

ARTICLES/ARTÍCULOS

The Halfway Society: Towards a Definition of the Features of Human Sociality

La sociedad a medias: hacia una definición de los rasgos de la socialidad humana

Jesús Romero Moñivas

Complutense University of Madrid, Spain
jesus.romero@edu.ucm.es

Received/Recibido: 11/2/2022

Accepted/Aceptado: 18/5/2022



ABSTRACT

The ambiguous relationship between individual and society is an issue shared by all social sciences. Society is only possible as an emergent result of an anthropological attribute of each subject: sociality. This article tries to analyse the features of that human sociality that is limited by three factors: the survival of individuality, the fluid character of nostrity and the specific structured finitude of its extension. As a consequence, the emerging society will always be a half society, with links that are made and unmade, with ambivalent conflictive processes that do not allow completely compact societies, nor homogeneous groups, nor absolute collectivisation. Freedom emerges precisely amidst the thick seams that make up this fragile social fabric.

KEYWORDS: sociality; social ontology; social complexity; human evolution; freedom.

HOW TO QUOTE: Romero Moñivas, J. (2022). La sociedad a medias: hacia una definición de los rasgos de la socialidad humana. *Revista Centra de Ciencias Sociales*, 1(1), 133-150. <https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.7>

La versión original en castellano puede consultarse en <https://centracs.es/revista>

RESUMEN

La ambigua relación individuo y sociedad es un aspecto común a todas las ciencias sociales. Su discusión tiene una larga tradición en la teoría social. Sin embargo, el enfoque del artículo no es específicamente sociológico, sino interdisciplinar. Se pretende especialmente introducir elementos más neuro-psico-biológicos en la discusión sociológica. Por ello se incluye un epígrafe previo sobre la evolución de la socialidad en el mundo animal. El objetivo del artículo es mostrar que la sociedad sólo es posible como resultado emergente de un atributo antropológico de cada sujeto: la socialidad. Por eso se trata de analizar los rasgos específicos de esa socialidad humana que está limitada por tres factores: la pervivencia de la individualidad, el carácter fluido de la nostridad y la finitud estructurada de su extensión. Como consecuencia, la sociedad emergente siempre será una sociedad a medias, con vínculos que se hacen y deshacen, con ambivalentes procesos conflictivos que no permiten sociedades completamente compactas, ni grupos homogéneos ni colectivización absoluta. La libertad emerge precisamente en medio de las gruesas costuras que constituyen este frágil tejido social. Esa libertad ambivalente es la que genera la compleja dinámica de las relaciones sociales estudiada por la teoría social.

PALABRAS CLAVE: socialidad; ontología social; complejidad social; evolución humana; libertad.

1. Introduction

Social sciences share a key but difficult to interpret aspect: the relationship between individual subjects and aggregates or collectives; in other words, the *individual and society binomial*. That said, the “and” in individual and society is copulative as well as disjunctive: it unites and separates two different realities, alien to each other, but constitutive at the same time. This ambivalent way of understanding the nexus is what prevents us from understanding the relationship as false or obvious. In fact, this way of conceptualising the relationship is misleading because it places at the same level two realities with different ontological statuses. The individual is an empirical concretisation, whereas society is partly empirical and partly abstract reality. Neither naïve realism nor radical nominalism can account for the complex ontology of the social (Outhwaite, 2006). But what then does this ambivalent duality of the “and” as copulative and disjunctive mean?

The copulative “and” places emphasis on the fact that society is an emerging result of a quality of empirical individuals: namely *sociality*. Thus, society emerges from an *anthropological property*. Sociology derives from anthropology. This implies that all social science is epistemologically anchored in human *sociality*, understood as an ontological property of the subjects. Without sociality there is no society. For its part, the disjunctive “and” stresses that although aggregates are not wholly empirical realities, they do acquire a specific ontological quality, a formalisation of specific relations. This idea indicates the strange nature of society, which often seems to swallow its very individuals, who desperately resist, generating an inherent tension in sociality. Thus the disjunction warns us that sociality is not an univocal sociality, but an ambivalent one. How is it possible that the individual and society relationship is intrinsically ambivalent?

2. Sociality as anthropological property

The dual nature of sociality leads to a paradox faced by social sciences. In order to do social science it is necessary to have a prior anthropological model on which to base any subsequent theoretical and empirical development. However, — and here is the paradox — the greater part of social science works with a type of implicit anthropological model that assumes sociality without specifically addressing it. Thus, social sciences retreat into the “social” without taking into account the type of underlying “sociality”. It is assumed that society is a result that emerges easily and automatically from the mere grouping of individuals. But the key question is the *specific mode* of sociality that underpins society.

Like any human property, sociality is subject to the interrelated influence of what I call the “etiological triangle”: biology, culture and environment. These three vertexes do not work in the same way and they are not symmetrical. While the human being *is* biology and culture, *it has* environment. The three factors contribute to the concretisation of the type of society that may emerge from a specific form of sociality. But the etiological triangle does not work in a deterministic way. Each vertex acts to *moderate* the influence of the others. This explains the *complexity* of the social agent and their irreducibility to any simplified model. Here the complexity of a system refers to “one in which a few simple rules give rise to phenomena that cannot be deduced from those rules themselves” (Lumbreras, 2021: 47). Thus, the interrelation of the three vertexes generates properties that are difficult to attribute to only one of them. This does not exclude the possibility of aspects that may be *essentially* quasi-determined by specific factors. But these exceptions show that it is not easy to delimit the scope of action of any of them. For that reason, the vertices must be understood as *accentuating* and not *delimiting* concepts. In the case of sociality, biology functions as an *intrastructure* that modulates and is modulated by the *environmental* properties in which it has been concretised, and by the *cultural* expressions that have accentuated one or other aspects.

