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Mapping Global Inequality with World Society Theory and Social Structural Analysis – Can Worlds Meet?

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Inequality, on both local and national levels as well as globally, cannot be reduced to income inequality. While this insight is less and less disputed in scientific and policy debates, and probably best exemplified in the comprehensive approach on inequality taken by the World Bank in its 2006 *World Development Report* (World Bank 2005), a wide and multi-faceted understanding particularly of global inequality creates a vast array of analytical problems. These problems can roughly be divided into problems of empirical analysis related to the issue of data availability on the one, and theoretical issues regarding the proper unit of analysis on the global level on the other hand. While for practical purposes these two sets of problems can and indeed need to be addressed separately, they are of course nonetheless intrinsically related to each other as expressions of what Ulrich Beck has appropriately termed ‘methodological nationalism’ (see, for example, Beck 2002). This term refers to the close link between, and indeed the constitutive role of, the modern nation-state as the prime unit of analysis both regarding the collection of relevant social data on the one, as well as in relation to the formulation of conceptual accounts of global inequality on the other hand. Regarding the issue of data collection and availability, both data on income and other aspects of global inequality rely primarily on aggregates of national aggregate data. Very little or no data is available if the prime units of reference are ‘transnational’ social spaces which cross-cut national boundaries or even are characterized by being embedded in different localities spread around the globe (e.g. transnational migrant communities). The problem is aggravated if the relevant data sought for transnational or global contexts extends beyond standardized national data into more complex panel data used for analyzing the formation of inequality in social structure analysis. Here, even standardized panel data extending beyond a few countries remain more the exception than the rule. Representative data sets pertaining to a larger number of countries, let alone to all countries, do not exist or arguably are troubled by conceptual and methodological problems.

Of course, the lack of adequate data in order to comprehensively map global inequality in the quality which is available within most and across some OECD countries could be portrayed as a largely technical problem which could be solved provided the availability of sufficient resources. However, as particularly the notion of ‘methodological nationalism’ suggests, it is not merely a technical problem related to issues of data gathering – which however of course it is also –, but also a rather basic conceptual problem. This more general problem is reflected in the fact that although analyses of global inequality do not refer to single nation-states, they mostly refer to a global *aggregate* of social spaces organized as nation-states. There is of course no dearth of conceptual proposals and theoretical ideas about which kinds of political and social spaces and systems other than the nation-state can be seen as relevant orders and structures of a global system – this is basically the core of the conceptual arguments in the debates about globalization and transnationalization. However, the gap between these conceptual arguments on the one hand and the possibilities to work on hypotheses derived from it with quantitative data seems to be persistent and deep.

It is of course a gigantic task far beyond the scope of this contribution to either systematically develop the nature and scope of this gap in relation to various theories of globalization and transnationalization on the one and the many sets of global quantitative data available on the other hand. And it is equally beyond its scope to systematically list the many attempts and promising avenues which seek to narrow this gap. What is within its scope, however, is to try and provide a more thorough illustration of both the nature of this gap as well as of possible strategies for closing it in relation to but one of its aspects. This aspect is derived from juxtaposing the methodological state of the art of social structural analysis on the genesis of inequality in Western countries on the one hand with the analysis of the forms and consequences of functional differentiation on a global scale on the other hand. The main argument here is that if indeed the global condition can be characterized in terms of a world society primarily differentiated not in a segmentary fashion into nation-states, but primarily differentiated functionally into operatively autonomous spheres of politics, law, economy, etc., then analyses of global inequality may in fact not only ask some wrong questions as long as they primarily remain geared even towards functionally (i.e. political, economic etc.) defined inequalities between national spaces. But that vice versa there is a basic problem of the accessibility of theoretical accounts of global functional differentiation for empirical analysis with quantitative data as long as the latter is primarily based on national units of reference.

