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AFTER LATE MODERNITY: POSSIBLE SCENARIOS FOR FUTURE SOCIAL CHANGES

Contemporary society is currently undergoing milestone transformations. Many are the signs that modernity is moving into the background, no longer the dominant form of social order. This phase of decline is connected to numerous problems: a sense of uncertainty, a normative crisis, or, in other words, a state of anomie. The question therefore arises as to what comes next. If anomie is perceived as an illness, then three further scenarios are possible: the end of the world, crisis as a permanent state of affairs, or a healthy "recovery" which would entail the emergence and stabilization of a new type of society. This article presents all three of these variants: a society scattered across a network form of social order, a social order based upon a new type of community, and an order which, on a broad scale, incorporates nonhuman objects within human societies.

Keywords: late modernity, anomie, individualization, social networks, communities, nonhuman objects

LATE MODERNITY – SOCIETY IN UNSTABLE TIMES

Contemporary society finds itself in a phase involving diverse, abrupt, and far-reaching changes; it appears that modernity is experiencing either a collapse or an extensive reformulation. Yet modernity has been the social order since this form was born in the West at the end of the 18th century as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution as well as political revolutions: the French and American (Sztompka 2003: 493). Over the course of time it conquered ever larger regions of the world. Nevertheless, its typical phenomena, institutions, forms of social integration, and discourses lending sense and order to reality (the "grand narratives") are now vanishing or undergoing a significant metamorphosis. Society is losing the framework which institutions – such as industry, correlating class divisions, bureaucratic organizations, mass media, and nation-states – have been providing. This can no longer be described as a whole, be it functional or an amalgamation of conflicting parts.

These processes of transition have been ongoing as of the second half of the 20th century, as social scientists have been shedding light on a heightened individualization; a pluralization

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of cultures, convictions, ideologies, and lifestyles; the disintegration of fixed social structures leading to a crisis in individual identity; ever stronger consumerism; as well as the increased importance of information distribution channels alongside the technology and agencies responsible for their processing (see Szacki 2002: 917). It might seem that all of these phenomena are unrelated, yet it turns out that on a deeper level they are intricately interwoven.

For instance, the current individualization assumes autonomous creation of identity by an individual, regardless of the social structures in which he or she is entwined; the building blocks in this process progressively include more patterns of consumption, information, and diverse cultural contents. All of these processes are accompanied by an ever more dynamic globalization. Although that globalization is a consequence of a typically modern expansiveness, the world order is collapsing under its own weight and chaos. Moreover, the overpowering and dominating influence of Western civilization has been leading from the start – and thus the problems of this cultural circle have become the problems of the entire global community.

The contemporary transformations sometimes manifest themselves as grand and momentous as those which took place during the transition from the traditional to the modern society (Krzysztofek 2012: 20). This is why some theoreticians and social scientists describe the shifting modern society as postmodern. Others, however, feel that modernity is continuing, although changing its shape – sometimes quite radically. These sociologists maintain that the phenomena taking place are not only a continuation but also an intensification of modern tendencies. Anthony Giddens (2008) draws singular attention to this, especially when, with Scott Lash and Ulrich Beck, he calls these days "late modernity" (Beck, Giddens, Lash 2009). Giddens also underscores that the application of concepts such as postmodernity is, all in all, an expression of futility when facing a world that has become incomprehensible and unpredictable.

Yet another thinker who felt that the existing society has not ceased being modern was Zygmunt Bauman (2006) who declared that it had only become a different kind of modern. Bauman did notice the breakdown of a social order rooted in strong and permanent institutional structures; he describes this state of affairs via metaphors such as "melting" or "dissolving" and dubbed the latest historical phase as "liquid." Furthermore, he stresses that this "liquidity" is part of a logical chain of processes initiated in the mature phase of modernity. This continuation of modern tendencies amidst simultaneous transformations and intensifications can be observed in such trends as individualization, differentiation, and rationality. Mature modernity was characterized by such components (see Sztompka 2003: 563–564), and so late modernity is characterized by their altered and radicalized forms.

Individualization pertains to the emancipation of a human being – the possibility to decide for him or herself and to bear the responsibility for such decisions. The sources of individualization can be found in the shifts which gave rise to the modern era. Both the Industrial Revolution and the philosophical thinking of that period began to contribute to the emancipation of human beings from the all-encompassing power of communities. The dominant form of socialization ceased to be the local society (*Gemeinschaft*) associated with traditional societies. As a result of the mass migrations evoked by the Industrial Revolution, clustered metropolises arose in which people felt alienated and linked to one another primarily on the basis of economic exchange (*Gesellschaft*). Thus the dominant means of

socialization was now an outsized, individualized society based upon impersonal relations and social structures (Tönnies 1988).

