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Conceptualizing European Society on Non-Normative Grounds
Logics of Sociation, Glocalization and Conflict

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Abstract
For the most part, current reflections on the social seem to overemphasize either homogeneity (society/nation-state, modernization/globalization) or heterogeneity (sociality, cosmopolitanism). Against this, here the argument is put forward that it is appropriate to think of the social as consisting of aspects of homogeneity or shared frames of reference and aspects of heterogeneity at the same time. This thought is developed particularly in contrast to normative concepts such as Bauman’s sociality-republicanism nexus or Beck and Grande’s ideas on European cosmopolitanism. With the help of concepts such as sociation, glocalization and conflict, a basis will be developed for the elaboration of particular socials (e.g. Europe) as a general social theory. This avoids falling into normative traps, which are usually risky when starting out from a historical particularity to explain current and future structures and features of notions such as European society.

Key words
- conflict • European society • globalization • glocalization • sociality • sociation

How can European society be conceptualized under conditions of globalization? This question implies (at least) two challenges: how can society be conceptualized? And is it possible to define and legitimize particularity – in this case, Europe – in an increasingly worldwide perspective? In the following, an attempt will be made to answer the question ‘Which Europe?’ – rather than ‘Why Europe?’ – without falling back on predominantly normative positions. Sociological debates on Europeanization\(^1\) focus on highly diverse aspects, being divided in the most general sense between applying a comparative perspective to a selection of European countries, on the one hand, and a One Europe perspective, on the other. This article starts from one form of the latter view in a broad sense, assuming
that there is some kind of European society object which is worthy of being studied. The leading idea, here, is that when thinking about society, it is inappropriate conceptually to separate the two aspects of heterogeneity and homogeneity; they have to be understood as two inseparable sides of one and the same coin. This will be elaborated by defining the concept of European sociation (Vergesellschaftung) against a range of constructions of opposition, the focus being on society (which is too substantive) against sociality (which is too fluid), as well as the more explicitly normative discussion on unity against diversity. In order to develop this argument step by step, first, I will refer to rather static concepts which will be used for the purposes of contrast later. After summarizing the problems of the mainstream concept of globalization, I will look at the classical European society–nation nexus as well as at assumptions which are often made when theorizing about European identity.

What, then, are the characteristics and advantages of sociality? In this concept which is put forward prominently by Zygmunt Bauman in the context of postmodernity (Bauman, 1992, 2000), emphasis is placed on flexibility, individuality, change, and process, which considerably loosens the classical ties between social processes and their geographic position(s) and, therefore, opens up an extensive space for thinking the social differently, including, for instance, the direct and indirect consequences of transnationalization processes, migration or more generally: mobility flows. After a more detailed exploration of this concept and its potentials, I will turn to the possible weaknesses of this approach, the most serious being – from the general point of explaining Europe – the difficulty in defining and legitimizing particularity, or in other words: to contain flexibility and to do so on substantiated grounds. In contrast to Bauman’s idea of basing the social on a republican model, on the one hand, and to other authors who answer the question ‘Why Europe?’ in an outright normative way, giving reasons why it is necessary, useful, unavoidable, etc., on the other hand, the answer will be grounded differently here, mainly by combining the logics of sociality, glocalization – which has to be distinguished from mainstream ideas of globalization – and conflict theory. In this way, a conceptual discussion will be provided on the background of general problems such as flexible versus static lines, individualization versus belonging and community, or diversity versus unity. In the concluding remarks, we return to a question which has been implicit from the very beginning of this inquiry: is it really appropriate to give up the sociological core term ‘society’ altogether and invent new terms such as ‘sociality’ to replace it?