On the one hand, the environmental etiological vertex, in its triple physical-natural, artificial-technological and social tipology (Garcia, 2004: 25-26), has conditioned sociality and the society emerging from it in many ways. For example, the two are not the same in mountainous-isolated environments and coastal-open environments, in environments that are deeply connected through technological infrastructures or in those where artificial connectivity is absent, or in societies that are egalitarian or strongly stratified. Current *Big History* narratives unequivocally show how the Earth “has been the protagonist in shaping the human narrative”, for in fact “the Earth made us” (Dartnell, 2020: 9). In social sciences, this power of the physical-natural environment has been an essential ingredient in macro-social explanations, particularly human geography, geopolitics, economic history, etc. For their part, in archaeology and in the history, philosophy and sociology of technology, the artificial environment has been at the forefront. The technosphere or technostructure has become a privileged factor in social theory. But sociality and society are not only conditioned by those infrastructures that are by their nature specifically connected to communication.

As Sennet (1996) and all disciplines related to urbanism insisted, the design and planning of cities conditions the way people react with each other, how we see and hear each other, and whether we touch or avoid each other. Finally, the social environment or social structure is a privileged factor in explanations from sociology and political science. The structure and its social positions of status, class and power will condition the ways in which sociality is expressed and the type of society that can be built.

On the other hand, the cultural vextex, in other words, the ideas and beliefs resulting from the symbolic and ideological dimension, have been key to shaping sociality. The political philosophies that form the bases of various ideologies are based on wide-ranging prior ontological and anthropological commitments to the social nature of human beings. Often these ideas become customs, in other words, in that which does not involve reflection and requires no more motivation than “convenience” (Weber, 1984: 24). These cultural influences are often subtle, but are very real and specific. By way of example, the specific role of human sociality is substantially different between individualist and collectivist cultures, exemplified generically in Western and Eastern cultures (Sapolsky, 2018: 406–418). Put succinctly: “collectivist cultures are about harmony, interdependence and conformity, and the needs of the group guide behaviour, while individualistic cultures are about autonomy, personal achievement, originality and the needs and rights of the individual” (*ibid.*: 406).

Precisely this last example provides me with a chance to insist that if we want to understand how the human being is a “zoon politikon”, the influence of the biological infrastructure cannot be ignored. Sapolsky himself insisted that the difference between these two types of culture could be correlated with a variant of the dopamine gene DRD4. The 7R allele has a 23% incidence in Europeans and Americans of European origin, and only 1% in East Asians. Precisely this variant “produces a receptor that is less responsive to dopamine in the cortex, and is associated with novelty seeking, extroversion and impulsiveness” (*ibid.*: 416). Its greater incidence could explain the typical traits of the individualist culture against the collectivist. The development of such research from the increasingly fruitful field of ancient DNA genetics is already bearing fruit in its relationship to archaeology and anthropology (Reich, 2019). Some social science theories regarding ancestral population movements and their influences on the constitution of specific cultures throughout early human history are being refuted, qualified or confirmed by genetic data. It would be useful for social theory to strive to integrate new findings from the natural sciences if it is to understand human sociality and the complex individual–society relationship.

The rest of the article is an attempt to reconstruct sociality as an anthropological property. To do that, I will focus on the infrastructure of that sociality, ignoring the influences of environment and culture that I have just described. The aim is to show that human sociality as an anthropological property shows an ambivalent quality that explains that “and” which is simultaneously copulative and disjunctive and which forms the basis of all social sciences.

3. Human sociality in animal evolution

Although social theory does not usually resort to comparative, evolutionary analysis, it is an essential requirement if we are to understand the infrastructure of sociality.

In the animal kingdom, almost all species have some kind of intraspecific (with those of their own species) or interspecific (with those of other species) relationship. Even solitary, pre-social or sub-social species have to cope with mating rituals, confrontation with potential competitors, predation relationships, etc. All of these require behaviour of a social nature, such as, for example, the fascinating quality of deception or dissimulation. However, what we are interested in here is sociality as an *essential* property of a species. Independently of the sub-types that may be distinguished from within the enormous animal biodiversity, in general we can talk about three large sociality types and their three corresponding societies.

1. *Colonial invertebrates*. Here the individual-society relationship is perfectly anchored. There are no conflicts or rifts. Examples of this type of sociality are found in corals, siphonophores or bryozoans (Dunn, 2006). These animals are a colony made up of other smaller animals. The colonial animal — in other words, society — emerges from the cooperative assembly of smaller animal units called “zooids”, which are of two types: those which have specialised in order to feed the colony (autozooids such as *gastrozooids*) and others which have specialised in defence, cleaning, support or reproduction (heterozooids such as *gonodendra* for reproduction, or *dactylyzoid* for trapping prey). The “social perfection” of these colonial invertebrates lies in the fact that zooids, although homologous to a free-living solitary animal, are actually attached to and physiologically integrated with the rest of the colony. They are like parts of the body, incapable of living alone although they are independent organisms. Siphonophores have the highest degree of functional specialisation and the greatest organisational precision of any colonial species. Thus, sociality in this first type has an absolute orientation and the result is perfect societies without rifts or conflicts. The division of labour is so strict that society is a perfectly fitting *colony*.

