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Assessing the glue that holds society together: social cohesion arguments in liberal democracy

ABSTRACT

The article addresses social cohesion (SC) as a given political good in liberal democracies. It analyzes arguments based on SC by discussing a scientific and a political discourse on SC and the adjacent literature. The analysis identifies shared premises in conceptions and usage of SC, showing that the concept is both analytically flawed and highly normative. Next, it assesses the function of the concept in both discourses and argues that it raises problems for liberal democracy. The article concludes that SC clashes with several political values of liberal democracy and that liberals should question the worth of SC as a result.

ABSTRACT

Artiklen adresserer social sammenhængskraft (SC) som et givet politisk gode i liberale demokratier. Den analyserer argumenter baseret på SC ved at portrættere en videnskabelig og en politisk diskurs om SC samt den tilknyttede litteratur. Analysen identificerer delte præmisser i konceptualiseringer og brugen af SC, hvilket både viser, at begrebet er analytisk mangelfuldt og særdeles normativt. Derefter vurderer den begrebets funktion i begge diskurser og argumenterer for, at den rejser problemer for liberalt demokrati. Artiklen konkluderer, at SC kolliderer med adskillige politiske værdier i liberalt demokrati, hvorfor liberale bør stille spørgsmålstegn ved værdien af SC.

KEYWORDS:

Cohesion policy; liberal democracy; political argument; political good; social cohesion.

1. Introduction

Social cohesion (SC) is a protagonist in debates on social order (Jenson, 1998, p. 12; 2002, p. 146). Since the 1990s, academics have endorsed SC as the idea that globalization, immigration, and economic insecurity threaten social order, and recently *The Economist* (2010, p. 16) dubbed SC as something "all decent Europeans can sign up to". According to conventional wisdom, SC peaks the top chart of political goods, and it appears to be an unquestioned and inarticulate given. These attributes are evident in a certain class of political arguments: If an issue is framed as an obstacle to SC, the issue *eo ipso* becomes politically deplorable since SC is deployed, often implicitly, as a good that trumps other concerns without further justification. In effect, the conclusions reached in such arguments are elevated beyond critique. I refer to such arguments as 'SC arguments'.

A recent example of this kind of reasoning is found after the eastward enlargement of the EU in 2004 and 2007, which allowed flows of workers, many of them unskilled, to migrate more freely in search of work. In countries such as Denmark, which now houses a growing number of Eastern European workers, the SC argument may proceed thus: These workers steal jobs from Danes and channel earnings back to their home countries. In so doing, they undermine the Danish societal cohesion, which depends on equally burdensome contributions to the state's finances, as a result of which, enlargement of the EU is a bad idea that should be resisted. Clearly, the argument values Danish SC above European integration, but the point is that SC fuels several arguments that instantiate a similar reasoning and that these arguments occur as a trump card in contemporary politics. I focus on this class of arguments on a general level in relation to liberal democracy because SC arguments tend to occur in this setting. By 'liberal democracy' I understand a democracy in which typical liberal values, such as individual integrity and freedom of speech and choice, are widely recognized in the public and commonly practiced and protected by the state.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 shows that intertwined discourses from real politics and social science support the status of SC. Section 3 portrays SC as a political good via a literature review, which may appear extensive but simply serves to outline the underlying premises of SC arguments. Section 4 evaluates the function and politics of SC in liberal democracy. Lastly, Section 5 concludes that SC arguments clash with several values of liberal democracy and that liberals should question the status of SC as a given political good as a result.

This agenda means that I do not evaluate the soundness of specific SC arguments, as for example Holtug (2010) and Mantovan (2013) do with regards to immigration. Furthermore, it implies that I set aside specific debates in the political-philosophical literature in which SC has recently

played a major role (e.g. in multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism). Lastly, the chosen scope prevents me from addressing liberal replies to the problems posed by SC.

