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## **The Meaning of Integration under the Conditions of Complex and Dynamic Societies**

### **1. Introduction**

From its very beginning sociology has dealt with internal conflicts of societies and the question what is holding societies together. This question refers to two aspects: systemic integration, relation between the different subsystems of society, such as economy, politics, families, the legal system and the educational system; and social integration, the relation between social structures and the individuals (Lookwood 1964). And as we can see from the development of various theories, the question of integration leads to complications. This is the case, because societies are complex and dynamic entities. Therefore neither systemic nor social integration can be understood with mechanistic models. Rather the question of integration has to be shaped in a way, that looks at integration toward a society which underlies ongoing changes and has to be understood as a heterogeneous structure. For an understanding thus a theoretical approach is required, which deals with the specific characteristics of complex and dynamic social systems.<sup>1</sup> If we take a look back on the relevant discussions on this subject within sociology theories, we can draw the conclusion that modern societies can rely on the ability to deal with a lot of changes as much as on the capability of individuals to adopt themselves to various living conditions and new developments. So a fundamental sociological message towards the fears and aggressions which occur in times of social change and which are often directed against minorities and migrants might be to keep a cool

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<sup>1</sup> The most sophisticated theoretical concept for this purpose is represented by Niklas Luhmann's theory of society (Luhmann 2012; cf. Scherr 1994, Scherr 2015, Moeller 2012).

head. From a sociological perspective it is important to keep distance towards forms of moral panics which arise in political debates and the media.<sup>2</sup>

This can be considered as a recommendation for the contemporary public debates on the necessities and possibilities of integration too. These debates are closely related to controversies on migration and the political regulation of migration and tend to develop all features of moral panics.<sup>3</sup> Three conflicting aspects characterize these debates:

- Firstly, interest-based considerations regarding the benefits and needs of immigration, especially in relation to population structure and the labour market.
- Secondly, migration – and this is increasingly becoming the dominant perspective on flight and forced migration – is discussed as a threat to host societies, as a threat to their political culture, their cultural identity and to social cohesion. Furthermore the framing of migration as a threat implies assumptions on migration as a root of terrorism.
- Thirdly, a human rights perspective emphasizes the necessity to offer refugees admission and protection even if their numbers and their social set-up means enormous challenges for host societies. Thereby it is argued that national economic and political interests must not lead to a restriction of the rights of refugees.

In these controversies, the topic of integration plays a central role. It stands for far-reaching and often rather vague ideas of migration as a burden to the host society, of migrants as a far reaching threat as well as for blurry concepts of what is needed in order to deal with the perceived challenges. When talking about integration, questions about the identity of societies are evoked, especially with regard to the assimilation of migrants to the dominant social values, norms,

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of moral panics was developed by Stanley Cohen; see Cohen (2002). It's basic idea is the observation of dynamics of public attention: "Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible." (Cohen 2002, p. 1)

<sup>3</sup> See as an instructive analysis Baumann 2016.

practices and customs. In this context doubts about the capability of societies to integrate migrants as well as the migrants' willingness to integrate are central to attitudes of rejection as formulated in influential nationalistic and racist discourses.

Unclear ideas that are linked to the use of concepts such as integration, social identity and social community in political and media discourses demonstrate the need of a clarification by social sciences. Therefore, I will scrutinize the following questions: First, what are the traps of the concept of integration? Second, what does integration mean in social sciences? And third, what are the conditions for successful integration?

## **2. Integration into communities and societies**

For the purpose of such a clarification, it is necessary to address first the basic distinction between "Gemeinschaft" -groups and communities- on the one hand and "Gesellschaft" -societies- on the other hand.<sup>4</sup> This distinction points to a central characteristic of modern society, namely that societies can no longer be understood as communities.

*Communities* are social units that are based in communality, familiarity and far-reaching agreements on norms, values, and habits, as is the case in families, with friends, peer-groups or religious communities. People come together in communities, because they share similarities regarding language, habits, practices, norms, values and interests. This is why communities offer a feeling of belonging; yet they are consequently intolerant. They exclude those who are not similar enough to their members and thus are regarded as strangers, threatening consensus and conformity. To integrate into a community, thus, means assimilation to its members and acceptance of its rules, norms, and habits, preferably without any reservations.

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<sup>4</sup> This distinction, which was developed by Ferdinand Tönnies 1997 is a fundamental starting point of sociology as a science.

