Societies, Identity, and Belonging[1]

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The word *society* gets tossed around a lot. We can belong to the American Philosophical Society, be considered part of the high society, or live in the society of others, but what I'll focus on here is the group, outside the immediate family, to which we feel a great allegiance and which we are often willing to fight for or even die for. Societies persist over generations and membership in them is involuntary. If you were born into a society, the usual expectation is that your grandchildren also will be part of the society. Transfer of individuals between societies is possible, but the process is arduous and often uncertain. Furthermore, most societies exclusively occupy a territory.

My wife Melissa and I have traveled around the world to track down and study a wide range of animal species. In the course of those expeditions I also have encountered hunter-gatherer and tribal groups (Figure 1). These experiences with my fellow human beings, and with other species, have led me to brood often and hard about the nature of societies.

Picking out societies by the features mentioned in the first paragraph, one realizes that a variety of groups conform to the idea of a society, including the tribal and hunter-gatherer groups. This perspective would surprise those sociologists and political scientists since Benedict Anderson (1982) who think of societies as "imagined communities" brought into existence, in the form of nations (or "states"), by modern mass media. However, my contention (Moffett 2013, 2019a) is that societies have been focal points of human life throughout history, and prehistory. Indeed, when we look at the basic characteristics of societies described above, we see that societies exist among animals also, ranging from beehives to meerkat clans.[2]

How do academics distinguish societies? In fields like anthropology and biology, societies are often described in terms of *cooperation*—a society is a cooperative group. This viewpoint seems curious when we

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2 Psychologists point to additional aspects of human societies that may be impossible to elucidate for animals: people often perceive society members as acting together like a unit—possessing *entitativity*—and as sharing an underlying essence. We sense an inner Frenchness to the French, and Germanness to Germans.

FIGURE 1. Human societies predated nations, and indeed have been with us since the origin of our species. I have been fortunate to spend time with tribal and hunter-gatherer societies and see firsthand how they function, such as in New Guinea (left), with Peru's Machiguenga (top right), and with Africa's Bushmen (bottom right). Photos by Mark W. Moffett.

look around the world today. While cooperation is an important feature of human societies, it certainly isn't universal within them, as it is, for instance, among the workers in many ant colonies. A person's worst enemy may well be a fellow citizen of his or her country. Venezuela has been looking totally dysfunctional, and yet surveys indicate that its citizens tend to be extremely patriotic. On the other hand, citizens and groups from different societies can freely cooperate, and most of us have foreign friends. Adding to the difficulty of thinking about societies as cooperative groups is the hermit who refuses to pay taxes, indeed, to cooperate with anyone, but in spite of that is recognizably of a particular nationality and able to claim the passport of that nation.

Of course, societies are simply one aspect of belonging. There is a diversity of groups both within societies and between them today, from the American Philosophical Society to corporations, political parties, sports team enthusiasts, and so forth. Studying such affiliations has been a core concern of social psychology. Still, these groups are less primal, urgent, and lasting than our societies. You don't think of the

people at your book club meetings as likely to pass their memberships on to their children's children, nor are you likely to go to war with other book clubs. Nevertheless, there are groups that commandeer certain characteristics of societies in ways that increase the commitment of their members—effective companies instill a spirit of unity by encouraging employees to share a corporate culture while training them to think and act alike and work toward common goals; some criminal organizations go a step further by trying to enforce this commitment across the generations.

Where did our capacity to join multiplicious groups come from? Early nomadic hunter-gatherers seldom had anything equivalent—their people belonged to a family, a society, and little else. Our diverse other attachments arose after people settled down, in an amplification of social complexity that bears on our need to be both like others but also different (the idea of optimal distinctiveness developed by the social psychologist Marilynn Brewer [1991, 1999], which would have caused groups to flourish as societies grew larger and people felt "lost in the crowd"). Social networks, like these social groups, have been subject to intense research by psychologists. As with group affiliations, however, our personal networks extend both within and between societies and tend to be fluid; for instance, who we consider to be our close friends changes over the years. By comparison, the social and physical boundaries of a society tend to be remarkably stable barring subjugation by another society or a civil war.

All this is to say that scholars need to disentangle the idea of being *social* from that of being in a *society*. These are two different things. We will achieve a more accurate understanding of human societies if we deemphasize cooperation *per se* to focus instead on societies as a certain sort of group with a clear and enduring membership. Given that perspective, we can productively ask how patterns of cooperation can emerge in societies, as well as between societies. German social theorist Georg Simmel (1950) once proclaimed that cooperation and conflict are inextricable forms of sociation, and indeed, it seems to me that to speak only of cooperation is to cherry-pick.