2. Two discourses

I discern two discourses of SC, one political and one scientific, in order to show that they share two premises, which are found in most SC arguments. The political discourse originated in the 1980s, prior to the scientific discourse, and may be defined as remarks and arguments that deploy, rely on, or assume SC in order to express a political preference (Jeannotte, 2000, p. 14). It is thus embodied by political agents – policymakers, officials, opinion leaders, etc. The scientific discourse may be defined as scholarly debates and works on SC in journals, academic books, and policy recommendations from research committees. It is thus comprised of scholars. The distinction is analytical, but I will later use it to show that both discourses are premised on ontological realism, i.e. on the idea that the referent of 'SC' literally exists.

Ideally, SC should only appear normatively in the political discourse and descriptively in the scientific discourse (Duhaime et al., 2004, p. 301). Reality, however, is not ideal; as politics is increasingly premised on social science, and science is progressively more politicized, the discourses converge (Bond, 2007, p. 898). The more political agents talk about SC, the more academics study it, and the more affirmative studies of the existence of SC, the stronger its political potency becomes. SC travels between the two discourses due to this reflexivity, partly benefitting from its scientific legitimacy (Bernard, 1999, p. 48), partly being discredited as ideology (Duhaime et al., 2004, p. 295).

I will elaborate below on the characteristics of the discourses. Two observations cling to the political discourse. First, SC fuels ideologically opposite projects (Støvring, 2008, p. 93). Consider an example: For more than two decades (Pahl, 1991, p. 357), the European Commission (EC, 2004, p. 374) has held that SC "is vital to the full development and enduring success of the Union" whereas the Danish People's Party (DPP, 2009, p. 44, my translation) – a critic of the EU *par excellence* – argues that "maintenance of social cohesion is [...] crucial to the survival of the welfare state". Their policies are mutually exclusive, since the EC works towards a supranational EU, which undermines DPP's project of restoring Denmark as a Westphalian nation-state. Yet both justify their policies in terms of SC. For example, the EU justifies its regional funds system for resource redistribution on account of its positive contribution to SC while DPP justifies its tough agenda on immigration in terms of immigration threatening to undermine SC. Nonetheless, SC surfaces as a given good in both cases. In addition, current political consensus holds that SC is threatened (Jeannotte, 2000, p. 11). The perception is thus that SC is decreasing, though there is some disagreement as to the causes, and since SC

is conceived as a social good, guarding it becomes a common policy issue. In this sense, a perception of threat is crucial to SC arguments.

Next, I will turn to the scientific discourse, where one finds disagreement as to the *causes* of the threat. The literature predicates causation of globalization and/or modernity (Dickes, Valentova, and Borsenberger, 2010, p. 453; Jansen, Chioncel, and Dekkers, 2006, p. 190; Lafaye, 2009, p. 393). The scientific discourse thus shares the political belief that SC is threatened and conveys the idea that something precious is about to be lost, however obscure the referents 'globalization' and 'modernity' may be (Bly, 2005, p. 876). Additionally, the scientific view is that modernity, globalization, and SC are *processes*, i.e. series of related events rather than end states (Decker and Bolt, 2005, p. 2427; Easterly, Ritzen, and Woolcock, 2006, p. 105; Jenson, 1998, p. 38; 2002, p. 143). By implication, the scientific discourse speaks of degrees of SC, whereas the political discourse uses 'SC' disjunctively as something that can be definitively achieved or lost. Actual policies, however, most often deal with the processes that may lead to such extremes (Vergolini, 2011, p. 198).

Both discourses assume two premises to which I now turn. Broadly, the absence of SC is deplored and raises concerns. SC "is most often discussed in terms of threats", notes Jenson (2002, p. 142). I call this concern 'the threat premise', and it says that SC, however defined, is diminishing. This premise fuels SC arguments by generalizing the perception that political action is needed, thereby framing the argumentative setting in favor of change.