Before briefly outlining the scope of the argument to follow it is necessary to be very clear about what this argument is *not* about. It is *not* an argument concerning itself with basic methodological and philosophical issues as to whether the knowledge of the sort generated by, in this case, systems-theoretical approaches to world society, is compatible with empirical analysis on the basis of statistical data. However, it is also not an argument which argues that such issues can or should simply be brushed aside or at least temporarily ignored for heuristic purposes. It is first of all an argument about the possibilities of combining insights from strands of social scientific analysis – world society theory on the one and social structural analysis on the other hand – which usually remain silent towards, if not ignorant of each other, for the purpose of identifying promising routes of research for analyzing global inequality. And it is second an argument which seeks to establish an understanding that even vastly different approaches towards analyzing global inequality can start to talk and in fact mutually reinforce each other analytically through appropriate mediating concepts.

In the following sections of this contribution, we will develop the argument in four steps. The *first section* will argue that the analysis of global inequality has much to benefit in conceptual terms from approaching it from the perspective of a theory of world society broadly in the tradition of the work of Niklas Luhmann, yet particularly following the thread of the theory of functional differentiation embedded in this work rather than its more systems theoretically-oriented component. It will particularly be argued that pursuing the route of world society theory for the purpose of conceptualizing global inequality has the advantage of providing a frame regarding the social ‘whole’ addressed. The argument here is that while the criticism of ‘methodological nationalism’ has rightly pointed out that to view this global social ‘whole’ as a mere aggregate of nation-state-enshrined social spaces is deficient, it has so far failed to come up with convincing analytical alternatives save normatively laden ideas regarding a global/cosmopolitan/civil society (in various combinations of these adjectives). While it will be argued in this context that a theory of world society provides a promising route for conceptualizing global inequality, we will however also identify some of the deficiencies built into the theory which so far have made it largely inaccessible for quantitative empirical analysis on a larger scale. A *second section* will then elaborate on a number of questions which any conceptualization of and research into global inequality has to answer, irrespective of the theoretical approach taken. Using these questions as guiding posts, a *third section* will then inspect whether and to which degree contemporary social structural analysis could be applied to a global context and take inspiration from notions of functional differentiation and

inclusion/exclusion prominent in world society theory. A final section [to be written] will argue that in spite of high conceptual and methodological hurdles, world society theory and social structural analysis can usefully complement each other particularly in the analysis of global inequality, yet that for this purpose a number of analytical joining and translating devices are required. We argue that the concept of ‘diversity’ is particularly suited for such a purpose.

World society theory and inequality

In contrast to many traditional theories of society which face the task to explain how territorially and nationally delimited societies are somehow ‘held together’ (through forms of community, common values etc.), world society as the biggest social system conceivable is ‘just’ that:¹ given that social systems are constituted by communication alone and that in principle all communication could connect/refer to all other communication on the globe, Luhmann argues for the existence of world society with no social system existing outside of world society. However, this world society is not integrated at all; rather, it only achieves its unity through its internal differentiation, i.e. it is not a structural level somehow ‘above’ constitutive units. World society is primarily differentiated *functionally* into function systems, including, for example, the political, the economic, or the legal system. This is the point where systems theory comes in and the point which illustrates why trying to think in terms of Luhmannian theory is so awkwardly difficult for those socialized in other traditions of social theory. Luhmann’s entire theory is about the operation of social systems – nothing less, but also nothing more: it is about the question of how social systems manage that communication can continue, that it is constantly rejected and accepted, and that it leads to new communication; it is about symbolically generalized media of communication, such as power, money, or truth; it is about communicative codes, such as legal/illegal, true/false; it is about the evolution of social systems through processes of communicative variation, selection, and restabilization; it is about the self-referential quality of social systems. Yet it is not at all about the question, for example, about how human actors interact and how ‘agency’ relates to ‘structure’: only communication communicates. The radical departure here is from agent-based sender-receiver models of communication. Since psychic systems/systems of

