

The Phenomenon of Exclusion

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This article aims to elucidate the concept of social exclusion from a phenomenological approach. Exclusion is distinguished from the mere problem of poverty, based on the three dichotomies: agony and agency, disparity and cohesion, and the self and the other. Moreover, exclusion denotes a shift in social responsibility. In analyzing social exclusion as a process of individual drift, four structural elements are significant—work, family, institutions, and the human body.

It was the discourse on the new urban underclass that emphatically showed that social inequality is not only a question of ups and downs but also, and with more existential relevance, a question of being-in or moving-out. Before outlining the elements and the dynamics of the vicious circle that takes one out of society and into a kind of social no-man's land, some conceptual questions must be considered. What does the concept of social exclusion mean and what is meant by a phenomenological approach to it?

In much of Europe in recent years, the discourse on poverty within the analysis of social problems has been replaced by attention to the broader, obviously more diffuse problem of social exclusion.¹ The socially excluded, according to this notion, are usually poor, but they suffer from more than just a shortage of money or material transfer pay; they endure other kinds of deprivation and deficits, the cumulative impact of which leaves them detached

1 An International Labour Organisation Report suggests that the concept of social exclusion can be seen as a replacement for poverty, which provides a multidimensional view of the processes of impoverishment (International Institute for Labour Studies 1996).

from the mainstream of our society. Some scholars see the problem as implying exclusion from the labor market, from education, from security, from health, or at least from human rights (cf. Badelt 1999). Other aspects of social exclusion involve a lack of participation in community life and insufficient access to social benefits (cf. Atkinson/Hills 1998). So, this is the conclusion, social exclusion is a problem that requires more than a public transfer to those in need (cf. Hills/Le Grand/Piachaud 2002).

We seem to know what poverty is about. Poverty is a question of shortage, lack, and deficiencies in relation to what the majority has, earns, and requires. It is something relative and nothing absolute (cf. Hauser 1997). But, nevertheless, there are a lot of findings that absolutely prove that poor people lead less healthy lives, experience more stress, and die earlier. So one could conclude that all it takes is to provide them with financial aid in order to change the relationship of those who have and those who have not. But what is exclusion about? And what does it mean to regard social exclusion as a phenomenon? There are three aspects that constitute a social fact as a social phenomenon (Herzog/Graumann 1991).

The first aspect means that we are “addressed” by a phenomenon. We are captured by experiences that create a rupture in our normal construction of the world. Let us take the situation at a party where you meet an old friend who appears set apart from all the others’ way of living. He or she drinks too much and complains too much. Instinctively, you distance yourself from him or her because you do not want to be affected by those bad vibrations. In phenomenological philosophy, there is the term “fatality,” which is assigned to this experience of being addressed or struck by a phenomenon.

The second aspect is that we see a phenomenon as a totality in itself. A phenomenon cannot be reduced to a certain element without destroying its whole structure. In this sense social exclusion has an effect on all of the dimensions of the personal life of an individual: not only on how you consume or on how you work, but also on how you love and on how you trust. That is the “totality” of a phenomenon.

Thirdly, a phenomenon implies a certain reflexive effect. The moment we are captured by it and see it as a whole, we are confronted with ourselves. We aim to distance ourselves from that friend at the party because there is the possibility that we could be in his or her place. He or she shows us the threshold of shame that rules out the possibility of being integrated into the community of belonging. In the vocabulary of phenomenological philosophy, this is the idea of “fundamentality.” Faced with someone who is excluded, we are confronted with the question of what counts as a livable life and as a grievous death. Obviously, there is a shift in attitude when one replaces the concept of poverty with that of social exclusion. Through this phenomenological ap-

proach, the following three implications of the concept of exclusion become evident:

The first implication involves the difference between agony and agency. The excluded suffer, as the classical investigation on *The Unemployed of Marienthal* shows (Jahoda/Lazarsfeld/Zeisel 1975): they are in some kind of agony. They have lost or they are losing their focus, their control over the world. They no longer stand on their own feet. Inclusion, therefore, means to reconstruct agency. The rhetoric of empowerment, activation, and responsibility are concentrated in the idea of agency; this concept changed social welfare politics from the principle of income maintenance to that of preventing social exclusion. This marked a shift from passive to active policies, from an emphasis on responsibilities to rights, a shift from protection to inclusion. In order to reconstruct agency, the enabling state that follows the welfare state aims no longer to protect labor, but to promote work (cf. Gilbert 2004).

The second difference involved in the concept of exclusion is that of disparity and cohesion. Especially in France, responses to the problem of social exclusion are embedded in the discussion about the republican nation. Those who are socially excluded are the pariah of the nation and thus mark a limit for liberal society. The community of the republican nation cannot bear the fact that significant parts of the population are on the outside. In this case, exclusion is connected with the notion of a division between the included and the excluded (cf. Nasse 1992).²

The third difference implied in the concept of exclusion is that of the self and the other. In the face of an excluded other, we are confronted with the question: Who cares (cf. Göttle 2000)? Who cares for those who are losing control and are being thrown into a state of distrust and hopelessness? It is obviously inadequate if the state alone, which functions according to the requirements of formal rights and standardized measures, takes on this task. The concept of social exclusion appeals to a “we” that cannot delegate its responsibility for the other to someone else. Who or what this “we” is, however, is highly disputed. Is it the nation, the neighborhood, civil society (cf. Walzer 1983), or is it, as Judith Butler would say in the words of Levinas, each of us as a human being (Butler 2003)?