The threat premise hinges on the belief that the referent of 'SC' literally exists 'out there' – otherwise it would not make sense to assert that SC is threatened. I label this belief 'the ontological realism premise', which states that SC exists as a distinct entity upon which agents may act and that SC influences the workings of sociality. As I see it, this premise is frequently implied in the political discourse when policymakers are keen to promote SC, yet policymakers rarely unpack the notion (Jeannotte, 2000, p. 26). In contrast, the scientific discourse has engaged with the meaning of 'SC' to such an extent that a great many studies now propose revised definitions. Consequently, the literature has inspired several meta studies of SC (Chan, To, and Chan, 2006; Dickes, Valentova, and Borsenberger, 2009; Friedkin, 2004; Janmaat, 2011; Lafaye, 2009; Noll, 2002). However, the ontology of SC has received scarce attention. This blind spot is notable since common sense holds that SC is – and by implication exists as – 'the glue that holds society together' (Capshaw, 2005, p. 53; Decker and Bolt, 2005, p. 2448; Hannan, 1999, p. 6; Sterk and Kushner, 2005, p. 1). However, this is merely a picturesque metaphor that affirms the ontological realism premise. It affirms *that* SC is but does not say *what* it is. Since both discourses assert the threat premise, they also imply the ontological realism premise, and this dependency underscores the need for a clear idea of what SC really is. The undisputed status of SC as a given good is, however, an obstacle to assessing its meaning and use. I therefore provide a

detailed literature review in the following section in order to trace common denominators in conceptions of SC.

3. The meaning of 'SC'

Below, I will map the meaning of 'SC' in the scientific discourse. There are several conceptual studies of SC in the scientific discourse whereas 'SC' appears with a quasi-fixed meaning in the political discourse. Generally, political agents use 'SC' as a truism, as if everyone knows its meaning – but no one explicates it. In contrast, conceptual studies – and controversies – are common in the literature. One might dismiss such conflict-loaded concepts as semantic delusions, but it is naïve to interpret the conflict in the scientific discourse as mere word play. It is, rather, evidence of a politico-scientific struggle, not only about the right to define SC and the authority to lead research but also about the political power to frame social phenomena, which is a prerequisite for effective SC arguments.

One should thus note that the scientific discourse is founded upon a terminological twist of translation originating in Durkheim. The twist continues to shape the use and study of SC and moreover mirrors two competing interpretations of sociality. This foundation is relevant to the understanding of contemporary SC arguments, because it shows an ambiguous core in the reasoning of SC arguments. Specifically, it shows that both the threat premise and the ontological realism premise are integral to usage of SC.

3.1. Theoretical foundations

This section looks at the historiography on 'SC', which sees Durkheim as the "intellectual origin" (Chan, To, and Chan, 2006, p. 275) of the concept (Jenson, 1998, p. v; Noll, 2002, p. 54; Rajulton, Ravanera, and Beaujot, 2007, p. 462; Ultee, 2006, p. 386). Durkheim was shaped by the French intellectual environment of the late-19th century, in which the positivist idea of an independent social reality flourished (Joseph, 2003). Durkheim captured this *esprit de temps* in his concept of *faits sociale*, i.e. social facts existing as independent entities external to agents over which they exercise coercive powers (Hamilton, 1990, p. 60; Keat and Urry, 1975, p. 60). For him, SC was merely a social fact, which shows a historical link to the ontological realism premise. Durkheim, however, did not use the French counterpart to 'cohesion' ('*cohésion*'). Historiographers usually refer to Durkheim's work *De la division de la travail social* (1893) in which he consistently speaks of '*solidarité sociale*'. Standardized translations later changed '*solidarité*' to 'cohesion'.

This alteration is unfortunate because the terms connote a threshold between two views on sociality. While 'cohesion' is rooted in the Latin verb '*cohaerere*' (to cling together), '*solidarité*' stems from the Latin noun '*solidus*' (an undivided whole). Thus, '*solidarité sociale*' refers to society qua entirety or

