

CHAPTER 1: MAKING SENSE OF SOCIETY

What Do We Mean by Society?

That modern society works at all is nothing short of a miracle. The fact that billions of people go about their daily lives, believing that what they are doing has meaning, identifying themselves as belonging to a wider community with common aims and values is an incredible achievement. Yet, as with virtually all major achievements, there is a heavy price to pay. In one sense, this book is all about this price – the cost of a world organized to make sense. By ‘heavy price’ I am not referring here to the inequalities, the social injustice, the conflicts, the exploitation, the suffering that unfortunately abound in the world today, although many others may well see these as major flaws in modern society. The price or cost that I want to explore in this book is that of collective self-delusion, the way in which society fools itself into believing in realities which exist only at the level of virtuality. This self-delusion has enormous implications for anyone wishing to analyze and describe the workings of modern society.

To begin with, it is important when we talk about ‘society’ to know what we are referring to. Too often the term is used in a loose way where the meaning is deliberately left vague, so people can project their own assumptions and beliefs. Indeed, here are a multitude of different interpretations of what society consists of: Different political ideologies, different cultures, different religions all offer their own ways of understanding how and why things happen as they do and these feed into what people understand as society. Yet, they go much further than just providing

different interpretations of society. These particular ways of seeing the world colour beliefs about human nature and the relationship between individuals and the world in which they live. They also influence expectations about what controls over human behaviour can do and where the most effective mechanisms for exercising control lie. Controls arising from class and caste structures, family cohesiveness, market-forces, penal sanctions, rewards and punishments in the after-life, taxation, contractual obligations, government regulation, respect for the humanity or human rights of others- all have at one time or another been used to give the impression that order in society depends upon their effective functioning.

Past events can be explained as the results of the success or failures of one or more of these different mechanisms of control and whatever happens in the future is seen as depending on how well they perform their tasks. Yet for modern society, it is always human beings, and not supernatural forces, who are seen to be the controllers of the social world.

Since the time of the European Enlightenment, when a belief in science and human endeavour dethroned a faith in God as the prime mover, the western world has tended, to put ‘the individuals’ at the centre of what it recognizes as the social order. For those living in post-industrial countries, not only does ‘society’ itself consist of the sum total of all individuals, but these individuals tend to be held responsible for everything, or almost everything, that goes on in ‘society’. In general terms, it is individuals who are seen to be responsible for formulating effective controls for the benefit of society and putting these controls into operation. It is they who steer society. ‘Society’ in the West becomes, then, both the totality of individuals and the

sum of those mechanisms of control (operated by individuals) that allow all those individuals to live out their lives in relative peace and harmony. For people who live outside this Westernized version of society, a belief in the power of supernatural forces or in fate and chance may play a much greater part in their understanding of what society consists of and in identifying the controls necessary to make society work and threats to those controls.

Throughout recent history there has been a multitude of debates about the differences between Western and Eastern values, between the claims of modernity and those of traditional societies, between a certainty that people are in charge of their lives and a conviction that supernatural forces control their destiny. Yet, what makes the thesis of this book different from all these debates and the many thousands of previous books and articles written on the subject of human destiny and social control, is that *it totally rejects the basic assumptions that pervade these debates about what society is and how it works. Above all, it totally rejects the fundamental idea that society, any society, can be steered or controlled, whether by human or divine hands.*

Modern society is not the first society to have proved to itself that it is perfectly able to improve itself and control its future. The difference today is that these delusions are founded upon a belief in the possibility of increasing understanding of society itself. Just as the high priests had to admit that God acts or the gods act in mysterious ways and that prayers or sacrifices may, for no clear reason, be ignored or rejected, the message of this book is that, a belief that the future may be controlled through a growing understanding of society itself is bound to lead to

disappointment. There can be no control of the future, but only the illusion in the present that the future is controllable. Yet, much more interestingly, these very illusions of control, according to which almost anything is possible through knowledge acquisition, problem solving, and human action, are themselves essential for society's existence. The message here is that the very notion of society depends upon the perpetuation of these myths. This is the paradox of society which I want to unravel in the pages that follow.

