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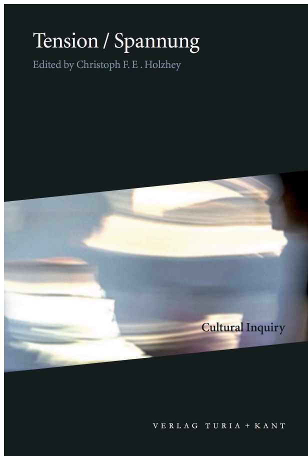

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JEAN TERRIER

On Social Forces

Tension as a Metaphor and the Image of Society

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ABSTRACT: This article conceptualizes tension as a relation between elements in which at least two forces with different directions are involved. How can this concept of tension be applied to the analysis of the peculiar logic of life in common? The article offers a reading, inspired by the method of conceptual history, of the use of the concept of 'force' in three models of society: Hobbes's political model, the economic model proposed by the thinkers of commercial society, and Durkheim's social theory. The analysis sheds some light on the ways in which the presence of contradictory forces can be taken to be constitutive of the social itself. This observation is then used to suggest that the puzzling fascination exerted by the notion of tension can be better understood if we see it pointing to some fundamental features of our way of collectively inhabiting the world.

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ON SOCIAL FORCES

Tension as a Metaphor and the Image of Society

Jean Terrier

'Tension', both as a concept and as an empirical phenomenon, constitutes a topic of enquiry which will strike anyone by its amplitude. This characteristic alone is sufficient ground to decline any invitation of tackling the problem of its meaning and bearing in a single essay. Hence, the present investigation will be limited to the more specific question of the relevance of the notion of tension to describe and classify a selected number of models of society proposed by social and political thinkers. What happens to their understandings of life in common when we try to approach them from the perspective of tension? And, conversely: what happens to our conceptualizations of tension if we approach tension with the methods and from the standpoint of social and political theory? I will suggest that concepts and images such as force, conflict, equilibrium, as well as a few others, lend themselves to be understood as metaphors of tension. Such a statement, of course, is predicated upon a specific notion of what we should understand by 'tension'. It is to this question that I turn first.

I.

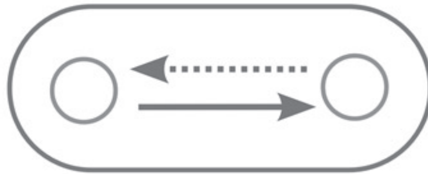
It seems impossible to conceptualize tension without mobilizing the category of relation. If I start in imagination with zero or one element, I quickly observe that the conceptual space required for thinking tension withers away, and that notions such as emptiness, oneness, or fullness arise instead. To form an idea of tension, I need to posit at least *two* elements *between which* a tension may develop. Moreover, the potential for tension-building comes from the fact that the two elements do not exist in complete isolation but are susceptible of entering into some kind of relation. Tension, however, does not seem to be simply synonymous with any kind of relation or interaction. To arrive at a more specific understanding of tension, we need to perceive the two or more

elements we have posited as standing in a *determinate* kind of relation: a relation that involves a force. For instance, the two limbs of a bow are in a relation merely by belonging to the weapon itself; but they are said to be in a relation of tension because we have bent the bow by means of a string. The force used in this process remains present in the object in the form of the tension of the string, which is also the tension between the two tips of the bow. This example illuminates a further point: that relation *plus* force is still insufficient to arrive at an understanding of tension satisfactory for our purposes. In a bow, a tension can be said to exist because there are not one, but *two* forces: very loosely put, the string 'pulls' and the limbs 'resist'. In other words, if there is only one force in a relation, or several forces which have the same direction, we would hardly have a tension at all. One last point that I wish to make at the outset is that the more interesting forms of tension involve forces that are roughly *commensurable*. Let us indeed imagine again two elements caught in a relation involving forces, and let us assume that one of the forces is extremely large, so that the counter-force of the thing or subject upon which the force is exerted is, all things considered, negligible. To come back to the previous example, we can envision that we bend the bow with such vigour that the weapon breaks in two: the tension that had built up for an instant is suddenly released from the relation, and the relation itself breaks. In such a case, the tension is so ephemeral that it is inapplicable as a figure for the description of society as a relatively stable entity.

In my understanding, thus, the phenomenon of tension requires at least two elements standing in a relation involving at least two forces with different directions. That is, one element exerts a force upon at least one different element that happens to be exerting some kind of resistance or counter-force. The two forces, although they do not need to be of identical magnitude, must at least be commensurable since, as just suggested, the presence of a radically superior force would immediately trump all others in an instant, leaving no room for an enduring tension. In the rest of this essay, I will call 'equilibrium' the situation in which the forces exerted are of the same magnitude, so that (as suggested by the definition of an equilibrium in physics)[1] the total sum of the forces is zero. We may call 'collapse', or 'dissolving relation', the situation wherein the sum of the forces is not zero (without any

1 I am grateful to Silvia Casalino for the clarification of this point.

force being radically superior). In the long run, a collapsing relation disappears: the element which was resisting is definitely freed from the attraction or force to which it was subjected (resistance was successful), or, conversely, the resistance of the element is annihilated and it is either modified or destroyed. In the following figure, I have tried to render this notion of tension, choosing the specific case of tension as 'equilibrium':



In this schema, the two circles represent two subjects, the line around them, the existence of a relation between them, the plain arrow the force exerted by the subject on the left, and the dotted arrow the resistance exerted by the other subject. The two arrows have the same length in order to indicate that the two forces have the same magnitude, so that the relation depicted here, as mentioned above, is in a state of 'equilibrium'. If, by contrast, one of the forces was larger, that specific relation would first develop, and eventually, 'dissolve' or 'collapse'.

