

Herausgeber:
Dirk Baecker, Universität Witten/Herdecke
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Peter Fuchs, Fachhochschule Neubrandenburg
Michael Hutter, Universität Witten/Herdecke
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Redaktion:
Johannes F. K. Schmidt

Redaktionsadresse:
Soziale Systeme, Fakultät für Soziologie, Universität Bielefeld,
Postfach 100 131, D-33501 Bielefeld, Tel. (+49) (0)521/106-4623/6924, Fax (+49) (0)521/106-6020
E-Mail: soziale.systeme@uni-bielefeld.de

Rezensionen:
Urs Stäheli / Thomas Kurtz, Fakultät für Soziologie,
Universität Bielefeld, Postfach 100 131, D-33501 Bielefeld
Tel. (+49) (0)521/106-6924/3997, Fax (+49) (0)521/106-6020, E-Mail: urs.staeheli@uni-bielefeld.de

Umschlagentwurf:
Rolf-Hermann Geller, Fachhochschule Neubrandenburg

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Exclusion and Socio-Cultural Identities

Systems Theoretical and Poststructuralist Perspectives

Edited by
Urs Stäheli and Rudolf Stichweh

With contributions from
*Dirk Baecker, Friedrich Balke, Cornelia Bohn, Jonathan Elmer,
Alois Hahn, Oliver Marchart, Armin Nassehi, William Rasch,
Urs Stäheli, Rudolf Stichweh and Joseph Vogl*

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Editorial

Urs Stäheli/Rudolf Stichweh

Inclusion / Exclusion. Systems Theoretical and Poststructuralist Perspectives

Together, the distinction between inclusion/exclusion and the problem of the formation of socio-cultural identities embrace a large variety of social phenomena and theoretical problems that, to a degree independently of one another, have taken shape as central research foci in various theoretical approaches and disciplines in recent years. This special issue of ›Soziale Systeme‹ addresses different systems theoretical and poststructuralist perspectives dealing with the connection between inclusion and exclusion processes and the constitution of social, cultural and political identities. The papers in this volume were delivered at the conference ›Inclusion/Exclusion and Socio-Cultural Identities‹ which was held at the ›Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies‹ (ZIF), University of Bielefeld, in March 2001. We would like to thank the ZIF for its financial and organizational support for this conference.

Systems theoretical and poststructuralist approaches diverge significantly in their conception of how to link inclusion/exclusion with the constitution of identities. Poststructuralist approaches analyse the constitution of identities from the standpoint of agonistic and antagonistic (discursive) practices (Hall 1991; Hall/du Gay 1996; Butler 1990; 1993; 1997; Laclau 1996; Laclau/Mouffe 1984). The constitution of collective identities is understood as a precarious process of identification, which inevitably depends on creating an area of exclusion and the excluded. What are of interest here are processes and modes of drawing frontiers, as well as how the included is affected by the excluded. However, this focus on the constitution of identities often neglects to note that conditions of inclusion and exclusion are also structured by functional systems. In contrast to poststructuralist accounts of identity, Luhmann's systems theory understands the twin concepts of inclusion and exclusion as a correlate of functional differentiation (Luhmann 1995; 1997; Stichweh 1988; Stichweh 1997; Stichweh 1998; Göbel/Schmidt 1998). Function systems are confronted with a tension between an all-inclusive semantics of the inclusion of everyone (e.g. human rights, constructions of citizenship etc.) and phenomena of exclusion at the level of social structure. Counted as to-be-included are individuals who are not included in their total existence as psychic systems and bodies,

but only by being addressed as ›persons‹ in communication (Luhmann 1995; Fuchs 1997). This implies also that not simply individuals, but specifically classified individuals are included or excluded, so that processes of classification also determine how the distinction between inclusion/exclusion operates. Although systems theory offers a highly developed vocabulary for thinking processes of inclusion and exclusion, the question of socio-cultural identities as effects of inclusion and/or exclusion is only illustratively addressed (e.g. fundamentalist identities or protest identities). Taken seriously, the poststructuralist observation that inclusion and exclusion processes produce identities must lead to the systematic question of how to explain the persistence of identities that are not in line with functional differentiation. For example, the semantic and socio-structural ›success‹ of gender identities (Cornell 1992; Pasero 1994; Tyrell 1986; Weinbach/Stichweh 2001; Stäheli 2003) or of ethnic identities (Nassehi 1990; Stichweh 1997) points at the problematic relation between identity formation and functional differentiation. While systems theory has only recently addressed such questions of identity, they occupy a prominent position in poststructuralist approaches (Grossberg 1996). Here it is the discursive construction of identities that interests most centrally: identity is seen as a category in constant dispute, one that rests of necessity on exclusion. Moreover, the excluded is understood as a ›constitutive outside‹ that haunts the very process of identity constitution.