**Static Concepts: Globalization/Modernization, Nation-State/Society, and Identity**

In this section, selected approaches will be discussed which are considered problematic because of their one-sided emphasis on homogeneity and their related tendency of rigidity. The first is mainstream globalization theory, followed by the society–nation nexus, and identity. And although certainly many globalization
theorists do not argue for this, some of the conventional or mainstream ideas on globalization seem to be a more or less direct further development of classic modernization theory. Therefore, a range of well-known problems seems to persist, the two most important ones being an analytical and a normative one. The analytical problem is the evolutionary perspective, which not only assumes that developments are increasingly taking place worldwide, but also ‘the view that . . . locality – even history – is being obliterated and so on’ (Robertson, 1995: 25). The main normative problem which has an immediate relation to the analytic one can be summarized by the idea, ‘bigger is better’ (Robertson, 1995: 25), and the idea of ‘the West’ being a role model – or generally speaking, the idea of the existence of one model at all. In much of the literature, a West (still?) serves as the starting point – either as an ideal, or as a problem, e.g. when discussed as Americanization or McDonaldization, what Ritzer defines as ‘the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world’ (1993: 1). When seen as a problem, it often is contrasted with another role model, an East, seemingly having other values – assuming the general idea of homogeneity and the potential for gradual convergence nevertheless. Other examples of homogenizing perspectives on the globe are Ohmae (1994, 2000), or Friedman (2000) (see also Ray, 2007: 7–14).

As sociology is a child of a nationalized and/or nationalizing environments and its particular conditions, it stands to reason that its objects – societies – have traditionally been regarded as being an allegedly natural part (or counterpart) of the nation-state (for a summary, see Gellner, 2006: 415–16). This is true, the fact notwithstanding that sociologists have applied and still apply the term to earlier social constellations, which show the characteristics that are assumed as being fairly different from the ones that modern nation-states demonstrate. The national society, however, has been the point of reference for sociological research for decades, with regard to social structure, mobility or institutional organization, as, for instance, Robertson discusses the concept of nostalgia: ‘For the most part, sociologists were interested, often in very nostalgic ways, in the coming of diffuse modernity to Western societies and the problems of integration and meaning occasioned by the new kind of relatively standardized national society’ (Robertson, 1992: 156). This linking of the presumed social form to the relatively rigid concept of the nation-state, however, has had considerable consequences for any theoretical conception, as it was based on the ideal-typical conception of one place and its one meaningful social space, demarcated by clear borders and populated by a principally homogeneous (or at least homogenizing) group of people. The central question has been one of integration – suppose the existence of an end or ideal scenario – accompanied by the idea of identity, which in this edifice of ideas symbolizes sameness on an individual level, in the sense of being the same over all time, and particularly on a collective level refers to belonging to a (one) group. Undoubtedly, these assumptions and especially their largely static essence are now being fundamentally challenged. Core concepts which have been developed against this background are transnationalization, globalization,
glocalization – and partly Europeanization. With an insight into the difficulty of grasping Europeanization, however, several attempts were made which simply reproduced the national concept on a different (European) level, such as comparing different European countries and strive for proofs of convergence or divergence, having the ideal of European integration and a kind of European nation-state in mind.

Another, yet less obvious, example is the quite widely discussed notion of a European identity. While the concept of identity traditionally refers to sameness as well as to belonging and is typically related to a particular space – usually primarily the nation-state – as has just been described above, this concept underwent an important change in the past decades and particularly recently. Its theoretical conceptualization increasingly includes multiplicity, variety, process, change, etc., and relates potentially to a number of different levels (e.g. local, regional, global). This has only to some extent been taken into account and used by the supporters of the idea of a European identity, who in part simply apply more or less the same structures of order to (an idea of) Europe which are familiar from the ideal-typical nation-state model. This is very much reflected in expectations which go with these perspectives: they relate to integration, to the manageability of political spaces, and, therefore, to an increasing degree of social homogeneity – to a European society. There, again, the basic idea is some kind of European nation-state. At the same time, and rather paradoxically so, European identity seems to be regarded as a potential tool for overcoming the characteristic dangers of nation-states: if we had (or: believed in) a European identity, the dark sides of nationalism would disappear. And although this might be true in a highly limited sense, the supposition that national identity and European identity are two essentially different things cannot be maintained. In both cases – as well as with local, regional, or any other particular identity – meaningful borders are constructed and acknowledged (at least to some degree), which separate ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ and which constantly include at least latent devaluations of ‘the other’. Therefore, even if nationalism disappeared, its problematic aspects could well survive as regionalisms, European nationalism – just like parasites that change their host.

Hence, all approaches that retain the nation-state models – either directly, as in comparisons of single European states or the image of a European nation-state, or indirectly, as with the help of concepts such as European integration or European identity – seem to be inappropriate to the aim of analysing current social forms in Europe, as they are too limited and rigid. This is true to a great extent also for what has been called updated modernization/globalization theory. Instead, concepts which might be less clear and provide rather indirect answers only (if at all), but which are more able to depict the complexity of current social forms could be more successful.

