

The Origins of the Concept of Society in Arabic, English and French Languages: A Conceptual Analysis of their Convergence and Divergence

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Abstract: This paper explores the etymological threads of the concept of Society in three languages: Arabic, English and French. It examines the etymological transformations of the concept society and its implications. The conceptual analysis this paper adopts in its analysis of the etymological and epistemological frameworks of the concept of Society helps to uncover the epistemological complexity of the concept 'society'. Hence, the ultimate goal of this paper is to revisit the current definitional lines of society with the aim of marking out the areas of convergence and divergence between them. In doing so, it suggests approaching the concept Society at two interrelated levels. Where, on the one hand, primacy will be given to marking out the etymological trajectories of the concept 'society' from different perspectives; then focus will be placed, on the other hand, on analyzing the key conceptions in which these arcades are entrenched.

Key words: Society • Community • Umma (Nation) • Qawm (People) • Tribe • Social Group

INTRODUCTION

Once one decides to write and/or to speak alike about 'one's' society, one feels the task as easier as that of describing a physical entity situated on a fixed platform. The feeling, even so, becomes stronger as one sits down on an arm-chair before a desk, picks up a pen along with some blank sheets and starts jotting down different aspects of one's society: Its history(ies), geography(ies), language(s), culture(s) and religion(s), among others. However, as the welter of information one comes across in the course of description is rewoven into a theoretical frame of reference and thus brought to be tested in the course of actual analysis, to use Raymond Williams's phrase[1] (1976), one's description shifts away from having it forced into, if not the "misleading expressions", at least simplistic ones.

This conceptual predicament certainly creates some kind of attrition in that it can get one caught between the desire to offer a satisfactory understanding of what society is or might be and the fear from getting such an account dwindled to something reductionist. Hence, to understand the concept of society in its microscopic picture, this paper suggests approaching it at two interrelated levels. Where, on the one hand, primacy will be given to marking out the etymological trajectories of the concept 'society' from different perspectives;

then focus will be placed, on the other hand, on analyzing the key conceptions in which these arcades are entrenched.

The Etymological Frameworks of Society: It is not too much to say that tracing both the etymological and epistemological trajectories of the concept society is a long path to tread as it can be traceable as far back as human existence started itself. However, it should suffice to note that this paper is much more concerned with the etymological and epistemological debates that have burst with tremendous force on the intellectual landscape than the historical origins of the concept 'society' as such. In so doing, it is worth beginning by detaining oneself, for a while, for the definitional enticements offered by the most referred-to dictionaries

According to the most 'recognized' Arabic dictionaries, the term المجتمع [Al-mojtama'a] (society) is derived from the verb جمع [jama'a] (to gather, collect; to combine, group; to join, unite, connect; to assemble, put together) [2]. However, a considerable number of Arab etymologists argue that the term 'society' as such does not exist in the old Arabic language dictionaries, as it has recently appeared on the Arab conceptual landscape. [3] For this reason, one finds Arab sociologists trying to develop some definitions of the concept society.

For instance, Mustapha Al Khashab, an Egyptian sociologist, offers an analysis of the concept of 'society' that summarizes the most frequently-used definitions which see it as the general framework that determines the relationships emerging between the individuals living inside it in the form of units and groups [4]. According to others, society is a bevy of individuals who live on a given politically recognized geographical space, sharing a set of traditions, customs and values alongside with a set of social norms and common interests that have their roots in their religion, language, history and race [5]. Still others define society as the totality of the individuals' relations that interact with organizations and associations that have certain rules and foundations [6]. Furthermore, Al Faraj Abdellah Mubarak explains that some sociologists demand that for a society to be called so, there should be (a) - individuals living together for a long period of time; (b)- a land on which they reside; and (c) systems that determine their social relations and a collective sense of belonging to a social unity [7].