Classical sociology underscores that *Gesellschaft* is characterized by a certain degree of individual independence, but this goes hand in hand with isolation and a significant deficit of social ties. Nevertheless, *Gesellschaft* gave rise to many a new type of category (e.g. social classes, nations, nuclear families, circles of friends, and labour unions and other collectives). These novel formations proved to be a crucial source for social norms and a sense of identity; they also sheltered the individual from a sense of loneliness or uprooting.

This situation began to change in the mid-20th century, largely under the influence of the 1960s counterculture. Hence individualization today tends to mean an underscoring by individuals of their own distinctiveness with the possibility of severing any and all ties that bind. Persons are not only "set free" of their traditional communities, but also other social formations such as classes, families, and gender categories (Beck 2002: 111–112). Individualization as an option to disconnect from others also entails the necessity of reflectively constructing a unique, "authentic" identity for oneself – a process marking the second phase of mature modernity. This is complemented by a "duty" to create for oneself a maximally happy and successful life – a cultural commandment to focus upon oneself and to demonstrate such original and exceptional traits as will distinguish the individual from others (see Jacyno 2007).

This novel dimension of individualism has many geneses. Among them is a growing degree of social mobility alongside the decline of such communities as social classes, labour unions, and professional associations. All of this is also associated with technological advancement. Increasingly efficient means of communication and transportation are simplifying physical mobility and changes in place of residence; social conditions often force changes in jobs, forms of employment, or even career tracks. Quite aptly Giddens (2004: 84) linked the new individualism to globalization.

All the same, this phenomenon can be as much a blessing as a curse. It expands one's range of freedom, but also one's responsibility for the consequences of choices made. Amplified, too, is uncertainty and insecurity, as there is decreased support in relationships, communities, and social institutions. As Jean-François Lyotard (1997: 58) observes, "each individual is referred to himself. And each of us knows that our *self* does not amount to much." An outcome is "the dissolution of the social bond and the disintegration of social aggregates into a mass of individual atoms thrown into the absurdity of Brownian motion". Temporary and impermanent forms of rooting – even if they could provide behavioural norms and guidelines – are like "cloakroom communities" (Bauman 2006: 308–321) which lend no support in the long run. They are rather attempts to satisfy a need to belong and to find one's place in the world, but are easily cast aside when they demand engagement and commitment.

Nevertheless, the supply of options from which to choose was and continues to be meaningfully limited. Traditional industry and manufacturing could only produce less than the desired number of consumer goods; analogue media offered a limited number of print periodicals and telecommunications channels; customary norms were still so anchored as to impede real choices of an employment career (for instance, women were often precluded from undertaking education and work); physical transportation around the world was so slow as to render selection of another place to live much less than free; and so on.

However, once those constraints were lifted (especially as a result of technological achievements) options of all ilk bourgeoned exponentially, choices including ways of life, products, information, ideas, viewpoints, tastes, social roles, professional careers, interests. Consequently, the modern world began to resemble, in Bauman's words, "an infinite collection of possibilities: a container filled to the brim with a countless multitude of opportunities yet to be chased or already missed." Moreover, "There are more – painfully more – possibilities than any individual life, however long, adventurous and industrious, can attempt to explore, let alone to adopt" (Bauman 2006: 95). However, the necessity of making a selection from the realm of possibilities leads to doubts about whether the individualized society has not sent too many signals and hence whether a person has truly made the right choice.

It is easy to observe that individualization and differentiation are tightly spliced with the development of science and technology. This is a consequence of the next principle of modernity – rationality – which is inherited from the Enlightenment postulate that social beliefs and actions should be based upon reason. Therefore, conviction and behavior should be deprived of emotion and all that can be considered irrational such as prejudice, superstition, or creed. The apotheosis of reason in the modern sense entails an imperative of calculation, planning, efficiency, objectivity, etc. Rationality gradually came to also encompass those spheres which had theretofore been subordinated by religion and belief systems. The world was now divested of "enchantment," meaning that non-rational convictions anchored in traditional beliefs, myths, customs, or magical thinking were delegitimized (Weber 2011). The sole legitimate form of gaining certain knowledge was science – anchored in experience, scientific methodologies, formal logic, and the objectivity of results divested of the researcher's personal traits. Modern times comprise a period of an extraordinarily intensive expansion of information, invention, and discovery of the principles governing the world.