Increasing Complexity: Sociality as a Flexible Approach

How does the individual place himself in the social – and how does he, on the other hand, place the social in himself, if we no longer follow the idea of a clear
order of nation-state and homogeneous or homogenizing society? Bauman develops his theory on the basis of some general assumptions. A particularly important one is the observation of a fundamentally changed relationship between time and space, which he calls compression (for a more detailed elaboration of this term, see also Harvey, 1994): ‘In the conquest of space, time had to be pliant and malleable, and above all shrinkable through the increased “space-devouring” capacity of each unit’ (Bauman, 2000: 115). This corresponds to what Pries analyses as a transformed relation of place and space. He diagnoses a change from uni-local geographic containers with the conjunction of the social and the spatial as found in nation-states and (national) societies7 to pluri-locally spanned social spaces with no necessary conjunction of the social and the spatial. This, according to Pries, results in new or at least more widespread types of social space: “Stacked” social spaces could exist in a single geographic space, and social spaces could extend over more than one of the coherent geographic container spaces of different national societies', the latter resulting in the ‘emergence of pluri-locally spanned transnational social spaces as social realities’ (Pries, 2001: 3, italics in original). These changed conditions are highly transformative and correspondingly influence individual and social forms, specifically the way in which social relations are defined as relevant through communication. Against this background, Bauman looks at current social forms from the metaphorical point of view of liquidity in order to make use of its symbolic flexibility;8 ‘liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape. Fluids, so to speak, neither fix space nor bind time’ (Bauman, 2000: 2). He applies this pattern of thought directly to social forms: ‘the present day situation emerged out of the radical melting of the fetters and manacles’ (p. 11f.), and

These days patterns and configurations are no longer ‘given’, let alone ‘self-evident’; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another and contradicting one another’s commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers. (p. 14)

The upshot is the assumption that:

we shop outside shops as much as we do inside; we shop in the street and at home, at work and at leisure, awake and in dreams. Whatever we do and whatever name we attach to our activity is a kind of shopping, an activity shaped in the likeness of shopping. (p. 73)

In this way, Bauman undoubtedly opens up the social for a fundamental reworking – but certainly follows earlier writers, in particular, Georg Simmel (in the context of modernity, the figure of the city-dweller, etc.).

A second and increasingly important aspect of his theory is the observation of an increasing search for community, understood as a form of re-framing the individual socially through belonging to some kind of group. Bauman constructs this as the other side of the coin of vanished social linkage and is correspondingly critical: ‘the dream of the “community of similarity” is, essentially, a projection of l’amour de soi. It’s also a frantic bid to avoid confrontation with vexing questions without a good answer’ (p. 181).9 Against this background, the link between
the individual and the social (if we wish to fall back on this highly analytical differentiation) can be nothing but extremely ambivalent: ‘society is now primarily the condition which individuals strongly need, yet badly miss – in their vain and frustrating struggle to reforge their de jure status into the genuine autonomy and capacity for self-assertion’ (p. 41). What can be the link that relates the individual to the social, then? Bauman assumes a community of consumers, which creates short-term feelings, or better, illusions, of belonging created with the help of spectacles (see Bauman, 2000: 200) in their temples, i.e. the shopping-malls (p. 98ff.). This highly critical diagnosis of the present is complemented by a normative suggestion, presented as a solution, called civility. This is defined as the ability to ‘interact with strangers without holding their strangeness against them and without pressing them to surrender it or to renounce some or all the traits that have made them strangers in the first place’ (p. 104f.), developed through an ‘art of negotiating common interests and shared destiny’ (p. 106). Bauman calls this a republican model of unity,

of an emergent unity which is a joint achievement of the agents engaged in self-identification pursuits, a unity which is an outcome, not an a priori given condition, of shared life, a unity put together through negotiation and reconciliation, not the denial, stifling or smothering out of differences. This, I wish to propose, is the sole variant of unity (the only formula of togetherness) which the conditions of liquid modernity render compatible, plausible, and realistic. (p. 178)

Although this is a path-breaking perspective on the question of if and how the individual and the social can be appropriately framed intellectually, Bauman’s approach can be criticized for several reasons. What seems to be the most problematic aspect in the chosen perspective is the huge and largely constructed gap between a very critical and pessimistic diagnosis of a liquid modernity and its loose and risky link via consumption, on the one hand, and the purely normative solution called the republican model, on the other. In this way, the central idea of diversity is not used analytically. Also, in contrast to Bauman, communities of consumption are not the most important examples of belonging. This perspective risks neglecting the search for other types of community, which have the potential to be much more fraught with political consequences. So it is not sufficient to reject the concept of community of similarity, as they obviously are perceived as relevant frames that are aspired to again and again.