¹ It should be noted that we use the term „world society theory“ to refer to the version as primarily developed by Niklas Luhmann; for a brief overview over other world society theory, see Albert 2006; the present section seeks to fulfil the purpose of introducing into some basic tenets of world society theory as an arguably quite complex body of theory. A “concise” introduction in this sense is thus by definition a difficult and unsatisfactory exercise; in its present form it draw from a somewhat more extensive attempt in Albert 2008.

consciousness cannot directly observe each other,² sociality can only emerge through communication recursively related to communication. '*Communication*' is the unity of the difference between information, message, and understanding. This unity cannot be attributed to individual systems of consciousness. *Meaning* ('Sinn') then forms the general medium of communication that marks the unity of the difference between actuality and potentiality. Communication can then be either accepted or rejected, leading to follow-on operations of communication. From the standpoint of a theory of society formed on the basis of such an understanding of communication, the main underlying question to be confronted by social theory is thus not how order emerges out of chaos; rather, this latter question can only be addressed on the basis of a conceptualization of how communication does and can continue, i.e. an account of the conditions of meaning offers being accepted or rejected. While this is just to illustrate the scope and the difficulty of coming to terms with a theory which operates at such a basic level yet in the end generates far-reaching observations about macro-structural change in (world) society, it is also an important point where Luhmann goes far beyond traditional systems theoretical approaches in the social sciences, and rather builds on elements of systems theory which were most notably first introduced in the natural sciences (e.g. Maturana, Varela), adapting them to social systems which operate through the medium of meaning.

Systems differentiate themselves from their environment on the basis of their observation of the difference between system and environment and the according differentiation between self-reference and other-reference. However, although a system may very well be able to distinguish between its environment and specific systems in its environment, drawing the constitutive boundary between system and environment is always an operation by the system itself. Social systems are self-referential, autopoietically closed systems, meaning that they generate all their elements within themselves. Autopoietic systems are operatively closed, yet structurally and causally open systems. 'Operatively closed' here means that communication relates to communication within autopoietic systems only on the basis of the basal code employed by a specific system, such as 'powerful/non-powerful' in the political system, legal/illegal in the legal system, true/false in the scientific system etc. Function systems utilize specific symbolically generalized media of communication (i.e. power in the political system, money in the economic system etc.) and stabilize expectations by building up specific

² Put simply, it is not possible to have access to somebody else's consciousness; meaning is only meaning as communicatively constituted meaning – it does not emanate as a given, but always requires observation.

(semantic) forms through which the systems describe themselves, such as, for example, ‘the state’ in the political system.

While this is not the place to provide a comprehensive introduction into the detailed argumentative structure of world society theory, these brief remarks can already be utilized to illustrate some of the significant implications of this theoretical architecture for conceptualizing global social inequality.

Central to understanding the conceptualization of (social) inequality in world society theory is the idea that persons are not ‘part’ of world society in a strict sense, but only serve as ‘addresses’ of communication which are either included into or excluded by the different function systems of world society, such as the political, the economic, the legal system etc. People are thus not primarily excluded from the access to material resources, but excluded from communication – and the exclusion from the access to material resources can be seen as a consequence of such a communicative exclusion (see also Stichweh 2000: 87ff). The interesting point here is that theoretically – as a consequence of the notion of the operative closure of autopoietic social systems, the inclusion into or the exclusion from specific function system as such says nothing about the inclusion into or the exclusion from other function systems. This observation becomes particularly pertinent if one conceives of the modern nation-state, particularly in its form as a modern, democratic welfare state as a communicative form which seeks to achieve a cross-functional (‘full’) inclusion of people, and in the following concludes from empirical diagnoses of an increasingly globalized operation of function systems, independent of the structuring effects of nation-state boundaries, that cross-functional inclusion becomes less and less likely. The main analytical challenge then becomes one of whether and under which conditions, an inclusion into/exclusion from a global economic system also leads to an inclusion into/exclusion from, for example, the political system. An obvious consequence here would of course be to ask whether functional equivalents to the modern welfare state could be said to emerge on a global scale (and thus whether the global spread of welfare standards as well as the global redistribution of resources, standards, and practices through the channels of ‘global governance’ constitute something like a ‘global welfare state’; see Leisering 2007). Another, partially complementary approach which in the end could only be tackled through empirical research is whether and under which conditions – and possibly also with which regional specifications – chain inclusions and exclusions occur, in which an exclusion/inclusion from/into a specific function system lead to similar processes in another one (see Stetter 2008).

