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THE CHALLENGES OF 21ST CENTURY SOCIETY AND KEY HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES



ABSTRACT

Today's societies face many challenges that are closely linked to changing values, the weakening of values or the emergence of new values. Values not only guide people between right and wrong, but also represent a kind of cohesive force for communities. If these values are shaken, social order and coexistence may be endangered.

My study aims to provide a brief summary of norms, values and social challenges in the 21st century. Our rapidly changing world, the fast flow of information and social transformation influence our everyday lives, which has made individual and community adaptation stronger.

KEYWORDS: *social challenges in the 21st, social transformation, human rights, society, social change*

INTRODUCTION

The society of the 21st century is changing dynamically, while facing new challenges and modern forms of old problems. Technological progress, globalization, migration, climate change, and economic inequalities all have an impact on people's lives. Amid these challenges, human rights issues are becoming increasingly important, and protecting and ensuring these rights is key to creating a just and sustainable society. One of the greatest social challenges is growing inequality, both in social and economic life. This includes digitalization, which, although it offers new opportunities, leaves many people behind and unable to access basic services and education. This particularly affects disadvantaged groups such as Roma, people with disabilities, and people living in rural areas. Equal opportunities are therefore essential to ensure that everyone can participate in social and economic life.

Climate change is another significant challenge, which is not only an environmental issue but also a social one. The consequences of climate change, such as droughts, floods and desertification, threaten the lives of millions of people and could trigger new waves of migration. Climate justice means protecting the rights of those who have contributed least to the problem but suffer most from its consequences. Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are key human rights issues. Disinformation, surveillance and data misuse in the digital space pose new threats. The protection of the rights

of women and minority groups cannot be ignored either. Gender equality, combating domestic violence and non-discrimination are fundamental human rights issues that in many cases still need to be fought for, not only in the poorer parts of the world but also in developed countries.

In summary, the social challenges of the 21st century are closely intertwined with human rights issues. The society of the future can only be successful if the rights of all people are respected equally and solutions to common problems are sought together. It's also important to raise awareness, improve education, and strengthen active citizenship. That's the only way we can build a world where everyone can live with dignity and safety.

SOCIAL FACTS AND NORMS IN TODAY'S SOCIETIES

Social facts and norms fundamentally influence the functioning of today's societies. These invisible yet powerful forces determine our everyday behavior, our decisions, and how we live together with others. At the same time, we often do not even notice that these rules, expectations, and realities are deeply embedded in our social values. Social values are not innate, but are acquired through socialization.

The concept of value is fundamentally a philosophical, metaphysical concept. We can only talk about value in its original sense if we have some valid basis of comparison against which we can measure something as valuable. In sociology, a distinction is made between objective and subjective values. According to this definition, an objective value is *everything that a given system (and this system can be a human organization, an institution, a group of people, a society, or even the whole of humanity) needs in order to exist, function, and possibly develop* (Beluszký, 2000).

In a society, the central elements of the value system may include justice, freedom, equality, solidarity, respect, respect for work, or even environmental protection. The functioning of society on a daily basis is fundamentally influenced by its value system, i.e., the laws it enacts, the norms it establishes, how it judges the behavior of individuals, and the goals it sets for itself. If values are healthy and balanced, this can help the community develop, hold together,

and live together peacefully. Conversely, if the value system is distorted, it can easily lead to division, social injustice and, in some cases, exclusion.

The value system is based on norms that help to maintain and transmit values among members of the community. However, if a value system changes, norms may also change over time. In some cases, equality and acceptance may become increasingly important in a society, and new norms may emerge in speech and behavior. In this situation, social independence is shaped by values and norms. Social facts are an integral part of this issue. These facts are objective realities that are independent of the will of the individual, yet still influence it. Examples include laws, economic systems, and social consensus. These are shaped collectively by people, but once they have been established, individuals can only adapt to them. However, social facts not only describe society, they also provide a framework for its functioning.