There are a few things that I would like to emphasize at this point. First, in my attempt to work out a general concept of tension, my aim was primarily to capture some elements that I take to be relevant for arriving at a proper understanding of the semantic field occupied by the word in everyday language. While I readily admit to have found some inspiration in definitions borrowed from mechanics, my interest is not to propose a concept of tension that could apply indifferently to both the natural and the social world. What I am after here is the figure of tension understood as a component of social imaginaries and political discourses. In order to grasp this figure and its manifestations (i.e., the various forms it may take), it seems necessary to have a sense of what it entails, of the elements it is made of: this is precisely what the above exercise in conceptualization was seeking to achieve.

The second point, which is related to the first one, is that my use of the concept of force is general and abstract, and to a large extent metaphorical. In particular I will not use the word 'force', in the context of a description of the social world, to refer only to the phenomenon of direct physical coercion. I include in my notion of force any means

that a subject may use to move another subject to an action he or she may not have otherwise undertaken.[2] Among such means we find, of course, brute physical strength; but in social affairs other ways are at the same time more benign and more efficacious, and thus more likely to be adopted: means which range from threats to attempts at persuasion. Such a broad concept of force, I should add, is customary among social and political theorists. Speech act theory, for instance, commonly refers to the 'illocutionary force' of statements, and defines it as that which is done *in* saying something (the effect the speaker is seeking to achieve). What distinguishes warnings, threats, orders, promises, from merely descriptive statements is that they entail and (implicitly) express an expectation, on the part of the speaker, that the recipient of the message will adjust his or her conduct in a certain way (for example, in the case of a warning that something heavy enough to cause harm is falling, the recipient is expected to step out of the trajectory of the object).[3] Similarly, the theoreticians of deliberative democracy do not shy away from speaking of the 'force of the better argument',[4] thereby referring to

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2 Incidentally, the previous sentence corresponds exactly to one of the many possible definitions of power in political science. See for instance Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View – The Original Text with Two Major New Chapters* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). In other words, 'force' is in my usage a kind of *Oberbegriff*, a generic or umbrella term: natural phenomena and animals, but also human beings and their artifacts (such as concepts, beliefs, and perhaps institutions) all exert forces. Power, in turn, is the name of force when consciously exerted by a human being over another one or over a group. For the sake of consistency I will stick to the notion of force in the present essay, even though in several cases the concept of power may legitimately have been used instead. A consequence of all this is that my distinction below, between images of society as tension-free and images of society as tension-ridden has some connections with another more familiar one: that between views of society as power-ridden or as power-free. However, the two distinctions do not fully overlap: an issue to which I will come back in my discussion of Emile Durkheim.

3 John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). See also Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), I: *Regarding Method*.

4 This is a lose translation of Habermas, who speaks of the 'zwanglose Zwang des besseren Arguments'. The topic of the 'force of the better argument' is discussed in several essays contained in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political,* ed. by Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

something which possibly modifies future courses of action: a convincing argument (i.e., an argument that has 'force') transforms the beliefs held by subjects and, therefore, the actions such subjects may undertake.

The simple, overtly mechanistic, but purely heuristic model proposed here can be useful to interrogate human life in its different manifestations with a view to detect which of them may be described as entailing tension. To begin with, it seems that the mind could easily be seen as a site of tension. This is especially the case if we take desire to be a prominent feature of the condition of most humans, insofar as desire can be described as a relation between two states of the subject, one of which is exerting a 'pull' upon the other one. Moreover these two states are separated by time and, most probably, other obstacles as well. Another relevant candidate, with which I will be solely concerned here, are social relations. One view of them, although of course not hegemonic, is quite ingrained in our imaginaries. According to this view, society is made of individuals with diverse dispositions who evolve in a world of scarce resources. In the pursuit of their goals, they are therefore likely 1) to actually enter into some form of (possibly violent) conflict, and 2) to expect, and prepare for, the occurrence of such conflicts. Both phenomena (actual and expected conflicts) may be seen as tensions in the sense proposed above. I will return below to this image of the social, which has been depicted, among other authors, by Thomas Hobbes. However, it is important for my argument to perceive that not all visions of society take tension to be a central component of life in common: this is the topic of the next section.

II.

Basically, if society is envisaged as a homogeneous whole – i.e. as a totality composed of identical elements – then tension cannot easily build between the parts and, therefore, it also remains absent from society as a whole. To further clarify this, we can turn to David Hume's reflection on the conditions of possibility of conflicts, and of politics itself as the sum of activities that aim at controlling and regulating such conflicts. In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* he described two counter-factual situations in which conflicts, disagreements, or clashing desires, were unlikely to occur. He imagined, on the

one hand, a situation where individuals are naturally wholly benevolent: 'the mind is so enlarged, and so replete with friendship and generosity, that every man has the utmost tenderness for every man, and feels no more concern for his own interest than for that of his fellows'.[5] Given such generous dispositions, equality always reigns in the community, since benevolent individuals willingly distribute the resources available in a perfectly fair way. Because of this equality and of the ties of affection and respect which bind individuals in such a situation, 'interest or revenge or envy'[6] never arise, and all threats against property or physical safety are thereby prevented from developing.