In addition to this conceptualization of what traditionally has been called inequality as inclusion/exclusion in world society theory, Luhmann (1997: add p. ref.) in particular added and started a strand of discussion about some kind of ‘meta-differentiation’ in world society with the observation that one of the gravest problems in this respect might not actually even be the fact that large parts of the world population are excluded from various function systems, but that they are not even addressed at all – and thus even not excluded. The idea here is that it may in fact not even make sense to consider people to be ‘exploited’ or ‘suppressed’ (i.e. excluded by the economic and the political system) which are stripped to bare physical existence with no access to even minimal resources at all.

While on the level of theory-building world society theory largely substitutes the notion of social inequality with the notion of inclusion and exclusion, social inequality is on another level also observed to constitute a powerful historical semantic which almost exclusively carries with it a latent normative claim that inequality is to be avoided, reduced, and possibly eliminated. Yet the argument here is that such a normative semantics of inequality is not an analytically fruitful guide in addressing the varying forms of and the problems following from inclusion and exclusion into and from the different function systems of world society. While this may at first sight constitute a wide and unbridgeable gap between thinking in terms of world society theory on the one hand and the social structural analysis of (global) social inequality, we will argue in the final section of this paper that this gap can at least partially be bridged if for analytical purposes the focus of social structural analysis is reoriented from the notion of inequality to the notion of diversity. Before doing so, the next section will however start to approach the issue from the angle of social structural analysis.

How to conceptualize social inequalities in a world society context?

Social structural inequality research usually deals with the conditions of access to highly valued goods in a society at the level of individual resources, structural opportunities, and institutional rules. Standard conditions identified in this respect are usually money (in the form of income and wealth), prestige, and positions associated with higher or lower degrees of autonomy, power, or status. Access to (higher) education could be added here as value in its own right, yet primarily should be seen in its function as the meritocratically most legitimate criterion to access these highly valued goods, as it is institutionalized in modern labor markets.

There is - or for long has been – a shared understanding that at least in the OECD- world a satisfactory analysis of social inequality can be obtained on the basis of these indicators and

predictors. However, the growing diversity in preferences, values, and the social structural composition of the population has increasingly called into question the implicitness of these conventions and re-drawn attention to the basic questions underlying any kind of social structural research on social inequalities, regardless of its geographic frame of reference. They are recalled as our starting point before arguing about possible links between social structural inequality research and world society theory. These basic questions address the ‘inequality of what’, the ‘inequality between whom’, the ‘inequality by what’, and the justification/injustice of inequality

Inequality of what?

It is necessary to first establish what exactly the ‘highly valued goods’ referred to above are, in order to inquire whether they are universally relevant or whether they are subject to group or context-specific interpretations within a society. The question here is whether indeed everybody has the same thing in mind when defining a felicitous life for him- or herself. This presents a particularly pressing problem even for standard international comparative studies given that measures of social inequality even within the OECD world include limits of comparability in the sense that in fact all standard indicators may be important to different degrees in the different national social settings. The question here, for example, is whether the notion of ‘prestige’ carries the same connotations in all national societies despite significant variations in cultures of competition; does money ‘count’ the same in terms of liberal, market-oriented societies as it does in the context of comprehensive welfare states? Both the capability approach as well as the Rawlsian approach to social justice in this sense point towards an empirical as well as a normative diversity of acceptable notions of what individuals do or could define as a notion of ‘the good’ for themselves. The literature on justice, capabilities, and well-being is full of debates about and lists of what might constitute a reasonable ensemble of the most important goods to measure social inequalities (a practice of listing which most notably Amartya Sen refused to join; see Sen 1992, Nussbaum 2007, Robeyns forthcoming) The jury remains out on the question of whether an even minimal consensus about what are the most relevant aspects of a ‘good life’ in this respect can be achieved as a basis of talking about notions of global/universal social inequality.