All this was an outcome of unprecedented technological progress. Scientific discoveries (e.g., electricity itself) often made their way into everyday practical usage. The rapid development of science, industry, and technology was both a consequence as well as a reinforcement of modernity as a specific type of social order. Scientific achievements and technical inventions (e.g., the steam engine) facilitated the industrial revolution which (as one of many causal factors) led to the birth of modernity. Furthermore, it could only be in such a new world order that subsequent inventions such as the combustion engine, telegraph, and telephone could appear and be applied practically.

Yet another dialectic relationship manifests itself between technological achievements and the late modernity society: computers, the internet, mobile phones, and other digital technology have become symbols of the contemporary world. In fact, they are sometimes viewed as a definitive trait of society today – something made evident in concepts referring to the "information society" (see Krzysztofek, Szczepański 2005). The creation of digital information and communication technologies comprises what Manuel Castells (2007: 52–78) calls the next technological revolution, one bearing repercussions comparable to those of the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries. Nevertheless, these technologies should not be seen as the sole cause of current social changes. After all, just as with the inventions of the Industrial Revolution, digital technologies could only find general, practical applications under specific social conditions. For example, only the individualized society of late

modernity could give rise to a desire for personal computers and other personalized digital equipment.

Here it should be noted that the above-mentioned modern tendencies have evoked and continue to evoke negative reactions and backlash trends. Accompanying individualization is both the emancipation of successive social groups and protests on the part of defenders of the traditional order. The response to a dissolving national identity is a host of nationalisms; in response to secularization there is religious fundamentalism; the dominance of rationalistic discourses leads to the prospering of irrationalism (e.g., rejection of science and medicine, embracement of conspiracy and magic); globalization evokes anti-globalization movements; and so on. These days such phenomena often stand as attempts to find the meaning of life in a chaotic and uncertain reality; the very appearance of these phenomena deepens a sense of being lost, of finding no signposts directing the individual how to live, in what to believe, what is (un)important, and what is right or wrong.

Much weaker, however, is the backlash against digital technologies – something along the lines of the folk movement in the age of industry. There are some movements and trends proclaiming the wonders of slow life to be found in rituals such as slow food and a return to nature, but few are those who push for a radical rejection of technological advances. Intriguingly enough, for some backlash movements the tools of digital technology are crucial to action, organization, and expression (e.g., usage of YouTube by ISIS or Facebook by anti-vaccination advocates). Hence inventions which emerged out of rationalism can now serve irrationalism.

CRISIS, ANOMIE, AND THE COLLAPSE OF PERMANENT STRUCTURES – THE END OF SOCIETY?

A characteristic trait of contemporary society is a broadly understood "multiplicity" – the multiplication of both the number of human beings and their ways of life. There are also multiple options from which to choose. Who a person is and what he or she does in life is a completely open question to be answered by the individual. Multiple, too, are the levels and directions of the bonds and relationships among individuals, groups, and institutions around the world. Hence the social world becomes extremely complicated, unpredictable, and lacking in fundamental principles. It is often described as complex (see Urry 2005), but from the perspective of the individual it looks like bedlam. According to Mirosława Marody (2015: 82–118), such an impression stems from living in the midst of masses of people, goods, and information. Marody sees these three types of a sense of excess as generational experiences of modernity.

The number of people inhabiting the Earth is growing ever larger. Yet the latest means of transportation permit those people to travel fast and easily, even across long distances, while information-communication technologies facilitate mediated contacts unfettered by time and space. It is true that both population growth and migrations were typical of the era of early modernity, but the scale and intensity of these phenomena are much greater today. An aftereffect of this is that individuals are more often confronted by numerous others – each person representing different patterns of behavior and cultural contents. But such interpersonal contacts

are often devoid of the context which would lend them sense and meaning. A consequence is that the behavior of others is ever more incomprehensible. Adding to the confusion is the disappearance of established norms and expectations associated with social positions and roles. Human beings begin to experience a feeling of being "jam-packed" because masses of people cannot, by any means, be situated within a social order framework. Hence the masses appear to be all the more oppressive than the still rather large number of persons with whom an individual is capable of socially engaging.

Similar is the issue of an excess of goods. Automated industry permits high quantity production, while increasingly improved means of transportation permit expedited distribution around the globe. In today's world, buying and consuming becomes simpler and progressively more important. Nonetheless, the products and patterns of consumption now cease to have a permanent and universally recognized delineation. The incapability of placing goods within a network of meanings and of reading the message those goods bear contributes to a perception of these products as superfluous.

