Social Cohesion and Gender: Reflections on Tendencies and Tensions

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Abstract: Social cohesion, in various guises, has become a topic of great interest in recent years – to policy, to sociologists and other social scientists, and to the public. The knit of social fabric is dependent on relationality, on social caring and connectedness, on a sense of social cohesion. Questions about social cohesion centre on a sense of growing inequalities compounded by increasing diversities. A key dimension of both the relationality dimension of social cohesion and the questions about inequalities and diversity, is gender and a strong interest in addressing gender faultlines. In this reflection, emerging tendencies, counter-tendencies and tensions with respect to gender and social cohesion clustering around gender and age, the gender gap in political attitudes, the privatization of life and of family, the emergence of new forms of social cohesion, modernization of gender regimes, regionalization, and the persistence and reinforcement of sexism are examined. It is suggested that gender faultlines may be increasing in serving the interests of globalizing markets.

Résumé: La cohésion sociale, sous différents angles, est devenue depuis quelques années un sujet qui intéresse beaucoup les chercheurs en matières de politiques, les sociologues, les autres spécialistes des sciences sociales et la population dans son ensemble. Les liens tissés en société dépendent de la relationalité, du souci des autres, de l'interdépendance et d'un sentiment de cohésion sociale. Or un sentiment d'inégalités grandissantes, aggravées de diversités croissantes, remet en question la cohésion sociale. Dans la relationalité en tant que dimension de la cohésion sociale, comme dans les questions sur les inégalités et la diversité, figurent en premier plan le genre et un intérêt marqué à relever le défi des lignes de partage selon le genre. L'effort de réflexion qui suit porte sur divers points : tendances émergentes, contre-tendances et tensions ayant trait au genre et à la cohésion sociale amalgamée au genre et à l'âge, le fossé du genre dans les attitudes politiques, la privatisation de la vie et de la famille, l'émergence de nouvelles formes de cohésion sociale, la modernisation des régimes de genre, la régionalisation et, enfin, le maintien et le renforcement du sexisme. Il est suggéré la possibilité que les lignes de partage selon le genre soient de plus en plus marquées pour servir les intérêts de marchés mondialisés.

Social cohesion has become a topic of great interest in recent years – to government policy, to sociologists and other social scientists, and to the public. A Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada thematic initiative has focused on social cohesion. And there has been fundamental conceptual work done by Canadians, most notably Paul Bernard (1999), Jane Jenson (1997; 1998; and with Denis Saint-Martin in this issue), Judith Maxwell (1996) and Dick Stanley (2001; and in this issue).

There are at least two spurs to contemporary interest in social cohesion, one positive, the other a worry. Since both texture the reflections made here on social cohesion and gender, each will be noted and then returned to as the discussion unfolds. First, with technological change and globalization, our concerns may turn toward the "ties that bond" (borrowed from Himmelfarb, 2000), or put differently, the knit of social fabric is dependent on relationality, on social caring and connectedness. Second, the less positive prompt to interest in social cohesion centres on the "what ifs?" Described as "faultlines" (Stanley, 2001:4), these questions centre on a sense of growing inequalities compounded by increasing diversities. What if the social glue or trust in Canadian society is coming apart? What if there is less commitment to community? To country or nation-state? To a sense of public or shared good? What if these are diminished in the interests of economic efficiency or the values of trading partners?

The contexts for increased interest in and attention to social cohesion are multiple and well known, although less well theorized sociologically, as the papers in this issue make clear. One context is globalization and postmodernity which, it is widely acknowledged, may have separate, uneven or even contradictory effects, leading both to fragmentation and to integration (Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel, 1999). The project of neo-liberalism, some have argued and observed, has opened new schisms in societies, new faultlines and interest groups (Brodie, 1997; Jenson, 1997; 1998; McDaniel, 2002b). A third context is the re-engineering of public and private on several terrains and along several dimensions. Examples include the increased familization of caring and responsibilities as well as the individuation and privatization of many public services from day care to some health services to pensions and home care.

Why Gender and Social Cohesion?

In the mid–1990s Status of Women consultations about policy priorities, social cohesion emerged as a "hot policy issue" (Thomson, 1997). Gender equality is seen not as an "add on" to other quests for equality, but as a focus by itself. Contemporary inequalities between women and men are defined increasingly as a social cohesion issue. This is the case not only conceptually (see Walby, 2000; Wallerstein, 2000: 234–252), but in policy initiatives, particularly those of the European Union (see European Commission, 2002; World Bank, 1995). Gender is sociologically enticing as a faultline of social cohesion.

