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# Social Integration – Levels and Dimensions

Thomas Schwinn

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**Abstract** The conceptual proposals on social integration are diffuse and vague. Alarmist diagnoses are contrasted by empirical research results that give an all-clear signal. For an adequate understanding of social integration processes, basic theoretical questions must first be clarified. The specific unit “society” as the point of reference for what is to be integrated is replaced by a constitutional perspective that takes a look at different levels of societization (*Vergesellschaftung* [Max Weber’s term “*Vergesellschaftung*” is not easy to translate. I follow Bruun and Whimster’s (in Weber 2012, p. 496) proposal: “societization”.]) and their relationship with one another (social categories, milieus, intermediary organizations, state order, and the global level). Social integration is not identical to a stable and well-organized order. It has value references that set standards for successful integration. However, the extent of cultural integration is no less fraught with conflict than that of social integration. Actors in a certain structural situation resort to such legitimizing values and are thereby confronted with value dilemmas. Sociology is not able to offer ideal states as expressed in conceptual promises of “solidarity” or “cohesion.” Rather, it has a rich knowledge of constellations with different levels of societization in the context of different value relations. This is of central importance for an understanding of the complex processes of integration and disintegration and the role of the social sciences in public discourses on problems of integration.

**Keywords** Integration · Social and cultural integration · Categories and social conflict · Intermediary level · State order · Value conflicts

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## Soziale Integration – Ebenen und Dimensionen

**Zusammenfassung** Die konzeptionellen sozialwissenschaftlichen Vorschläge zu Integration sind diffus und vage. Alarmistischen Großdiagnosen stehen empirische Forschungsergebnisse gegenüber, die Entwarnung geben. Für ein adäquates Verständnis sozialer Integrationsprozesse müssen zunächst grundlagentheoretische Fragen geklärt werden. Die Setzung einer bestimmten Einheit als Bezugspunkt für das Zu-Integrierende wird ersetzt durch eine Konstitutionsperspektive, die verschiedene Vergesellschaftungsebenen und ihre Beziehung zueinander in den Blick nimmt (soziale Kategorien, Milieus, intermediäre Organisationen, staatliche Rahmenordnung). Soziale Integration ist nicht identisch mit einer stabilen und gut organisierten Ordnung. Sie weist Wertbezüge auf, die Maßstäbe für gelingende Integration setzen. Allerdings ist das Ausmaß der kulturellen Integration nicht weniger konfliktbesetzt als das der sozialen Integration. Akteure in einer bestimmten strukturellen Lage greifen auf solche legitimierenden Werte zurück und sind dabei mit Wertedilemmata konfrontiert. Die Soziologie vermag keine Idealzustände anzubieten, wie sie in Begriffsversprechen von „Solidarität“ oder „Zusammenhalt“ zum Ausdruck kommen. Vielmehr verfügt sie über ein reichhaltiges Konstellationswissen zu unterschiedlichen Vergesellschaftungsebenen im Kontext verschiedener Wertbezüge. Dieses ist für ein Verständnis der komplexen Integrations- und Desintegrationsprozesse und die Rolle der Sozialwissenschaften in öffentlichen Diskursen zu Integrationsproblemen von zentraler Bedeutung.

**Schlüsselwörter** Integration · Soziale und kulturelle Integration · Kategorien und sozialer Konflikt · Intermediäre Ebene · Staatliche Ordnung · Wertkonflikte

### 1 Overstressed Diagnoses and Missing Theory

One is inclined to drop the term “social integration” and the phenomena it addresses – as theoretically and empirically too diffuse and vague. It serves as an indicator of problems and, accordingly, the negative side is the more prominent one. Complaints about disintegration are plentiful and belong to the identity of our discipline. Each historical phase produces its own version: alienation and impoverishment (Karl Marx), the disappearance of collective consciousness (Emile Durkheim), the divergence of subjective and objective culture (Georg Simmel), the iron cage of bondage (Max Weber), the lonely crowd (David Riesman), problems of legitimization in late capitalism (Jürgen Habermas/Claus Offe), tendencies toward individualization (Ulrich Beck). These theses usually move on a high level of abstraction, from which modern society appears as a fragile or over-integrated entity incapable of stabilization. Corresponding to the scientific theses are political and social efforts to overcome the perceived problems. The perspective of an excessive demand and destruction of nonregenerable stocks of integration in Romanticism and in the bourgeois youth movement at the beginning of the twentieth century led to a reactivation of the concept of community, which continued into the *Völkisch* movement and the ideology of a “*Volksgemeinschaft*” (national community) (Geiger 1982, p. 22).