The same pertains to the issue of excess information. Computer technology and digital media facilitate an unparalleled greater amount of information, disseminated on a global scale. As Marody (2015: 111) argues, this is not just a matter of too much information, but rather the fact that they stem from various frameworks and orders. This information is not inscribed into any single, consistent vision which would describe the entire world – delineating what is normal, good, and obvious, or not. In other words, the knowledge imparted is not part of any "grand narrative" – in truth, to be more precise, it is derived from the most varied and even most exotic of narratives. The effect is a cacophony which arouses a feeling of too much information.

At the root of these feelings of overload and of functioning in a chaotic, unintelligible reality is difficulty in describing and understanding other humans (along with their cultural products) via commonly known and shared categories. This loss of an "intersubjective conspicuousness of the social world" can be, as Marody (2015: 115) observes, treated as a symptom of what Émile Durkheim (1999) labelled social anomie. The normative anarchy described by this classic sociologist was characteristic of the transition from the traditional society to the modern one. Perhaps the current state of anomie is now reflective of the collapse of the subsequent social order – of modern society itself (Marody 2015: 115). A similar conclusion – that society no longer exists – was reached earlier (albeit on the basis of other indicators) by Alain Touraine (2013). He, in turn, places emphasis on the disintegration of the modern society's institutional frames of reference. He calls attention to the breakdown of an order anchored in fixed representations of society (e.g. nation-states, political parties, and labour unions). Therefore, a coherent society no longer exists: its substitute is an assemblage of discrete individuals, each of whom shapes his or her own life.

At this point, however, it should be noted that an assertion that society no longer exists (however catchy the phrase) is dispossessed of any sociological sense. Defining society as a conglomerate of social actions or as a field of interpersonal relationships undergoing a continual process of transformation, as did Piotr Sztompka (2016: 29), then we must admit that society will last as long as there are human beings and actions and relationships among them. After all, Touraine did point not towards an end of society in general, but only a certain

form: the modern society organized within nation-states. Few would raise doubts about the fact that this formula, this form of socialization, has exhausted its means. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, sociologists are not in agreement as to whether there has been a complete severance with modernity, or if this just entails an intensification and reformulation of its archetypal characteristics. Hence we can state that society does exist, albeit taking on different and novel forms.

If we accept, as Durkheim himself did, the metaphor of anomie as a social illness, then we can venture to describe potential scenarios. An illness can, after all, result in three types of further developments. The first and most dangerous is, of course, death. Here the current state of anomie would, in the near future, lead to the annihilation of all of humankind – not just a form of human society. If we define society, as explicated above, as a conglomerate of social actions or as a field of interpersonal relations continuously changing, then the expiration of society would also mean the expiration of the entire human race. This is not, unfortunately, an impossible scenario, especially if we consider the risk of an ecological catastrophe or nuclear war, which are foreseeable (if distant) consequences of modernity. It is also possible to imagine (albeit more within the realm of science fiction) the existence of some dispersed collective of individuals, isolated from one another, served by robots, and participating only in virtual relations with computer-generated, phantom images of others. In this case humanity would exist, but not society.

The second possible development of illness is a chronic state which would entail a perpetual crisis situation of uncertainty, constant conflict arising from cultural confrontation, and disintegrating normative systems (see Krzysztofek 2012, 2017: 218). Making this scenario more likely is the rapidity and intensity of the changes actually transpiring. The expansion of technology, globalization, and individualization, alongside exponential and accelerated interpersonal contacts, mean that shifts not only take place more quickly, but they are self-propelled. Nearly every year brings technological innovations as well as complementary modifications in social relations. This is an unprecedented situation in the history of civilization, even in its current shape. Human beings are not adapted to functioning in such a complex and unpredictable reality. The incessant variability leads to a state of institutionalized insecurity; impulsive reactions to that state aim towards recovery of a feeling of understanding the world and of bearing influence on its shape. A consequence of these circumstances can be deep social conflict and even deeper anxiety. Sustainment of a state of crisis would, therefore, be destructive for individuals and for society.