We can re-describe Hume's spontaneously peaceful society by saying that no tension exists between individuals in this society since they all have the same mental dispositions (in this case, friendship and generosity). In other words, all individuals are in agreement concerning what the good in life may consist in, and undertake actions that are conducive to roughly similar goals. I do not need to constrain or convince others to act in a given way since, guided by values and beliefs comparable to mine, they automatically act in a way that I find acceptable. Furthermore, we can probably generalize Hume's intuition and affirm that the existence of *any* unanimously shared belief or value system results in a society that is to a large extent deprived of tension. To prevent misunderstandings, I need to make it clear that I am thinking here not just of similar mental dispositions in general, but specifically of similar substantive world-views. We can easily imagine a society in which all members may be described as similar because they are all convinced of the legitimacy of pursuing their individual interests (whatever these may be). In this case however, while all individual minds are similar from the perspective of their 'form' or 'functioning', each one of these minds may become filled with a different content, i.e. be animated by idiosyncratic goals and preferences. As it shall become clear later on – after my discussion of some aspects of Hobbes's political thought – we have good reasons to think that such a society would *not* be deprived of tension.

5 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. by Jerome B. Schneewind (Indianapolis-Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1983), p. 21. Note, in this quote, how Hume uses a vocabulary emphasizing fullness ('replete', 'utmost'; see also, in the quote below, the use of the phrase 'fully provided'): this seems to confirm my intuition that the metaphor of tension and the vocabulary of fullness and oneness are mutually exclusive.

6 Ibid., p. 43.

What *would* reduce tension, I claim, is the existence of shared substantive goals: for instance, in the vocabulary of political theory, the existence of a unanimous concept of the good life.

A consideration of the history of social and political thought does indeed suggest a connection between unity and homogeneity. In fact, most theories which emphasize the unity and harmony of society have understood this unity as resting on the identity of the composing parts, or at least on the identity of the parts in some particularly significant respects (such as beliefs and values held), while elements seen as less defining (such as preferences or functions), are allowed to vary. Among these models of society we can rank most nationalisms (especially those of the 'ethnic' kind),[7] but also culturalist theories of the social,[8] as well as some specific political imaginaries such as those of the Soviet bloc, whose ruling parties were fascinated by the image of the 'People-as-One' (*Peuple-un*), as Claude Lefort has argued:[9] a community of producers standing as a man to fulfil the demands of history. What all these models have in common is the conviction that all individuals have, by and large, the same mental dispositions, the same beliefs, ideals, and goals. For this reason they all look, so to speak, in the same direction and spontaneously act in a consonant way. While conflicts may arise, they are taken to be easily resolvable (especially by way of an invocation of the higher values held in this model by all individuals), so that tension is seen as a marginal and even pathological phenomenon of social life, and not as one of its distinctive features.

Hume further devised another model of society which, while dispensing with the assumption of an identity of all members of society,

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7 For an influential statement on the difference between two understandings of the nation – the civic, i.e. voluntaristic, and ethnic, i.e. objectivist one –, see Hans Kohn, *Nationalism: Its Meaning and History* (Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand, 1955). On homogeneity as the distinctive creed of nationalism, see Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism: New Perspectives on the Past* (London: Blackwell, 1983).

8 For a presentation and critique of such theories, which understand culture as a personality type shared by all members of society, see Anne Swidler, 'Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies', *American Sociological Review*, 51.2 (April 1986), pp. 273-86; William H. Sewell, Jr., 'Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History: From Synchrony to Transformation', *Representations*, 59 (Summer 1997), pp. 35-55.

9 Claude Lefort, 'L'image du corps et le totalitarisme', in *L'invention démocratique: Les limites de la domination totalitaire* (Paris: Fayard, 1981).

was free of tension in the sense given here to this term. He conjured up a state of

> profuse *abundance* of all *external* conveniencies, that, without any uncertainty in the event, without any care or industry on our part, every individual finds himself fully provided with whatever his most voracious appetites can want, or luxurious imagination wish or desire.[10]

In such a 'happy state', Hume argued, conflicts between individuals are unlikely to arise at all (be it only because the institution of property is superfluous here), so that the use of force or constraint is rarely required. While that state of complete abundance is hypothetical, Hume did believe that in some parts of the earth goods were, in fact, more readily available than in his homeland, or less needed (such as clothing or shelter in warm countries). He suggested that in milder climates, 'fewer quarrels are likely to arise' among individuals, and there is 'less necessity [...] for a settled police or regular authority to protect and defend them from foreign enemies, or from each other'.[11] In this state of abundance, individuals may well be diverse – some may prefer to drink wine and others non-alcoholic fruit juices; or some, less superficially, may want to build sports stadiums and others libraries or temples. Such diversity, however, does not lead to conflict, since the perfect abundance of things allows *ex hypothesi* for the realization of all desires anyway: land and building stones, for example, are infinitely available so that millions of stadiums, libraries, and temples may arise side by side, to the equal satisfaction of sport fans, bibliophiles, and religious fanatics.