2. *Eusocial insects*. The second type is that of social insect species such as ants, termites, and certain wasps and bees (Wilson, 1980). They have a high degree of sociality without achieving the perfection of the colonial invertebrates. The difference resides in the fact that the organisms making up the colony of insects are separate physical entities, although they cannot live for long in isolation from the rest of the colony. Ant colonies have evolved degrees of complexity, size and internal differentiation. In some species of simpler, or at least less complex, social insects, specialisation and functional differentiation in castes are not so pronounced. The degree of evolution of these insects in which society appears more like that of the siphonophores is one where the size of the colony has led to division not only into reproductive and non-reproductive castes, but also into physical and physiological sub-castes of workers with greater specialisation regarding specific tasks. The appearance of this system derives from evolutionary tension between the tendency towards inter- and intra-colonial competition (Hölldobler and Wilson, 2014: 54). But the society of eusocial

insects is not as strict as in the case of invertebrate colonies. There is always the possibility of the same organism performing several tasks. In terms of colonial efficiency, in eusocial insects natural selection has tended to work with an unstable equilibrium between specialisation and plasticity (*ibid.*: 115–116). Although this type of sociality is more common in insects, there is also an extraordinary, exceptional case of a mammal that maintains this same sociality; the mole-rats. In the societies of these mammals there are also workers, semi-workers and soldier castes, and a queen (Attenborough, 1993: 142–145). Thus, the individual-society relationship in this type is less perfect. We cannot speak of a colony, but a *super-organism*. Specific individuals have a degree of autonomy and independence. There is a degree of individualism. For that reason, the fit is more complex, conflicts may occur between individuals, and each individual may be required to perform different tasks with varying degrees of skill and adapted to the super-organism.

3. *Vertebrates and mammals*. Finally, the last type of sociality generally includes the social species of vertebrates and mammals, in which there is greater mismatch between individuals, intra-species aggression, selfishness, etc. This type of sociality is ambivalent: there is a driving force behind social behaviour, but there is also a counteracting force (Wilson, 1980: 395). Their individuality positions them as closer to solitary species and their sociality to colonial and eusocial species. But neither of the two extremes is sufficient to explain these animals. To various degrees and complexities this evolutionary route is present in social mammals (elephants, wolves, social primates, whales, etc.), which are “who-animals”. In other words, “They know who they are; they know who their family members and friends are. They know their enemies. They establish strategic alliances and deal with chronic rivalries. They aspire to a higher rank and await their chance to challenge the existing order. Their status affects their private life prospects. Their lives follow a career arc. Personal relationships define them” (Safina, 2017: 14). Here behaviour is more complex. There are tasks involved in physical survival to cope with, but above all there is the task of managing social relationships. The social environment is therefore more complex than the ecological niche itself. The members of these species display more complex social behaviour: they play, rehearse, plan strategies, pretend, dissimulate, lie, fight politically, have complex hierarchies that it is necessary to be aware of, complex interaction rituals, etc. In other words, they have a strategic mentality in which the balance between their individuality and the collective is no longer rooted in an absolute, boundless sociality. They are political species because they are forced to engage in diplomacy, to compromise at times and show resistance at others, to play Machiavellian games between individuals. Any social mammal displays this type of conduct. It is perhaps primates, and particularly chimpanzees, that have been best studied in that respect, since the famous book by Frans de Waal (2007). But we know that the same is also true for wolves, cats, elephants, etc. Among social vertebrates and mammals the individual and society maintain a complex balance. The fact that the subject is formally autonomous and independent prevents perfect adaptation at the collective level. For that reason, these species do not form either colonial or super-organic societies, but what I prefer to call *communities* (I am not using the term in a strictly technical sense, but loosely). That is why for these species society will always be a *halfway society*. The human being cannot escape this ambivalent, conflictive logic between the individual and society.

4. Limits of human sociality

It is important to stress the diversity of evolutionary pathways towards sociality, because it prevents making unjustified assumptions or mistaken comparisons between species. In any event, as stated by Wilson (2012: 17), “the path to [human] eusociality was traced by a competition between selection based on the relative success of individuals within groups versus the relative success between groups. The strategies of this game were written as a balanced blended mix of altruism, corporatism, competition, domination, reciprocity, defection and deception”. This difficult strategy between the individual and the social is characteristic of the type of society of all vertebrates, non-human social mammals and humans. Their most advanced societies fall short of perfect adaptation, for alongside a driving force towards sociality there is a counteracting force that privileges individuality. There are signals that trigger contradictory impulses in others: sometimes gregarious and sometimes aggressive behaviour (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989). Along the same lines, the infrastructure of human sociality is complex and ranges from brain mechanisms to endocrine or microbiotic influences. Furthermore, the elements common to the species must always be balanced against the organic peculiarities of each individual subject. In any case, I believe that there are three fundamental limitations to human sociality: the survival of individuality, the fluidity of nostrity and the structured finitude of its extension. We are going to look at each in turn.

4.1. The survival of the individual

In reality, society will always be a society of individuals because it is the result of sociality conceived as an anthropological property. For that reason, it is interesting to ask ourselves how it is possible that individuals can generate societies. Or to put in another way, what are the infrastructural traits of sociality? Simplistically, one can speak of three neural circuits involved in social cognition that give rise to three adaptations related to sociality (Lieberman, 2013). These adaptations allow the creation of societies through the interaction of individual subjects.