It is not out of the question that such a burdensome and long-lasting state could constitute just an interlude between the modern form of socialization and an upcoming new type of social order. Perhaps humanity currently finds itself in a transitional phase which, as Immanuel Wallerstein (2004: 27) predicts, "will be a terrible time of troubles, since the stakes of the transition are so high, the outcome so uncertain, and the ability of small inputs to affect the outcome so great." Continuing with "illness as metaphor," we need to bear in mind that a breakthrough and return to health can occur, although not necessarily back to a state identical to that before the ailment. According to Wallerstein (2004), the modern social system is currently entering its ultimate crisis and, quite likely, it would collapse within a about a dozen years from the time of his writing, surrendering to another historical system. As Wallerstein

(2004: 167) notes further, it is unknown whether this will be a structure similar to the current one or diametrically different, better or worse (for whom), and/or encompassing the same geographical territory or several structures in various parts of the world. It is worth treating this contestation as a challenge and attempting to foresee succeeding events on the basis of present-day tendencies.

Presented herein will be three auxiliary scenarios. Naturally, this is not a complete list; the categories introduced here do not have to be disjunctive. Furthermore, if we were to accept Sztompka's (2003: 557) thesis that sociology has always been a study of modern societies, then we need to recognize that each fundamental shift in the social order also provokes a shift in this academic discipline. Sociology would need not only to struggle with descriptions of this new social order and the nature of the changes underway, but the discipline would need to reformulate itself.

VARIANTS OF A NEW SOCIAL ORDER

DISPERSAL, SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND ELECTRONIC SURVEILLANCE

The first variant assumes the preservation and further augmentation of individualizing tendencies. This is expedited by the continued emancipation of human beings from successive traditional and conservative societies across the world. However, this does not result (as was the case in modern Europe) in the birth of new communities which define the identity of the individual, but rather into an individual autonomy which signals both liberation and a compulsory self-sufficiency. Alongside the progressive processes of globalization, this means the intensification of societal diversification. Societies are turning more into Lyotard's (1997: 58) "mass composed of individual atoms" and less into an organized social whole. To use the words of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004), society becomes a "multitude" of individuals striving for freedom and finding support in information technologies. This multiplicity is diffuse, diverse, and constitutive by way of singular actions; it realizes itself in movement, establishes new geographies, questions boundaries, and functions under global conditions. There is no way to describe it via such categories (typical of modernity) as a social mass, folk, nation, or social class. The components of what is called a multitude are not defined by the collective but in and of themselves – by ephemeral forms of belonging along the lines of the "cloakroom communities." Moreover, the differentiated and dispersed society – in which billions of interactions take place on many levels, unlimited by time or space – is a complicated structure difficult to capture and analyse (see Urry 2005).

The propensity for social multiplicity and complexity goes hand in hand with the presence and development of digital technology. Perhaps, just as the counterculture became the catalyst for the second phase of individualization, so the universalization of the internet (especially in its Web 2.0 version[1]) might be considered as the beginning of the next phase in the metamorphosis. This does not mean that this new stage in the internet is the cause of the

[1] Web 2.0 refers to the production and organization of content made available on the internet by the users themselves, rather than by specialized companies and institutions (O'Reilly 2007).

new stage in society; this is a dialectic dependency. Web 2.0 tools (blogs, vlogs, social media, etc.) are often directed towards individual expression, towards an original and "authentic" individual identity (see, for example, Kramer, Winter 2008; Mehdizadeh 2010; Nadkami, Hofmann 2012). On the one hand, these forms could only gain popularity under the conditions of the second phase of individualization, while on the other they underpin and support further progress. All in all, the utilization of the internet becomes ever more personalized with regards to information retrieval, personal management of relationships, and taking advantage of network tools in self-reflective work on one's own identity (see Halawa 2013).

This process aiming for multiplicity is not necessarily negative – although, like modernity's individualization, it often is. This also does not mean the end of society, but rather a changing formula for the organization of social relations. In this new system, individuals function as self-realizing agents: free, striving to achieve their own goals, and entering only into occasional kinds of integration with others. Hence a question arises as to whether such a dispersed, individualized society would have any sort of structure and, if so, what would possibly act as its institutional frame of reference. At this point in time, it is not possible to provide a univocal and thorough answer. It does, however, seem that a structure could be found in the network society concept articulated by Manuel Castells (2007). In his opinion, the social network is a set of nodes (i.e., individual or collective social actors) with various functions and meaning. Social networks have always existed in varied types of societies, so the concept is not new to sociology, but they were not the dominant form of social order. According to Castells, this became conceivable only when the effects of the microelectronic revolution in communications began to spread. At the present moment, all social phenomena and processes (e.g. the economy, social organizations, media, government, politics, and culture) take on the form of a social network. This likewise pertains to interpersonal relationships.