Modern *societies* on the other hand mean a living together of individuals and social groups that differ in many aspects and who may remain alien to each other. They are based in mostly abstract, formal rules of living together. For example: The rules of law don't lead to detailed regulation like cultural norms do, they establish nothing more relatively small set of restrictions. Therefore, they can tolerate manifold differences. Positive and negative freedom of religion, to give another example, is a fundamental principle of modernity; as much as is everyone's right to self-determination of their personal life. This is how modern society enables plurality of beliefs and culturally different ways of life. Modern society is structurally tolerant. It can allow and tolerate the co-existence of different communities and does not depend on the enforcement of similarity. Therefore modern society – as a topos of classical sociology holds – enables the co-living of strangers.<sup>5</sup> Due to the number of a society's members and the heterogeneity of their living conditions, lifestyles and experiences, this is without a reasonable alternative. If such heterogeneity is not accepted politically, the only option is repression and indoctrination. Accordingly, one function of human rights can be found in the establishment of norms that positively evaluate and ensure the liberties of individuals that are fundamental to modern societies and their structural tolerance.

This structural characteristic of modern society, however, also has a problematic side-effect: Modern society is not able to offer its members feelings of accordance, belonging and familiarity as communities allow for, or at least promise. In addition, as modern societies are not stable, but in constant transformation, they evoke feelings of insecurity. As a consequence, the living together of people who differ in manifold aspects and who may stay alien to each other, can lead to feelings of anonymity and isolation.

In reaction to this set of problems, countermovements against modernity have formed again and again, asking for and making it their program to shape society as community.

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<sup>5</sup> As a classical reference for this see the chapter, Excursus about The Stranger' in George Simmel's *Sociology*, first published in 1908.

In historic perspective, two forms of such counter movements were influential: First, the program of a socialism that counters not only social injustice, but also the individualism of civil society. Leading here was not the Marxist formula of socialism as “free association of free individuals”, but the vision of a state-managed community in a classless society of equals. Second, the idea of a society as national community in a nation state that is as ethnically and culturally homogenous as possible was influential and continues to be powerful today. Different varieties of nationalism aim at imposing an extensive homogeneity on heterogeneous societies, as historical and sociological research have shown. Central instruments for this purpose are a public education in schools that is directed towards imposing a national identity and loyalty; a political propaganda which appeals to the identity of the nation and its differences to other nations. Not least also suppression, eviction and extinction of minorities, which do not wish or are regarded as unable to immerse in the “imagined community” of a nation, are instruments of creating a homogenous nation.

From historic experience, we thus can learn that every attempt to transform a modern society with the heterogeneity of its groups, social classes, religions and worldviews, with its diverse regional traditions and languages, etc. into a homogeneous community, automatically leads to repression. Nationalist movements, but also other political and religious ideologies are directed against the abstraction and heterogeneity of the co-living in modern society. They conjure the integrative power of homogenous communities and reject therefore also the universalistic idea of human rights. This is the case, because the concept of human rights is in a certain way radically individualistic: The basic idea of human rights is to respect the dignity of each individual; the ideal of human rights is one of a co-existence of equal and free individuals, ultimately independent from their membership to any community.

### **3. Integration and differentiation**

The so far outlined considerations carry consequences for the question how the concept of integration can be defined under the conditions of modern society.

Integration into society cannot be understood as assimilation, as adaption to a homogeneous group or culture. Integration into society rather stands for the acceptance of the basic rules of the legal order and the political order; it stands as well for equal participation in all subsystems of society.

To clarify this further, let me introduce yet another central concept of sociology – the concept of differentiation. It addresses another substantial distinction between communities and societies. Societies, according to the concept of differentiation, are not one single entity, but divided into manifold subsystems; into subsystems such as economy, law, politics, sciences, education, art, religion, mass media, and family. Each of these subsystems is specialized for specific tasks, follows own rules and is characterized by its own regulation of social inclusion and social exclusion. These subsystems are not subject to an overarching regulation of integration and participation. To illustrate this: In order to participate in the economy as consumer, individuals need nothing more but money. In order to go shopping, for example, it is not necessary for them to be citizen of the nation state; and even if they have no legal residential status, they are not excluded from participating in consumption, because their status is not checked. It is a different situation, however, on the job market: Access to paid labour is usually bound to a legal residential status. But at the same time, there are segments of the job market that defy such controls and in which illegal labour is common and more or less accepted. In regard to the political system, it is a different story: In order to take part in votes, not only are legal residence permits required, but citizenship is generally obligatory. In Germany, for example, this leads to the situation that people with a permanent residence title live there and have regular work, yet as non-citizen, they are excluded from elections.