oneness as an object of preservation (Joseph, 2003, p. 68). Starting from the premise that sociality should mirror *solidus*, modern political discourse extends this view by seeking to secure societal unification in light of perceived disintegrating threats; i.e. to glue increasingly separate individuals together in times of globalization and mass immigration. *Solidus* thereby seems to underpin right-wing projects, such as the DPP, which insist on the preservation of a particular unity (e.g. a nation, people, or race). Conversely, coherence evokes an idea of sociality qua the political unification of originally atomized parts. In the *cohésion* view, unified sociality is a construct imposed on the dispersed pre-sociality by political endeavor, such as the Hobbesian unification of separately rational but collectively violent individuals who socialize themselves for protection under a sovereign. A modern example is the EU's system of regional funds, which is based on the idea that resource redistribution strengthens the EU's social linking value (read: glue). This primacy of separate individuals and rational cooperation tailors the cohesion view to liberal preferences.

The distinction between seeing sociality via its parts or as a sum extends into both contemporary discourses. On the one hand, the scientific discourse asserts that policies may construct SC (Berger-Schmitt, 2002, p. 410; Easterly, Ritzen, and Woolcock, 2006, p. 116) – and should do so (Taylor-Goby 2012). It thus exports policy guidelines on how to create coherence and social glue to the political discourse. On the other hand, the political discourse uses 'SC' to refer to an abstract goal of unity and the conservation of *solidus* as an end in itself (Hooghe, 2007, p. 713).

This shows that the political discourse draws on both *solidus* and *cohaerere* in SC arguments. The result is an essential ambiguity in the concept of SC, which allows it to harbor divergent political projects, such as the liberal EU and the nationalist-conservative DPP. In my view, this ambiguity may explain why the literature fails to delimit the concept of SC as the next section shows.

3.2. Two research phases
I will now introduce a distinction between two chronological research phases. The first phase is characterized by efforts to identify the constituency of SC and offers limited consensus on the meaning of 'SC'. The second phase takes insights from the first – evident via references – and proceeds to what I call 'conceptual infrastructure': the origins, development, and interplay of the constituents of SC.

The first phase begins with Jenson's 1998 study. She identifies five socio-political dimensions of SC: belonging and isolation, inclusion and exclusion, participation and non-involvement, recognition and rejection of values, and legitimacy and illegitimacy of institutions. Scholars have since held that a set of dimensions defines 'SC'. However, although Jenson does not systematize, prioritize, or develop the dimensions, one can see the dimensions as binary

schemes, with the first part of each conjunction referring to the political goods of SC and the second part denoting their threats. Jenson thus implicitly incorporates the threat premise at the level of definition. Bernard (1999) expands Jenson's map with a sixth dimension, equality and inequality, but according to Berger-Schmitt (2002, pp. 408–10), the six dimensions are reducible to two "inherent" dimensions of SC, i.e. an inequality dimension (social exclusion, lack of resources and opportunities) and a social capital dimension (social relations and quality of institutions). Seeing a set of dimensions as "constituent" of SC, Kearns and Forrest (2006, p. 996) follow this lead. They emphasize civic culture and territorial belonging but basically extend Jenson's approach. Duhaime et al. (2004) downgrade the dimensions from constituents to "indices" of SC. They propose to add demographic structures (e.g. age composition) but offer no hint as to what these are indices of. They thus mirror the ontological premise by focusing on phenomena that indicate the existence of something called 'SC' without saying *what* exists. Noll (2002) proposes a similar shift with his argument that SC is not property of the individual but is instead an inter-subjective entity. In effect, this is a shift in perspective from *cohaerere* to *solidus*. Consequently, Noll (2002, p. 57) advances three "levels of manifestation" of SC: interpersonal relations, intermediary relations (e.g. clubs and communities), and formal institutions. However, he omits a central issue: He does not say *what* is manifest at the levels of manifestation, with the result that he too exemplifies the ontological realism premise.

In summary, the first phase holds that SC exists and is defined and constituted by dimensions, but one finds disagreement about the specific dimensions and their theoretical status. The first phase is justificatorily vague since the studies give few reasons as to *why* a given dimension should be included or excluded. They depart from the ontological realism premise, sometimes with reference to the threat premise, but tend to circumvent the meaning of 'SC'. SC is thus a free-floating concept lacking a supportive, conceptual infrastructure.