1. The *connection* based on the neural overlap of physical and social pain. In other words, our well-being is related to our capacity to be connected to other persons. For that reason, separation produces pain, and connection produces pleasure. This fact even goes back to the mother-child bond: “Since a mother cannot be simultaneously attached to and separated from her baby, the opioid system and the arousal system function reciprocally. When one is active, the other shuts down” (Smith, 2003). The importance of being connected has left its imprint on human brain mechanisms. This connection is what is known as *attachment*, which also has an evolutionary origin in a kind of widening process of the circle of care, starting from self-care and extending. In the case of mammals (and possibly social birds), it appears that evolutionary adjustments to emotional, endocrine (hormones such as oxytocin and vasopressin), nervous and reward/punishment systems in virtue of which individuals achieve their own well-being, were modified to extend the well-being of others (Churchland, 2012: 39).

At first, these others were limited to offspring, then to kin, then to friends, and so on, thus progressively widening the circle. This assumes that the well-being of our loved ones is part of our own “internal homeostasis”.

2. The *theory of mind* or the ability to interpret the actions and thoughts of others, given that, as neuroscientists insist, “humans have an irresistible tendency [...] to transform our understanding of the behaviour of others into a whole series of assumptions about the mental states of others” (Jeeves and Brown, 2010): 98). A lot has been written about the theory of mind. In any case, a fundamental requirement for being socially connected is to be able to share a common world through the mutual interpretation of our intentions and actions. People with autism encounter difficulties precisely in the aspect of social life in which the reading of intentions and the strategic capacity to manage social connectivity are essential. Less severely autistic people are guided in their social relationships more by actual behaviour and less by their underlying behavioural patterns. And those who exhibit more severe degrees are outspoken and honest, because they do not feel the pressure to conform to others (Kandel, 2019: 53).

3. *Harmonisation* is a paradoxical neurological capacity because, according to Lieberman, it requires a malleable sense of self that allows the influence of others over the subject. In fact, the self would not be so egoistic or selfish, but deeply influenced and constructed by others. Lieberman (*ibid.*: 189) considers that “our sense of self [can be described] as a ‘Trojan horse’ self”, in that its function is not so much to distinguish us hermetically from one another, but to ensure the success of sociality. The delicate balance between the individual and society is not exempt from tensions. Thus, according to Lieberman, despite maintaining the subject’s own consistency as an independent individual, this egoistic Trojan horse aims to minimise this conflict. Lieberman’s idea is not new, of course. In general, social psychology and sociology have always considered that the self has an essential social construction component. For Lieberman, “the self exists primarily as a conduit to enable the social groups in which we are immersed (i.e. our family, our school, our country) to supplement our natural drives with socially derived drives” (*ibid.*: 191–192). That said, this harmonising quality requires an effort of “self-control” because the simplest cognitive tendency is to use one’s own perspective to interpret the intentions and actions of others. But this is often unhelpful because it can lead to confusion between what I think the other is doing and what they are actually doing, or the intention I think the other has and their own intention. This duality shows that harmonisation is not achieved automatically, because the social brain does not exhaust all the brain’s characteristics. For that reason, Lieberman insists that self-control is also necessary to challenge this egocentric bias in order to evaluate the other person from their own perspective.

However, these three sociality mechanisms not only do not eliminate the survival of the individuality of the subject, but are the basis of it. In the sociality of vertebrates and mammals, there will always be an unresolved tension between the demands for the survival of the individual subject and the survival of the collective. We thus know that even beginning with the supposition — which I do

not share — of strict rationality of the subjects, it is evident that the aggregation of these individual preferences and rationales will not always be beneficial for society as a whole. What is rational and even beneficial for a particular individual may be detrimental for the community. And vice versa. In that sense, the “motivational pluralism” (Tena Sánchez, 2010) in human beings invalidates both disintegrating individualistic selfishness and automatic socialising altruism. Human sociality is complex because it is based on a greater range of motivations: the non-social (selfishness) and social (aversion to inequality, strong reciprocity, weak reciprocity [or reciprocal altruism], unconditional altruism, and malice and envy). In reality, this means that individual motivation and social motivation are constitutive and pervasive in human sociality. Social bonds are generated through an emotional complexity that reinforces or destabilises connection, theory of mind, and harmonisation with others.

4.2. The fluid nature of “nostrity”

Another limitation on human sociality resides in the fluidity of the construction of our “nostrity” or awareness of a collective and aggregate identity. The nostrity or collective identity is based on the social identity of its subjects. However, the existence of diverse social identities in a single individual makes nostrity forever a “halfway” process. The limited sociality of people prevents “nostrities” being homogeneous. Although this fluidity affects any group membership and any one person experiences it daily, it is perhaps most relevant in the political sphere. I shall therefore provide some general reflections along these lines.

The political construction of the “us” and “them” is not absolute, but fluctuates. In the individual subject there are continuous re-categorisations: sometimes the “us” of being a woman may suit me when I feel displaced in macho politics, but I will automatically stop feeling united with a woman if she is a neo-liberal and I am a communist. At that point, perhaps the categorisation of “us” that suits me means betraying sisterhood if I can achieve a class goal that I consider more important than a gender goal. But that alliance with a communist man over a neo-liberal woman can be destroyed if it turns out that my communism is religious and Christian, while the man is an atheist Marxist. So, if the destruction of religion is proposed as an objective, perhaps I would be better off allying myself with my Christian co-religionists, even though they may be men and rich businessmen, and that would be a betrayal of my class objective. Even so, if the aim of this new alliance with rich Christian men proposes armed struggle against Muslims, and I am a pacifist, it may be in my interest to betray my co-religionists and ally myself with a multi-religious movement whose aim is peace and tolerance. That said, in that movement, most of them eat meat, and I am a vegan, which forces me to realign myself once again with those who, although they are men, liberals, atheists, religious, violent, etc., are nevertheless vegans, and I need to ally myself with them in my fight to defend animals and their dignity. And so on ad infinitum. In different situations each person sees the need to re-categorise their “us” and their “them”. Of course, on some occasions these different ideological rifts or fractures can come together to a greater or lesser extent in “unified packages”.