As Jenson (1998) has shown, the concept of social cohesion, variously defined, is at the centre of many policy concerns in the late 1990s in Europe. Social cohesion is routinely mentioned by the European Commission (EC) as being directly related to increased competitiveness, sustained economic growth, and more jobs. Jenson and Saint-Martin (in this issue) elaborate on these initiatives and the differences they entail. For the purposes of this paper, it is noted that a key dimension of social cohesion in most of its manifestations, is gender and a strong interest in addressing gender faultlines. The goal, expressed by the EC for many years, has been moving toward a model or ideal of social inclusion, by age, by gender, by region, etc.

Emerging Tendencies, Counter-tendencies and Tensions

Emerging tendencies, counter-tendencies and tensions with respect to gender and social cohesion cluster around key themes. These include gender and age, the gender gap in political attitudes, the privatization of life and of family, the emergence of new forms of social cohesion, modernization of gender regimes, regionalization, and the persistence and reinforcement of sexism.

Age may matter more and more, not 'per se' but because of three interconnected tendencies. First, the pace of change, including technological change, suggesting that that the non-young have been left behind or out of technological advances may be a myth, at least in part. Recent Statistics Canada data suggest that few in the workforce of any age have computer training as part of their jobs, and contrary to popular belief, mid-life to older people are the fastest growing group of computer users in Canada (McDaniel, 2002a; Statistics Canada, 2000; 2001). The myth may be both useful and self-fulfilling, however, in the restructuring of work to eliminate or reduce layers of older workers on the basis of the claim that they lack the new technological skills or the flexibility to learn the new technologies. Women may be particularly seen as technologically challenged because of the vastly changed demands in the work requirements for many occupations where women cluster. Some of the mid-life women seen this way may be returning to careers after raising children or obtaining credentials as adults. They thus are caught in the crunch of changing expectations and life course cumulative patterns (McDaniel, 2001).

Second, the ways in which recent massive social changes have been age-structured may have gender implications as well. Quadagno (1997; 1998), for example, finds in her U.S. research that just at the historical moment when women have made gains in access to the public and private benefits of paid work and savings and a toehold on the citizenship rights previously held by men, work and pension restructuring have consolidated the privileges of white, older men while disadvantaging younger women and minorities of both sexes. Brodie (1997), Jenson (1998) and McDaniel (2002b) have found similar patterns in Canada and other western countries.

Third, the gaps among women by generation, always large with the fast-paced changes in women's lives, have widened recently. Younger women with greater opportunities for education and careers have distanced themselves in life experience and generational connection from women of previous generations whose lives were more centrally domestic, or characterized by career pursuit secondary to that of the men in their lives. Added to this distancing are dimensions of class and ethnicity.

A gender gap in political attitudes of inclusion seems to have emerged. Evidence for this is found the sense women have of being outside the new society (EKOS, 1995). It is mainly younger men with good incomes who see themselves as centred in society. Women who are older, who are not in the labour market, who are unwell see themselves as increasingly on the outside of society. In part, this is a combined function of women's greater longevity, lesser labour market benefits throughout life, and more in depth involvement with family.

The thinning of civic society, as people isolate themselves with cell phones, internet hook ups, rampant consumerism and now free-floating anxieties about security, has led to the tuning out of the need for consolidation of interests in common. That we are the "risk insurers," as is discussed by Maxwell (1996) for each other in society has been, to some degree, a fading concept in late capitalism. This may be paradoxical since it is in the collectivity, the sharing that we all are most protected in an uncertain world.

Individual lives and families have become less connected through diminishment of state transfers, for example. Social cohesion requires the sharing of values, goals and a sense of common purpose in community. As states shrink, possibilities of building on shared values, priorities and overall goals diminish. Connections instead become more local, more based on ethnic groups or interest groups or families (Bernard, 1999). Social capital becomes social networking among individuals rather than societal sharing and bonding.

At the same time, new forms of social bonding develop in response to shared challenges. Notable among these new forms of social bonding is the anti-globalization movement, comprising largely young people formed through the internet who share deep common concerns about transnational corporatization and power. Some leaders of the movement are women, Naomi Klein and Maude Barlow for example, and gender is among the central concerns. It is an impressive coalition with world-wide participation that bases itself not on nationalistic identities or interests but on global common worries that are invisible to many.

Gender regimes have been modernizing since the 19th century, largely with women entering the public sphere of paid work and civic participation, reducing their dependency on husbands and fathers (Walby, 2000). For some women with skills and education, this reduces gender inequality. For others,

it simply exchanges private inequality for another kind of dependency in the paid labour market of low wages, cycling in and out of jobs, and limited access to pensions and benefits. The result for the vast majority of women who work in the lower echelons of the labour market, is the exchange of housework and uncertain family situations, for low paid uncertain paid work plus the continuation of unpaid housework and increased family responsibilities.