Inequality between whom?

A basic prerequisite for studying social inequalities seems to be the definition of who belongs to the population within which social inequalities occur. This question not only pertains to the

definition of the ‘social whole’ in this respect, but also to the definition of the relevant groups to be compared. Which groups define themselves as entities defined through *internal* cohesion and a sense of belonging, or, alternatively or supplementary, through a competitive or even antagonistic *relation to other* groups? The definition of such reference groups is important for social inequality research for at least two reasons. First, the *subjective* evaluation of the own situation is generally highly dependent on social comparison and social recognition. Second, relations within these different groups and between them may be characterized by reciprocity or by solidarity (if they are not entirely indifferent towards one another). Inequalities arise as violations of these principles of reciprocity and solidarity. The Marxian formulation for such a violation is the concept of *exploitation*, if the relationship is one that requires cooperation. The classical example here is labor relations, particularly between owners and workers. A second concept, espoused by Weber and reformulated by Tilly (1998), is social closure or opportunity hoarding: In this case one group of the population ‘hoards opportunities’ against other groups by excluding them from promising organizational affiliations or group memberships³. In both cases inequality is defined as categorical in the sense of relations between *diverse*, if not antagonistic, groups within the population as a whole.

Inequality by what?

Following from the previous two questions, social structural analyses of social inequalities need to trace the ways through which institutional rules, individual properties, and affiliations to groups and organizations become relevant for social inequalities in the sense described above. On the one hand, cultural definitions of ‘what kind of inequality between whom’ become relevant for theoretical models if and when they are relevant for institutional rules and the actions of relevant groups and organizations. On the other hand, however, cultural definitions and beliefs about social inequalities may or may not be congruent with the results of structural analyses. For example, there can be ‘objective’ manifestations of exploitation without a corresponding subjective perception of the exploited that they are exploited.

Inequality justified or unjust?

Following the questions of inequality between whom and inequality by what, the question arises whether or not the patterns perceived in both respects occur within (or indeed co-

³ “When members of a categorically bounded network acquire access to a resource that is valuable, renewable, subject to monopoly, supportive of network activities, & enhanced by the network’s modus operandi, network members regularly hoard their access to the resource, creating beliefs & practices that sustain their control” (Tilly 1998: 91)

constitute) a ‘zone of acceptance’ of inequality. There is no society that is equal, so simply asserting the existence of social inequalities is of limited analytical and theoretical value. On the other hand, abstract norms of reciprocity, solidarity, and justice remain vague if they are not substantiated with respect to specific principles of justice and specific social relationships.

Challenges for social structural analysis from World Society Theory

While the four questions addressed above identify fundamental conceptual issues which need to be addressed in any kind of research on social inequality, their transposition to a global realm poses additional conceptual problems. The question to be pursued here is whether the conceptual apparatus and imagery of world society theory in the sense described above could in fact assist to identify promising routes for research on *global* inequality, and, vice versa, how these basic conceptual questions addressed by social structural inequality research may in fact help to clarify the current shape of a functionally differentiated world society – whose form and structure up to now is arguably more theoretically deduced than empirically asserted.. We move on by resuming the same four basic questions.

Inequality of what?