The notion that the ability to fulfil material desires efficiently leads to a peaceful, harmonious society is part and parcel of the social theory of the advocates of the integral market. On the one hand, these authors do assume that individuals have strong desires, so that some tension is always present in commercial societies in the form of the attraction subjects feel for certain goods and services. On the other hand, however, a well-functioning market enables subjects to satisfy their desires easily so that the resistance, which is characteristic of tension in the model proposed above, is absent. Moreover, the proponents of the integral market, for instance Friedrich von Hayek, typically seek to demonstrate

10 Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 21.

11 David Hume, 'Of commerce', in *Political Writings*, ed. by Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 104.

that commercial societies are peaceful entities, and are devoid, except in abnormal cases, of force and coercion. Even though the state must be present to guarantee the enforcement of contracts, the overall picture is that of a society which tends towards some form of good balance, or spontaneous order (for which Hayek proposed the name of 'catallaxy').[12]

It may be useful to add that Hume's second model (like the first one, but for different reasons) is a fairly optimistic one, insofar as it assumes that the fulfilment of material desires tends to appease individual appetites enough to strongly reduce most opportunities for conflict. We could instead legitimately imagine that, regardless of the fulfilment of such desires, individuals may remain unsatisfied all the same. They may, indeed, desire things that no material abundance is ever likely to procure. For instance, the bibliophiles may be of the opinion that the preoccupations of sport fans are futile and ought therefore to be banned. Less extremely, they may tolerate sports as long as their adepts explicitly recognize, by some kind of pledge of allegiance, the moral superiority of reading. In other words some desires – such as the desire for recognition, or the desire to be true to one's God – are not easy to satisfy, even when material resources are abundant.[13] Therefore Hume's model, of a society deprived of tension because resources are abundant, only makes sense *provided that* we also assume that individuals desire first and foremost material satisfaction, so that other, ideal desires arise only, as it were, as sublimations of unfulfilled material or biological needs.

It is probably no exaggeration to say that the idea of a society devoid of tensions, of society as a tightly sutured whole, or as a perfectly executed symphony, has haunted and continues to haunt our social and political imaginaries. It seems to be a common feature of as

12 See, among other writings, Friedrich von Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge, 2006).

13 These examples are not given at random, but allude to the fact that many classical political thinkers, including Hobbes, Rousseau, as well as Hume himself, took religion (especially of the Catholic variety) and the striving for recognition as the two most common causes of social strife. Their political theories entail proposals to cope with this problem. Rousseau, for one, spoke of a strong culture of equality and of civil religion as possible solutions to the second and first dangers mentioned here, respectively. On the culture of equality, see Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, in *Ecrits politiques* (Paris: Gallimard – Pléiade, 1964), Book II, ch. 4; and on civil religion, Book IV, ch. 8.

different visions of the social as Plato's philosophers' state, More's utopia, Rousseau's republic (at least in some readings), or the commercial society advocated by Adam Smith and Benjamin Constant, that harmony reigns in them. Harmony must be understood here as a situation where each part not only plays the role for which he or she is best suited and receives his or her due; but also *is aware*, on the basis of a shared vision of society, of playing the right role and of receiving the proper amount (this is the dimension of substantive identity, discussed above). When these two elements are present, frictions and tensions in the form of conflicts of attribution, overlapping claims, dissatisfaction concerning one's social position, and the like, are envisaged as easily avoidable. In this vision of the social, conversely, the appearance of such frictions is taken as a sure sign that the community is on a path of corruption. Social conflicts and tensions, thus, are understood as diseases of life in common.

III.

We can now move on to describe some models of society that put tension at the core of life in common. If we try to apply the model of tension delineated above to conceptualize society, we observe that we are led towards a pluralist and conflictual understanding of the social, i.e. a conception which starts by assuming that a variety of social subjects with contrasting or even incompatible preferences, desires, beliefs, world-views, exist on a given territory. This is the situation that contemporary political theorists describe as pluralism. From John Stuart Mill and Max Weber to Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas or William Connolly, pluralism is understood as a basic condition of modern society: a situation in which the diversity of individuals and groups is so wide-ranging and deeply-seated that any hope of overcoming the differences of world-views is a mere fancy of the mind.[14]

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14 Of course, in spite of this common view, the authors mentioned differ markedly in their normative evaluation of the basic situation of pluralism. The position they hold concerning the best way to cope with diversity may even take the form of a proposal (in the case of Rawls and Habermas) to supersede pluralism by establishing a consensus at a higher, more abstract, meta-level. On this idea, see John Dryzek and Simon Niemeyer, 'Reconciling Pluralism and Consensus as Political Ideals', *American Journal of Political Science*, 50.3 (2006), pp. 634-49.