Such a radical departure from those cherished beliefs about steering and control has to start with an even more radical departure from the even more cherished belief in what society consists of. In other words, to grasp the ideas about society in this book requires a complete change in what we believe society to be. Yet for me to reveal at this early stage what exactly these changes consist of would be to give the plot away – something no self-respecting author would ever do. Yet, more seriously, simply to blurt out the answer – ‘Society consists of this or that’ would make no sense, before I have explored the problems arising from existing ways of describing society and then laid the foundations for understanding ‘the social’ in very different ways from those available from these descriptions.

Identifying Causes

There is one further major difference, however, between the radical approach of this book and more conventional accounts, both academic and popular, of different forms of social control that I want to discuss before embarking on a detailed exploration of these new ideas. This is the common belief that any understanding of society always has to involve identifying causes. In general terms, this way of analyzing events assumes that everything that happens in the world has a cause or causes. One thing supposedly leads directly to another in a causal chain reaction. It is through identifying causes that we are able to construct our understanding of how society works, how society relates to people, how people relate to society and how the many complex parts of the social world relate to one another. Without causes, it is difficult to see how anything could make sense.

The opposite approach to assuming that everything that occurs has an identifiable cause would be to see every event as a spontaneous happening. Something just happens, then other things, unconnected to the first event, happen without apparent rhyme or reason. This is not just an echo of the notorious response of former US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld to news of the looting of museums in Iraq - "Stuff happens". Rumsfeld's point was not that the looting of priceless ancient treasures just happened. It was rather that, given the situation of the Iraqi people at that time, there was nothing anybody could do to avoid this happening. It was unavoidable, but it *had a cause*. For Donald Rumsfeld the looting of ancient treasures was the messy price to be paid for the freedom that democracy brings. So there was

a cause, according to Rumsfeld; it was the liberation by US forces of the long-suffering Iraqi people.

This highlights the inherent problem with identifying the causes of social events. Causality is in the eyes of the beholder. Rumsfeld's response was blatantly ideological. Other 'observers' with different ideological views concerning the wisdom of the United State's invasion of Iraq would no doubt have given very different explanations. It is not just politicians who cannot avoid viewing the causes of events through ideological lenses. Even distinguished academic commentators and researchers are not immune from the processes of making attributions, which depend upon some pre-existing beliefs and understandings. There is no avoiding this. Even if they set out alternative explanations in their books and journal articles, it is they who have selected these alternatives rather than others of which they were either unaware or which did not appear to them to be worthy of consideration.

The only sure way to avoid this problem is to steer away completely from direct causal explanations. This may seem bizarre, but it is precisely what I intend to do in this book. There is an alternative, a middle ground between attributing direct causes and the extreme view that everything happens totally spontaneously. Society's existence may depend on the possibility of explanations being available, on the ability to identifying causes, as it is impossible to envisage a society where no explanations, no causes exist. Yet there are always limits as to what is acceptable as a cause. There are always constraints on possible explanations for events. They have, for example, to be reasonable, rational, conform to scientific knowledge or collective beliefs. Where do these limits and constraints come from? Who or what defines

them? Who or what lays down what are and what are not legitimate or acceptable explanations? The ideas that I am going to set out in this book may not actually explain anything about the *real or true* causes of social events, *but they do provide answers to these difficult questions.* These answers, as we shall see, offer in themselves a way of redefining what we mean by sociology – the science of society. It no longer consists of a mass of causes, effects and explanations produced by people, but rather takes the form of descriptions of ways in which society at any one time orders itself, the ways in which it lays down and polices the boundaries of what accounts of causes, what explanations, are acceptable – what it is that makes sense.

To illustrate the point, let's take the much-quoted example from chaos theory that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil may be connected causally with a tornado in Texas. This may be true (or at least partially true) as a scientific explanation for events in weather patterns, but the movement of a butterfly's wings does not qualify as an acceptable explanation for the major rise in the price of oil following the tornado in Texas Index following the tornado. Likewise, the high cost of gasoline following loss of oil production in Texas is on its own is not an acceptable explanation for a subsequent defeat of the ruling party in the next general election. A minor disturbance to an air current might contribute to the triggering of a reaction in weather patterns, but before it enters other spheres of activity, such as the economy, politics or education, it needs to be transformed into something other than a disturbance to an air current. The simple fact that one event follows another is obviously inadequate as a causal explanation to connect two events. There has to be some framework of meaning to relate the one to the other. For example, until chaos

theory, the movement of butterflies' wings could not be meaningfully related to tornadoes. So chaos theory becomes the acceptable framework of meaning for producing causes. Yet, as far as I am aware, there still is no framework of meaning to connect butterflies movements with the price of oil or the defeat of governments.