These movements seized Tönnies' antithesis of community vs. society in a sense not intended by him. Certain traits of this thinking, which is driven by the "unease in modernity," admittedly with other political intentions, can later be identified in the communitarians, in Robert Bellah, Amitai Etzioni, and Robert Putnam. Doubts about this fundamental weakness of integration into modern society were expressed again and again (Geiger 1982 [1931], p. 22; Kocka 1988, pp. 184–185; Peters 1993, pp. 215 ff.; Berger 2004, p. 258; Portes and Vickstrom 2011, pp. 472–473).

Social integration, cohesion, and solidarity have been booming in recent years, not only in the social sciences but also in politics and the media (Deitelhoff et al. 2020, pp. 9–10). The discussions revolve around several problem areas that are the focus of this issue: religious renaissance and ethnic diversity, political populism and shifting cleavages, and social inequality. The discussions are sometimes characterized by alarmism,<sup>1</sup> leading to the thesis that society as a whole is in a major crisis, and accordingly it is given labels such as "Society of Fear" (Bude 2014), "Society of Descent" (Nachtwey 2016), "Society of Singularities" (Reckwitz 2017), or "Society of Anger" (Koppetsch 2019). In contrast to the media and political discourse, the social science discourse does not bring any clarity. Diffuse and heterogeneous ideas about social integration problems and areas are offered: globalization, digitalization, demographic change, fragile and failing states, civil wars, secession conflicts, drug problems, unemployment, etc. The political demands for strengthening political cohesion are just as heterogeneous: founding of a homeland ministry, unconditional basic income, strengthening of civil society participation, etc. "The impression of an arbitrary opportunistic use of terms" comes to mind (Deitelhoff et al. 2020, p. 13, author's own translation). If one contrasts this discourse of erosion and decay with the available empirical results of recent decades, one gets the impression that the talk of crisis is not really matched by factual problems of integration – at least not in such a dramatic way. Beginning with the social reporting initiated by Wolfgang Zapf in the 1970s (Zapf 1972; Zapf et al. 1987; Glatzer and Zapf 1984), the all-clear signal has been given empirically over the last 50 years: "There can be no talk of a dramatic breakup of society in a comparison over time" (Brand et al. 2020, p. 9, author's own translation; see Franz 1985; Gabriel 1999; Pollack et al. 2016; Lengfeld 2019; Lübke and Delhey 2019; Schneickert et al. 2019; Allmendinger and Wetzell 2020; Gerhards et al. 2020; Kumkar and Schimank 2021; Mau et al. 2020; Rössel et al. 2021; Konietzka and Martynovych 2022).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As an example of this pessimistic literature: "The institutionalized spheres of mutual recognition seem to be walled off at their edges and deprived of any general, respect-securing principle within them; more and more members of society are dependent on compensatory, non-public ways of acquiring self-respect, fewer and fewer can claim intersubjectively shared recognition for their endeavors and pursuits" (Honneth 2013, p. 38, author's own translation).

<sup>2</sup> In the empirical works, different aspects of integration are analyzed, which all, however, lead to the same conclusion. On social recognition, see Schneickert et al. (2019, p. 613): "The social recognition is overall positive, even for structurally disadvantaged groups. The 'crisis of recognition' (Reckwitz) is therefore ... not a phenomenon that concerns society as a whole" (author's own translation). On social division, see Gerhards et al. (2020), p. 9: "Therefore, the emergence of strong social and political cleavages is rather improbable" author's (own translation) and Mau et al. (2020, p. 339): "We hardly find any empirical verifications for the often claimed splitting of contemporary societies" (own translation). The diagnostic use of the concept of exclusion also has only limited potential: "The groups of people affected by exclusion ... are

