint of society.

To claim that society presents a solution to the possibility of no society is to presuppose what cannot be presupposed. One might then say that to believe in the possibility of human life in a state of nature without language and mutual recognition is not to *believe* in the usual sense of the term. If I were to *say* that the lion has beliefs about the state of nature, I surely do not *mean* that it believes the truth of certain propositions. Nor do I mean that what the lion "believes" is part of a structure of beliefs and other such facts. Indeed, I cannot mean that the lion, *qua* lion, has *beliefs*, unless I also believe that lions are humans disguised as animals. To say that believing is a function of language means, among other things, that it reflects a capacity to compare and classify at the same level of abstraction as the putative object of belief. Society, understood as

a universe or realm of being, can be a term of comparison only in the company of many concepts and beliefs, and in regard to the state of nature, if it is possible to imagine two absolutely opposed ways of living as a human being. One might argue that it is possible to project a conception of the negation of society from within society because the very capacity to use language allows its parties to conceive of not having anything of what they have even if they cannot name each thing. The questions are, first, does imagining not having what one has, including language, constitute a negation, or does it merely involve a series of specific denials or an improperly qualified rather than total view of the language being denied? Second, can one use language to conceive of a humanity without language?

First, it is not at all clear how a societal creature can dissociate itself from the very conditions that allow it to represent any condition as *total*. It would have to do this in order to imagine a *negation* of society from within, and it is this possibility that we are considering. In that case, the claimed negation will be something different from what is intended by the word "negation." The idea of a being in a state of nature precludes the capacity to represent, which stands as the most compelling presence of society itself. This is not to claim that there is no imagination beyond language. It merely says that where imagination requires language, as is obvious in the case of imagining society and its negation, what cannot be linguistically represented cannot be imagined in any useful sense of the term. Whatever critical point of view is adopted from within society cannot be inconsistent with the fact of language and it cannot be total in the way a negation of a totality would have to be. What is important in this is that the lack of a definition of sociality, or at least a reasonably clear conception, forces us to consider what cannot reasonably be considered: when we think of events, acts, or things as social without a comprehensible sense of the idea, we are likely to take recourse to a convenient default entity, which is to say a conventionally named semblance of sociality. This is typically an aggregate or categorical collection, like a nation, whose boundaries, distributions, and central tendencies are considered its most telling facts. What those facts are about is at best taken for granted. At worst, they confuse substance with what is determined by method. Whatever negation they make conceivable (of the sort of passive aggregation presupposed by such analyses), it cannot be a negation of society.

The question remains as to what is it about social life that supports the common characterization of it as having boundaries, distributions, and tendencies, and suggests that those characteristics might be denied. To the extent to which reference to an aggregate, or any received category, is adequate to describe it, individuals are likely to be posited as constituent units, elemental referents of a general account of human affairs. This raises the further question of how they can be conceived of as independent of something that encompasses them and gives them whatever unitary form is possible. The question can, of course, be begged, but what generates it, the irrepressibility of a sub-theoretical notion of

an irreducible sociality, is bound to remain troubling for any attempt to theorize society according to a default "entity" constructed within limits convenient to prevailing methodological dispositions, techniques, and discourses. One immediate consequence is the temptation to think in terms of origins and, therefore, a pre-social state of being or, as in recent discussions of societal evolution, a notion of sociality so primitive in its lack of articulation that it cannot be treated, even on an extended evolutionary scale, as a precursor to what are familiarly taken to be exemplary instances of society.[6] In either case, a negation of society is the *logical* basis of whatever concepts are used to describe pre-social conditions, and, as we have seen, it is impossible to form such concepts. We are then forced to confront directly the problem of substantiating what has been seen since the eighteenth century, especially by Rousseau, as unavoidable, irreducible, and virtually beyond definition or clarification—namely, sociality as such.

In what follows, I do not argue for a metaphysics of social entities or that society can be defined in standard sociological language without appealing to the idea of a state of nature. I claim that it is impossible, from the Rousseauian point of view, to think about human affairs without appealing to some notion of sociality as a sub-theoretical basic fact. In that case, much of what is problematic about those affairs has to do with the elision of what makes such thought possible in the first instance. To the extent to which we find ourselves unable to avoid dealing with the human aspect of human affairs, either we come to terms with the elision or our attempts to account for those affairs will be tragically contestable or beside the point. I argue that coming to terms with the elision from the first point of view for which sociality is particularly problematic requires acknowledging the immediate effect of Rousseau's narrative of the social contract on its reader. On the one hand, if the narrative is just a "useful fiction" that can have no such effect, the reader is free to concentrate on an idealized notion of society as an extension of a "first convention" that culminates in "the total alienation of each associate, with all his rights, to the whole community" (1978b, 53). On the other hand, if it presents society as the negation of nature, it tends to promote the idea of a system of mutually determining operations the relative autonomy of which is always dependent on a totalizing motive, presumably shared by all members, to create and preserve systemic conditions of rational action over and above whatever might express local and possibly opposing interests. If the problem with the first is that it lends itself to an untenable idealism, the problem with the second is that it requires a negation the reality of which is inconceivable. In that case, it begs the question of the meaning of society it was intended to answer. If the presence of the narrative in *The Social Contract* is to be understood despite the well-established criticisms of its literal meaning, it must be considered for its effect on the reader in the course of reading and the theoretical significance of that effect. While not directly theoretical, the effect is crucial for Rousseau's way of proving that what is distinctively human about human affairs is their social dimension. For this, it is

essential that Rousseau's readers be *possible* readers—beings in society who are, as such, unable to imagine the negation of society, though able to deny all that it appears to be.

Given information, time, and other material conditions of deliberation, any creature capable of the speech of reason is open to hearing and responding to different sides of a question at any level of abstraction at which it is posed. Being able to hear different sides requires at least an ability to grasp the difference between intelligible and unintelligible expressions, regardless of what otherwise might be said about their content; a sense of what it is for one side of an issue to be different from another side; a sense of what it is for a difference to be significant; and an ability to tolerate significant differences that might arise and that cannot be anticipated—and, of course, to appreciate the vagueness of the idea of a side. A creature able to do all this, and more, must be said to share society (and humanity) with Rousseau's readers and, therefore, to be unable to imagine its negation.[7] Furthermore, given the Rousseauian claim that the way in which humans fit the fact of society is by being *essentially* social rather than by being accidentally and/or partially so, the problem cannot be resolved simply by saying that association with others, in contrast with isolation or solitude, impairs the imagination—making it difficult but *not* impossible to imagine a referent of the negation. Rather, being social is all that can be imagined as what is generally human about human affairs—a fact that thereby qualifies even the senses of isolation and solitude. This last proposition poses a difficulty, since it implies that sociality can be imagined only from within sociality. How then can a "first convention" occur? For now, it appears that whether it is worthwhile to live in society is a question to which there can be no answer—because it is impossible to conceive of, to imagine positively, an alternative to society.