But such unification will never be full, total and absolute, and there will always be the possibility of re-categorisation. Every person is multi-selves, but there is also a “multi-nostrity”. The history of ideas shows the constant fragmentation into groups that had shared an initial homogeneous commitment.

Thus, each person belongs to multiple “us” with conflicting loyalties in their response to the challenges of the various interests that emerge from the multiple “them” whom they confront. Political ideology *cannot* recognise this impossibility to construct ideologically homogeneous groups, because this would involve eliminating the supreme fiction of the unity of group interests against the enemy. That said, and given that this fragmentation always exists, it must be rationalised through the accusation of heresy and treason, as opposed to fidelity and coherence. Robert Michels’ Iron Law of Oligarchy shows exquisitely that the fragmentation of the original group is always accompanied by a complementary process of ideological legitimisation/delegitimisation. For those that break off from the original trunk, those that remain are infidels who have distorted the original meaning of the community. Those who remain will accuse those who leave of heresy and of betraying the original meaning of which they are now the only real and faithful representatives.

This does not mean, in any event, falling into an extreme nominalism that denies any possibility of categorising an “us” as a community of interests. Denying the homogeneity of categories does not imply rejecting the possibility of discerning groupings that are distinguishable by common features. In fact, nominalism would disable the possibility of criticism of the injustice of some over others. If individual persons are all that exist, then there is no room for a critique of the domination of class, race, gender, species, religion, and so on. Between nominalism and realist Platonism lies the balance: recognising that there is no absolute, timeless and stable cross-cutting nature that places human subjects in a permanent “us” versus an equally stable “them”; *while at the same time* insisting that group categories exist as approximate and forever correctable ways of accounting for social reality. This is why the concepts of Christianity, Islamic *ummah*, the proletariat, sisterhood, nation, race, ethnicity, ideological brotherhood, etc., are always marked by an inherent contradiction based on human sociality itself, in which multiple social identities which often do not fit together must always fit together. They exist, but they do not exist. This cross-cutting nature is a political fiction. The nostrity is always “half way”.

4.3. The structured finitude of sociality

The third limitation, closely connected to the previous one, derives from the very scope of sociality and its structured nature. Despite the limitations that critics have rightly pointed out to Robin Dunbar’s theories, and without having to assume the initial specificity of linear correlations between neocortex and social group size, Dunbar (2016) addressed two fundamental questions. On the one hand, in the limitation of our capacity to extend sociality to infinite limits; and, on the other hand, in the segmented structuring of sociality itself into different circles of greater and lesser attachment. Sociality, therefore, is neither infinite nor undifferentiated. It is always limited and structured. Connectivity

mechanisms do not lead us to be sociable with everyone, or in the same way. The two are linked: since our sociality is not infinite, we will have to choose with whom and in what ways we create social links.

Biologists, anthropologists, paleoanthropologists, evolutionary psychologists, etc. have documented the universal fact that we evolved to live in communities of few members and that we tend to favour our kith and kin more clearly. However, historical development has led to a totally different environment: humanity has been creating ever wider and more complex societies in which we have to cooperate and attach ourselves to people who are not necessarily from our closest circle. Humans have managed to form very large communities. However, these associations do not result from an automatic, seamless process, as the social nature of humans is neither colonial nor supra-organic. Turner and Maryanski (2016) have insisted that humans lack bio-programmers that automatically create social bond-building beyond small-scale natural connectivity. In fact, in human beings, the most natural sociality is not that of belonging to “groups”, but to “communities” with a general feeling of fluid belonging and not so much of close, stable ties. Over time, however, grouping into larger collectives demanded unification through cultural symbols, which became totems and religious symbolisations. The possibility of broad communities without direct, physical, interpersonal ties is only possible through the personification of the group through totemic symbolisation, as Durkheim previously proposed. For Turner and Maryanski, the key to the possibility of this enlargement is the emotions. It is not about forging monkey-like gregarious societies, but about creating strong bonds through increased emotional bonding. Human social solidarity reaches new heights through mechanisms that were already pre-programmed into their biology: increased positive emotions, interpersonal fine-tuning, rhythmic synchronisation, the exchange of valuable resources, positive sanctions and predisposition to ritualisation (Collins, 2004). In addition, two cultural ingredients — symbols and totems — have led to stronger ties and larger collectives.

From this we can deduce the existence of two contradictory types of “social instincts”: a *kinship instinct* that favours cooperative behaviour with our relatives and close friends, and a *tribal instinct* that favours cooperation and altruism in large groups and organisations of unrelated people (Richerson and Boyd, 2005): 196). This generates an inherent conflict within sociality. Despite the fact that thanks to environmental modifications and cultural adaptations we have managed to live in large-scale societies, this ambivalence in the intra-structure has not been eliminated. On the contrary, it has generated a further limitation: inter-group conflict. The symbolic totemisation and sacralisation of groups have created a supra-individual rivalry that is a feature of these complex human societies. The so-called “differentiation principle” in group formation (Giménez, 1992) takes place thanks to social psychologists’ well-studied process of a triple categorisation: *in-group similarity* (members of the same group see themselves as similar, but not entirely alike), *out-group homogeneity* (members of one group see members of the other group as homogeneous to each other, devoid of distinctive individual qualities) and *out-group differentiation*

