RECENSÃO

Post-Society, de Carlos Bordoni, por Daniel Davison-Vecchione

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In *Post-Society*, Carlo Bordoni offers a sobering diagnosis of our times. The normalisation of social distancing; technological mediation of social relations; widespread existential loneliness; voluntary submission to new forms of surveillance and social control in the hope of strengthening security; and the increasing centrality of emotions in social life now characterise our social condition. Social relations are sustained with intense communication but without physical contact. Although these developments have roots in broader social transformations, the Covid-19 pandemic deepened and accelerated them.

The figure of Zygmunt Bauman, who passed away in 2017, looms large in *Post-Society*. Bauman (2000) famously argued that we have moved from a "heavy" or "solid" modernity to a "liquid" modernity, characterised by constant change and mobility in identities, relationships, and global economics. The world is more connected economically, and change is more rapid, but our life plans are less secure, we are more socially atomised, and we feel we have less control over events. To Bordoni, "[t]he traits of liquidity […] have 'solidified' within the post-social; they have become endemic and chronic" (Bordoni, 2022, p. 2). Especially important in this respect is Bauman's (2012) reinterpretation of liquid modernity as an "interregnum". This picks up on Antonio Gramsci's (1971, p. 276) widely quoted remark that "[t]he crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." As Bauman (2012, p. 49) notes, "Gramsci detached the idea of 'interregnum' from its habitual association with the interlude of (routine) transmission of hereditary or electable power" and "attached it to the extraordinary situations in which the extant legal frame of social order loses its grip and can hold no longer, whereas a new frame, made to the measure of newly emerged conditions responsible for making the old frame useless, is still at the designing stage, has not yet been fully assembled, or is not strong enough to be put in its place." In Bordoni's (2022, p. 25) view, the "interregnum" of liquidity has ended: now "people are suddenly faced with the new world."

By "post-social", Bordoni does not mean a literal end to social relations between individuals, or between individuals and institutions. As he puts it:

> […] the post-social is obviously based on a form of sociality, but one that differs from the sociality of the previous type of society, to which we refer as "modern society". This form is not postmodern but something more radical, which questions the very principles on which public and private relations were founded and drastically changes them, thus altering its reference values. (Bordoni, 2022, p. 19)

Underlying the "post-social" condition is a changed relationship between sociality and humanity: hitherto "it has been taken for granted that one encompasses the other, since the human being is implicitly a social being" (Bordoni, 2022, p. 5). Now we live in a condition of "more humanity, less sociality" (Bordoni, 2022, p. 6). Sociality exists in what one might call a sublimated form: it is still present, substantial, and linked with human sensitivity at a higher level, but experienced differently, with emotions – a human characteristic – receiving a new weight and impulse (Bordoni, 2022, pp. 5-6). Here the "post-social" sensibility manifests in "the form of a long-distance relationality that operates in a virtual environment, without any physical contact, but not without a great capacity for communication" (Bordoni, 2022, p. 6).

By Bordoni's (2022, p. 3) own admission, *Post-Society* is "a non-academic analysis of society in the aftermath of the pandemic." Nevertheless, Bordoni draws on a wealth of literature and examples to paint a striking panorama of the "post-social" world. He points to how, far from being only emergency measures adopted in a public health crisis, developments like working from home and distance learning have persisted in many areas of everyday life, deepening the enhanced technological mediation that has mitigated "[t]he individual's progressive loss of openness to the outside world" (Bordoni, 2022, p. 7). Desocialisation has affected our ethical outlook and practices, centring an egoistic principle of survival in a way that subordinates solidarity to self-serving interests. In Bordoni's (2022, p. 72) words, "[t]he nomos of cold ethics is dictated by the advantage of not needing the other, except in a virtual and quantitative form."

Engaging with such thinkers as Axel Honneth, Bordoni considers the issues of visibility and recognition in this desocialised, technologically-mediated landscape. In Bordoni's view, (2022, p. 128), the drift towards individualism makes recognition more important, especially in the absence of "social shock absorbers" like mutual trust and understanding, which in turn demands "a high degree of visibility," except "it is not the quality of the recognizer that is needed, only the quantity." This drives social media engagement and colours attitudes to surveillance. As Bordoni (2022, p. 111) notes, values like transparency, visibility, and clarity have Enlightenment roots, but "[i]n our neo-Enlightenment phase, the idea that transparency and authenticity are added values that need display in order for people to be accepted as good citizens has gained currency." Consequently, "most Internet users care very

little about data, images, and information about themselves, which they divulge with extreme ease" (Bordoni, 2022, p. 111). Despite this rather bleak picture, Bordoni (2022, p. 169) acknowledges that, during the pandemic, social media practices "serve to make us feel that we are still united, perhaps more than ever, in an emergency situation that requires us to keep the distance, to accept confinement and absence."

This brings us to the question of what *Post-Society* aims to achieve. Many of Bordoni's observations about technologically-mediated sociality and communication during the pandemic echo those made in major empirical studies, including those that Robert Putnam (2020, pp. 415-444) compiles and comments on in the 20th anniversary afterword to his 2000 classic *Bowling Alone*, which famously charts the reduction of major forms of social intercourse in American life and their negative impact on civic engagement. Nevertheless, it is easy to accuse Bordoni of overdrawing his conclusions. This is especially true considering how, despite the persisting pandemic, numerous office-based workplaces continuing to offer more "flexible" work-from-home arrangements, and the accelerated "death of the high street," which has left more and more town centres feeling like ghost towns, significant elements of pre-Covid social life, including pubs, clubs, music festivals, and in-person teaching, have returned with remarkably little sense of difference from their pre-pandemic state. Relatedly, it is not entirely clear whether Bordoni primarily sees "post-society" as an accurate description of current social conditions, a cultural-critical commentary on selected aspects of present-day life, a grounded anticipation of near-future social conditions that might emerge from observable trends, or something that encompasses all these modes of analysis.

Whilst this interpretation might prove controversial, in my view, *Post-Society* is best read as something akin to dystopian literature. I do not mean this unfavourably. Admittedly, Bordoni (2022, p. 142, pp. 144-145) himself voices concern with how dystopias have "disfigured" the future "with their need to warn us and to prepare us for the worst to come" and encourages sociologists to have a certain modesty when projecting possible future scenarios. Nevertheless, he explicitly acknowledges that "[t]he term 'post-society' is […] almost dystopian, because it envisages an inverted utopia," and that, while "we are not exactly living in a dystopia," "the threat is present every time an environmental disaster, a war, or a state of emergency is announced" (Bordoni, 2022, p. 19, p. 142). Similarly, Bordoni's (2022, p. 108, p. 111) analysis makes pointed references to classic dystopian works, including Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

Although space constraints prevent me from exploring this angle in depth, elsewhere I have argued that a form of dystopian imagination has long been at play within the enterprise of social theory (Davison-Vecchione, 2021; Seeger and Davison-Vecchione, 2019). Put simply,

like classics of dystopian literature, many classics of social theory achieve their conceptual richness and critical import by reflecting on current, observable tendencies and evaluatively speculating about their further development and implications. When considered in this light, we can understand how, despite the issues noted above, *Post-Society* manages to capture something unnervingly familiar and significant about our present condition. On these grounds, I recommend the book to specialists and general readers alike. And if I am correct that the dystopian imagination has been central to social theory since its inception, then Bordoni can count himself amongst distinguished company indeed.

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