The process of integration into society, thus, is not identical to the integration into a community, for example to becoming a member of a family by marriage. Being accepted as a member is not a singular act of integration; it has to be understood as a combination of plural processes of inclusion into the heterogeneous subsystems, into organizations, as well as into small social communities. Thinking it through consequently, this also means that the concept

of integration into a society is a problematic and analytically only limited helpful metaphor. This is the case, because society is not a compact unit with clear borders, into which one could integrate or from which one can be excluded. Rather, society is a complex and differentiated construction with manifold forms of inclusion and exclusion.

Asking against this background what the beneficial and what the obstructive conditions for integration are, we find the following: The question how the success or failure of integration can be measured cannot be answered only by empirical research. This is because concepts of integration and criteria for successful integration are furthermore an expression of normative ideas regarding the characteristics of a good and desirable society. Concepts of integration can therefore be read as answers to the question “In what kind of society do we want to live?”, thus, as socio-political schemes. Controversies, in this regard, are entangled in the question of how we imagine a good society: as the coexistence of different but equal social groups, as the enablement of maximum liberties for individuals and their ways of life based on human rights, or as a homogenous community with regard to ancestry, values, norms, customs and habits.

#### **4. Conditions for successful integration**

Regarding beneficial and obstructive conditions for the integration of migrants into a society which understands itself as being obligated to basic principles of human rights and democracy and which understands equality and liberty as guiding orientation, following can be said:

- Firstly, the decisive foundation is what social theory calls *structural integration*. That is, the inclusion in the functional subsystems of the society, especially in the labour market, the educational and political system. To be more explicit: the equal participation under conditions of social justice and equal opportunities in opposition to the experience of social exclusion and discrimination that impede integration.

- Secondly, another important foundation is to enable *social integration*, meaning contacts and communication between long-term residents and immigrants., based on mutual recognition and respect. Social integration is, but should not be hindered by forms of socio-spatial segregation and xenophobia.
- Thirdly, the dimension of *symbolic integration* is significant for integration: It is meaningful here, whether migrants – independent of their origin, their skin colour, their ethnicity or religion – are regarded as full, regular and equal members of the society, or whether their membership to society is contested, regarded as doubtful and detectable at any time. Thereby, an understanding of integration, which links the recognition of membership to assimilation, to the maximum surrender of everything that migrants connect to their specific biographical experiences and the collective history, is counterproductive. This is self-evident, because generally no one is willing to give up everything that represents her or his individual and collective identity in order to be an accepted member of society. And where migrants and minorities are consistently reminded by the majority that they are different compared to those, who see themselves as normal members of society, it is not surprising if migrants or minorities react with emphasizing differences or separation. Defining membership by ancestry and traditions provokes a reactive self-definition along group categories, for example along ethnic or religious contexts.

In this regard, let me briefly point to yet another aspect: the relation between individual and collective identities is complex. The personal identities of individuals can be understood as a result of experiences in different social contexts and of identifications with different social groups. They are not simply the result of belonging to just one social group or community. Political concepts, however, which aim at fixating migrants and minorities to a singular group identity, deny the reality of the complex processes, which lead to a self-definition of one's identity as an individual. This is the central set of problems of the narratives of political and educational multiculturalism. Zygmunt Bauman

(1997), in contrast, argues that the right to choose one's own identity, to decide on membership and belonging, is a fundamental human right.

Finally, let me summarize my arguments: Integration in modern societies requires the recognition of difference, because homogeneity cannot be established by means of human rights and democracy. The specific challenge of a modern immigrant society, therefore, lies in the consequent recognition of basic principles of human rights and the democratic order. Therefore, racist and nationalist schemes of society are hostile to integration. In order to convince people – immigrants as much as locals – of the meaning of democratic and human rights principles, of the idea of equality and liberty of all individuals, it is necessary that they are enabled to make the experience of being recognized as equals. It is not enough to declare it only symbolically. Politics have to facilitate equal participation on the job market, in the educational as well as in the political system and recognize migrants as normal members of society in order to enable integration.

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