Although problems of integration are identified, these do not justify the pessimistic assessments in the narratives of decline and downfall. Despite significant changes and structural breaks over the past half-century, individualization, reunification, globalization, demographic change, European Union, increasing migration numbers, as well as the coronavirus crisis, “the social foundation of our society is solid” (Brand et al. 2020, p. 76, author’s own translation). These assessments stand in contrast to the public discourse in which there is talk about a “social division” and a “divided society.” This discourse is supported by literature of the political sciences, where “de-democratization” (Manow 2020, author’s own translation), or a “democratic regression” (Schäfer and Zürn 2021, author’s own translation) are mentioned. “All this adds up to a crisis of political legitimacy in which a tough struggle has begun over nothing less than the constitutive foundations of the political order” (Streeck 2021, p. 23, author’s own translation). And some even consider the fight already lost: “How Democracies Die” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018); “How Democracy Ends” (Runciman 2018).<sup>3</sup>

In this mixture of empirical all-clear signal and political concern, it is striking that the research contexts and results are hardly related to each other. The political diagnoses of division often have a deficient socio-structural basis of analysis (see, for example, the critique by Hartmann 2020), and the socio-structural studies usually lack a political sociology that pursues their translation into political conflict. All of this certainly has “somehow” something to do with “social integration”; but how exactly – that requires theory.

If one tries to get clarity using the literature on social theory in the narrower sense, which strives for a theoretical and conceptual specification, the situation is not much better. There are complaints about the vague and diffuse theoretical content of social integration (Angell 1968, pp. 384 ff.; Fuchs 1999, pp. 147 ff.; Friedrichs und Jagodzinski 1999, pp. 9 ff.; Gerhards et al. 2020, pp. 18–19; Schnabel and Tranow 2020, p. 8; Deitelhoff et al. 2020, p. 18); it is considered an “omnibus category” (Levine 1968, p. 373); an “empty formula” (Friedrichs und Jagodzinski 1999, p. 17, author’s own translation); a “chameleon” (Forst 2020, p. 40); there is “conceptual chaos,” which makes some “finally doubt the scientific usefulness of this term” (Rottleuthner 1999, p. 407, author’s own translation, see also p. 398) and the editor in the introduction to a corresponding anthology laments “the rather low chances, in my opinion, of finding satisfactory answers to the title question ‘What holds society together?’” (Heitmeyer 1997a, p. 12, author’s own translation). Social integration is not only a social science concept but also a highly controversial and value-loaded topic of public and political debate. This frequently makes it difficult to maintain the necessary scientific distance from real-life perceptions of problems, which is, however, necessary for the elaboration of convincing theoretical concepts. Accordingly, the modest role of the social sciences as a “referee” in these disputes is lamented: “and much that is politically controversial can hardly be definitively

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so small that it is not possible to speak in any serious sense of a central division of contemporary societies.” (Rössel et al. 2021, p. 383, author’s own translation).

<sup>3</sup> Falter (2017), Wirsching (2017), and Bach (2021), however, cannot empirically find any parallels between Berlin and the Weimar Republic.

judged so far” (Esser 2009, p. 305; see also Schiffauer 1997, pp. 160–161, author’s own translation).<sup>4</sup>

Large-scale diagnoses get carried away into strong, far-reaching theses, which empirical research in turn tears down again. Nor do the theoretical and conceptual proposals offer a convincing framework with which to determine stability and change and their relative importance. One may wonder whether “social integration” can be conceptualized in general theoretical and conceptual terms independent of contemporary historical diagnoses. Do social inequality, ethnic diversity and religious renaissance, populism and political extremism, etc., share a common, general, problem that can be identified theoretically and which allows them to be designated as expressions of a unifying basic sociological term of “integration”? In most cases, metaphors such as “social bond,” “social cement,” or vague expressions such as “cohesion” or “solidarity” are used. In order to offer a broad theoretical umbrella, the “concept of society” or “concept of order” is usually invoked. Social disintegration threatens order and causes society to break apart. The terms are intertwined in an ambiguous way. Empirically, however, there were only a few events in Europe in the last century that led to a breakdown of “society”: 1945 for Germany and 1989 for Eastern Europe.