For the time being, however, most of these shortcomings should be regarded as problems of coherence within Bauman’s approach itself, without preventing use being made of the general idea and selected elements, in particular of the first, diversity-related part. The specific problem of normativity will be tackled in a moment, when analysing weaknesses of the concept in more detail. Before doing so, I will approach the topic within the chosen and more concrete context of Europe – as an example of an attempt to legitimize particularity on the grounds of (diagnosed) social heterogeneity.
What about Europe?

In particular, when applying Bauman’s perspective to Europe, the central elements to discuss are a changed relation between time and space, and place and space, the flexibility of individual and collective self-understandings, as well as the combination of loosened social bonds and the search for belonging and community. Although Bauman does not play an explicit role in their text, Delanty and Rumford (2005) start out from a range of flexible assumptions, too, when they search for a social theory of Europeanization. They, also, consider changed place–space–time relations as important:

> We need to view the spaces and borders of Europe not in terms of territory and fixed spatial units, but as dynamic zones in which various forms of connectivity (...) and discontinuity are continually shaped and formed. Dynamic zones exist where borders between inside and outside are eroded, and where global processes interact with more static territorial arrangements to constitute new local, regional and transnational spaces. (2005: 135, see also 120–36)

This is closely connected to their perspective on European identity:

> As a civilization based on rebirths or renaissances, reformations, revolutions and enlightenments, western European civilization does not rest on an indubitable origin as such or even a geographical territory; rather it is characterized by a mode of cultural transmission, which includes the transmission of the culture of other civilizations and societies. (Delanty and Rumford, 2005: 38)

In the context of Europe and Europeanization, they add an important piece, which is globalization: ‘If Europeanization is located in societal transformation, the dynamics of this transformation are global rather than European. Notwithstanding the regulatory power of the EU, Europeanization is occurring within world society’ (p. 5). In this way, the authors link their approach indirectly with the general and not explicitly geographically limited (although seemingly Western) social theory of Bauman. Coming from the opposite perspective, Delanty and Rumford reach a point very similar to the one Bauman proposes, regarding the current form of the social:

> Globalization has changed our appreciation of the importance of spaces and borders to the organization of society. Society has no boundaries in the way that was assumed within the logic of modernist social science and borders can no longer be taken to distinguish inside from outside. At its very root, globalization leads to a blurring of borders and the interpenetration of interior/exterior, self and other. (2005: 188)

To sum up, sociality opens up the border-oriented concept of society by using a highly flexible view of social co-existence and potentially of its political organization, taking into account the possibility of simultaneous and liquid attributions to several social groups and emphasizing the border-transcending qualities of current forms of belonging, in short, by shifting the attention from unity to diversity. Regarding the aim of a conceptualization of European integration, it overcomes the (assumed) monopoly of the nation-state in defining social and political
belonging, and it is easily connected to globalization and world society. In this sense, an important step has been taken: away from the reconstruction and substantiation or even questioning, respectively, of rather static social structures, towards the description and analysis of complex and permanently changing non-linear patterns of social forms.

The central question still has not been answered, though: can this extremely flexible and broad concept be applied to a more or less a territorially restricted imagined unit such as Europe? Why are social and political borders drawn at all – and why more or less exactly here and not there? Before elaborating on some first ideas regarding this task, I will discuss some problematic attempts to simply close the gap by linking it with normative claims.

Can Normativity Be the Solution?

Similar to Bauman’s approach, other authors attempt to overcome the perceived gap between similarity and difference by normative means, and some do so in the particular context of Europe. One way of giving reasons for and justifying the peculiarity of social and political entities, in this case Europe, is to account for concepts such as sociality on a clear normative basis, relating them, for example, to ideas of constitutional patriotism (Habermas, 2001) or cosmopolitanism (Beck and Grande, 2004, 2007) – or a republican model, as Bauman does. In the following, the idea of cosmopolitanism, as it is applied by Beck and Grande, will be used as an example of such a method, in order to make my argument against Bauman’s method more distinct and to frame it in a Europe perspective.