In sociology, social facts are the values, cultural norms, and social structures which transcend the individual and are capable of exercising a social constraint. For Durkheim, sociology is nothing but the study of social facts and social facts must be considered as things. The task of the sociologist is to search for correlations between social facts in order to reveal laws of social structure^[1].

He defines social facts as “ways of acting, thinking and feeling, external to the individual and endowed with power of coercion by reason of which they control him. To Durkheim, society is a reality ‘sui generis’. Society comes into being by the association of individuals. Hence society represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics. This unique reality of society is distinct from the other realities studied by the physical or biological sciences. Social reality has an independent existence of its own, which is over and above the individual. Therefore, the reality of society must be the subject matter of sociology. Social fact is that way of acting, thinking or feeling which is more or less general in given society^[2].

In contrast, social norms are expectations that regulate our behavior. In today’s world, however, these social facts and norms are often seen in a different light. Globalization, technological progress, cultural diversity, and generational differences constantly pose new challenges to the system of norms and values. What was acceptable a generation ago may now seem outdated or even problematic. Examples include gender issues and integration challenges.

Such changes often lead to tensions, as not everyone easily accepts new norms or understands the social realities that affect our lives. At the same time, these transformations also create opportunities to build more just, open, and inclusive societies.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES FACING OUR SOCIETY IN TERMS OF VALUES

The fact that humans possess reason and imagination not only creates a need for them to have a sense of self-identity, but also to find their way around the world intellectually.

The society of the 21st century faces a number of complex and interrelated issues that represent new challenges for communities, governments and individuals alike. This is not only about the structure of society, but also about the quality of life, values and future prospects of people. *Equality means that everyone has the same rights and opportunities, no matter what their gender, background, religion, or other personal characteristics. This principle was most clearly expressed in the slogan of the French Revolution (liberty, equality, fraternity). However, as one of the fundamental principles of human rights, equality today means that everyone must be recognized as having human dignity and equal rights, and that discrimination must be prevented. This principle is enshrined in numerous international human rights instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as in other conventions and national legislation. Promotion of equality is essential for social justice and respect for human integrity^[3].*

The most important challenge is to ensure equality and justice. *The principle of equal treatment means that all persons must be treated in a manner appropriate to their status, without discrimination. This is the basis of equal opportunities, as equal opportunities can only be guaranteed in a discrimination-free environment* (Makkos, 2024).

Similarly important is the weakening of solidarity and community responsibility. Consumer societies often emphasize individualism and self-centered thinking, which reduces social cohesion. Due to the decline of community values, many people feel isolated and vulnerable.

The values of respect and tolerance have also been challenged by global migration, cultural mixing, and political divisions. Prejudice, hate speech, and exclusion are common, which is contrary to the ideal of an open and inclusive society.

Another important value is responsibility – not only for ourselves, but also for our environment and future generations. Climate change, environmental pollution, and sustainability issues highlight that it is not enough to meet the needs of the present; we must also make responsible decisions for the future.

CHALLENGES RELATED TO THE VALUE SYSTEM OF TODAY'S SOCIETY

The value system of today's society is influenced by numerous factors, which in the long term will undoubtedly determine the activities of our society and communities. In the period before the technological revolution, everyday life was less complicated, and our values tended toward simplicity and more reliable social systems.

We can even say that there is a moral crisis in society. Throughout history, every generation has complained about the moral decline of the next. However, the moral crisis in today's society is not only alarming when viewed through the distorting lens of nostalgia; there are also many tangible signs that our value system has been fundamentally shaken. *When a concept of the good life is formulated and the path to achieving this ideal is laid out, the foundations of the moral order of society are laid. This includes the canonization of certain concepts of right and wrong, while others are censored. If, as result, the path to a moral life is defined in the organization of collective life as a general criterion for action, and deviations from this are punished, then the moral order of society is consolidated. The task of enforcing the moral order may be dispersed among institutions, but it can also be concentrated in a certain group of institutions* (Luckmann, 1996).