A new tension is emerging related to these changes. Women divide against each other as those who make it in the male paid labour market come to see to all women could or should do that too. The largely younger women who succeed tend to favour the neo-liberal agenda of reducing welfare state redistribution schemes that differentially benefit other women who had more limited access to the paid labour market, or whose family circumstance or health status prevents them from participating fully in paid work.

Yet another emerging tension of social cohesion and gender is the exacerbation of global inequalities, a trend that is decidedly gendered. There has been a growth in what are termed "regional hegemons" (Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel, 1999), the most advanced of which is the European Union (EU). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) zone may be another example, although it is less committed to political cohesion than is the EU. The NAFTA area may consist, in effect, of two distinct regional hegemons, the north, which is economically dominant, and the south. Women in both find themselves in a world where wealth is increasing and even some income inequalities narrowing. Yet, there is no indication that incorporating women or those previously not in regular paid work, the "dangerous classes," into paid labour, actually has the consequence of enhancing social cohesion or decreased social exclusion. As Bernard (1999) eloquently points out, these are not the same phenomena.

Indeed, a regional hegemon does not base its privilege in one country, but garners resources from many. This entails a profoundly different set of relations of workers to capitalists than in the "hay days" of early capitalism in the early 19th century. There is also a very different set of relations to gender equality issues. It could be that rather than gender inequality diminishing with globalized trade arrangements and transnationalism, the infamous hope of capitalism with its presumption of "trickle down" of economic benefits (in this case, it is "trickle out" to other parts of the world), that gender inequalities actually increase. Some women, largely those in the economic north, will be largely indistinguishable from men of privilege, while the majority of women in both the economic north and south become a vast pool of available cheap labour with limited or no accountability of those who employ them for how they are treated or paid. Most importantly for this discussion, there is zero political commitment to any concept of social inclusion. These transnational employment situations are extra-national, circumventing the hard won equality

assessment provisions devised in countries of the economic north. Indeed, it could be argued, as Joan Smith and Immanuel Wallerstein have (see Wallerstein, 2000:234–252), that liberalism as an ideology protects patriarchal arrangements of the bourgeois family based on unpaid domestic labour because it needs that labour to be cheap in the paid market.

However, regional hegemons can be a reflection of social norms applying only or mainly to that region. In this sense, they may offer both hope and new initiatives to develop regional interests more consistent with the interests of women. In fact, these could be the mechanism by which states and transnational corporations are engaged in and by regional and local issues and challenges.

The institutionalized system of sexism, whatever its basis, does three things extremely well. First, it allows expansion or contraction of the pools available in any time/space zone for the lowest paid, least rewarding economic roles. Second, it gives rise to and constantly recreates social communities or families that socialize children and adult women into playing appropriately passive roles, particularly in the economy. And third, it provides a non-meritocratic basis to justify inequality. Sexism as a system or a social regime works precisely because it is anti-universalistic. It allows for lower rewards and benefits to be allocated to a major segment of the workforce than could ever be justified by merit systems. In fact, it could be argued that the labour "input" of non-waged work at home, which seems to be growing as more demands are placed on women in families in caring for the ill, in caring for the schools and communities, etc, compensates and justifies lower paid work in the public sphere. The growth in the social exclusion of women globally as a result seems inevitable. What the consequences are for social cohesion is less clear.

What is Needed?

What is needed in analysis and theorization are several steps. First, perhaps a new vocabulary is called for, one that captures the complex meanings of social cohesion in globalization and postmodernity. The papers in this issue move that conversation in important new directions.

Second, new standards need to be developed for calibrating degrees and dimensions of social cohesion, or alternatively perhaps social inclusion/exclusion. These standards should map well onto current global arrangements and thinking. Any new standards must be transnational. The Beijing United Nations Conference on Women developed a common platform of action to achieve justice for women worldwide. This may be a start on standards. This is a place where "on the ground" experiences of justice, exclusion, and cultural and regional experiences of social cohesion can be constructively brought together with theoretical constructs.

Third, new theorizations of social cohesion specifically in relation to gender are needed. Gender, of course, is inextricably interlinked with class, region, ethnicity, age. This is a long-standing sociological challenge, now in new and even more challenging guise. What does redistribution mean in the context of regional hegemons? What does social cohesion in gender dimensions mean when some women in the economic south have more pay than they ever dreamt they could have, but are isolated from their families and communities as a result?

In practical terms, feminist thought as well as feminism as a global social movement, affiliated with other global movements, perhaps even anti-globalization movements, may be a force in humanizing the global economy. This reflection on gender and social cohesion has examined a few of the tendencies, counter-tendencies and tensions emergent globally. It strongly suggests that gender is, indeed, a faultline of social cohesion, one that deserves closer scrutiny.

Acknowledgements

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