The second phase begins with Friedkin's (2004) thorough review of the literature on SC. Assuming that SC consists of both attitudes and behavior, Friedkin argues that SC is a multidimensional phenomenon and therefore needs multiple indicators. In a critical remark (2004, p. 412), he claims that if some of the dimensions of SC "are causal antecedents or consequences of others, then they should be distinguished as such in a causal model and not lumped together as indicators". He therefore calls for an exploration of the "causal interrelationships" between the dimensions in order to identify "antecedent, intervening, or outcome variables" (2004, p. 421). He shows how the second phase builds on the first but also enquires into conceptual infrastructure. Moreover, he expands the notion of SC by arguing that it requires that individuals actually *do* something since SC is more than just attitudes. Certain patterns of behavior, like donating to charity, are thus

integral to SC, he claims (2004, pp. 413). This behaviorist expansion of SC is reflected in later studies (Chan, To, and Chan, 2006; Rajulton, Ravanera, and Beaujot, 2006). However, Friedkin does not clarify the relation between constituents, i.e. the causality between attitudinal states of mind and behavioral states of affairs. Similarly, Dekker and Bolt (2005, p. 2449) claim that in SC, "one dimension often goes hand-in-hand" with SC "in another dimension", which suggests a kind of interconnectedness, but they do not explain how the dimensions are connected. Later, one finds a different infrastructure in Rajulton, Ravanera, and Beaujot (2006, p. 463), who claim that the dimensions of SC, which they borrow from Jenson/Bernard, should be systematized into three "domains" of political goods: political (voting and volunteering), economic (occupation, income, labor force participation), and social (e.g. interactions and neighborhood-based help).

In short, the second phase deals with conceptual infrastructure, particularly the idea that dimensions are sets of antecedents and consequents ordered by causal connections. This makes it an empirical exercise to portray the infrastructure, and the resultant methodological consensus is that SC consists of subjective attitudes, which requires consulting the individual (e.g. value surveys), and objective behavior, which requires observing the individual (e.g. measuring community activity). Debate persists, however, with regards to identifying the actual attitudes and patterns of behavior that constitute SC.

I furthermore wish to emphasize three trends in the literature that have merged with the political discourse. First, the literature widens the extension of 'SC' in the sense of incorporating a growing number of constituents of SC, but it nonetheless builds on the a priori assumption that SC is exhausted in any of the given sets of dimensions. Second, it asserts the existence of SC as a *distinct* entity that encompasses and includes the dimensions and thereby reflects the ontological realism premise. Third, it unanimously assumes that SC carries positive normative value as a political phenomenon. Consequently, it holds that SC properly defined is universally applicable – despite varying geographical or cultural contexts. Chan and Chan (2006, p. 640) neatly sum up the resulting and rather complex view on SC in the matrix below.

	Attitudes	Behavior
Horizontal relations	*A*	*B*
Vertical relations	*C*	*D*

Cells *A-D* define 'SC', showing that SC arguments may target a highly diverse range of social phenomena by virtue of its dual-constituency as attitudinal states of mind and behavioral states of affairs. Horizontal relations signify social relations between members of society, and vertical relations signify relations between the state and the individual. Cell *A* thus consists of trust

and shared values, Cell *B* covers collective tendencies (e.g. voluntary work, helping strangers, etc.); Cell *C* marks a cognitive collective (e.g. a sense of belonging, national identity, and perceptions of the governing bodies' legitimacy); and cell *D* covers voting, political participation, willingly paying taxes, and the lack of social fraud. The reasoning is that the more society is characterized by these political goods, the more SC it possesses.

Due to chosen scope, I do not unpack the matrix any further. My purpose is only to illustrate that SC, according to the literature, is a normative notion of causally connected constituents. This view travels to the political discourse and legitimizes concerns over threats to SC since it affirms the existence of SC as a political good. Arguments based on 'the glue that holds society together' thereby gain scientific credibility.