The classic moral order—which was held firmly in place for centuries by religious, cultural, and family traditions—has now often been replaced by a kind of relativism where *everyone is right*, but no one has any obligations. Self-discipline, decency, and responsibility toward the community have been pushed into the

background in favor of self-assertion, consumption, and immediate satisfaction. Social institutions such as schools, churches, and families have weakened. Education is often replaced by the entertainment industry, which produces ratings rather than morals. In the loud but shallow world of social media, all opinions seem equal, and the *like* button is more important than the truth. This is how seriousness becomes ridiculous and scandal becomes the norm. *The question of individuals' economic behavior and the ethical norms they follow thus became a central issue at the end of the 20th century. Findings that inequality is growing within capitalist societies have also contributed to bringing the question of the relationship between the economy and justice to the fore* (Grenier, 2020).

Perhaps the most significant challenge is the rise of moral relativism. It is an increasingly widespread view that *everyone has their own truth* and that values are subjective, so it is impossible to establish universal moral norms. At first glance, this attitude seems tolerant and open-minded, but in the long run it can lead to moral disorientation. If all points of view are equally valid, how can we distinguish between right and wrong? And where is the line between acceptance and indifference? It is difficult for society to reach consensus on fundamental issues such as justice, responsibility, or freedom. In contemporary western societies, individual freedom and self-fulfillment have become core values. While this is not a problem in itself indeed, it is an important achievement—when individualism becomes excessive, it pushes community responsibility and solidarity into the background. People become isolated, family and community ties weaken, and the willingness to cooperate declines. The *every man for himself* attitude can easily lead to social atomization, where there are fewer and fewer connecting ties and mistrust increases.

The values of consumer society are based on possession, experiences, and instant gratification. This attitude prioritizes material goods, appearances, and quick success, while enduring values such as perseverance, moderation, and selflessness are pushed into the background. People's identities are often shaped by their consumption habits (*you tell me what you buy, I'll tell you who you are*). This can distort self-esteem. The effects of technological development are another area that needs to be explored further.

While technological development has opened up new opportunities, it has also created new value dilemmas. Social media has created a culture

of sharing, where appearances are often more important than reality. In this case, the depth of personal relationships is clearly weakened, and superficiality and the desire for instant feedback increase.

In contemporary society, there are increasingly sharp differences between generations. The older generation often represents the values of stability, tradition, and duty, while younger generations are more open to change, self-expression, and new interpretations of social justice. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it can easily lead to tensions if there is no dialogue. Values are constantly evolving, but if generations do not understand each other, society can easily become divided. *Cooperation between the different generations that make up society is clearly essential for effective work in both schools and the workplace, but it also presents increased challenges* (Thuma, 2016).

Just like artificial intelligence, genetics, biotechnology, or even climate change, which raise new and complex ethical questions. Society is not yet prepared to respond quickly, so solutions are always sought and integrated after the fact. society is also right to ask what the limits of technological development are and what responsibility we have towards future generations. It is important to regulate these issues professionally and to promote the use of new technologies.

The value system of today's society is not merely changing, but searching for itself. We are living in an era of uncertainty, diversity, and rapid change, where the challenge is not which set of values will prevail, but whether we can find common ground. We need values that are not rigid dogmas, but living principles that can be implemented in practice.

INTEGRATION AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Society is not simply a collection of people, but a cohesive community bound together by shared norms, values, customs, and goals. Integration is key to this process: it means that individuals and groups become part of the community as a whole, while also becoming part of its cultural, legal, and moral order. Integration does not just mean that someone is present in society, but that they participate in it through work, responsibility, and acceptance of shared values. A true society does not just tolerate new members,

but is able to accept them without the common norms dissolving in diversity. Society and integration are interdependent. If there is no integration, society fragments: groups live side by side but not together. If, on the other hand, integration is forced and superficial, ignoring cultural differences and community identity, resistance, mistrust and conflict arise.

The normative view of social integration is mainly represented by Parsons in his normative-functionalist systems theory. Parsons refers to social groups as collectivities, but in a broad sense, this concept actually includes institutional groups of different natures (communal, social, and mixed), with the exception of coercive institutional groups (Farkas, 2022).