From such perspective, one finds Mohamed Amine Al-Masri, a well-known Syrian Islamic thinker, arguing that the Muslim society is that which is distinguished from other societies in terms of its special systems, Quranic rules and its members who share one Aqida (Faith) and go for one *kiblah* (direction to which Moslems turn in prayer-toward Mecca) [8]; and thus society, though it consists of various *Aqwam* (peoples, nations, kins, kinsfolks, kindreds) [9] and languages-as this argument runs-is based on common characteristics, traits, general norms and unified customs [10]. Stemmed from such a perspective, some others, nonetheless, go so far to suggest that Islamic society-insofar as it is found on such grounds-needs no territory as Islam has come to correct the wrongdoings of all human beings so that Islamic society stays open to new converts regardless of their color, race, culture, gender, class, education, geographical backgrounds. Differently however, others see Islamic society as a group of Muslims who settle over a land [11], united by Islam and whose affairs are run by Islamic rules and enactments and under the rule of leaders chosen among them [12]. Following the same stratum, though differently expressed, the Iranian thinker, Ashahid Murtadi Al Mathari sees society as:

- Every group of human individuals, who are associated with each other by virtue of shared systems, customs, traits and laws and lead a social life, forms a human society. The social life assumes a group of people living together on a given area and benefiting from the same natural environment in

terms of water, air and the types of food. This, as we indicated earlier, characterizes the human being; and thus it is not possible to say that a grove can lead a social life, even if it benefits from the same natural environment, as well as that a herd of gazelles and the like that live, graze and move from one place to another together, can be said to lead a social life and thus form a society of gazelles [13] (My translation).

Hence, two features, as he goes on explaining, distinguish human gatherings from any other type of groups of other creatures. The first one indicates that for human life to be conceived of as social is to be founded on satisfying needs, accumulating wealth and conducting works that entail labor division, wealth distribution based on given traditions and rules.

The second feature relates to contemplation, beliefs and morals. For him, "every group of people is, to a great extent, unified by prevailing thoughts, creeds and morals" [14] (My translation). With due recognition of these interrelated features of human society, Ashahid Murtadi Al Mathari concludes his definition by saying that society should be considered as "a group of people who live under a social imperative by virtue of both the common needs and the same effects of beliefs and goals in a way that makes them united and linked together within one social life" (My translation). By way of analogy, he recounts that the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) described 'society'[15] "as a group of people who get into a ship and when it takes them to the heart of the sea with everybody having his own seat, one of them starts making a hole into the ship with the claim of doing that in his own place. So, if he is thwarted from doing so by the others, this would save them and himself alike from drowning"[16] (My translation).

If the term 'society' as such has recently made its way into Arabic language due to a number of reasons about which time and space limitations here do not allow to rehearse historical details-especially those related to the effects of colonialisms, the concept 'society', both in French and English, as having been the most dominant colonial languages worldwide, has its roots in Indo-European traditions as it is derived from the Latin words *societas* and *socius* [17] which mean respectively *fellowship* and *companionship*. These two meanings of society are recurrently found among others both in French and English dictionaries.

For instance, in the most 'recognized' French dictionaries, such as *Le Petit Robert* and *Larousse*, the term *société* (society), in its literal sense, is defined as the totality of "relations mondaines, sociales," (mundane

social relations). From a sociological standpoint, society is looked at as “compagnie habituelle. Se plaisir dans la société des femmes” (Customary companionship. To like being in the society of women). Additionally, society refers to an “Ensemble de personnes qui se réunissent habituellement en raison d’affinité de classe. La haute société,” (a group of persons who habitually associate with one another on account of class interests: High society) [18].

From a particular sense, *Le Petit Robert* goes on defining society as (a) an “état particulier à certains êtres vivants, qui vivent en groupes organisés (a particular state of given human beings, who live in the form of organized groups); (b) as an “ensemble des personnes entre lesquelles existent des rapports organisés” (a group of persons between whom exist organizational relations); (c) and as a “groupe social limité dans le temps et dans l’espace. Les sociétés primitives” (a social group limited in time and space. Primitives societies). Moreover, *Le Petit Robert* adds other meanings that map society out as (a) “compagnie ou association religieuse? congrégation. La société de Jésus (a religious companionship or association); (b) as an “organisation fondée pour un travail commun ou une action commune (an organization founded for common work or action) [19].

From a legal perspective, society refers to a “groupement, issu d’un contrat, de personnes ayant mis des biens ou des activités en commun, en vue de partager les bénéfices éventuels ou de profiter d’une économie” (a group of persons, linked by a contract, having goods or conducting activities in common, with the aim of sharing eventual benefits or profiting from an economy). It may also be used to speak about a company, enterprise or institution (établissement). The term *société* can also be used, according to *Le Petit Robert*, as a “nom donné à certaines associations entre États (comme l’ancienne Société des Nations) (a name for given associations between States, such as the ancient League of Nations) [20].