One could argue that a tornado in Texas could directly affect the price of oil, but you would need some economic theory involving scarcity and prices to do so. The price of oil does not always rise whenever oil rigs are damaged by tornadoes, so other factors must also have been at work. Similarly, the loss of seats in Congress does not invariably follow rises in the price of gasoline. Some political analyst might be able to tell us why it did so in this particular instance. These are different frameworks of meaning to that provided by chaos theory.

The fact that events occur is quite independent of the possibility that they may be classified, described and interpreted in different ways. Put the other way round, the fact that an event has not been classified, described or interpreted in society does not mean that it never occurred. Where the thesis I present in this book differs from almost any other is that it advocates an interpretation of events that does not depend upon values, beliefs or ideologies about human nature, freedom, democracy, God's will etc. Instead I shall be offering a way of seeing society which regards all expressions of values, beliefs and interpretations *as events in themselves* to be treated, not as true or false versions of reality, but as social phenomena. Donald Rumsfeld's comment about 'stuff happening' as being necessary to allow freedom and democracy to exist in Iraq, should be seen, then, as a social event which could well

spark off other social events, just as the butterfly flapping its wings raises the possibility future events occurring in weather patterns.

The difference between the movement of the butterfly's wings and the utterances of Donald Rumsfeld is that the first is a simple physical act which is likely to be seen in an identical way by all observers. The second by contrast is based upon some unarticulated assumptions about human nature and its relation to a political ideology which are, to say the least, hotly contested. The way that you make sense of Donald Rumsfeld and his interpretation of the looting in Baghdad will be determined by how you view the invasion of Iraq. By using your ideological perspective as a means of interpretation, you can never arrive at anything resembling an objective, detached description of events in the world and yet, we are told, there is no alternative to using our values and beliefs in order to make sense of the world. Of course interpreting Donald Rumsfeld's political speeches is far more complex than observing a butterfly, but what I shall be suggesting in this book is that there are ways of describing what is going on in society which *do not depend upon ideology*. They may not achieve the same kind of objectivity as that claimed by the physical sciences, but nevertheless, they are able to offer a detached, panoramic overview of the way that society operates in making sense of events in the world.

This is not just a matter of proposing that the ideas, like fashions change over time, that things are seen differently and people act differently at different historical periods – E.P. Hartley's "The past is a different country. They do things differently there". No doubt this is true. But what I am proposing in this book is a far more fundamental re-think of our understanding of society than E.P. Hartley or all those

who have quoted this well-used passage, have ever considered. It even goes so far as to reject the idea that people *doing things* differently could ever operate as a useful basis for making sense of the past. It refuses to accept that focusing our attention on differences between people's actions or our interpretation of those actions will help us to identify any fundamental differences in the way that past society differs from our own. In other words, I am making what for most readers will be appear as a denial of a self-evident truth. What I am asserting is that studying people's behaviour on its own tells you nothing or very either little about the important differences between societies or even about the driving forces that create major changes in society.

If you want to study societies, you need to focus not on people, but on the ways in which different *society organize themselves in order to give meaning to events*. In other words, instead of taking for granted the inherent meaningfulness of everything going on around us, and our ability to infer meaning from people's acts and their and others' explanations for their acts, would it not be better to study how *society itself* at any one time is able to make sense out of events in the world?

Issues, Problems and Systems

If not people and their actions and explanations for their actions, then what? The title of this book does rather give the game away. Yes, it's *systems*. But what systems? What do they consist of? Where do they come from? What do they do? Given the nature of these questions, the answers cannot be simple and straightforward, like the answer to a mathematical problem or a murder mystery.