(which exaggerates the differences between groups). This triple process gives rise to a collective identity — I have already stated that it will always be “half way” — which tries to subsume the subject under an umbrella that allows them to feel safe within a group, viewing those who do not belong to it as a threat. This social categorisation process ends up being the basis for stereotypes, collective discrimination, racism, xenophobia, nationalism and, ultimately, geopolitics. These social ills are not easily eradicated through culture/education and environmental modification, precisely because they are based on intra-structural mechanisms inherent to human sociality. The helplessness we feel as a society when we see that our scientific and technological advances are not matched by the meagre results achieved regarding social justice may be rooted in that. The intra-structure of human sociality has not evolved at the same pace as our cultural ideas about social justice and the technological transformation of our densely populated environments. This does not mean we must renounce the reasonable aspiration for a better humanity, but simply that we are obliged to recognise that intergroup discrimination and conflict emerge from the finite, structured sociality that — at least for the time being — still constitutes the human species.

5. The hypothesis of the uni/multi-self psychic structure: a bio-psycho-sociological approach

Human societies are therefore the result of a sociality based on three constraints: the survival of individuality, the fluidity of nostrity and the structured finitude of their extension. This type of sociality has generated complex, ambivalent and not perfectly fitting societies. Specifically, one of the basic features of this type of social environment is that which has been the focus of my research in recent years (Romero Moñivas, 2018, 2021). I believe that human societies have exacerbated a duality that exists in all the complex social species of vertebrates and mammals. I am referring to the ambivalent duality of two contradictory and complementary pressures present in the social environment: on the one hand, the existence of multiple and different situations with different cultural and social codes (fine-grained quality) and, on the other hand, the need for stable expectations of reciprocal action in order to maintain collective life (coarse-grained quality). The *grain* concept was introduced within genetics in the 1960s to explain the scale at which the organism experiences environmental variability (Gillespie, 1974). Highly variable environments are considered fine-grained and those that maintain a certain degree of stability are considered coarse-grained. The two generate different environmental pressures on genetic selection. Applied to human sociality, this fine-grained/coarse-grained duality must also have exerted significant pressure on the way the social environment is managed neuropsychologically. Thus, this way of understanding the social environment forces us to include a neuropsychological question within social theory: What must the brain and mental structure of the human being be like in order to be able to manage this dual dimension of social life?

Two opposing pressures push human beings: if an individual wishes to survive in complex social environments, they must be able to display a flexible psychic structure of multiple selves that allow them to adapt to a variety of changing social situations. But social life also requires stable reciprocal expectations, which make it necessary to manage this psychic flexibility in a specific way through the correct choice of a “specific self” for each situation. Therefore, people must be flexible enough and at the same time consistent enough to be able to produce and reproduce human society. It is a very complex equilibrium. These two psychic qualities must appear in a complementary manner in the human brain. If only one of the two qualities is present, pathological behavioural traits are produced. A uni-self structure (e.g. in people with autism) is inefficient for the individual because in a social environment featuring so many different micro-situations, rituals and interactions, a rigid psyche would make life impossible, preventing people from being functional in different environments (Richler, 2010). On the contrary, a completely multi-selves psyche (as in multiple personality or hard bipolarity) is also not viable as an adaptive strategy because it prevents the reduction of social uncertainty and the possibility of reciprocal social expectations between people. A completely unstructured and mismanaged multi-selves psychism disrupts community life because the stability required in social relations is absent (Lysaker and Lysaker, 2001). Therefore, the most optimal adaptation strategy is one that balances the two possibilities. On the one hand, the adaptive need for changes in social environments which requires the subject to be able to adapt to each ritual and social situation; and, on the other, the need to generate stable social communities through reciprocal expectations, which requires people to be able to manage their multi-self package with a degree of stability and regularity. To my mind, the fundamental point is that the uni/multi-self psychic structure can be considered as an evolutionarily stable strategy (ESS). This concept refers to a strategy that is *impermeable* when adopted by a population as an adaptive strategy to a specific environment. Impermeability refers to that strategy which cannot be displaced by another new alternative strategy. In other words, it is an adaptive equilibrium which, given a specific environment, cannot be improved by another. The human brain, therefore, demands both openness to what is new and contingent, and stability regarding what must be predictable. It is this complex balance that allows for that situational astuteness that Machiavelli in *The Prince* considered essential for the good of the prince, but which, in fact, is a feature of every human being in the midst of an intricate web of diverse social situations: “Thus, you can appear to be clement, faithful, humane, upright, devout and be so, but be so disposed that if it becomes necessary not to be so you can and know how to adopt the opposite attitude” (Machiavelli, ch. XVIII). Therefore, I have postulated that for the management of social duality, the social agent requires a uni/multi-self psychic structure.

However, this overall equilibrium is not the same for all people at all stages of life. Each brain is different, and therefore the uni/multi-self balance will be different. There are subjects who, because of their own biological disposition or because of their specific circumstances of socialisation, will veer more towards either the hypertrophy of uni-self rigidity or multi-selves chaos. But beyond the individuality of each brain and the peculiarity of each person,

my hypothesis implies that a transformation of the uni/multiple equilibrium can be postulated according to the age of the subjects. However, it is not age alone that determines this transformation. Rather, what is at stake is that brain development may be related to the type of roughness (fine-grained or coarse-grained) of the social environment at each stage. In other words, natural selection has generated a different pattern of brain development depending on the type of social environment in which the brain had to develop. Simplifying the situation, we can distinguish four main stages in the biological-social development of people: childhood, youth, adulthood and old age. Therefore, each stage requires a different balance in the uni-multiple structure in order to be able to adapt adequately to its particular social environment. In childhood there is a tendency towards uni-self rigidity, in adolescence and youth. There is a propensity towards multi-self non-governability, in adulthood is where uni/multi-self balance is most demanding and necessary, and finally in old age there is a progressive return to uni-self rigidity.