Beck and Grande expect a lot of their normative solution of cosmopolitanism: ‘What holds the enlarged Europe together? A new perspective on Europe – the cosmopolitan outlook!’ (Beck and Grande, 2007: xii). In their view, Europeanization by cosmopolitization is a process which is not based on homogenization and uniformity (see Beck and Grande, 2007: 5), but on the foundation of a solidarity of difference. Here, the clear focus on diversity becomes very obvious, but another, and familiar, problem arises: diversity again becomes overemphasized first, while some claim for unity is still maintained – as some kind of normative frame, at least.

Delanty and Rumford formulate a fundamental critique of this supposed nexus:

Unity and diversity is, in essence, a doctrine of cultural relativism. To a degree, relativism is an unavoidable dimension of any culture committed to the liberal values of pluralism, respect for the individual, tolerance, etc. But taken to the extreme it can be a legitimating ideology of cultural incommensurability. Interpreted in a less extreme way, it is a meaningless statement of the pluralism of a polynational Europe and it does not explain how unity comes about. (Delanty and Rumford, 2005: 65, for a more extensive discussion, see 50–68)

Although the two authors provide this inquiry with a range of good ideas, they come to the conclusion that normativity is unavoidable, too: ‘the European project
cannot be separated from normative considerations’ (Delanty and Rumford, 2005: 2). This attitude does not only run like a thread through their text, but it even becomes the starting-point for their logic: ‘if Europe is to be meaningful, as opposed to merely useful, there is a basic normative problem that cannot be solved without a theory of society’ (p. 3).

And so this idea stays high on the agenda, though, which can also be exemplified with the help of Beck and Grande, who impose unity on Europe. But again: if this is the common frame or shared space now, how is this particular type of unity and its particular framing by Europe justified? The implicit answer of Beck and Grande is: no answer is needed at all, normativity is sufficient. Following this argument, they construct a cosmopolitan Europe as a third way, next to or in between European nation-states and a nation-state Europe – sticking strikingly to the old and static concepts as they were examined earlier in this text. They assume that a cosmopolitan Europe should be based on a particular way of dealing with cultural difference, which they distinguish from ‘a number of other social ways of dealing with difference, in particular, hierarchical subordination, universalistic and nationalistic sameness and post-modern particularism’ (Beck and Grande, 2007: 12). Instead, they claim that ‘the recognition of difference becomes the maxim of thought, social life and practice, both internally and towards other societies. It neither orders differences hierarchically nor dissolves them, but accepts them as such, indeed invests them with a positive value’ (Beck and Grande, 2007: 13). Regarding European identity, they state: ‘This European identity does not exist by closing itself off from others, because the recognition, both internally and externally, belongs to its very core’ (p. 127). It is based, according to the authors, on ‘the universal norm of human equality’ (p. 14) – which leaves us without an answer to the question Why particularity, e.g. Europe, at all? – and to a process of ‘agreement on a basic stock of common procedural and substantive norms’ (p. 87). From this, they derive the claim that the European Union is an ‘empire of consensus’ (p. 22). At the same time, this debate shows strong connotations with the well-known (imagined) dichotomy of Gemeinschaft versus Gesellschaft. It does not surprise, of course, that parts of the Gemeinschaft idea are reanimated in the context of a particular perception of a seemingly overwhelming diversifying globalization. This can be interpreted as ‘new phase of accelerated, nostalgia-producing globalization’ (Robertson, 1992: 158), which results in nostalgic-normative forms like the ones described above.

Evidently, the authors hover between diversity and unity, between heterogeneity and homogeneity. Although they formulate important questions, it seems as if – by simply creating normative scenarios – they are neither trying to answer them, nor to develop the questions themselves further. In this sense, they make no headway, and their considerations appear rather abrupt and unfounded – apart from being elaborated personal moral ideas. At this point, we are back at the gap which Bauman has left, and which has not only become clearer by now, hopefully, but also is applied in the context of Europe. This is, how to overcome the breach between a diagnosis of a highly complex and flexible social form, to a great extent characterized by diversity, on the one hand, and the claim for unity
and solidarity within a particular and contingent space such as Europe, on the other – beyond a simple normative answer?