As I have thought more about societies in terms of their closed memberships, I have increasingly come to realize what an amazing thing a coffee shop is. Enter a café and you aren't obliged to walk up and introduce yourself to those you don't know. Nor do you feel an urge to kill the others sipping their lattes, and it's very unlikely that anyone there will want to kill you. This isn't possible for many species, which don't allow for the presence of strangers. A chimpanzee surrounded by apes it's never met would go insane with fear or anger. Like most vertebrates, chimps must be familiar with everyone they

FIGURE 2. In most vertebrate animals with societies, all the members need to know one another as individuals. Such individual recognition societies, for example, characterize African wild dogs, savanna elephants, baboons, and lions (clockwise from top left). Our ancestors broke free of this constraint. Photos by Mark W. Moffett.

encounter, at least by sight, in order to place them as belonging to their society (called a "community" in chimpanzees).

I propose that the emergence of the capacity to be around strangers, sometime in our deep past, meant that human societies could grow to contain millions, well before they actually came to do so. Let's look at what this means.

Studying species across the animal kingdom, I've differentiated two distinct types of society, the *individual recognition society* and the *anonymous society*. For individual recognition species, every member has to know everybody else in their society. This category includes the great majority of vertebrate species with societies. Such societies are quite small—often a few dozen, as in lions, spotted hyenas, wild dogs, and so on—with chimpanzee communities, near the high end, reaching over 200 (Figure 2). Presumably this population ceiling exists at least in part because of the cognitive burden the animals face in keeping track of each other, as individuals. Larger groups, such as the bats pouring out of a cave each evening, rarely are societies. Herds of bison,

schools of herring, and flocks of starlings are fluid—they have no set memberships. Given the opportunity, individuals are free to enter and leave their populations. While it's true that some of these species can be intensely social, they don't form societies.

There are species where societies grow huge, however. Such animals take a different approach to society building. Rather than basing their memberships around an intimate knowledge of others as individuals, society members distinguish themselves from outsiders of the same species by means of some trait, or "marker." As long as you display the right marker or markers, you're golden, regardless of whether other members know you (Tsutsui 2004). The premier examples of such anonymous societies are those of social insects. Insects use simple signals, chemical cues on the body surface, which basically act as a national flag. The societies can be tiny or enormous depending on the colony life cycle. As long as each added individual sticks to the same flag, the colonies of certain ants can grow and grow. The ultimate exemplar may be the Argentine ant, with societies that can reach into the billions. In fact, in California, one such Argentine ant "supercolony" extends from San Francisco Bay to the Mexican border. Take an ant worker from the Bay Area and drop it off 530 miles away at the Mexican border, and it will continue to do just fine, because it's still, in effect, home. You yourself will have to show your passport to a border agent, but the ant can go straight to work with its new colony-mates, who show the same national emblem the ants use up north.

However, drive back north again for a few miles and carry that same worker one inch over a borderline near San Diego, invisible to our eyes but which ants mark off with their lives, and it's as good as dead. As it turns out, all of Southern California is occupied by four Argentine ant supercolonies, each with its own emblematic scent, which occupy territories that converge here. The most lethal battlefronts recorded for any species extend for kilometers through this neighborhood; luckily, ants can't scream since millions perish underfoot each week amongst the grass blades of the tidy lawns of northern San Diego County (Moffett 2012).

Among the vertebrates, the only comparable species, with societies that seem to be able to grow indefinitely as long as space and resources permit, is *Homo sapiens* (Moffett 2019b). Our nations can keep adding more individuals, surrounding us nowadays with strangers in abundance.

Some folks find this comparison to an insect disturbing. They say, "Mark, you're obsessed with ants." To which I say, "Do not be afraid of your inner ant" (Moffett 2020). Certainly, we do things that are more complicated than ants in the ways we distinguish between groups,

and especially between society members and foreigners. And unlike both ants and chimpanzees, we also are tolerant of outsiders in our midst, particularly those whom we recognize as being from well-liked societies; in this, humans are more like the bonobo, a species of ape equally related to our species that can similarly befriend foreign individuals but despite that maintains clear society boundaries.

Chemical cues—odors—seem much less significant as markers for people than ants. Among the crucial traits for us are cultural differences; clearly, obvious signals like national flags matter, as do rituals and often language. But many human markers are subtle. Imagine living in the distant past when an approaching person could be dangerous if he or she didn't belong to our tribe. Could people detect such outsiders before they drew too close? Abigail Marsh, a psychologist at Georgetown University, has shown that we often correctly distinguish fellow citizens (Americans in her experiment) by the way they express emotions, or from afar by how they walk or wave a hand (Marsh, Elfenbein, and Ambady 2003, 2007). Few of her subjects could explain how they did this, and seldom even knew they had the skill: it's certainly not anything people were taught. We humans are actually walking billboards for our identities; our bodies and movements are laden with markers, few of which enter our conscious awareness.