As many of these authors observe,[15] one of the earliest and most influential depictions of the fact and problem of pluralism is the one proposed by Thomas Hobbes. Incidentally, this philosopher's mechanistic social ontology lends itself particularly well, as we shall see, to being formalized along the lines proposed above. Humans, according to Hobbes, are beings who strive after what they believe to be good (for them): 'in the first place, I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death'.[16] Power is the situation wherein one can obtain subjectively defined goods.[17] Among these goods, one finds not only material advantage, but also reputation or recognition by others, which Hobbes called glory.[18] Because they are creatures filled with desires, human beings also naturally want what is the primary condition of possibility of such desires, namely self-preservation. Another crucial feature of the Hobbesian human condition is that individuals are roughly equal in intelligence and strength: 'Nature hath made men so equall, in the faculties of body, and mind'.[19]

Hobbes imagined, under the name of the 'state of nature', what would happen if individuals with such characteristics were integrally left to themselves, i.e. were deprived of social rules and institutions. Such individuals would not a priori have any shared notion of right and wrong: Hobbes's conviction, inherited from theological voluntarism,[20] was that value emerges from the decision of a superior, so that in the state of nature – where no one is superior – there are as many rights and wrongs as there are individuals. All individuals are therefore morally free to ensure their self-preservation at the cost of others, and are morally free to pursue *any desire* without paying attention to the desires of

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15 See for instance John Rawls 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies,* 7.1 (Spring 1987), pp. 1-25, esp. p. 23.

16 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 70.

17 Ibid., p. 62.

18 Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. by Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 23; *Leviathan*, p. 88.

19 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 86.

20 Cf. Jerome B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 84 and 95-100. See also Michael A. Gillespie, 'The Theological Origins of Modernity', *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society,* 13.1 (1999), pp. 1-30.

others. In such circumstances, since individuals have, if not unlimited, at least numerous and ever-recurring desires, each subject is a threat to every other subject. The inter-individual relations of the state of nature, thus, are characterized at best by phenomena such as diffidence, mutual surveillance and fear (especially, as Hobbes never tired of repeating: 'fear of death'), and, at worst, by the recourse to violence.

In the state of nature, individuals continuously exert a force against other individuals, and these latter individuals in turn resist it (and also exert a force upon other individuals). Since, as we have seen, the forces that individuals possess are roughly equal (that is, in the vocabulary introduced above, commensurable) one can legitimately qualify the state of nature as a fundamentally tension-ridden situation. Furthermore, given that no individual can be expected to take the upper hand over a large number of his peers on account of an intrinsic physical or mental superiority, it may be tempting to assume that this situation may stabilize into a form of social equilibrium (a kind of generalized 'stand-off'), in which individuals keep from actual fighting for fear of being defeated. However, Hobbes does not seem to have conceived the state of nature in such a way. To begin with, many individuals, according to Hobbes, would happily break the stand-off situation to engage in direct fighting: this is because they overestimate their own force (they are, in Hobbes's vocabulary, 'vainglorious').[21] Even more modest individuals would probably fail to find a way 'to enjoy [...] in common or divide'[22] something they all simultaneously desire. Hobbes had this pessimistic view of language which led him to state that 'the mere act of disagreement is offensive',[23] so that discussions or negotiations to regulate access to given goods easily turn into overt conflict. For this reason, as Hobbes emphasized, the state of nature is necessarily a state of war of all against all. All this strongly suggests that inter-individual relations, in the state of nature, tend to 'collapse' or 'dissolve' (in the sense indicated above), because they all lead to fighting, and because fighting results in one of the parties escaping or being slain. Moreover, victors are further threatened by other individuals so that 'it is a miracle if even the strongest survives to die of years and old age'.[24] In view of all this, we must

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21 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 72.

22 Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 27.

23 Ibid., p. 26.

24 Ibid., p. 30.

describe Hobbes's state of nature, not as an equilibrium, but as a situation in which tensions permanently dissolve and re-emerge, involving each time different elements.

In Hobbes's state of nature, tension takes various shapes. There is first tension in the psychological sense of desire, which propels individuals forward towards objects and inspires actions that may induce the admiration or respect or fear of others. We could perhaps call 'excitement' this particular form of tension. There is also tension in violent conflicts, i.e. tension in the form of a use of physical strength to ensure one's control over coveted objects. Lastly, there is tension in the form of an expectation or presentiment, on the part of individuals, that they *may* encounter possibly life-threatening resistance in the pursuit of their goals, which is the source of insecurity and fear. If we had to choose a name for this experience of tension, we could call it 'intensity'.[25]

IV.

The forms of tension I have just enumerated all have something in common: they appear within a single plane; they are *horizontal*, insofar as they occur either within the subject or between two or more *equivalent* subjects. By contrast, in Hobbes's civil society, the relations between individuals take a different shape, given that all of them must now factor in the possible intervention of a third, a subject unlike any other standing tall above society: the *Leviathan*.

Hobbes's state is constituted by way of a compact among individuals who all equally seek protection from the violence of each: 'men agree amongst themselves, to submit to some Man, or Assembly of men, voluntarily, on confidence to be protected by him against all others'.[26] An absolute, indivisible power is thereby established, endowed with a force that shall check the forces of all subjects. Individuals still possess infinite

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25 I take 'intensity' in the sense just indicated to be closely related to 'suspense', which is an expectation or presentiment, on the part of the recipient of a work of art of some kind, that the fictional character is about to meet resistance, usually of a violent kind, but whose exact timing and form is left uncertain. My suggestion, therefore, is to speak of intensity when the subject expects to personally encounter resistance, and of suspense when he or she expects others to meet resistance, and thus takes on the role of a mere observer or spectator.