Does the idea of world society as a but one comprehensive, communicatively constituted social system lead to a common notion of what constitutes the most relevant inequalities? Is there any worldwide agreement about what is important in this respect? If an increasing diversity regarding such definitions is discussed and asserted even on the level of individual nation-states, than at first glance the chance to arrive a shared definitions and understandings on a global basis seems to be rather hopeless. It is in this context that the capability approach has been criticized for focusing on the metrics of a range of social inequalities dependent on the diversity of individual preferences and needs, thus however systematically biasing towards ‘luxury problems’ of global social inequality and against the extreme social inequalities regarding basic needs (Human Development Report 2006). Of course, the task of defining global social inequalities would be much easier if we confined ourselves to the question of basic human rights and the provision of goods necessary to move people beyond the threshold of absolute poverty. Obviously it is easier to agree on this lowest common denominator, as it is formulated in the UN Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, Article 25). However, such a focus on poverty issues at a very basic level nevertheless would carry with it the cost of neglecting the extreme inequalities at the level of material well-being created by

the power relations and opportunities of the global economic system (Pogge 2002) as well as relevant differences within the OECD world. And though there may be a common quest for minimum welfare standards, there is still the salient question of how these minimum standards can be defined for different world regions (and how in addition global governance institutions can be established to institutionalize such a global welfare state in order to avoid arbitrary misconceptions and failures of national policies).

Trying to establish some kind of middle ground it seems worth noting that resource approaches do not deny the role of an inter-individual diversity of preferences, yet concentrate on some resources which are assumed to be universally important. Among them, GNP per capita as well as disposable individual income are the indicators most easily available, yet also the ones which arguably enjoy the least support from sociologists analysing social inequality and even less so from theorists of inequality and justice. More robust in the face of the varying importance of subsistence economy, household production, and provisions by welfare states, are measures regarding individual entitlements towards material goods (if seen as a supplement to the measure of individual income). Following an empirical assessment of what is actually important for the perceived quality of life, a more promising approach may be to try to validate these results for different countries and to define the availability of these resources as generally relevant indicators of inequality, ranging from material goods over housing, including the immediate social and natural environment, to physical and mental health and to social recognition and social integration (Layard 2005). Social recognition is primarily based on self-determination and approval in the sphere of work, individual success in the status attainment process, and perceptions of fairness regarding one's own position compared to the position of significant others. Satisfaction with life or happiness as a single indicator can not replace these indicators as the psychological literature on the subject has convincingly shown that such measures are not an outcome of pursuing primary goals alone, but can also be formed by secondary adaptation (i.e. resignation).

An alternative to this empirical approach on the question of what are the most stable predictors of individual subjective well-being over different national and other social contexts is provided by the primarily normative approach of social production function theory (Ormel et al. 1999): this theory asserts that people try to improve their life situation by optimizing the two 'ultimate goals' of physical and social well-being, specified at a lower level through five 'instrumental goals': stimulation and comfort for physical well-being, and status, behavioral

confirmation and affection for social well-being.⁴ More specific goals below this level are assumed to become progressively more idiosyncratic in relation to a specific culture, group or, finally, even a specific person. Within the specifications of the two ultimate goals, to a certain degree substitution between the more specific instrumental goals is possible and dependent on the (bounded) rational calculation of costs and benefits between alternatives, which however remains limited by strong commitments (Nieboer/Lindenberg, 2002).

Both approaches outlined to at first sight not seem to be conceptually compatible with an approach based in world society theory. Rather than addressing social inequality in terms of inclusion and exclusion they refer instead to basic principles of welfare production as they are broadly accepted, both empirically and theoretically. However, a possibly fruitful link between such multi-dimensional concepts of social inequality and world society theory could start with the notion that the most relevant universal dimensions of quality of life are produced in different function systems. Starting from this vantage point questions then can be addressed under which conditions inclusion takes place within a specific functional system, and under which conditions inclusion into /exclusion from one functional system ‘spills over’ to another subsystem.

Inequality between whom?