There, once you understand the principles or have been given the clues, the answer falls into place. What we call ‘society’ or ‘systems’ is neither simple nor straightforward. There are no principles or clues or at least none that are able to help us solve the problem of society or society’s systems. The answers are not solutions, but open the way to more complex problems and more complex questions. The more we know, the more we realize how much we do not know. No, this book is not about problem-solving. Its concern is rather with how problems are formulated and conceived so that they *make sense* as problems demanding solutions. It is also concerned with expectations as to where these solutions are to be found. How do we know where to look for answers? How can we be sure that we are looking in the right place or using the right framework of understanding? Do different *kinds of answers* exist beyond the horizon of our immediate knowledge? I may seem to be straying into the realms of philosophy and abstract theorizing, yet there is nothing abstract or theoretical about the issues covered in this book. They are issues which we encounter every day, either directly through our personal experiences, or indirectly through the information that we receive from the mass media. Here are some examples:-

- Animal Behaviour
- Aviation disasters
- Child abuse and protection
- Criminal justice and penal policy
- Defamation
- Drunkenness as a defence to crime

- Financial disasters
- Global warming
- Immigration control
- Internet chat sites
- National sovereignty
- Protection of fishing stocks
- The sale of faulty goods
- Regulation of business plans
- War against drugs

Of course no single book could cover all these diverse topics in any depth and no author would be so foolish as to attempt such a ridiculously ambitious project. What I am going to present to you is an *ideas-driven* rather than *issues-driven* book. It is the ideas about society, about what is and what is not achievable through human action which are central to this book. Yes, it is also about individuals, but only in terms of their relationship to the central focus of our study – society.

Issues are also vital element in the book, for without them, the ideas would remain on the abstract level of theory. By applying these ideas to pressing political, economic and scientific problems it should become increasingly clear that the usual, ‘conventional’, ways of understanding social issues is severely limited by the frameworks available to us. This is not to say that the following pages will miraculously open your, the readers’, eyes to all possible alternative perspectives. If this were its ambition, it could only lead to confusion, rather than offering an enlightening experience. Total complexity, the sum of everything that can be

communicated as knowledge, as I shall explain, has no meaning or at least none that can be communicated. What the book aims to do rather is to convince you that what you see, hear and understand is only a small part of a reality which remains and is always likely to remain inaccessible. Its more modest ambition is then to simply to create an awareness that other possibilities exist, other understandings, other 'realities', even though we cannot at any one time be aware of them.

The process of becoming aware of the existence of other possibilities, other ways of viewing the world and events in the world, almost inevitably carries with it a deep scepticism. If what we have been led to believe is not the only reality, not the only way of seeing things, then why should we accept the visions of the past, present and future made available by education, or politics? Why should we accept the visions of the future predicted by economics or climate science or the controls and constraints imposed by law? Above all, why should we accept modern society's claim or aspiration that the ever-turning wheels of progress will lead to a complete and thorough understanding of society and eventually to complete control. Already in the opening years of the twenty-first century we are experiencing not only the gradual decline of these grandiose claims, but also a decline in the number of people who are prepared to accept them. The two most devastating wars in human history, the ability of mankind to destroy itself many times over, global warming, the collapse of banks, the depletion of scarce resources - all these events have contributed in this lack of trust in rationality and confidence in the ability of humanity to find solutions to all problems facing the planet.

Where Do My Ideas Come From?

The final introductory matter that I need to deal with before moving on to the substance of this book is, like all good academic writers, to identify my sources. In fact, I have made the deliberate choice not to take this step at the moment. This is because I want your attention to concentrate upon the ideas, free of the distractions biographical details – the, identity, nationality, gender, careers etc. of those responsible for creating them. In the academic world, so many social sciences courses are organized around a list of the ‘greats’ to the detriment of the creative ideas which they and others (who failed to make it to the list of ‘greats’) have generated. For the same reason, this book has hardly any footnotes or references.

Before I am accused of blatant plagiarism, however, those readers who are curious to know about my sources should turn to the Afterword to this book. There I set out in a full account of the authors, whose works I have drawn on in writing this book. From this account, you will see that there is one social theorist, in particular, whose vision inspired this enterprise. Without revealing his name at this stage, I dedicate this book to him and to the unique and original vision of society that he created.