26 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 96.

desires, but they refrain from certain courses of action for fear of being punished by the sovereign. Because he has armed forces at his disposal, the sovereign is physically and materially superior to the members of society, so that the threat of his intervention is sufficient to counter-balance the reckless acquisitive and destructive tendencies of individuals. In other words, the emergence of the state establishes an *equilibrium* in society: the various forces involved in the relations between individuals are constrained by the presence of an absolute, superior force (that of the sovereign). John Rawls, among others, emphasized that Hobbes's political theory could be indeed described as favouring equilibrium: 'the Hobbesian strand of liberalism' envisages social life as resting on 'a *modus vivendi* secured by a convergence of self- and group-interests as coordinated and balanced by well-designed constitutional arrangements'.[27] And he added that this view of society as a mere equilibrium revealed much too thin an understanding of social life: 'social unity is only apparent as its stability is contingent on circumstances remaining such as not to upset the fortunate convergence of interests. [...] stability does depend on happenstance and a balance of relative forces'.[28]

The appearance of the *Leviathan* is interesting for the topic with which I am dealing here in that it introduces a highly relevant figure, or metaphor, of tension. In the state of nature, as stated above, tensions exist in the form of contradictory yet commensurable forces between subjects. But this situation changes in the civil state. Subjects, of course, may still try to influence the behaviour of other (usually reluctant) subjects, though now predominantly by peaceful means. Therefore tension is still present in social relations. And yet, the situation is more complex since subjects, in their reasoning – that is, in their reflection about the means that are appropriate to reach their ends –, must take into account

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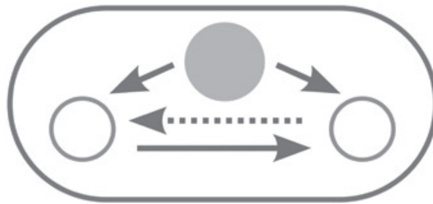
27 Rawls, 'Consensus', p. 23.

28 Ibid., p. 11. As a matter of fact, Hobbes himself was well aware of the lack of solidity in his construction. He believed that numerous phenomena could contribute to the erosion of the authority of the sovereign and was consequently very concerned that his logic of absolute sovereignty may prove insufficient to efficiently tame inter-individual conflicts. For this reason, we could perhaps describe Hobbes's civil state as a situation of progressive collapse, more than as a situation of equilibrium. On the pessimism of Hobbes concerning the stability of political institutions, see David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

not only the reaction of other subjects, but also the reaction of the sovereign, who may intervene, at his entire discretion, to preserve peace. Put differently, all social relations are, at a minimum, made of two kinds of tensions: *horizontal* tensions between subjects, and *vertical* tensions between the subjects and the sovereign.

I take this notion concerning the multiple layers of tension to be momentous, as it introduces a notion of society as a space in which the relations between individuals are not direct, but always mediated by something external to the relations themselves. In all social relations a (preexisting) third is present, which contributes to giving them shape. This is what the following figure is trying to indicate:



The nature of this third can be variously envisaged, but it is uncontroversial that language may be mentioned here as an example, with laws, collective representations, culture, symbols, rules, imaginaries, as further possible names and notions of something that individuals refer to, rely upon, and mobilize in their actions and interactions.

It may be worthwhile to spell out in more detail what I am trying to convey. According to Hobbes, individuals envisage certain courses of action as possible and rule out others on the basis, among other things, of the subjective calculation of their chances of success, which must involve a consideration of the likeliness of punishment. In other words, they must take into account, in their actions, the existence of laws as well as of institutions, which promulgate and enforce them. By generalizing this notion and removing its characteristic rationalistic and voluntaristic bend, we arrive at a conception of the institutional and cultural embeddedness of social action. In order to further substantiate this conception, we can turn to the work of Emile Durkheim.[29] In

29 For a more detailed presentation of Durkheim's position, which is hereafter only briefly sketched, see Jean Terrier, 'Die Verortung der Gesellschaft: Durkheims Verwendung des Begriffs "Substrat"', *Berliner Journal für Soziologie*, 19.2 (June 2009), pp. 181-204.

his attempt to account for the fact that individuals are shaped by the cultural environment in which they have been socialized, Durkheim re-elaborated the traditional notions of force and constraint with a view to sever them from the rationalistic individualism of classical social ontologies. He defined social facts as 'manners of acting, thinking, and feeling *external* to the individual, which are invested with a *coercive power* by virtue of which they exercise control over him'.[30] Durkheim indicated three modes of operation of social constraint: a certain form of behaviour can become prevalent 1) because of the threat of formal sanctions; 2) because of informal, communal sanctions such as mockery, laughter, or reprobation; and 3) because of individual 'internal tendencies',[31] which Durkheim sometimes called 'the force of habit'.[32] The first form of constraint is easy to understand, insofar as it is clearly reminiscent of the classical external force exercised by the state's coercive apparatus, discussed above. However, Durkheim also emphasized that collective institutions, including the state, possessed a social authority that commanded a form of obedience motivated not only by self-interest, but also by the recognition of a superior moral standing. The second form of constraint can be understood in the following way: through myriads of signs (smiles, looks, shrugs, winks, explicit words of encouragement, or dissuasion with corresponding tones of voice, etc.), individuals pursuing given courses of action are permanently reminded of their social and cultural appropriateness, and thus guided, possibly against their own preferences, towards predefined forms of behaviour.[33] The important element is that these signs are *not* a reflection of the subjective preferences of the individuals who emit them. Rather, such individuals merely rely upon, make explicit, and reproduce obligatory social norms of appropriateness which, as Durkheim emphasized, are external to them. Such norms are the expression of collective representations, of social 'ideals'.