At this point it becomes apparent how the concept of social exclusion leads to a shift in the grounds for social responsibility away from the state towards something else. In sociological terms, this is a shift from Marshallian citizenship to Durkheimian membership.³

2 For a general discussion, cf. Silver 1994.

3 As a widely discussed position inbetween, cf. Margalit 1997.

What can we do, how can we deal with this concept of social exclusion, that is, on the one hand, normalized and, on the other hand, dramatized? Is it more than an intuitive shortcut elaborated in philosophical dimensions?

There are different frames of reference from which studies about social exclusion typically operate: that of individual drift and that of chronic social contexts (cf. Mingione 1996). Studies of the second type look at mechanisms of institutional discrimination and territorial signation. They examine urban poverty, racial division, and gender relations. What I would like to present in the following are some results from our analysis of processes of individual drift. Normally, four structural elements play a role in the processes of social exclusion: work, family, institution, and the human body (cf. Bude 1998).

To begin with the end: It is the body that the everyday struggle for recognition seems to be focused on. We have this debate about “white trash” on the one hand, and the emerging beauty culture on the other: mere bodily appearance as a sign of an individual’s lack of responsibility, flexibility, mobility. You see, smell, and feel someone moving from the zone of precariousness to that of exclusion. Robert Castel (2000) has promoted the model of social zooming in order to understand the micro-processes of social inclusion and exclusion. His main idea is that social exclusion is becoming a possibility that bridges the center and the edges of society. It could happen to everybody because of the change not only in the regimes of labor and employment, but also in the regimes of the family, the state, and the self. Things are getting more heterogeneous and precarious in all respects. You cannot project the excluded into a certain social place; they are among us and affect us. For this reason, the body is of social importance for the determination of one’s position in the social world.

Of course, a certain kind of job experience is normally the starting point for a disastrous career. What is less important is the loss of the job itself; what counts more is experiencing a long period of failure in trying to get back into employment, which tends to condition people to continue to fail. There is a type of person, who could be called the “active loser,” who is characterized by doing everything right at the wrong moment. He or she invests too much into a certain situation and therefore cuts off all paths of return.

A different type of person shows an inability to adapt to an “alternative role” that is supposed to secure a socially acceptable way of leaving gainful employment. A traditional example could be the change of status for a person who takes on the role of a housewife. Recently, extra “communitarian” bonuses have been awarded for “third sector” activities. But if people are not successful at regarding loss as a sacrifice, or feel exposed when the neighbors look at them rather contemptuously, they start to have doubts about the justification for their own existence.

A third negative experience regarding work would be a person dropping out of contingent work as a result of an “unusual life-event.” Sudden illness or an unfortunate accident can pull the rug out from under an attempt to juggle with different sources of income. The whole economy of a household then breaks down.

The crisis in the family represents a second decisive factor. In principle, the crisis engendered by unemployment can lead to the re-establishment of family solidarity. On the one hand, the “extended family” often proves to be a secure environment, offering the final point of stability. But this, on the other hand, increases the vulnerability of people sticking together. Men in particular suffer from the fear of losing their “normative competence” because of their employment problems, and this can plunge the whole family system into a state of vague unrest, which causes everything to become a problem. If the family support system finally cracks under the strain, the individual who is left alone has taken a further step down the road towards believing he or she is superfluous.

Coupled with problems associated with work and family, a third factor of social exclusion must be considered. The social welfare institutions react decisively when confronted with obvious symptoms of social malaise. Personnel dealing with unemployment and poverty have their own ideas and theories on how to treat these people, and such opinions often play a most significant role. People who appear to be socially unstable will quickly lose their rights to full benefits in the eyes of officials. This battle for recognition between those seeking benefits and those awarding them is played out in the micro-situation of contact within the institution. There has been little research on how claim limits are defined in everyday situations like these. Whatever the situation, dependent people experience institutional classification and administrative assignments as degrading procedures that mark them as dependent beggars. In extreme cases, they can lose their ability to conform to the institution’s expectations because they end up playing the role the institution expects of them, and this can lead to ongoing “institutional isolation” (Gans 1995).

The final and most important indication seen in processes of social exclusion is, as mentioned above, the human body. The road to superfluity, the road out of society, is often marked by one type of addiction taken from the entire available spectrum. Physical dependence can be seen as the final closure mechanism initiated by a person to seal the break with the legitimate social link, with work, the family, and institutions.

What we have in the end is the logic of failure in terms of work, the logic of break-up in terms of the family, the logic of registration in terms of the institution, and the logic of stigma in terms of the human body. When these four components act together, a pattern of feeling superfluous can cumulatively build up and finally close people to all outside influence. Analysis of these

processes shows an irreversible pattern of exclusion based on a loss of resources, bewilderment in the face of imposed sanctions, and the anticipation of being stigmatized.

If we pursue this analysis, we can distinguish at least three groups: the unemployed, the poor, and the excluded. There are links between all three, but no exact congruence. Normally, unemployment is a pre-condition for exclusion, but it is not the only factor. You can be included while being unemployed. Poverty usually is an additional factor, but to be marginalized does not mean to be excluded. It is possible for a person to come to the end of the social road despite a personal history that offered adequate provision for material needs.

One can see whether a person is excluded. One can see his or her weariness, indifference, or apathy. One is addressed by the other, imagines the totality of his or her life, and feels the urge to ask oneself: Who cares?

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