Thinking the Inseparable Together: Homogeneity and Heterogeneity as Two Sides of the Same Coin

On the basis of my argument that homogeneity and heterogeneity are two sides of the same coin, I want to develop my line of reasoning in favour of understanding current social forms with the help of the concept sociality. In contrast to the approaches as sketched above, I shall try to develop a concept of a European sociality which offers the possibility of being linked to normative derivations without using normative positions as a starting point and basis of conceptualization, however. When developing the question further, the starting point has to be recalled, which was: which current social forms can we identify and describe against the background of the processes of Europeanization? More specifically, in which way can Europeanization be understood as a particular regional form of transnationalization and globalization from a cultural theory perspective?

Up to this point, the argument has been free of one-dimensional and static approaches, by replacing the term society by sociality. Throughout this analysis, it becomes increasingly clear that the main task is to link the general with the particular – or diversity with unity, individuality with belonging, and so on. On this basis, some hypotheses can be developed. The core aspect, here, is to reach an understanding of the social between the rigidity of society, on the one hand, and the fluidity of sociality, on the other, by focusing on the processual term sociation. A promising general approach for this seems to be the logic of glocalization. Robertson (1992, 1995, 2003) defines it as a process, ‘through which ideas and practices spread all over the world, by adapting to local or particular conditions and “find a place” there’ (Robertson, 2003: 583, own translation). Conceptualized in this way, glocalization frames difference (or the more normative term: diversity) and similarity (or: unity) together in one edifice of ideas, always taking into account the contingent character of both perceptions, as they are based on highly socially shaped definitions. The particular expectations regarding this concept with respect to my intention relate to several aspects.

The Concrete Meaning

First, I consider the concept of globalization as a one-dimensional process which leads to a single and homogenized world society not only premature, but conceptually wrong. The role of nation-states has always been subject to change and definition, and is still important – though in a different way, under contemporary conditions. Given the fact of the perceived growing importance of local and regional types of entities for expressions of belonging and community, on the one hand, and the contingent character of any social formation, on the other, there is no reason why universalism should completely replace any particularism.
In direct opposition to the idea of replacement, processes of globalization and localization have to be understood as two sides of the same coin: glocalization. In this sense, Europe has to be seen as just one possible illustration of how to generally understand constructions of particularity and specific belonging in an increasingly globally perceived social and political world. This gives more potential meaning to a study like this one, as it makes it comparable, but also, and even more importantly, it liberates the argument from being linked inseparably to a particularistic and very often directly normative, starting point.

**A General Intellectual Concept**

Second, although it is tempting to construct a flexible approach, in order to grasp the complexity of current social forms at least to some extent, it is vital to take into account that there is not only flexibility, definition, process, change, and plurality, but at the same time a perceived need of belonging, of somehow fixing relations and related attempts of demarcation from defined others – and seemingly increasingly so. In this context, I presume that although rather new forms of social being develop and grow in importance – such as the internet, its groups and discourses, or consumer communities, as Bauman assumes – familiar concepts of exclusive we-group definition on the grounds of territory or religion do not lose their applicability and meaning. On the contrary, alongside newer forms they might well become more and/or differently important, which makes the analysis of functions of segmentary categories with high inclusive and exclusive potentials particularly interesting (Giegel, 1998; Hahn and Bohn, 1999). This puts the term ‘sociation’ and its related processes to the forefront again. There are, however, some important modifications to be made, in order to design the approach according to this logic: first, the question of collective self-definitions makes sense only if selecting the individual as basic category. Second, the (Western) individual has not one but multiple identities, relating to a whole range of levels of reference. Therefore, the less static, more process-oriented, and plurality-assuming term ‘identification(s)’ is appropriate – and is rather agreed upon among current social scientists (as elaborated by Hardin, 1995, in the context of group conflicts, for instance).