For an adequate understanding of processes of social integration, in the following second section basic theoretical questions are first clarified (2.1). The often used concept of society is replaced by different levels of societization (*Vergesellschaftung*): categories, relations, organizations (2.3), the state order and the global level (2.4). No “unity” can be set as a reference point for social integration, but rather “what is to be integrated” is determined and reproduced through the levels and their interactions with as well as their indifferences toward each other. The third section focuses on cultural integration or value references, without which social integration cannot be analyzed. Proposals on this, however, diverge widely and the question arises as to what analytical competence sociology has with regard to values relevant to integration (3.1). Divergences of interest cannot, in principle, be reconciled by shared values or consensus on fundamental issues. Values themselves have a conflicting structure that can have a disintegrative effect (3.2). Finally, the considerations on the structural levels and value dimensions of social integration are brought together (4).

<sup>4</sup> Lepsius (1989, pp. 218–219, author’s own translation) complains that sociology has failed to develop a “social criterion of rationality” and to devote itself to its professional appropriation and administration, analogous to the economic efficiency and legal efficiency of the other disciplines. Sociology, however, has a difficult task in this regard. Although political science focuses on democracy, economics on the market, jurisprudence on laws, and educational science on education, sociology has to deal with all these criteria of rationality. “Integration” is therefore a multi-layered phenomenon that cannot be grasped by one “social rationality criterion.” What sociology is able to do in this context is the subject of this article.

## 2 Levels of Order of Social Integration

### 2.1 Basic Theoretical Issues

In order to clarify the theoretical foundations, it is necessary to switch from the theory of society and general diagnosis, in which the bulk of publications are situated, to social theory. Systems theory and action theory offer different strategies of conceptualization. The concept of integration comes from the collectivist tradition (Bernsdorf 1969). From Herbert Spencer through Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons to Niklas Luhmann, the focus is on the close connection between differentiation and integration. All these authors assume that society is a useful level of analysis for questions of social integration. But they offer different ideas and concepts for this societal level. Reacting to the difficulties of his predecessors, Luhmann only gives a slim definition of integration as a mutual restriction of degrees of freedom (Luhmann 1997, pp. 602–603, 759–760). However, this version is highly abstract and thus loses significance for concrete analyses. Integration and interdependence are merged into one and modern society is characterized as “over-integrated” (Luhmann 1997, p. 618, author’s own translation). “The coefficient of irritation, which thus rises across society as a whole, reflects the simultaneous increase in interdependencies and independence. The resulting lack of clarity practically makes it impossible to calculate possible changes and their effects in the relationships between systems” (Luhmann 1997, p. 763, author’s own translation). This theory is no longer able to say anything about cause-and-effect relationships and how both sides can be distinguished; they get lost in the inextricable complexity of the social system.<sup>5</sup> The whole-and-part or system-environment understanding of integration guided by systems theory, which is used in many theoretical attempts and encyclopedia articles, does not fit with inequality and migration research as well as political sociology, which are rather individualistically oriented: how do actors fit into social orders? Theory and empirical research of social integration do not meet.

From an action-theoretical perspective, the level of society as a unit of accounting for various socially integrative chains of effects is an analytically useless concept. Not every problem, e.g., unemployment, has the same urgency for all actors. Problems of social integration and crisis phenomena cannot be determined objectively at a superordinate systems level, but must be traced via the patterns of interpretation and interests of the social actors. Talk of “systemic problems” or a “breakup of society” suggests the assumption of an even level of affectedness by a problem. In most cases, the sensitivity to “pain” is distributed very differently and impairs the willingness to see a “problem” as such. The multitude of problems and poorly integrated contexts require instances of attribution and action that take care of their definition and processing. It is true that “objective problems” (*“Probleme an sich”*)

<sup>5</sup> Durkheim’s “organic solidarity” also suffers from this abstractness, which in many respects does not stand up to concrete analysis. Among the multitude of criticisms, see only Tyrell (1985) and Schmid (1989). Parsons’ (2007) last book, published posthumously, is devoted to the problem of social integration. It is subtitled “A Theory of the Societal Community.” In Luhmann’s work, this term is a theoretical foreign object.