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30 Emile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007), p. 4; emphases mine, JT. The translation is from *The Rules of Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and Its Method*, ed. by Steven Lukes (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), p. 52.

31 Durkheim, *Règles*, pp. 4-8.

32 Ibid., p. 91.

33 I take the third form of constraint to be merely an internalization, a 'becoming habitual', of the expectation of the sanctions of the second kind.

Indeed, according to Durkheim, social subjects possess in their minds two kinds of representations: individual and specific ones, on the one hand; and collective ones, on the other, which are intuitively perceived as having a distinct quality, as being greater, nobler, worthier than those of the first kind. (In part, this 'greatness' has something to do with the fact that these representations pertain to the more considerable aspects of life in common, such as religious, scientific or political ideas, as opposed to particular needs and preferences.) Collective representations endow individuals with a sense of the values shared by the collective, with a notion of what is appropriate and what is not, with a feeling of right and wrong. Moreover, these values, notions and feelings are not merely things that individuals 'know'; they are part of a deeper mental level, the level of strongly held beliefs, ingrained habits and fundamental categories. Because of this they are very effective in inspiring and orientating action, in *forcing* individuals into determinate forms of conduct.[34]

A few remarks deserve to be made on this conception of the social. To begin with, we may wonder how this social theory relates to the main topic of this essay. The answer is that Durkheim's society can be described as inhabited by a permanent tension: we have indeed here the notion of a force (the authority of the social values that make up collective consciousness) which is exerted upon a variety of subordinate elements (the consciousness of individuals). This creates what deserves to be called, quite appropriately, a tension between the individual and the collective. Durkheim himself concretely described many instances of such tensions: for example, he spoke of the tension between the requirements of the division of labour, which demands collaboratively-minded individuals, and the often flinching motivation of manual workers, who are condemned to repetitive, unsatisfying tasks.[35]

Second, these brief considerations on Durkheim's sociology show that the contrasting visions of society as either tension-ridden or ten-

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34 Durkheim went even as far as to affirm that our very concept of force is simply a transposition of our experience of the authority of social representations and institutions. Cf. *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Alcan, 1912), pp. 522-23. On this, see Anne W. Rawls, 'Durkheim's Epistemology: The Neglected Argument', *American Journal of Sociology*, 102.2 (September 1996), pp. 430-82.

35 Emile Durkheim, *De la division du travail social* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), esp. part III, chap. II.

sion-free do not fully overlap with another opposition – the opposition, namely, between visions of society that stress diversity and conflict, and visions of society which stress consensus and integration. This is because an integrated society can be understood as the necessary, but always uncertain, result of a *process* of integration. In order to be more concrete, I recall here the classical opposition between the two founding fathers of contemporary social thought, Durkheim himself, on the one hand, and Max Weber, on the other. Each of these two authors can be taken to represent one pole of the continuum I am trying to describe. We can say, simplifying things a little, that the difference between Weber and Durkheim has to do with the fact that, for the former, there can never be a moment of unanimous cohesiveness: the incommensurability of the beliefs held in society permanently prevents such a stage being reached; any world-view tending to hegemony immediately produces its own contestation. By contrast, Durkheim did believe that there were moments of fusion in social life, which he termed moments of 'collective effervescence' (religious celebrations and rituals, public holidays, major cultural events, and the like), wherein the diverse members of society lose their individuality, adopt wholeheartedly the values of the collective, and thus turn into one.[36] The excitation *per se* that accompany such moments can readily be described as a further notion of social tension in Durkheim's thought. Equally interesting is the fact that, for Durkheim, the collective ideals which are at the same time the condition and the result of these moments of social excitation progressively lose their binding force, giving birth to individualization and differentiation and bringing up the need for a renewed fusion of social elements. Thus social life, in this understanding, has a certain pulsating rhythm, in which phases of disaggregation are followed by moments of re-aggregation. At any rate, my point here is that despite their different emphases on conflict and integration respectively, tension, in both Weber's and Durkheim's models, is at the core of social life. In Weber's case tension especially takes the form of contradictory forces existing between groups; but there are further phenomena which could be analysed from the viewpoint of tension: charisma, for instance, may be described as a kind of gravitational force exerted by the personality of a given indi-

36 See Hans Joas, 'Kollektive Ekstase (Emile Durkheim)', in *Die Entstehung der Werte* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997).

vidual upon other individuals.[37] In Durkheim's case, I have mentioned three forms of tension: as excitement in moments of effervescence; as the constraint exerted by society upon individual minds; and as the pulsating rhythm of the social.