4. The functions of SC arguments

I believe that this back-up function of science raises a question as to the function of SC in these discourses: What impacts do SC arguments have on liberal democracy? To answer this question, I assess below SC in both discourses, first briefly as a conceptual tool in the scientific discourse, then in more detail as a policy goal in the political. I split this section into two parts to show how the discourses converge.

4.1. Vis-à-vis scientific discourse

The function of SC in the scientific discourse is a product of both research phases, and it is shaped by the definitional enlargement of SC. In effect, SC becomes an all-encompassing term that begs the question: What is SC *not*? As Chan, To, and Chan (2004, p. 280) note, "the informative nature of a concept depends on how much it excludes, not how much it includes". Yet research focuses on inclusion. It holds that SC is an attribute of sociality, but the problem arises when 'SC', as an umbrella term, becomes indiscernible from 'sociality' itself. It appears that the discourse thus identifies the subject (sociality) with its attribute (SC), but from this article's practical perspective, it is more important to note that one cannot then know into which phenomena social scientists are enquiring – that is, if studies using 'SC' also share referents. This clouds the scientific discourse as well as confuses policymakers looking to science for advice. Due to this fundamental slipperiness, SC arguments cannot escape an initial obscurity.

However, the scientific discourse shows a tendency to hold that the meaning of 'SC' is exhausted in the given definitions. Ironically, it is also aware of its lack of clarity, which even predates the political use of 'SC'. Mudrack (1989) saw "a legacy of confusion" in SC. Earlier, Mitchel (1979, p. 180) mentioned that SC has "no generally agreed upon meaning". And recently, Malutas and Malouta (2004, p. 450) labeled SC as "a problem of 'denotativeness'" – that 'SC' only denotes scientists' own mental constructs. This problem may be a

result of not treating constituents and conditions of SC as conceptually distinct entities. An exclusive definition of 'SC' should thus not include conditions or values that promote or enable SC. When researchers focus on indices of SC, as in the first research phase, SC is defined as 'that which occurs if X'. For example, Duhaime et al. (2004, p. 301) define SC as "structured by access to formal economic and governmental institutions [… and] access to family and community-based, face-to-face relations". Yet it is unclear why SC should be defined as such access even if it may be relevant to promote SC. Likewise, by defining SC through a set of moral values that promote it, Friedkin (2004, p. 412) makes the following proposition: 'SC is that which is fostered if people believe X'. Both cases illustrate that the scientific discourse shuns the meaning of SC itself at the same time as it asserts that SC exists 'out there' in the social as a fact and as a universal ideal for certain patterns of behavior and attitudes.

This article does not seek to solve such methodological puzzles, but I want to stress that in my reading of the scientific discourse, I have found that it is far from trivial to assume that SC is a given good in political arguments. The point is political, not metaphysical: I am not concerned with *how* SC exists but rather with *what* is said to exist since it defines options available to policymakers. As the next section shows, this is important because the complexity and normative connotations of SC fuse with politics.

4.2. Vis-à-vis political discourse

The fusion of SC with politics is evident in SC arguments. Its political function should thus be seen in relation to the conclusions reached. Broadly speaking, SC arguments aim to justify cohesion policies (cf. Fenger 2012). By 'cohesion policy', I mean a political recommendation, measure, or action aimed at strengthening or protecting SC, whether official policies or informal debates. I argue below that the use of SC raises three problems that question the value of cohesion policies to liberal democracy.

The first problem is one of looseness. It stems from the lack of a stable meaning of 'SC' and is connected to the use of 'SC' in the scientific discourse. The problem can be illustrated by imagining two distinct social phenomena, S and P. Say a policymaker sees S as a problem for P and that she uses 'SC' to describe P. Further imagine that she declares S to be a threat to P, which by virtue of SC is a political good, and that action Q therefore ought to be taken to alleviate S. The risk is now that the meaning of 'SC', given the multiplicity of interpretations and vagueness of definitions, transcends P and thus that Q encompasses too many phenomena. That makes it difficult for people – voters in liberal democracies – to evaluate what Q is actually aimed at since it is possible to stress one dimension of SC in one context and prefer a different dimension in a another context. By blurring the end of political actions, the elasticity of SC arguments makes it hard to hold policymakers accountable. Chan and Chan's above matrix is a testament to this risk.