can have consequences in the medium or long term, but even then they must be perceived by and attributed to instances (*“Probleme für sich”*). From an action-theoretical perspective, therefore, there can only be a relative and gradual analysis of the constellation effects of integrative problems. The many aspects and their interactions do not arrange themselves into a unified perspective of integration that focuses on all aspects and that could be captured by “society.” If one says, for example, that unemployment represents a “problem of social integration,” one must specify exactly in what respect. And the “concept of society” does not provide any clues in this regard (Sander and Heitmeyer 1997, p. 448–449). One can be interested in the various ways in which those affected deal with it: subjective coping strategies, effects on their family life and contacts, efforts to find a new job or frustrated withdrawal. Or one can ask how unemployment rates and political election results are related: do the unemployed vote differently from the employed; which party is particularly dedicated to the unemployed and how: as a problem attributed to the individual or to the market. All these perspectives on the problem have something to do with “society.” This term, however, does not offer a central perspective toward which these perspectives would be oriented to produce what might be called an “integrative overall assessment” of the problem.

If this level as a unifying bracket is not available, is there something common that conceptually connects the heterogeneous problems of social integration? Here, it is worth taking a look at Max Weber. He takes up the influential distinction between “community” and “society” in Ferdinand Tönnies (Lichtblau 2000) and translates it into his own conceptual language. The concepts of *Vergesellschaftung* (societization) and *Vergemeinschaftung* (communalization) remind one of other distinctions: system vs. social integration or system and life-world. However, they must not be equated with this. First of all, they do not stand in an evolutionary sequence as in Tönnies. “Society” does not replace “community,” but the latter is also common in modernity. Second, they must not be placed in a strictly dichotomous relationship like the other concepts; they occur in different combinations. “The great majority of social relations, however, have partly the character of communalization, partly that of societization” (Weber 1980, p. 22, author’s own translation; see also Lichtblau 2000; Schluchter 2018, p. 145; Stachura 2020). Accordingly, the orientations of action occur in different combinations.

Jürgen Habermas’ formulation of a “colonization of the life-world” stands in a series of writings that claim with the concept of alienation to point to pre-institutional, unspoiled socially integrative relations that are overrun by modern abstract processes of societization. Communalizations, however, are not original life-world realities, but emerged with modern processes of societization. Social integration presupposes reference frames and categories that allow people to perceive themselves as equals. Processes of societization and differentiation have contributed to the development of forms of association. Working class, middle class, white collar, ethnic groups, women, etc., are all social categories that are defined or socially constructed in specific ways in modern social orders.

For Weber, communalization is a variable, gradual process. With “community” one associates an already clearly outlined social phenomenon with the danger of a reification of collective entities. Communalization has to be discriminated by



means of the social aggregate levels in Weber's "Basic Sociological Terms."<sup>6</sup> He demonstrated this with the class and ethnic problems (Weber 1980, pp. 22–23, 237, 241–242, 533, 539–540). When one speaks of social integration or disintegration, it is crucial on which level these processes are in motion. Following Weber, Brubaker speaks, for example, of "ethnicity without groups" and of an "overethnicized view of the social world" (Brubaker 2005, p. 475; see also Wimmer 2008). According to Weber (1980, p. 242), the "collective term 'ethnic'" needs to be specified analytically.

## 2.2 Categories, Relationships, Organizations

At an elementary level, it is initially only a matter of the commonality of a structural situation or characteristic, without this already resulting in a mutual orientation to one another. "But even if they all react to this situation in the same way, this does not constitute a communal relationship. The latter does not even exist if they have a common 'feeling' about this situation and its consequences" (Weber 1978b, p. 42, 1980, p. 22). Here we are dealing with social categories, women, men, old people, migrants, workers, civil servants, etc., i.e., largely unconnected numbers of people with similar structural characteristics and behavior.

Social relations emerge with the orientation to each other, and questions of belonging and togetherness arise. Class analysis addresses them with the transition from class as an objective phenomenon to class as a subjective phenomenon, i.e. from structural similarity to common consciousness. The conditions for this are well studied (Dahrendorf 1957, pp. 165 ff.): The communicative exchange among categorical equals, emergence of conflict consciousness, leadership figures and providers of ideas, identification of guilty persons and opponents.