**A Particular Theoretical Approach as a Consequence of this Perspective**

Third, difference has to be seen as a constitutive and persisting characteristic of the social (although certainly always changing the concrete forms). Here, and not too unusual in current sociological thought, communication in a broader sense is seen as constitutive of any social kind of social being, i.e. communication constitutes sociation. In this sense, sociation is an always changing result of processing conflicts without eliminating opposition (voices or in person). In other words, processing difference has the potential to develop a kind of unity – unity in a sense of always precarious and constantly moving balance. This understanding
of unity as highly flexible and liquid is easily interpretable as part of sociation and, in my view, linkable to basic notions of Bauman’s. Although he presents his idea of negotiating common grounds in a purely normative way, it can be connected with the suggestion of conflict-communication as processes which induce developments of the social. This might, then, be a chance to reconcile the two aspects of reality and norm in his theory. For my argument, it is, however, of great importance that conflict communication, its accepted frames, and related processes of negotiation as well as of individual and collective self-constitution are not only constantly changing, but are also characterized by non-determined outcomes. This makes a crucial difference in comparison to normative approaches such as the ones referred to above: here, there are no concrete expectations that there would or even should be some Europeanization, how it might look, and particularly not that it will or should be stable as soon as it reaches an imagined ideal. As long as there is communication, though, some kind of exchange will take place, be it of converging or diverging consequences: the most realistic expectation may be that it has both and others, all at the same time. In this respect, more thinking is necessary in order to structure the analysis. What can be said already, though, is that conflict can be conceptualized parallel to homogeneity and heterogeneity: if we imagine a continuum, having only conflict/extreme heterogeneity at one end and no conflict/total homogeneity on the other, it is evident that the social can only be in between these extremes.

In this way, the idea of some kind of European sociation is imagined very differently from the ways described above, be it termed society or sociality, understanding Europe as no more and no less than one example of a glocalizing space on the basis of varying and only possibly intensifying and increasingly dense streams and networks of communication. Instead of setting out from some unique Europe, the starting point here is a general social theory on the grounds of the logics of glocalization, not separating homogeneity and heterogeneity. This concept is open to connections with transnationalization processes or mobility flows, for instance, as well as to comparisons with other kinds of regional processes.

Conclusion

Regarding the theoretical frame, a lot of thinking still has to be done to elaborate this approach. This relates less to the question of whether there was some kind of acceptable balance of homogeneity and heterogeneity, which could be quantified somehow, and also serve as a fixed measure that can be applied to any research on the social. It rather concerns the task of making the underlying logics clearer, particularly by designing typologies of conflict, etc. In order to substantiate this argument, empirical studies are essential. Instead of seeking one European public space, thought of according to the ideal-type of one national public space) (for this discussion see, for instance, Trenz, 2004, Eder, 2006; and particularly van de Steeg, 2002), the empirical research should consider European discourses in a broader sense. This could be related, on the one hand, to similar
contents of arguments, and on the other, to the form of discussion: in which ways are arguments exchanged, although they differ? Are unity-building processes through conflict communication recognizable – even if, or particularly, when they have some kind of liquid character? Can we sketch some processes of European sociation on these grounds? Finally, this research certainly offers the possibility of discussing the general question whether we need different terms for contemporary work on classic sociological topics. To put it in a nutshell: society, sociality or sociation?

In the beginning of this article a change of terms in favour of sociality and sociation was justified on the grounds of the problematic nexus of society and the nation-state. Assuming that this link is correct, Bauman was right when he claims that the fundamental social change, which he interprets as part of a liquid modernity, and the consequently developing novel conditions of life require

a rethinking of old concepts that used to frame its narratives. Like zombies, such concepts are simultaneously dead and alive. The practical question is whether their resurrection, albeit in a new shape or incarnation, is feasible; or – if it is not – how to arrange for their decent and effective burial. (Bauman, 2000: 8)

Ray’s assumptions – regarding the starting point as well as the consequence – are directly opposed to this. He emphasizes that ‘the territorially based state has not rendered the notion of “society” redundant but has, on the contrary, initiated projects of societal formation in response to consequences of global economic and social restructuring’ (Ray, 2007: 75f.).16 This corresponds to the view Delanty and Rumford hold: “To drop the term “society” in favour of another term is not the most helpful solution. The social is changing its form rather than disappearing and is therefore open to new definitions” (Delanty and Rumford, 2005: 2). Similarly, Boudon remarks: ‘The society is as useful to sociologists as the concept of life for biologists: an empty regulatory concept describing the ultimate asymptotical aim of their research’ (Boudon, 2007: 246). Possibly we tend to overestimate the role and extent of change in our times compared to others. This is, however, a discussion that certainly deserves more consideration; in the context of this text, the decision to use the term ‘sociality’ has been a useful starting point to emphasize complexity and flexibility, and it helped to outline the particularities and theoretical advantages of the concept of sociation, such as its process-oriented character, but this does not necessarily have to be the end-point of the discussion in this context.