Yet concepts like SC attract policymakers. This is because they are flexible enough to harbor the necessities of day-to-day political action and hence appeal to different audiences (Bernard, 1999, p. 48; Maloutas and Malouta, 2004, p. 450). In other words, SC has policy appeal by virtue of its looseness and status of political good while simultaneously seeming analytically unfit for this role. That makes it a potent political weapon. SC is flexible enough to meet most popular demands, giving policymakers in search of support an easy retreat from detailed deliberation. SC arguments therefore challenge liberal democracy to the extent that liberal democracy thrives on deliberation, making it preferable to act on reasonable justifications. The problem of looseness, then, is that SC allows one to interpret almost any development as a threat to SC while almost any action may be framed as productive to SC. In a society convinced that SC is a given good, such political communication may, from a liberal democratic perspective, be too successful in escaping the commitment of pros and cons.

The second problem is the de-legitimization of dissent. To the extent that liberal democracy is not about agreement but about the right to express dissent (Helly, 2002, p. 15), there is a problem: Liberal democratic politics without dissent is an empty gesture since there is no point in consulting the electorate if the outcome – nurturing SC – is fixed. Additionally, SC arguments clash with egalitarianism as they "don't aim at recognizing social protests, or promoting a more egalitarian sharing of power" (Helly, 2003, p. 24). While egalitarian concerns appear in the political discourse, they are subordinated to concerns over the *total* level of SC. Thus, SC arguments often imply that certain groups can be the target of specific aid or affirmative action *only if* the efforts contribute to societal cohesion. The problem is thus that if SC is indisputably good, if not best, then SC arguments are immune to critical enquiry (Kearns and Forrest, 2000, p. 998). Such arguments in effect hinder the practice of liberal politics in the sense of ongoing critique of social affairs and block proposals for new fundamentals of political struggle (Diken and Laustsen, 2004).

This problem stems from the observation that the meaning of 'SC' approximates 'good society' in the political discourse. Justifications for cohesion policies thus resemble tautologies: One should promote a good society because it is good. Correspondingly, policies contrary to SC are predefined as bad. However, anything can be framed into contrariness given the opacity of SC, and it becomes difficult to disagree with SC arguments – anyone against good society? Unlikely though that may be, cohesion policies seem inappropriate for dealing with all political issues, such as the underlying distribution of power and recognition that determine the social distribution of goods and rights. A liberal democracy committed to serving the needs of its citizens qua individuals, not merely as a single social body, should thus recognize the limits of cohesion policies and weigh SC issues against competing concerns such as social justice (e.g. Boucher 2013), recognition (e.g.

Juul 2010), and solidarity (e.g. Vasta 2010). I do not enter details here as I am more concerned with the overall function of SC arguments.

This brings me to the third problem of social oneness. In so far as politics also concerns struggles for representations of social phenomena (e.g. a rise in Eastern European workers), SC is a notion of political battle (Peters, 2010). The battle is fought in both discourses, where the power to define what makes the social cohere is co-extensional with the power to exclude opinions contrary to SC. This means that cohesion policies may work as an informal exclusion of political ends contrary to the overarching desirability of the given ideal of SC. The Council of Europe's book series *Trends in Social Cohesion* illustrates this approach to politics: "Deconstructing firmly anchored differences [...] is the only reasonable way towards a shared management of the transformations currently taking place [in the EU]" (Farrel and Oliveri, 2006, p. 24). One thus finds a near contradiction in terms when a liberal democratic institution promotes SC by dismantling differences rather than by including diversity on the basis of liberal respect for unique individuals.