Another stage in the structuring of processes of social integration and disintegration is set with the formation of organizations. Only for some categories does this succeed at all, depending on their capacity for conflict and organization. "As over against the actions of classes and status groups, for which this is not necessarily the case, party-oriented social action always involves association. For it is always directed towards a goal which is striven for in a planned manner" (Weber 1978b, p. 938, 1980, p. 539). Social integration or disintegration acquires on this level an element of order that has a recurring effect on the initial stage. If there are organizations that have the objective of women's emancipation, patterns of interpretation are offered as to how one should see oneself as a woman and what interests one should have. The probability increases that a social problem or disadvantage can be presented as disintegrative and that political authorities will listen and show willingness to act. Assuming objectively given integration problems obscures the selectivity of their social structuring. "Much talk about ethnic, racial, or national groups is obscured by the failure to distinguish between groups and categories. If by 'group' we mean a mutually interacting, mutually recognizing, mutually oriented, effectively communicating, bounded collectivity with a sense of solidarity, corporate identity,

<sup>6</sup> Integration and disintegration are therefore not basic sociological terms as Dahrendorf (1979b) assumes in his comparison of two models of society: integration theory and conflict theory. Both sides of the dichotomy are not self-explanatory but require basic theoretical assumptions for their analytical specification.

and capacity for concerted action, or even if we adopt a less exigent understanding of ‘group,’ it should be clear that a category is not a group [...] It is at best a potential basis for group formation or ‘groupness’” (Brubaker 2005, p. 476).

Social integration and disintegration means various things at the different levels of relationships and order. One can speak of social integration or disintegration on the categorical level only to a limited extent, at best in an objective sense, as an aggregation of many individuals that can be expressed statistically: Women earn less than men; children of workers and ethnic minorities are less likely to attend high school; members of these categories have friends and marriage partners from the same category; members of the lower class have higher crime rates, etc. Statistical categories become a social problem only when actors refer to them and judge the situation as unfair or degrading. The underrepresentation of certain classes in education was not a problem until the discussion of the so-called educational emergency (*Bildungsnotstand*) in the 1960s. Many lifestyles are deprived and underprivileged, but without voice, communication, or contact. They must hope for vicarious advocacy by the welfare state or charities. A social order tolerates a high degree of statistical underprivileged status. It is structurally caused, but it remains a problem that individuals must cope with biographically, for example, by lowering standards of aspiration. This intrapersonal shift of structural conditions has an effect of stabilizing order that should not be underestimated. Esser (1999, p. 19, author’s own translation) speaks here of “deferential integration.” “It is the weakest form of social ‘integration’ ... For ‘society,’ however, it is rarely a dangerous affair. Misery and hopelessness are known to make people apathetic.”

On the categorical level, there is also positive integration, which, however, does not or hardly shows any instances of communalization. It is discussed in the literature on individualization by Ulrich Beck and in systems theory by Niklas Luhmann. Inclusion in the differentiated institutional orders is expected and attributed as a biographical achievement. It is motivationally fueled by one’s standards, and the life course can be structurally described via careers. It does not require social communalization. This form of being integrated can also be recorded statistically: increasing rates of intergenerational education, increased income and job opportunities, improved living and consumption standards, declining old-age poverty, etc. Contrary to a widespread assumption that the modern individual, supposedly overburdened with problems of orientation, seeks strong forms of communalization<sup>7</sup>, the latter are rather signs of failed or problematic integration. Communalizations are ignited by impeded and obstructed inclusion when Simmel’s circles of contact coincide. Ethnic minorities, which are restricted in terms of education and labor market participation, marriage circles, etc., find themselves in milieu-enhancing neighborhoods and residential districts. People do not want milieus as compensation for the modern differentiated orders that supposedly create deficits of integration. They want careers, i.e., opportunities to participate and advance in differentiated institutions. To the extent that opportunities of inclusion are opened up to individuals, milieu-

<sup>7</sup> See the critique by Portes and Vickstrom (2011) of Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*.

dominated ways of life are eroding. The modern mode of integration has shifted from one shaped by layer or stratum to one shaped by (life) course.<sup>8</sup>

Even the next level after the statistical-aggregate one, characterized by interaction and relationship, has heterogeneous, not uniform, effects on social integration. Relationships can have different degrees of crystallization and commitment. Contact opportunities resulting from a structurally identical situation do not necessarily lead to a closure of milieu. With the formation of common patterns of behavior and attitudes, the degree of crystallization and reality of such forms of communalization increases. Giddens' (1979, pp. 134 ff.) conceptual differentiation gained from the class problem can be used to distinguish between "milieu awareness" and "milieu consciousness," and the latter to distinguish between difference, conflict and revolutionary consciousness. Awareness means the common perception of similar attitudes and convictions associated with a common way of life, without the perception of a particular group membership being connected with it. This requires a consciousness of difference, the notion of group identity, and differentiation of group. Conflict consciousness goes hand in hand with the recognition of a clash of interests, and revolutionary consciousness with the conviction that group action must be aimed at the reorganization of the entire social order.