English dictionaries, on the other hand, offer a wide variety of meanings which the concept society takes on. *Oxford Dictionary*, for example, gives about five definitions that read society subsequently as “(1) a system in which people live together in organized communities, people in general; (2) a community of people living in particular country or region and having shared customs, laws, organizations; (3) an organization of people formed for a particular purpose; a club; an association; (4) the class of people who are fashionable, wealthy, influential or of high rank in a place; the upper class; [and] (5) the situation of being with other people, company” [21].

Similarly, though differently put, the online-free dictionary [22] like many online dictionaries, defines society as “(1) the totality of social relationships among organized groups of human beings or animals; (2) a system of human organizations generating distinctive cultural patterns and institutions and usually providing protection, security, continuity and a national identity for its members; (3) such a system with reference to its mode of social and economic organization or its dominant class; (4) those with whom one has companionship; (5) an organized group of people associated for specific purpose or on account of some common interest; (6) the privileged class of people in a community, especially as considered superior or fashionable; (7) the social life and intercourse of such people to enter society as a debutante; [and] (8) companionship; the fact or state of being together with someone else” [23].

Following the same definitional line, in their *The Sage Dictionary of Sociology*, Steve Bruce and Steven Yearly bring about four meanings forward that oscillate between what they think to be the general, least useful sense and the particular one. From a broadest, ‘least useful’ sense, society-as they explain-“can be the totality of human relations.” It can also, from a particular perspective, refer to “any self-reproducing human group that”, as Bruce and Yearly state, “occupies a reasonably bounded territory and has a reasonably distinctive culture and set of social institutions.” In this respect, they argue that the concept ‘society’ is often used to point to various political and social organizations, such as nation-states. Furthermore, it is also used-as their explanation runs-to refer to “a particular people within a state.. . [or to] distinctive groups that sustain some sort of collective identity by virtue of culture and social interaction but lack a territory”[24].

Different Languages, Common Definitional Lines:

However different all the afore-mentioned definitions of ‘society’ might sound, one can still touch upon significant, particular areas of similarity. On the one hand, one notices that what lies thereby beyond these definitions-perhaps one may want to say repressed-is that most of them, if not all, tend to introduce society as something like a bounded entity. What is more is that such entity, which consists of a group or a class of people, large or small, high or low, is believed to develop-or at least live under-given systems and/or structures of social existence, out of which they develop and sustain some kind of order. The latter is usually energized with shared norms, values, customs, laws, rules, traditions and specific class interests among others

around which their relations are arranged in a way that distinguishes them from others, or at least keeps them associated with one another. On the other hand, of all the definitions brought forward so far, it is not out of the question to note that they all define society in light of other different concepts, such *community, group, individual, nation, tribe, kin, kinsfolk, kindred, clan* and *sect* among others. Indeed, however central the examination of each of these terms on its own might be, it remains very hard to pack more thought into fewer words to do so. Instead, primacy is going to be given, as is the main concern of this section, to sketching out a brief analysis of how these terms are commonly used to portray society.

From an Arab perspective, a variety of terms are used to refer to society, such as *Al Oumma, Al Qawm, Al Jama'a, Al Hizb, Ata'aifa* and *Arraht* [25]. *Al Oumma* (nation) refers to *Al Jama'a* (a group of people), religion and *Al Mella* (religion, nation). It is also used to speak about all Muslims [26]. *Al Qawm* (nation, tribe, group), on the other hand, is used to talk about *Al Jama'a* (community) whose members associate with one another for a common goal [27]. *Al Jama'a* (community) itself is used to refer to "any number of things, or *ta'aifa*; a group of people who share some common interest," (My translation) [28]. *Al Hizb* (party) refers to a group of people wielding over power [29]. This term appears in the *Quran*, as it is usually argued, to refer to the group who is victorious: "And whosoever takes Allah, His Messenger and who have believed, as Protectors, then *the party of Allah will be the victorious*" [Italics added] [30]. *Atta'ifa* (group of people) refers to a group or team of people whose size oscillates between one and one thousands [31]. Some claim that this term also appears in the *Quran* to refer to society [32]: "And if two parties among believers happen to get in fighting against each other, then make peace between them both"[33]. Last but not least, *Arraht* (a small group of people) is used to indicate a group of people that consists of no more than ten persons [34]. This term is also mentioned in the *Quran* to speak about *Al Achira* (one branch of a tribe) and tribe: Moses said, "O my people! Is then my family (tribe, sect, clan) of more importance to you than Allah?"[35]. Equally, terms, such as group, community, nation, association, organization among others are used in both French and English to describe society. Still, since all the French and English terms all refer almost to the same meanings [36] as those in Arabic, suffice it to remark that however imperative these terms are to understanding society, it should be noted that tracing their etymological origins entails years of research.