Consider our hair. What fascinates me is that it doesn't only need to be groomed, the way that other primates do for each other; people must also style their hair if just to keep it out of their eyes. Many tribes had an identifying hairstyle or range of styles, one example being the Mohawk tribal coiffure. Even though a tribe can permit members to alter their hair to express their personal identities, the overall effect made it clear who belonged to which tribe (Thierry 2005; Moffett 2019a).

Someday I hope scientists learn when it was in the past that our head hair grew so unmanageable as to require styling—this was likely about the time, after our divergence from chimpanzees, that protohumans began to employ markers of identity that allowed them to feel comfortable around strangers who belonged to their societies. This shift from individual recognition, when our ancestors had to know each other as chimps do, to anonymous societies was a turning point in human evolution. The strategy would have made sense even initially, when human societies were still small, since a showy marker such as body paint or a hairstyle reduces the risk of mistaking foe for friend (or vice versa), a potentially dangerous error.

Will our societies ever go away? Most signs point to no. Societies can be heavily interdependent, and you might think that this need for

outside help would reduce the significance of social differences to the point where what had been two societies becomes one. Yet evidence from psychology suggests that reliance between groups doesn't reduce the importance of their differences. History supports this. The Iroquois Confederacy persisted for centuries, for example, with its five tribes retaining their distinctions (Dennis 1993). The European Union, too, lacks venerable uniting symbols and an origin story that might drive people's attachment the way their nations have done since time immemorial, making the EU disposable despite its economic and defense value. Or consider that even while China has been flooded with American goods, the Chinese people have remained thoroughly Chinese (Knight 2008). Nor is the interconnectedness brought about by social media erasing national borders.

Indeed, from what I have determined, healthy societies never freely merge, in humans or in other animals (with the possible exception of elephants, and then rarely). Throughout our tumultuous history, generating a single society out of populations from formerly independent societies has required the employment of force—war and subjugation (Carneiro 2012; Moffett 2019a). The ethnicities and races of today's nations are largely an outcome of a violent past, sometimes long forgotten. Such groups converge on the markers required for them to be considered members of the greater society but retain their differences, too. In part this is unavoidable; there can be differences in physical appearance, for example. In part it is driven by the dominant ethnicity, who both expect minority groups to fit in and also want to keep their own separate and privileged status. And in part it's the desire of the minorities, who retain some of their own sense of community and uniqueness.

These observations have obvious implications for the phenomenon of immigration. The social issues around immigration arise from the disconnect between the legal definition of citizenship and how our brains register who belongs. We measure those around us, often subconsciously, by their way of being—how they walk, talk, smile, and so on. These details are more important in the day-to-day than the facts and figures that immigrants are expected to learn about their new country to earn their citizenship. This dissonance drives many social conflicts. So it is that while the British sociologist T. H. Marshall (1950) described citizenship as "a claim to be accepted as full members of the society," the real issue, given what we know about psychology, is what is meant by the word *full* (e.g., Devos and Ma 2008). Whether immigrants thrive has much to do with the ability of newcomers or their descendants to assume the signifiers of the society to an extent that its other members find sufficiently acceptable.

Our most primal group affiliations give us meaning and validation—and the most ancient of those affiliations is to our society, though the fault lines of ethnicity and race, artificial as they may sometimes be, retain a similar hold on us. Giving them up would strike against timeless yearnings. The truth is we can't give them up. It's become clear from studies by University of Kent psychologist David Kelly and colleagues (2005) that preverbal infants already respond preferentially to others of their race, or at least their primary caretaker—before they can be told about such groups. Psychologists Banaji and Greenwald (2013) have further demonstrated that even politically progressive adults have implicit biases in favor of their own groups, which they seldom recognize in themselves.

Societies may be a permanent reality for humans and animals, yet they are forever in flux. A conclusion from my past research (Moffett 2019a) that I will pursue over the coming years is that societies go through a life cycle, as do their individual members, though of course over far longer periods of time (often many generations). While geographer Jared Diamond (2005) has chronicled the collapse of societies from ecological disasters and wars, the fact is that the catastrophes he discusses are not needed for societies to inevitably fall apart. My hypothesis is that societies generally fail due to a breakdown in the shared identity of their members. Such transformations of the familiar into the foreign may come about in different ways, depending on the species and situation. This subject is of unspeakable importance to our survival as a species, yet it's been all but ignored by both biologists and psychologists. How can we live harmoniously in the future, given the shifting nature of our sense of belonging together in societies? One question that hangs over us, for example, is whether the fragmentation of a society necessarily involves violence, and how any such antagonism can be managed.

In short, the acceptance of strangers was a breakthrough in the evolution of humanity. Still, humans have never lost their ancient allegiance to group identities, and our uneasy coexistence with outsiders is reflected both in the fault lines within societies and in the relationships between nations. These dynamics are an urgent area of study across the traditional academic disciplines.

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