I also want to draw attention to the attitudinal aspect of SC. Cohesion policies are not only about creating certain institutions or welfare objects but also imply that citizens confirm the set of *values* in SC. This requires, for instance, that there should be a high level of trust, that people commit to society, and that they are glued together and to the state by a sense of belonging. In short, cohesion policies regulate what people *do* as well as *feel* by a near-hegemonic value set. The oneness problem is then that the values implied by SC should be subject to debate in liberal democracy and not merely affirmed by social science as *the* proper form for sociality. And liberals may have further worries. The normative attitudinal core of SC allows policymakers to cross a threshold usually considered hands-off by liberals, that is, the sphere of privacy that secures citizens' freedom of thought.

This means that cohesion policies fueled by SC arguments alter the relationship between states and citizens, who, in order to attain SC, must enter into an *emotional* relationship with the state and commit (not just submit) themselves to a given normative version of sociality. The creation of the glue that holds society together, for proponents of SC, thus requires a collective oneness in terms of values and attitudes, i.e. the *solidus*. This contrasts with *rational* relationships favored by many liberals in line with the social contract tradition, according to which individuals with different interests but with a mutual need for security formalize the establishment of social order out of rational calculi. This kind of order tolerates any attitude that does not counter the maintenance of the resulting order. In contrast, SC arguments both aspire to regulate actions and to align attitudes as a certain affective attachment to the state and between its members. Liberal democracy was, however, invented to allow for the co-existence of divergent ways and

views of life (Israel, 2011, p. 53), and cohesion policies challenge this goal through their preoccupation with *solidus*.

5. Conclusion

The above shows that SC has a troubling function in relation to liberal democracy. It leads a dual life in two intertwined discourses that mutually define its function as a conceptually indeterminate yet universal political good in arguments for cohesion policies. This function may be reconstructed in a general SC argument:

(1)   SC exists
(2)   SC *should* exist
(3)   SC is threatened
(4)   Therefore, cohesion policies should be enacted.

Each step connects to the points I have dealt with. Step 1 reflects the ontological realism premise, which is justified by the body of affirmative studies in the scientific discourse. Step 2 expresses the status of SC as a given good. As the political value of SC is consensually assumed, this step is rarely made explicit. Step 3 mirrors the threat premise, which – usually without argument – is asserted as a conventional perception in the political discourse. It is justified by the framing of a phenomenon as incompatible with SC, such as the influx of Eastern European workers in the introductory example. Step 4 concludes that cohesion polices should be enacted to mitigate the perceived threat.

This reasoning poses three problems to liberal democracy. First, the conceptual looseness of SC, which is a consequence of the lack of clear definitions in the scientific discourse, means that political communication in terms of SC is misleading to the electorate and that SC arguments can support virtually any action in the absence of the quality control of deliberation in liberal democracy. Second, since SC appears as a champion of political ends, it immunizes cohesion policies to critique, which contradicts the recognition of dissent in liberal democracy. Furthermore, it subordinates other liberal concerns – e.g. issues of egalitarianism and distribution of rights – by shifting focus from individuals to the social body. Third, the aspiration to create a social oneness implies that cohesion policies target citizens' behavior as well as attitudes and thus enter the sphere of individual privacy, which is traditionally safeguarded by liberal democracy. To the extent that liberal democracy politically emancipates citizens, subjects of cohesion policies may thus be said to be de-emancipated through a strangely non-liberal and coercive kind of cohesion.

I conclude that these problems give liberals reason to question the idea of a *cohesive* glue holding society together. It is, rather, *corrosive* to liberal

democracy. It is thus peculiar that liberal democracies seem particularly eager to pursue cohesion polices, creating a contradiction between practiced and official ideals, blurring the political trajectory, and making it hard to hold policymakers accountable.

Let me add a final remark on the scope and impact of this conclusion. SC is a certain design of social order, but my argument does not exclude concerns for social order. It instead states that SC harbors its own conceptual problems and that the *kind* of social order advanced in SC arguments confronts liberal values. The conceptual issue calls for the scientific discourse to elaborate on the ontological realism premise and rework the analytical framework of SC. In light of the threat premise, the political issues imply a need for further normative debate on the worth of SC and its relation to other liberal values.

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