Lastly, I have to clarify how all this relates to the notion of the 'third' introduced above. Durkheim suggested that there is a social background of shared representations (norms, values, and the like) in every interaction. A subject pursuing a goal does not merely act in function of the (expected or actual) behaviour of other subjects involved in the action: rather, the kind of actions he or she may undertake and the kind of reaction he or she may expect are, at least in part, defined by the social context (cultural, intellectual, political or otherwise) in which the interaction is taking place.[38] There are many different ways of spelling out this phenomenon. One is to emphasize the determination of actions by their social settings (as Durkheim, perhaps, and certainly others, did); another one consists in seeing a 'culture's causal significance' in its 'providing cultural components that are used to construct strategies of action'.[39] Precisely these cultural elements represent the third I have in mind, and this third plays a crucial role in social interactions while at the same time remaining external to them.

What is interesting for us is the fact that this notion of a properly social dimension which is always 'in excess' with respect to individual actions and interactions is often illustrated by way of further metaphors of tension. We may formulate the following working hypothesis: as long as social relations are described as taking place on a single plane (this is the case, for instance, of Hobbes's state of nature), mechanistic

37 See Max Weber, 'Die drei reinen Typen der legitimen Herrschaft', in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1985), pp. 481-88.

38 An important feature of the social thought of Jürgen Habermas is his belief that, under certain circumstances, social and cultural contexts may stop constituting a mere background to individual actions: they may be turned into an object of reflection, questioned, evaluated, and even transformed. All this happens, as it were, within a kind of social and moral void: a void that Habermas fills by invoking the common ground of reason.

39 Swidler, p. 273. The contrast between the theories I am discussing here and the culturalism I mentioned earlier in this essay is that the former clearly suggests that agents actively select and mobilize cultural elements. Culture is seen here as a '"tool kit" of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may *use* in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems' (ibid.; emphasis mine, JT).

and physical metaphors of society reign supreme; society is compared, for example, to a field of forces or to a clockwork without intentionality, centre or hierarchy. By contrast, the theories of the social which emphasize the symbolic, the cultural, typically make use of images that are more organic and, as it were, more elevated: society is described as a person, as a self-regulating organism, as an entity whose members manipulate symbols located in an ethereal, meta-social space.[40] Crucially, society is seen as having more than one dimension, it is vertical as well as horizontal, with complex, web-like relations existing between the elements located on different planes. It is precisely this assumption concerning multiple social planes or levels which renders an important metaphor of social life possible: the metaphor of *suspension*,[41] which is obviously one of the many forms of tension in the sense in which I am using the term here. I have in mind here a particularly famous image of the social, proposed by Clifford Geertz:

> Believing [...] that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.[42]

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40 Carl Schmitt observed that Hobbes, in his *Leviathan*, had recourse (confusingly, Schmitt believed) to mechanical as well as to organic metaphors of the social. From the perspective adopted in this essay, this 'confusion' could possibly be better understood as a reflection of the specificity of Hobbes's position concerning the nature of the third present in all social relations: this figure is clearly present, but within a rationalistic and mechanistic framework which many more recent theories of the social precisely sought to overcome. See Carl Schmitt, *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes: Sinn und Fehlschlag eines politischen Symbols* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2003).

41 Note that this metaphor, in its typical form, does not envisage social agents as suspended on a *single* string, but simultaneously on a variety of them: this is the image of *entanglement*.

42 Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 3.

V.

It is undeniable that the notion of tension – even before any theoretical effort to sharpen and strengthen its meaning with a view to transform it into a concept useful for analyses in the human sciences – exerts a distinct 'spell', to borrow a term from Wittgenstein.[43] At first sight, this spell may have to do with the sheer *extension* of the term's meaning, insofar as it entails a number of rich connotations which pertain to a variety of fields – from the technological (electric tension) to the aesthetic (suspense) and to the sexual (excitation, arousal). However, tension seems to be capable, to use a term from classical psychology, of 'taking hold' of our imagination not only because of the sheer quantity of its possible uses and associations, but also because of some intrinsic quality common to all these uses and associations, a quality which bestows the notion of tension with a particular *weight*, a particular vividness, a particular attractiveness. The situations, objects, images, which we associate with tension seem to relate to some sectors of our experience which are perceived or believed to be fundamental in one way or another.

In order to account for this intuitive feeling, it is tempting to suggest that the weight of the notion of tension has something to do with the fact that it resonates with some universal aspects of our way of inhabiting the world as embodied beings of a particular kind – e.g. beings whose most natural position is that of standing in erect position. However, when looking at tension from the viewpoint of social and political theory, one seems to detect a further possible explanation of the spell of tension. It is an important component of Durkheim's sociology that our most basic concepts and categories (such as time, space, force, class) owe part of their appeal to their origin in fundamental social experiences. What this essay may have shown is that something similar could perhaps be said of tension: the distinct spell of this notion may have something to do with the fact that it captures, and thereby discloses, something which is at work, secretly or not, in most forms of life in common.

43 Ludwig Wittgenstein said that we are 'guided by the rules as by a spell'. See *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), § 234.

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