We need to remember that man remains a social animal endeavouring to make contacts and form relationships with other human beings. To a greater degree these contacts and relations will be based upon the personal decisions of an individual: with whom, when, under what conditions does he or she want to enter into a relationship, and how strong a contact should be. As a result of such decisions, networks of interpersonal integration will be formed – some impermanent and changeable, but based upon individualized, horizontal connections. Yet another scholar of contemporary social processes, Barry Wellman (1999) feels that it is already difficult to speak of a society by applying traditional sociological concepts such as "group," "community," or "collective"; he calls these closed enclaves "little boxes." Processes of social integration today should, instead, be described in a language accentuating the social actions and interactions which form social networks.

Here it should also be added that the dispersal of societies across a multitude of active individuals – in association with the present-day possibilities and anticipated technology of the future – have resulted in the production of Big Data: the gigantic volumes of information which also concern human beings (see Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2017). Large masses of valuable information arise, especially in the course of individual identity construction. This can occur through utilization of the Web 2.0 or some reasonable improvement of a human being's life through technology which monitors his or her life parameters and other information gathered about the subject (see Grajeta 2018). It is estimated that as much information

is created in a matter of days as was created over a millennium in the pre-electronic era. It is now possible to extract data from these information resources about different aspects of the life of specific persons (usually without their permission or even awareness); interdependencies involving various issues grant the holders of this data (inasmuch as they possess the appropriate tools to analyse Big Data) the chance to influence the actions of individuals and collectives. Yet the agents working with Big Data are usually difficult to detect and identify, as they are just as scattered as the persons they try to monitor. Paradoxically, emancipated individuals strewn far and wide can be quite easily supervised and manipulated (see Krzysztofek 2014).

THE REACTIVATION AND REDEFINITION OF GEMEINSCHAFT

Yet another vision of society in the future is, at least on the surface, contradictory to the one just presented. This vision presupposes a return to communal forms of organization of social relations. This form – most often labelled in sociology as *Gemeinschaft* (Tönnies 1988) or *communitas* (see Turner 1996: 179–182; Bauman 2003: 175–182) – was assumed to have vanished or at least lost its sense and meaning in the days of the triumphant *Gesellschaft* (*societas*) based upon formalized and unemotional social relationships. Hence network socialization was expected to be the next stage in the evolution of ways by which social relationships were to be organized. It turns out, however, that (inasmuch as *Gesellschaft* is indeed undergoing a crisis) network structures can support the building of relationships constitutive for *communitas* – relations rooted in emotions, strong bonds, support, mutuality, and pro-societal attitudes. Thus it is not out of the question that the future social order will be founded on *communitas*-type relations. In this case, sociology could apply its current palette of analytical concepts, although as one requiring a degree of redefinition.

Nonetheless, this is no simple return to the past. Among other things, the new communities are rather disconnected from physical space. Moreover, they are based upon conscious and voluntary membership, so permanence is not guaranteed. These communities do not have a monopoly on delineating the identity of individuals belonging to the group, and participation therein must be continually reconfirmed. These collectives do not succumb to any colonization by *societas*. They do bear a post-traditional dimension (see, for example, Giddens 2001; Bierówka 2007; Olcoń-Kubicka 2009; Krzysztofek 2012: 13). Among those calling attention to this is Michel Maffesoli (2008), according to whom contemporary societies are experiencing quite a renaissance of communal trends. Currently, structures are being established which Maffesoli calls "neo-tribes" partly because of their emotive, "untamed" nature, but mostly because they realize the primal need of being with other people. These tribes are inaugurated by human actions and relations; they arise spontaneously without any presupposed rational goal. Such groups can be, for instance, a network of contacts which forms a community of mutual, interpersonal influence.

The presence of a post-traditional *communitas* is also reinforced by the internet – a tendency noticed at a very early stage of the web's development. At the beginning of the 1990s, Howard Rheingold (1993) introduced into the field of sociology the concept of the virtual community. Virtual communities were seen as existing on the frontier of both the virtual and

real worlds, as self-defining networks of interactive communication organized around core interests or goals. Members thereof were joined together by shared values and bonds of friendship and support which could (but did not have to) extend beyond the worldwide web. Rheingold's concept has often been used in research into the social aspects of the internet although, with time, more attention has been drawn to the changing characteristics of these communities: a loose arrangement, specialized and unidirectional in focus, bearing frequently weak ties amongst the membership, and with lower emotional engagement by the members in the life of the community (Wellman and Gulia 1999). Furthermore, although virtual communities were, in principle, expected to function beyond physical spaces, it turned out that the core topic around which they are concentrated could actually be a sharing of the same space. As a result, the local and virtual society overlap (Wellman and Hampton 2003).