In any case, what all this implies is that the duality of the social environment — diversity and predictability — would have required a complex sociality that allowed subjects to manage this inherent tension. This sociality is not the same at each stage of human development, which explains why social bonds and configurations are different between children, young people, adults and the elderly. Society is not something that emerges automatically, but is rather a complex process of management by individuals faced with ambivalent, changing situations, cognitive limitations, conflicting group loyalties, biased interpretations of others, and so on. Therefore, human sociality is a neuro-psycho-sociological management process. As stated by Lüscher (2011: 387) “social cohesion is not based on values and norms, but arises from the possibilities, skills and mechanisms that people develop, invent and deploy [*entwickeln, erfinden und entfalten*] and thus institutionalise, when confronted with ambivalences in joint procedures”. Sociality is an anthropological property that allows the exercise of the management of social relations with limitations that are reflected in the very result of this management: the societies that emerge are “halfway-societies”.

6. Conclusion: the half-way society and the emergence of freedom

The main idea that I wanted to stress is that the human social agent will always be found in a dynamic tug-of-war with other agents and, as a consequence, there can never be a *complete society, homogeneous collectives, or unified socio-political systems*. Human beings are social and unsocial, dependent and free, collective and individualistic. Although we are bound to social life, it does not come about without a laborious, continuous effort through which we create bonds of various types that are never definitive, nor one-dimensional, nor perfectly fitting. In fact, even at the moment of birth of human beings, this conflict between the individual (the baby) and society (the mother) is already present. The two dominant theories about the timing of childbirth show this conflict. Whether

it is due to the problem of the “obstetrical dilemma” — our bipedalism created narrower hips in women that prevent oversized baby brains from being able to exit through the birth canal — or the problem of “metabolic rate” — at a certain point the baby’s energy demands exceed the mother’s ability to supply — both cases involve a conflict of survival. Natural selection has opted for a half-way equilibrium allowing the survival of both baby and mother. But if only one of them had been chosen, the other would not survive.

Our common origin with primates such as orangutans, gorillas and chimpanzees has not completely disappeared from our development as humans throughout the biological and socio-cultural history of our species. This has generated ambivalence regarding social links. For that reason, at the current evolutionary stage of our species, the emergence of a complete or total society in the style of siphonophores or even the most highly evolved eusocial insect species is unlikely. For example, feminism itself has certainly been the latest social movement to base its demands precisely on this ambivalence of sociality: the woman (the individual) cannot and should not only be a “mother”, submitting her individuality to the well-being of the family (the collective). Only in a balance, both difficult and complex, between altruism and selfishness, between cooperation and resistance, between being a mother and being an individual, can a healthy equilibrium be found between the demands of the individual and those of the family collective. In sociology, it has long been clear that a healthy, normal socialisation process involves a balance between the conventional dimension that I take from society and the idiosyncratic contribution that each subject makes when taking on the conventional. If this does not happen, two pathologies appear: through excess, the oversocialised and, through a lack, the undersocialised. Pathological subjects who can be recognised through their unhealthy submission or their indomitable resistance. Neither of the two is socially functional. The former is not because society also demands resistance, freedom, and creativity in order to trust our functionality as members of society. The latter is not either because continuous resistance to everything prevents the creation of stable and harmonious bonds.

Human beings are social and their brains attest to that, so it is not possible to fully understand a social system without interpersonal ties of one kind or another that constrain individuality while at the same time making it possible to enhance it: from weak to strong bonds, from kinship to tribal, from stable to fleeting, from emotional to rational, from altruistic to selfish, from communal to associative, from competitive to cooperative, etc. But, for the same reason, this variety of ties prevents the construction of systems in which collectivity is constituted as the purpose of the human, subsuming the subject to social totality. Unitary social integration is only possible — if indeed it can be possible at all — at the cost of violating human individuality. The political transcript of this half-way society is precisely the impossibility of the *fulfilled utopia*, not as a regulative ideal, but as a *de facto* harmony caused by a specific socio-political system. There will always be thick seams constituting human society and any political system that tries to manage it. There is never a perfect fit between all subjects or between all groups. This misalignment creates folds, creases and

thick seams throughout the social fabric. It is precisely these rough edges of the social fabric that are the condition of possibility for the margins of action, that is, of freedom (Romero Moñivas, 2018b). Where there is no perfect fit between the “barriers” there is the possibility of resistance, evasion and reform.

In that sense, rescuing Mead’s (1982) classic analysis, human sociality is half-hearted because the *self* is always made up of the *me*, as a “series of organised attitudes of others that one adopts oneself” and of the *I*, as a “reaction of the organism to the attitudes of others”. An essential part of what we are is devoted to sociality. But the individual does not disappear within the social aspect. In Mead the “I” “is uncertain”, a more creative dimension of the “oneself”: “the “I” is always different to what the situation itself demands” (*ibid.*: 205). Mead’s “I” is that very experience of creativity, of freedom, which is exemplified so strikingly in the artist, the inventor and the discoverer, but which is present in every human being (and I would add, in every vertebrate and mammalian social animal where this individual–society conflict occurs). Therefore, this duality of resistance–submission, of obstinacy–fidelity, of individuality–sociality, always endures because both are constitutive of this half-way society typical of humans and which the social sciences have as their object of study.