Within a national framework the social whole seems well defined, and we can easily identify relevant groups to be compared: the classical example of employers and employees, and as a newly accentuated example different birth cohorts (or ‘generations’ in the public discourse) within nations. World society theory widens this perspective in two important respects: First it opens the perspective in order to see that the question of inequalities can arise only for those who are included at all in the first case. On the one hand, nobody will claim anymore that a national framework is still sufficient to monitor possible inclusions within the subsystem of economy. Labor market opportunities and dependencies have long since transcended national borders. They are not limited to very specific, and therefore relatively small groups in a worldwide ‘war for talents’. Worldwide competition is not confined to the upper segment of the labor market but has extended to wage competition in the lower segments as well. On the other hand, it is rarely the whole world population being addressed when arguing about global social welfare, global economy, global labor markets, or global social networks. In this view,

⁴ Note that the aforementioned empirical results and this list of five instrumental goals overlap to a high degree. In practical terms it has to be kept in mind that at large the absolute level of material well-being is not as important but the comparison with reference groups.

the filtering by exclusion/inclusion within the various functionally differentiated subsystems is a precondition for assessing inequalities only between those who are included (Luhmann 1997). It makes no sense at all to try and to assess social closure/opportunity hoarding or exploitation relationships in relation to groups which are not included (into a function system) at all in the first place.

Inclusion into the economic system of world society could thus be subjected to the empirical investigation of

- (a) who in principle *could* be included into segmented labor markets according to formal system- immanent requirements, e.g. in the labor market formal qualifications as ‘merit’ provided by the subsystem of education and training;
- (b) who among them is actually included (‘monitored’) especially by those who in practice demand labor, i.e. work organizations;
- (c) to which degree national/regional diversity is a criterion for exclusion, and among those who are included, is a relevant demarcation line between privileged and disadvantaged positions compared to and interacting with other diversities, e.g.: does regional diversity operate in the same way as racial or ethnic diversity, and cultural diversity influence the chances of inclusion and exclusion in the same way in different parts of the world, in poor as well as in affluent ones? Are there transnational classes of high potentials for which no regional demarcation line exists?
- (d) How do semantics of exclusion and inequality overlap with the respective social structural patterns, and how do they influence each other?

The same questions can be posed for global citizenship and a global welfare state. In this case, in principle mankind as a whole is included, and there are increasingly pleas for global solidarity. The emergence of several international organizations dedicated to defeat economic injustice, human rights, or ecological destruction shows that appeals for global solidarity must not be in vain, but questions arise on how far ‘zones of belonging’ as basis for ‘zones of solidarity’ may indeed span different world regions and ethnicities, and may transcend cultural convictions primarily defined through national boundaries. The few available analyses up to now present mixed results, showing that perceptions of belonging and cosmopolitan attitudes are at least not elitist but rather differently spread over different world regions (Furia 2005). Thus, the inclusion of the ones may imply the exclusion of the others.

Sceptics say that belonging and solidarity is worldwide only possible for the 'prevention of the worst case', like war or absolute poverty, as the lowest common denominator – if at all.

Inequality by what?

Against purely national perspectives, world society theory enables us to conceptualize how spatial and especially national boundaries still shape the exclusion patterns and patterns of unequal inclusion. The relative position of diverse groups within specific nations is then not only seen as dependent on opportunity hoarding and exploitation within nations, but as dependent on the inclusion of populations – especially into work organizations - in other parts of the world and in the following on patterns of exploitation and opportunity hoarding in relation to them.

Such developments may also affect systems of solidarity based on social security systems. A self-conceptualization as a global player in a competitive market can weaken national solidarity systems. A good recent example are young German managers who show a high degree of readiness to leave these systems of solidarity: They pretend not to rely on national social security systems any longer, but trust their own effort and ability and the resulting reciprocal networks, and do not want to engage or pay for those less talented (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2007).

Inequality justified or unjust?

Perceptions of injustice are among the most detrimental conditions for well-being. Notions of who is included in such comparisons, and to which degree different groups are subjectively relevant, is crucial in this respect. Of course national boundaries are again no more a reasonable demarcation line for such comparisons if we refer to exclusion and actual relationships of opportunity hoarding and exploitation. The question is, however, whether in the perception of the population these dependencies are taken into account when thinking about justice and injustice.

How to operationalize social inequalities in a world society context in practice- towards the concept of 'diversity'?

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