

On Jodi Dean's "Society doesn't exist"*

Thank you for your study on "Society doesn't exist," Jodi. The agreement on this question between right-wing neo-liberals and those who count themselves as radical democrats is something that has been a focus of my concern as well. While it is self-evident that a paper which seeks to do what yours does, must necessarily conflate some very different concepts, there are important distinctions which both the sources you cite and consequently your own article treat somewhat carelessly. We ought to reflect on the very significant differences between the concepts evoked by the use of "a society" as opposed to "society" (without the article).

Nowadays, "society" (without the article) is usually used to indicate a vague disciplinary domain or *medium* where certain "forces" operate, beyond the power of individuals acting on their own. In this sense, society can have no opinion or will, no norms, whether semantic, practical or theoretical; things happen *in* it, but "society" does not *do* things. It does not exist as a thing or a process or even a collective, far less an agent. It's use in this sense as a social-theoretical domain is usually in contrast to "the individual" (suddenly the article appears), which is indeed a thing, a living thing, which can have a will and hold opinions, have rights, act according to norms, etc. This difference is nothing at all to do with ideological preferences for liberal or communitarian theories of human life. For Marx as much as for Thatcher, "society" does not have opinions or responsibilities, rights or obligations, will or experience - it does not exist. For social theory, then we need some supra-individual unit or entity, not a medium or disciplinary domain.

A related use of this term is "society" in the somewhat antiquated sense of a specific, self-conscious although informal collective, which adheres to norms, has a will, etc., and in fact, acts in the name of the nation, a.k.a. "society," further taken to be inclusive of sundry others who consent to their coverture by "society." This usage of "society" without the use of the indefinite article, indicates a specific entity and is just a variation on the concept indicated by "a society" or "our society," etc. Elsewhere, "society" used without the article indicates no particular society, not a nation or a people, far less any particular class or group of people, just some homogenous medium of action. So, when "society" is used in that sense, I would tend to agree with Mrs. Thatcher: "society" is a construct of social theory and corresponds to no objective entity: society does not exist. It is a meaningless amalgam. At best it can indicate generalities concerning nations or peoples at a specific cultural and historical conjuncture, as in "ancient society" or "democratic society."

But does "*a* society" exist? While this claim is at least plausible, it is vague and lacking in delineation and differentiation. I think the claim that "a society," as something which has a will and opinions, rights and responsibilities, and so on, is significantly false because "a society" is in principle *capable* of forming a will or a belief and acting concertedly, but it is just generally not the case. Many different norms and wills are subsumed and submerged in a single generalisation. Will and opinions adhere only to more self-conscious entities. The concept of "a society" (or "this society," etc.) lumps together disparate projects whose will, ideals, semantic, practical and theoretical norms and identity, may be very different from each other, and in particular, at odds with the dominant or hegemonic power of the moment.

This conception, of "society" as the dominant power at some conjuncture of human life, as something capable of having a will and norms, is actually *not* what Margaret Thatcher claims not to exist. On the contrary, she was very forthright with the idea of Britain being "a society" (or a *people* or a *nation*), having a will and norms of various

* See http://www.academia.edu/3117402/Society_doesnt_exist

kinds and took herself to be the incarnation of those human powers, to the extent of launching Britain into a war. But Thatcher did reject “society” as something which existed aside from formal institutions, possessing human powers beyond those formally vested in institutions. Doubtless, she was far from consistent in either words or behaviour in respect to this distinction, but *Eh! C'est la vie!*

The construct of “society,” as a distinct association of people which deems itself able to act on behalf of a nation or other institution also taken under the name of “the society,” to formulate and express its opinions, etc., is a falsehood and a deception. Now, having observed this, many people taking themselves to be radical democrats as well as scientists adhering to strict methodological norms, reject the very idea of “society” or any kind of collective entity whatsoever. Instead of concerning themselves with collectivities such people restrict their theorising to interactions between one individual and another. They take Margaret Thatcher’s famous maxim to the point of denying the reality of *all* institutions, social movements, nations, cultures, and so on. All that exists is individuals and their interactions. This tendency, usually known as ‘interactionism’, is in fact the dominant current in the human sciences today. Such approaches not only reject the validity of concepts for human collectivities at the societal level, but usually discount the place of the material culture, products of the historical culture, in mediating human interactions. Only individuals and social interactions exist. The societal phenomena which arise from these individuals and their social interactions are transitory and contingent.

So the only difference between Margaret Thatcher and present day interactionists, is just that Thatcher only went halfway. And I agree with your hypothesis, Jodi, that “they are from the same basic historical period, the period of the end of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberalism,” but Thatcher does not “reject the idea of an organic social whole or grounded totality” because it was one of these, viz., Britain, in whose name she acted as Prime Minister.

Interactionists have a serious problem, I believe. For interactionism, the existence of concepts, semantic norms and material culture as a whole is inexplicable. For Thatcher on the other hand, “Britain,” “the British way of life,” etc., etc., not only exist, but are unproblematic.

Science demands that we approach the problem of theorising the social fabric with care. Not any concept of human collectivity is adequate for the purposes of science. Which conceptions of human collectivity provides an adequate basis for social theory is something I take up elsewhere.