Funding

This article has been possible through funding from the Community of Madrid through the Multi-annual Agreement with the Universidad Complutense under the Young Doctors Research Stimulus Programme, within the framework of the V PRICIT (V Regional Plan for Scientific Research and Technological Innovation), within the project “A proposal for epistemological integration of sociology and biology through an analysis of human ambivalence (PR65/19–22435) (2020–2022)”.

References

- Attenborough, D. (1993). *La vida a prueba*. Barcelona: RBA.
- Churchland, P. S. (2012). *El cerebro moral. Lo que la neurociencia nos cuenta sobre la moralidad*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Collins, R. (2004). *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400851744>
- Dartnell, L. (2020). *Orígenes. Cómo la historia de la tierra determina la historia de la humanidad*. Barcelona: Debate.
- Dunbar, R. (2016). The Social Brain Hypothesis and Human Evolution. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.013.44>
- Dunn, C. (2009). Siphonophores. *Current Biology*, 19(6), 233–234. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2009.02.009>
- Eibl-Eibesfeldt, I. (1989). *Human Ethology*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

- García, E. (2004). *Medio ambiente y sociedad. La civilización industrial y los límites del planeta*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.
- Gillespie, J. (1974). The Role of Environmental Grain in the Maintenance of Genetic Variation. *The American Naturalist*, 108(964), 831–836. <https://doi.org/10.1086/282958>
- Giménez, G. (1992). La identidad social o el retorno del sujeto en sociología. *Estudios de Comunicación y Política*, 2, 183–205.
- Hölldobler, B. and Wilson, E. O. (2014). *El superorganismo. Belleza y elegancia de las asombrosas sociedades de insectos*. Madrid: Katz.
- Jeeves, M. and Brown, S. W. (2010). *Neurociencia, psicología y religión. Ilusiones, espejismos y realidades acerca de la naturaleza humana*. Pamplona: Verbo Divino.
- Kandel, E. R. (2019). *La nueva biología de la mente. Qué nos dicen los trastornos cerebrales sobre nosotros mismos*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Lieberman, M. D. (2013). *Social. Why our brains are wired to connect*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Lumbreras, S. (2021). Es hora de exigir explicaciones a la inteligencia artificial. *Investigación y Ciencia*, 542, 46–47.
- Lüscher, K. (2011). Ambivalenz weiterschreiben. Eine wissenssoziologisch-pragmatische Perspektive. *Forum der Psychoanalyse*, 27, 373–393. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00451-011-0083-7>
- Lysaker, P. H. and Lysaker, J. T. (2011). Psychosis and the disintegration of dialogical self-structure: Problems posed by schizophrenia for the maintenance of dialogue. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 74, 23–33. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000711201160777>
- Mead, G. H. (1982). *Espíritu, persona y sociedad: desde el punto de vista del conductismo social*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Outwaite, W. (2006). *The Future of Society*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470773505>
- Reich, D. (2019). *Quiénes somos y cómo hemos llegado hasta aquí. ADN antiguo y la nueva ciencia del pasado humano*. Barcelona: Antoni Bosch Editor.
- Richerson, P. J. and Boyd, R. (2005). *Not by genes alone. How culture transformed human evolution*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226712130.001.0001>
- Richler, J., Huerta, M., Bishop, S. L. and Lord, C. (2010). Developmental trajectories of restricted and repetitive behaviors and interests in children with autism spectrum disorders. *Development and Psychopathology*, 22(1), 55–69. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579409990265>
- Romero Moñivas, J. (2021). Ageing Brain and geopolitical leadership. A bio-psycho-sociological approach to the fall of Sharif of Mecca Hussein ibn Ali, 1908–1924. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 47(1), 76–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03080188.2021.1951986>

- Romero Moñivas, J. (2018). Is the Ambivalence a Sign of the Multiple-Self Nature of the Human Being? Interdisciplinary Remarks. *Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science*, 52, 523-545.
- Romero Moñivas, J. (2018b). El juego de los márgenes de acción estratégica. Apuntes para una sociología de la libertad. *Razón y fe*, 1432, 205-215. <https://revistas.comillas.edu/index.php/razonyfe/article/view/9119>
- Safina, C. (2017). *Mentes maravillosas. Lo que piensan y sienten los animales*. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg.
- Sapolsky, R. (2018). *Compórtate. La biología que hay detrás de nuestros mejores y peores comportamientos*. Madrid: Capitán Swing.
- Sennet, R. (1994). *Flesh and Stone. The Body and the City in Western Civilization*. New York: Norton & Company.
- Smith, Th. S. (2003). Attachment, Interaction, and Synchronization: How Innate Mechanisms in Attachment Give Rise to Emergent Structure in Networks and Communities. En D. D. Franks y J. H. Turner, *Handbook of Neurosociology*. New York: Springer.
- Tena Sánchez, J. (2010). El pluralismo motivacional en la especie humana. Aportaciones recientes de la ciencia social experimental. *Papers*, 95(2), 421-439. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/papers/v95n2.41>
- Turner, J. and Maryanski, A. (2016). *On the Origin of Societies by Natural Selection*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315633121>
- Waal, F. de. (2007). *Chimpanzee Politics. Power and Sex among Apes*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Weber, M. (1984). *Economía y Sociedad*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Wilson, E. O. (1980). *Sociobiología. La nueva síntesis*. Barcelona: Omega.
- Wilson, E. O. (2012). *The Social Conquest of Earth*. New York: Liveright.