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Notes

1 I agree with Delanty and Rumford who suppose that European integration, in contrast to Europeanization has the disadvantage of having ‘too strong connotations of cohesion to be useful and does not make clear the different dimensions of integration’ (2005: 6). The term ‘Europeanization’, on the other hand, offers a degree of indeterminacy which is indispensable, although it has to be emphasized that the explicit or implicit evolutionary idea is misleading in both concepts. This will be discussed further in the article.

2 A counter-example would be Giddens, who believes that globalization is multidirectional (see e.g. 1999). Although he assumes that the relevance of local perspectives decreases, he does not expect this to take place in one way only, but expects a ‘runaway world’ which is ‘emerging in an anarchic, haphazard, fashion, carried along by a mixture of economic, technological, and cultural imperatives’ (1999: 19).

3 Freitag writes, for instance: ‘one spoke not only of modern society or capitalist society in the singular, but also of feudal society and Greek society or Chinese society or else of Dogon society, even though it was clear that these were not nation-states’ (2007: 270).

4 Ray argues differently on the relation between nation-state and society, focusing on the role of the nation-state in globalization processes, though:

With relatively few exceptions global space is organized in terms of territorially bounded civic communities, political parties, definitions of citizenship, borders, institutions, official language(s), political, educational, cultural systems etc. The nation state as an ethnically homogeneous realm is relatively new and has co-existed with other forms of state organization throughout the modern period. But because populations are now diverse, and economic, cultural and political life is complex, it does not follow that the state and territoriality are no longer significant. On the contrary, the state has arguably become more significant as an actor in the global area than it was previously. (Ray, 2007: 102)

5 This might be a German hope in particular, as it is reflected, e.g. in writings of Habermas.

6 Empirical research adds another aspect against these high-flying hopes: attitudes regarding the question of a developing (or not developing) ‘European identity’ are examined regularly by the Eurobarometer, for instance, and one result is very stable over the years: where we find high numbers of people who claim to be proud of their nationality, we find many who express pride in their Europeanness as well. In this sense, the important question is not about a European identity as such – especially if there was an interest in avoiding the specific risks of particular and exclusive definitions of identity, e.g. within a frame such as Europe – but about the differentiation between individualistic and collectivistic perspectives.

7 ‘For centuries the mutual embeddedness of social practices, symbols, and artefacts in uni-local geographic “containers” have predominated. Today this complete conjuncture of the social and the spatial is questionable’ (Pries, 2001: 3).

8 The translation into German uses ‘fleetingness’ instead of ‘liquidity’. Although the obvious difference the translation makes to the sense is surprising, it seems to catch even better what Bauman seeks to express.

9 Consequently, Bauman criticizes communitarian positions, too.

To ground these claims, they invoke a ‘historical argument’, which ‘makes it possible to see the values and norms of the new Europe as an answer to the history of the regimes of terror of the twentieth century on both the left and the right’ (Beck and Grande, 2007: 9) – a moral(istic) argument which might seem difficult to challenge as such.

Related to this differentiation, Chernilo provides a very good criticism of Beck’s concept, from a different point of view, though, namely with respect to ‘understanding the position and legacy of the nation-state in modernity’ (Chernilo, 2006), summarizing: ‘In a rather paradoxical fashion, Beck creates a renovated version of social theory’s most famous dualism: he has his own versions of the dichotomy between Gemeinschaft – now the nation-state – and Gesellschaft – world risk society’ (Chernilo, 2006: 12).

Robertson concludes: ‘Nostalgia is simply not what it used to be – it is more than what it used to be. It has been doubly globalized. It has become both collective on global scale and directed at globality itself’ (1992, 161).

In this sense, it is not too surprising when they limit their concept of society to civil society: ‘On whom, then, can this project (cosmopolitan Europe] rely? Our answer to this question is: on European civil society! – more precisely, on a new coalition between the state, supra-national actors and civil society’ (Beck and Grande, 2007: 157).

The idea of conflicts having an integrative potential has a considerable tradition, being developed by several sociologists, such as Simmel (1972), Coser (1956), Dubiel (1998a, 1998b), and Hirschman (1994).

Later, he states: ‘Thus new strategies of governmentality restructure the social in ways that attest to the continuing potency of the state but question traditional notions of the state–society dichotomy’ (Ray, 2007: 94).

References


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