In modern state society, the integration of different spheres of life and different groups living together varies in degree and nature. In the sphere of community life, a community group is integrated by the community institutional system and/or institutional community morality that has developed within that group through its normative function and the community relations it has created or defined, as well as through the internal adaptation of individuals to these relations (Farkas, 2013).

The most frequently used concept today is *social integration*, or more precisely, *integratedness*, which refers to (1) a situation in which people can exercise their rights and opportunities without restrictions or artificial barriers, or even in spite of them. This interpretation is closely related to and complemented by the concept of social integration as a process, namely a kind of emancipation process. Social integration can also be conceived as (2) a situation where interactions are based on mutual understanding and harmonious solidarity, or strive to achieve this. Social integration can also mean (3) functional coercion. The division of labor imposed by market mechanisms, the mandatory adherence to bureaucratic procedures, and adaptation based on interest-driven considerations. Social integration can also mean (4) a danger, the danger of uniformity. Integration can force uniformity on the individual, requiring them to give up their unique individuality, but also on a community.” (Szepešsy, 2015)

According to this, successful integration is a two-way process: new members show openness and adaptability, while the host society offers direction, frameworks, and fair opportunities. This interaction ensures that society not only survives but also develops while maintaining its internal cohesion. The essence

of integration is that people of different origins, ways of thinking, or cultures are able to live together by participating in the life of the community, adapting to its rules, and accepting common values, while preserving a worthy part of their own identity.

Integration is therefore not merely coexistence, but becoming part of a community entering a society not only in a legal sense, but also morally and culturally. People who integrate do not just *use* society, but contribute to its development, abide by its norms, and take responsibility for it. The success of integration depends on whether there is a clear set of values to which people can adhere and whether there is a will to do so. If any of these are missing, integration will fail and society will become divided and unstable.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to provide a brief summary of the changes taking place in society in the 21st century, the greatest challenges it faces, and the issues that arise in relation to social norms and rules, integration, and cooperation. Radical changes in values are taking place in modern society. Traditional values such as family, work, faith, patriotism, responsibility, and honesty are gradually receding into the background and being replaced by individual rights, self-fulfillment, consumption, and freedom/individualism.

The change is not merely development or modernization, but a moral transformation. The community is often replaced by the individual, duty by desire, and tradition by a passion for novelty. The result is uncertainty: without shared, enduring values, all opinions are equal and society loses its internal cohesion. To achieve this, society must constantly evolve and adapt, but the consequences of social change can far exceed human thinking, relationships, morals, and identity. This causes communities to weaken, family and national ties to loosen, and individuals to resort to multifaceted coping strategies. Often without support, this reinforces uncertainty, anxiety, and moral identity crises. However, social changes are also transforming the nature of power: instead of personal responsibility, decisions are often made by anonymous systems, and traditional authorities (teachers, parents, spiritual leaders)

are losing their influence and being replaced by *information noise*. People find it more difficult to find common ground, which further increases uncertainty.

But we must not forget that social change also offers opportunities for renewal and the creation of a more just order. But only if we remember that technological progress does not in itself make us more human, and that new is not always better than old. The question is not whether there will be changes, but in what direction they will go and who will control them.

Finally, there is the big question of whether the society of the future will be merely a network of rights, where everyone gets what they are entitled to, or a moral community where people are held together not only by the law, but also by responsibility, trust, and shared moral values. Is it possible to build a society based on a *contract* if there is no common belief in what it means to be a *good person*?

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ENDNOTES

- ^[1]Emile Durkeheim. Source: <https://gyansanchay.csjmu.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CLASSICAL-SOCIOLOGICAL-THEORY-2.pdf>
- ^[2]Emile Durkeheim. Source: <https://gyansanchay.csjmu.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CLASSICAL-SOCIOLOGICAL-THEORY-2.pdf>
- ^[3]Emberi jogi szótár egyenlőség/ Human rights dictionary equality. Source: <https://helsinki.hu/en/>