The various social categories should be sorted through according to the degree and ability to form groups or milieus and the consciousness associated with it. Not all categorical characteristics lend themselves equally well to milieu formations. In the case of gender, we have a high degree of consciousness of political conflict in the absence of a given milieu formation. It is not conceivable that all women are concentrated in certain urban and residential districts as an underprivileged category of the population. With gender, unlike in the case of ethnicity, the intersection of social circles cannot be transferred in the direction of a milieu-promoting coverage of social circles. Relationships segregated by gender would be "incomplete," so to speak.

The class and ethnic issue presents itself differently. For example, Nauck (2009, p. 308, author's own translation) finds little or no conflict consciousness among ethnic minorities in Germany. "In this perspective, it is thus not so much ethnic conflict scenarios that move into the focus of analyses of social theory, but rather the question of why ethnic conflicts did not appear in Germany in such a sustained manner and what consequences are to be drawn from this for social and inclusion policies." The low level of conflict is also due to the absence of an ethnic cleavage with separate parties (Leggewie 1997, p. 252; Röder and Mühlau 2012; Fischer-Neumann 2014; Spies et al. 2020). The conflict is asymmetrical. Although attitudes

<sup>8</sup> The combination of options and ligatures, i.e., ties, is crucial for Dahrendorf's concept of life chances. However, this theme is not satisfactorily thought through in Dahrendorf's work. Ligatures are "the ancestors, the homeland, the community, the church [...]" In general, ligatures characterize the element of meaning and anchoring, while options emphasize the goal and the horizon of action." (Dahrendorf 1979a, p. 51, author's own translation). Apart from the fact that the ligatures he mentions serves Tönnies' viewpoint, the options are underestimated as "goal and horizon of action" and "future." Life course research in particular has shown that the meaning of life in modernity lies in the course, i.e., in the future perspective. This could also further be made plausible with Reinhart Koselleck's studies on the modern understanding of experience and time.

toward migration are polarized among the native population (Mau et al. 2020) and have found organizational expression in populist political parties, this is absent among the migrants. Although there are extreme groups such as the Salafists, their importance is exaggerated by right-wing extremists (Gerhards et al. 2020, p. 246). In turn, Members of Parliament with an immigrant background do not dramatize their origins but strive to downplay them. “Apparently, for marginalized communities, the externally inflicted omnipresence of their ‘origin’ leads to a defensive attitude not only against structural racism, but also against a ‘self-ethnicization.’ They do not want to reduce political representation to place of origin” (Mügge et al. 2021, p. 8, author’s own translation). There are hardly any differences among Germans, Germans with a migration background, and foreigners living in Germany with regard to the evaluation of fundamental democratic rights and values and in voting behavior (Neu 2021).

Strong communalization is for modern societies rather disintegrating. Historically, the negative integration of the German working-class milieu and the milieu-like pillarization of the German social structure up to the Weimar Republic is well documented (Lepsius 1993, pp. 25 ff.). These milieus were characterized by a coincidence of several structural dimensions, such as religion, regional tradition, economic situation, and cultural orientation. Subculturally highly segmented milieus inhibit institutional differentiation because the aspect-specific addressing and relevance of individuals is obstructed by internal–external moral boundaries. Strongly internally oriented groups weld all dimensions of life – political, economic, educational, marital relations, consumption patterns, etc. – into a context that differentiated institutions calibrated to specific standards and achievements can hardly address. Diffuse and value-laden questions of fundamental principles and constitution take the place of single-issue and small-scale conflicts based on problems of inclusion and exclusion. Such dense milieus are hardly influenced by policy, as it deals with a compact form of life that is difficult to cope with by selective measures.