Instead, one can still go so far as to suggest that of all these terms, be they in Arabic, English or French, the term group sounds like an umbrella one that can encompass all the others, as it is recurrently used in almost not only all the definitions of society stated above, but also in those definitions of terms used to brand society. Unswervingly, when examining all these terms, one can notice that insofar as each term refers to a bounded entity, it sounds hard for the latter to be other than itself. For example, a nation cannot be only a tribe; the latter cannot be, in the same way, a folk or kindred. The reverse along this line of contrast remains true. But one way to settle down this chain of (im)possibilities is to analyze these different bounded entities as groups in that in each of these entities (nation, tribe, sect, folk, clan) one can find groups.

In understanding society as a bounded entity or a set of bounded entities, a simple-but interesting question-comes to mind: taking it as a bounded entity, what lies behind the boundaries set around it? One possible answer to this question is to look at society '*from within*', as the latter indicates that there is something or things existing inside-perhaps systems, structures, organizations, relations; or simply individuals, activities, companionships, associations, interests; or still all of these-things that might be either static or floating.

In trying to understand this '*from within*', the American sociologist James Henslin (2008) believes that society-as the largest and most complex type of group, to use his own words-"sets the stage for our life experiences." These experiences are, as his analysis goes on, structured through the interplay between small groups within society. Based on Emile Durkheim (1933), Henslin states that these small groups play the role of a buffer between the individual and the larger society to bloc what Durkheim termed as *anomie* [his Italics]; "a bewildering sense of not belonging"[37]. But before proceeding much further in examining small groups as the main components of society, Henslin offers a distinction between the small group and other concepts, such as the *aggregate and category*. For him, the aggregate is composed of individuals who share the same physical space, but do not feel themselves belonging together, such as people standing in a check-out line or drivers waiting at a red light. The category, on the other hand, is deemed to be a set of individuals who have characteristics in common, but do not interact with one another, such as "all college women who wear glasses or all men over 06 feet tall"[38].

Unlike the aggregate and category, small groups-as components forming society-exist to give us, according to Henslin, “a sense of belonging; something that we all need”[39]. This sense of belonging stems from the intimate relationships these small groups provide for individuals. Henslin divides these groups-but in a relational rather than organizational way-into various types forming society. According to him, one’s basic-one might say early-orientations to life spring from one’s association and cooperation with what Charles Cooley (1962) called *primary groups*.

Primary groups-as Henslin explains, based on Cooley’s arguments-contribute to one’s identity-formation; a sense of belonging and “a feeling of who one is through “intimate, face-to-face interaction.” To make it clear, by primary groups Henslin refers to those characterized by intimate face-to-face association and cooperation. They are primary in several senses, but chiefly in that they are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual”[40]. These groups, moreover, are composed mainly of family members and friends. Henslin argues that primary groups instil significant values and attitudes in individuals in a way that makes primary groups’ views “become the lenses through which we view life”[41]. Furthermore, he moves on to claim that “even as adults-no matter how far we move away from our childhood roots-early primary groups remain “inside” us. There, they continue to form part of the perspective from which we look out onto the world. Ultimately, then, it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to separate the self from our primary groups, for the self and our groups merge into a “we”[42].

The second type of groups forming society is what Henslin terms as *secondary groups*. According to him, this type differs from that of primary groups in that it is “larger, more anonymous, more formal and more impersonal.” Another feature is that members of such groups share common interest or are engaged in common activity. Their interaction with one another is based on “specific status, such as president, manager, worker, or student. Examples are a college class, the American Sociological Association and the Democratic Party.” Still, another discernible aspect of secondary groups is that insofar as “they often fail to satisfy our deep needs for intimate association”, Henslin explains, they “tend to break down into *primary groups*. At school and work, we form friendships. Our interaction with our friends is so important that we sometimes feel that if it weren’t for them, school or work ‘would drive us crazy” [43].

Rather than leaving it at this point, Henslin suggests that society also consists of two other types of groups; *in-groups and out-group* or what has frequently been referred to in different intellectual literatures as *outsiders and insiders*. For Henslin, *in-groups* point to the “groups toward which we feel loyalty” while *out-groups* are those “toward which we feel antagonism.”