Along with the initiation of the Web 2.0 phase in the internet's evolution, the attention of social scientists turned more towards the building and preserving of individualized social relations by the worldwide web (e.g., via social networking sites). It was also noted that signs of *communitas* can be distinguished here, too. This especially pertains to dedicated discussion groups which have created communities bearing traits of the virtual community, but whose members also exchange knowledge and/or other resources with each other (Bierówka 2007).

Over the last few years, as the activities of internauts have become increasingly more consolidated by a handful of firms (Facebook, Twitter, Google, etc.), a new tendency has been gathering strength: the policies of the large companies lead to the enclosure of users within enclaves of people who think similarly, have comparable worldviews and convictions, and end up in "filter bubbles" (see Pariser 2012). The groups create discursive communities segregated from one another; not only do the different communities not communicate between each other, but sometimes they are even incapable of acknowledging the other's existence. This phenomenon supports *homophilia*, a tendency known for a long time in sociology; it shapes conditions which facilitate the production and buttressing of communities which are no longer just virtual. We need to keep in mind that the internet today is not a segregated area of social life, but part and parcel of real, everyday life (see Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002).

NONHUMAN OBJECTS AS A PART OF THE SOCIAL WORLD

A great challenge for sociology is the next tendency which depends upon successive acquisition of autonomy by nonhuman objects. This entails, above all, the products of technology: machines, equipment, algorithms, artificial intelligence, robots, etc. Not only do such objects perform tasks relayed by humans, but they also display higher degrees of freedom in undertaking certain activities – and these do influence the surrounding milieu, including the social. They can therefore become (aside from or together with human beings) social actors *par excellence.* If this process were to become stronger, then the new social order would encompass nonhuman subjects to a heretofore unknown degree. Actions which are components of institutions organizing social life would no longer have to mean human actions, but could also entail automated, robotized, and algorithmized ones. This would require, too, a redefinition of sociology as a science dealing with society understood as an agglomeration of social

activities which can only be undertaken by human beings or understood as a collection of interpersonal relationships. Society would be replaced by some post-social entity bearing as yet undistinguished traits (see Knorr-Cetina 1997).

The social sciences began much earlier to take note of phenomena in which nonhuman objects achieve the status of social actors. This relates to objects, as well as specific emergent social phenomena (e.g., organizations, politics, economics) which began to function like agents come to life. Concepts which are considered part of Actor-Network Theory (ANT; see, for example, Latour 2010; Law 1999; Callon 2014) have been used to describe this. Spotlighted is the fact that technical products (nonhuman objects) become agential entities in interaction with humans (e.g., so-called techno-human collectives). Furthermore, such a subject can, in fact, only be a whole (a network) comprising both humans and nonhuman objects; of no use is an analytical partitioning of such an entity (Latour 2007, 2010).

Despite appearances, ANT therefore presumes neither a technological determinism perspective, nor any kind of elimination or deprecation of the human factor. It only calls attention to the fact that humans and their products should always be considered together as subjects of social life, and, for this reason, it can turn out to be an especially cogent theoretical perspective in the social sciences. Although ANT concepts could be applied in analyses of various social phenomena played out at various times, and the nonhuman objects explored herein do not necessarily denote the latest technological inventions, it is no accident that reference to this theory is especially frequent these days. This is connected to an abrupt development of digital technologies which not only reproduce what a program creator encodes but are also capable of learning and subsequent decision-making. In this situation, the influence that nonhuman objects can have on social life is especially evident – even if this is always as part of a configuration which includes humans.

The meaning of this type of technology can be detected in different spheres of social life, a few of which will be mentioned here. Humans are being replaced by robots to an increasingly greater degree in industry and manufacturing and also in many services. For instance, this works well in the execution of financial analyses, and in servicing clients. This is particularly the case of tasks involving repetition which generally do not entail innovation or creative thinking. The largest field for robotization is, naturally, wherever there is more data entered in digital form. Nevertheless, automated equipment can supplant human beings in areas which (it would seem) are more demanding of creativity. Computer programs that are capable of learning and thus of undertaking decisions are already, for instance, writing texts, painting pictures, and performing translations.