In terms of their theories of society, poststructuralism and systems theory take very different positions. Poststructuralist approaches relate the inclusion-and-exclusion concept to processes of the constitution and failure of collective identity-formation, with the theoretical basis of these processes being thought of in terms of a hegemony model in the tradition of Gramsci. That is, inclusion and exclusion processes are ultimately explained in terms of a model of society based on a theory of power, in which hegemonic and anti-hegemonic forms of identity are in perpetual conflict. Inclusion/exclusion then, necessarily, becomes a political question, nurtured by the »horror of indeterminacy« (Bauman 1991) of inclusion and exclusion. This problematizes the possibility of drawing a definite and clear boundary between inside and outside. This undecidability questions the very idea of stable identities, thus assuming necessarily contaminated identities (Bhabha 1994). Now, the question arises of how the re-emergence of the outside within the inside is politicized – be it as a politics of hybrid identities (Bhabha), the antagonistic constitution of identities (Laclau/Mouffe) or as the political inclusion of the outside as ›bare life‹ (Agamben 1998).

In contrast, systems theory does not automatically conceive of inclusion and exclusion as a political process. Rather, particular ways of including and addressing are explained from the viewpoint of function systems and their autopoiesis. Identities may crystallize at points of inclusion and exclusion, but

are neither prerequisites nor necessary effects of the autopoiesis of function systems. This, however, does not mean that systems theory is not interested in the complexity of the distinction between inclusion and exclusion which is exemplified with the re-entry of the distinction within itself. Instead of speaking about ›hybridization‹, systems theory prefers to speak of the re-entry of the distinction inclusion/exclusion.

Despite all these differences, systems and discourse theoretical concepts of inclusion/exclusion reveal similarities with regard to their formal construction, insofar as inclusion necessarily implies the counter-concept exclusion, which means that the possibility of a universal all-inclusion is ruled out from the first. Not only are both theoretical positions interested generally in inclusion and exclusion processes, but also in their specific modern form. The problem of socio-cultural identity arises from the breakdown of all-inclusive and stable categories of identity, as well as from the irreconcilability of different identities which comes about through this (Calhoun 1995).

Systems theory tries to account for the modern impossibility of including the individual as whole by suggesting the concept of ›exclusion individuality‹ (Exklusionsindividualität). This concept attaches the possibility of individuality to the condition that no individual is included in only one particular function system, thus obtaining his/her individuality precisely from her/his ›individuality‹ being excluded from all the inclusions of this individual (Luhmann 1989). In this sense, the concept of ›exclusion individuality‹ describes individuality as a typically modern phenomenon based on the functional differentiation of society. No individual is completely integrated into only one function system, but instead individuality as a whole is precisely what escapes the selective perspectives of function systems.

In poststructuralist theories, the idea of a completely included individual also becomes problematic, since it is impossible to consign somebody to only one discourse – and moreover, even the plural identities are never fully ›sutured‹ (Lacan) identities, i.e. they are always already marked by their necessary failure to achieve fullness. This impossibility (which, of course, does not mean that there are no attempts at identification and totalization!) also affects the idea of ›exclusion individuality‹. The concept of individuality itself – including that of ›exclusion individuality‹ – can no longer evade heterogenization, and thus cannot offer any ›private‹ integration of individual identity either. The assumption of the decentring of the subject means for the conceptualization of the individual that its unity is put at risk. These always unstable and disputed forms of identity then also need strategic forms and technologies of identity management (Calhoun 1995; Dean 1992). Social and cultural identities are no longer understood as stable categories with an »essentialist« core, but rather as precarious identification processes (Hall 1991; Hall/du Gay 1996; Žizek 1989) – processes that require constant ›re-iteration‹ (Butler 1993; 1997) and

thus hinder an ultimate fixing of identity. While systems theory retains the modern subject in the form of ›exclusion individuality‹, poststructuralist approaches problematize even this identity.

The different contributions to this volume try to address these theoretical tensions and they try to show exemplarily how processes of identity formation can be analysed in terms of inclusion and exclusion. The variety of topics addressed here – ranging from the foreigner, Lenin's theory of the party, the popular speculator, Captain Ahab to the Last Mohican – show that problems of identity formation are not restricted to the ›mantra‹ of Cultural Studies (race, gender and class). In this way, we hope to establish perspectives which would neither seem to conceptualize the de-construction of identity as an unexpected by-product of functional differentiation, nor society as something resulting above all from a battle for identities.

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Dr. Urs Stäheli, Fakultät für Soziologie, Universität Bielefeld
P.O. 100 131, D-33501 Bielefeld
urs.staeheli@uni-bielefeld.de

Prof. Dr. Rudolf Stichweh, Fakultät für Soziologie, Universität Bielefeld
P.O. 100 131, D-33501 Bielefeld
rudolf.stichweh@uni-bielefeld.de