Henslin goes on explaining that insofar as identifying oneself with a given group “can generate not only a sense of belonging, but also loyalty and feelings of superiority,” it can also lead to rivalries. Henslin states that “the rivalries are mild, such as sports rivalries among neighboring towns, in which the most extreme act is likely to be the furtive invasion of the out-group’s territory to steal a mascot, paint a rock, or uproot a goal post” [44]. In like vein, according to Ayyad Ablal (2011), a Moroccan Sociologist, these sports enmities find their ground in the way in which sport games develop a jargon that mainly draws upon a military terminology in that terms, such as defense, attack, strategy and techniques are often used in the process [45] (my translation). Other pictures of rivalries can also be discrimination, hatred and even murder. To clarify the effects of these rivalries on in-group’s members, Henslin brings up the example of Arab prisoners in the U.S prisons. He illuminates that the events of 9/11 were followed by coercive practices; “viewing Arabs as sinister, bloodthirsty villains, top U.S officials approved ‘cruel, inhuman and degrading’ treatment of prisoners-as long as they did not call it torture”[46].

Another interesting type of group is what Henslin calls *Reference Groups*. For him, a *reference group* is “a group that we use as a standard to evaluate ourselves.” Hence, each individual, as this definition goes, has a reference group, which may include one’s “family, neighbours, teachers, classmates, co-workers and the scouts or the members of a church, synagogue, or mosque.” As an explanation of this, Henslin recounts the following imagined, but likely to happen, scene:

- Suppose you have been offered a good job. It pays double what you hope to make even after you graduate from college. You have only two days to make up your mind. If you accept it, you will have to drop out of college. As you consider the matter, thoughts like this may go through your mind: “My friends will say I’m a fool if I don’t take the job...but Dad and Mom will practically go crazy. They’ve made sacrifices for me and they’ll be crushed if I don’t finish college. They’ve always said

I've got to get my education first, that good jobs will always be there... But, then, I'd like to see the look on the faces of those neighbors who said I'd never amount to much [47].

On the whole, reference groups, as the few lines stated above show, play a central role in evaluating one's behaviour and actions. However interesting such an explanation might be, it implies some kind of confusion which may be created in one's mind by virtue of the circulation of these reference groups' contradictory discourses in the same social space in which one happens to grow up. Hence, it is not too much to argue that the social space in which one is often disciplined-some might say socialized-or at least exposed to disciplining mechanisms, usually brims over with contradictory discourses, whose mismatch may, to a great extent, lead to inner pandemonium. Henslin traces back this potential state of mind to the existence of a wide range of reference groups. He states that "given the social diversity of our society and our social mobility, as we grow up many of us are exposed to contradictory ideas and standards from the groups that become significant to us. The "internal recordings" that play contradictory messages from these reference groups, then, are one price we pay for our social mobility" [48]. Insofar as this social mobility and its effects on one's perception of what forms society might take culminate in what has been referred to as the *detritorialization* of the social, they instigate debates on the ways in which the latter results in the fragmentation of the Self.

By Way of Conclusion: Insofar as all those definitions stated above tend to set a definitional and etymological framework for the concept "society", they raise a number of epistemological questions as disturbing as when, how and why such an entity (society) emerges, develops and changes. Still, who determines what and what determines who in such an entity? Or, alternatively, if should this entity be a system or an organization or a structure, or all of these, where does it start and stop, if it does at all?

However disturbing these questions are, one still feels eager to go much further in approaching society deeper enough as they open up the door for at least two possible interconnected epistemological paths. While the first one allows one to understand elements of society and their dynamics from 'within', the second path entices one to look at it from 'outside'. In methodological terms, these two epistemological paths invite two modes of

analysis: the first entices it into the micro-level one; the second one pushes it towards the macro-level. To put it more directly, whereas some of these questions motivate one to understand the dynamics of elements of society, other questions encourage one to extend one's research deeper enough to trace the intersecting historical contexts that gave birth to these dynamics.

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15. With this claim, one is left to wonder whether the term 'society' [al mojta'a] as such had existed during the Prophet Mohamed's (PBUH) times, or was it the case that the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) only described how human social life should look like with no intention to speak about human society as such in the same way it has been debated among sociologists. This sounds like speaking about Ibn Khaldoun or Auguste Comte as being the founders of Sociology in that they are claimed to be the first ones to study Society in a 'scientific' way even though they did not intend to breathe life into a 'new' field of study that would be called later on "Sociology".
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