Algorithmization is also affected by the hugely significant sector of computer-mediated communication. For instance, messages created and disseminated on the internet by so-called "bots" greatly sway social trends and processes. Such bots can manage accounts in social networking services and generate responses which attract human users, consequently influencing real-world choices. Further, automatons are generally used to moderate content in various internet services, deleting texts with specified words or photographs with specified images. Automatons can even communicate directly with each other, nearly eliminating humans in decisive processes and shaping the human environment. This is made most manifest in the case of the "internet of things" – the linking of various kinds of equipment to the internet

(Miller 2016). Hence, for example, we have a "smart refrigerator" which identifies the lack of some food items and orders it from an automated e-store, which then sends the goods to the home address.

Ultimately, internet communication is a sphere in which automatons and algorithms play a prominent role because it is uniquely anchored in digital data. Algorithms permit the user to efficiently search for information, are responsible for gaining results, and direct internauts in a particular direction. All this is possible thanks to the ability of automated equipment to search through huge databases and analyse Big Data. For instance, thanks to information regarding the topics which a user has explored earlier, Google provides information adapted to the user's preferences. All of this has far-reaching social consequences which are all the more momentous as the internet gains more significance as a means of social communication. One consequence is the appearance of the above-mentioned filter bubbles, in which likeminded people pass similarly amenable information within their own circle.

Computers and robots might also form relationships with humans. Towards the end of the 20th century an important shift occurred which Sherry Turkle (2013) calls the "robotic moment." It was then that computers and robots began to better simulate emotions and themselves became the object of human affections – in a sense, robots and humans had entered a relationship. Also making an appearance – and not only at the level of ideas but as their first realizations – were "social robots" that could take care of people or keep them company. Unsurprisingly, ideas about robot-friends or even robot-lovers have surfaced more recently (see Levy 2007). Thus social relations do not have to be interpersonal.

SUMMATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Often found in reflections upon contemporary society is a conviction that something has come to an end. Some assert that the world of familiar structures, known institutions, and unequivocal discourses has come to a close; others speak of the end of society, while still others claim this is the end of the human world.

Yet this culmination can mean (though considered more rarely) a new beginning. It is possible that a new social order will emerge from today's chaos. Of course, the opposite can come true: as an effect of the networks and dependencies known today, humanity can, in the nearer future, bring itself to annihilation. Still, if this doomsday prediction is not realized, then it is worthwhile to ask ourselves how the human world will look in the future. Will it be something which can still be identified as a society? If so, then to what extent will it be similar and to what extent different from what we know from earlier days.

Such questions are, at the same time, questions about the future of sociology as a science investigating societies. Will sociologists be describing a "new wine in old bottles," new phenomena described in old categories? Such an outcome is probable, but perhaps we will be facing some indistinct "post-sociology" as a field of study of post-societies?

The text at hand has not set its sights on providing comprehensive answers to these questions. It has simply presented a few possible scenarios as to what can happen with society. Articulated on the basis of current trends, this study has explored how sociology might react

to developments in the future. None of the visions is seen as the only one possible; none is seen as exclusive. Even so, it is likely in the cards that all of these will come to some fruition and will coexist, even while presenting mutually exclusive notions. The future social order will thus constitute a hybrid of all the above-described scenarios. That said, another outcome is possible: none of these extrapolations will become a social reality. The future can still surprise us.

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PÓŹNA NOWOCZESNOŚĆ I CO DALEJ?
MOŻLIWE SCENARIUSZE PRZYSZŁYCH ZMIAN SPOŁECZNYCH

Współczesne społeczeństwo podlega obecnie przełomowym zmianom. Wiele wskazuje na to, że odchodzi w przeszłość nowoczesność jako dominująca dotychczas forma ładu społecznego. Ta faza schyłku wiąże się z licznymi problemami, poczuciem niepewności, kryzysem normatywnym, czyli innymi słowy, anomią. Pojawia się pytanie, co nastąpi później. Jeśli przyrównać anomię do choroby, to możliwe są trzy jej scenariusze: zagłada społeczeństwa, przejście kryzysu w stan permanentny albo „powrót do zdrowia", czyli wyłonienie się i ustabilizowanie nowego typu społeczeństwa. W artykule przedstawiono trzy możliwe jego warianty: społeczeństwo rozproszone z sieciową formą uporządkowania społecznego, ład oparty na nowego typu wspólnotach i ład włączający na szeroką skalę w obręb społeczeństwa obiekty nieludzkie.

Słowa kluczowe: późna nowoczesność, anomia, indywidualizacja, sieci społeczne, wspólnoty, obiekty nieludzkie