Internally strong integrated communalizations can preserve deviant ways of life, such as the Amish in Pennsylvania (Diekmann 2007, pp. 48–49), or new models of life can be tried out, such as in artists’ colonies. However, illegal markets for drugs, weapons, prostitution, etc., also thrive in highly segregated milieus (Braun and Berger 2007; Heise and Meyer-Heuer 2020). The new milieus that have emerged in recent decades exhibit a weak degree of communalization (Hitzler et al. 2008; Rösseel 2009, pp. 335 ff.). They are aspect specific (music, sports, leisure, etc.), temporary, part-time, self-selected, weak in sanctions, without existential, often only aesthetic interest. Although the older milieus bound people comprehensively (Gabriel 1990; Tenfelde 1996), from the cradle to the grave, the new milieus have no clear affiliations; people can belong to several at the same time. This weak structuring of life is compatible with the differentiated institutional order (Schwinn 2019, pp. 147 ff.).

### 2.3 Voice and Conflict in Social Integration: The Intermediary Level

Significant integrative consequences result from the organizational and political translation of social problems and interests. The silent existence of underprivileged people is not a threat “to society.” However, when they raise their voices and elect

parties that challenge the political and social order, disintegration is felt by all and addressed to all.<sup>9</sup> The “question of society,” which is referred to in the aforementioned general diagnoses of social disintegration, is posed in terms of the political order. It is through the political order that collapses and new beginnings are defined: 1871, 1918, 1933, 1945, 1989 – these years mark the central turning points in modern German history. Only with political articulation does a forced need for institutionalization of conflicts arise that find expression in cleavages.<sup>10</sup> As long as disintegrative problems remain below this politically articulated threshold, their effects and their “social significance” are diffuse.

“Problems” and “interests” are not self-evident, nor can they be easily derived from categorical or structural location and milieu contexts. Political articulation is not only translation but also construction of socially integrative variables. “A worker may, e.g., use a conception of the social differentiation of society by occupations and identify with electricians, or conceptualization of social differentiation of society by classes and identify with the working class, or a conceptualization of the differentiation of society by categories of people who work for a living and who do not, and identify with the ones who work for living. All three conceptualizations may be available” (Lepsius 1976, p. 353). The type of political organization is decisive for which pattern of interpretation becomes dominant for self- and social perception. In the USA, for example, there is no labor party, only unions related to aspects of labor in the narrower sense, which is why a cleavage along the capital-labor line is not to be found there; this is in contrast to European countries, and there again to different degrees according to social democratic or communist parties. In recent years, populist tendencies and far-right parties in many countries have successfully performed a dramaturgy of conflict that distinguishes between “honest working people” and “freeriders.” In this context, migrants and asylum seekers, but also “lazy elites,” can end up in the latter category. One infers from this the emergence of a new cleavage (Eribon 2016, pp. 133 ff., Hochschild 2016, pp. 187 ff.; De Wilde et al. 2019; Reckwitz 2020), albeit with certain variations in how and where the course of the conflict is located and with considerable conceptual criticism of such assumptions of a new cleavage (Mau et al. 2020, 2021; Kumkar and Schimank 2021; Burzan 2021; Konietzka and Martynovych 2022).

The interactions and interrelation of the various levels relevant for social integration (categorical, relational, milieu-forming, politically organized and articulated) and problem dimensions (class, ethnicity, gender, etc.) do not converge on a societal level, which allows an overall account. In the political debates, it is ultimately

<sup>9</sup> Brubaker (2005, pp. 478–479) on the example of ethnic conflicts: “Although participants’ rhetoric and common sense accounts treat ethnic groups as the protagonists of ethnic conflict, in fact the chief protagonists of most ethnic conflict – and a fortiori of most ethnic violence – are not ethnic groups as such but various kinds of organizations, broadly understood, and their empowered and authorized incumbents.”

<sup>10</sup> The founding of the BMBF Research Institute for Social Cohesion (*Forschungsinstitut für gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt*, FGZ) probably owes much to the electoral successes of the AfD (Alternative for Germany), which prompted the established parties to take countermeasures. One of the conditions for the emergence of social movements is the lack of absorption by the established parties. Here, the political process has already been followed, and the responses and thematization strategies depend on the existing or missing organizational offerings of the intermediary level.

clarified which relevance and urgency in social integration is assigned to which “problem.” The systems theory version of social integration via inclusion and exclusion is under-determined. How the participants perceive their institution-specific participations (e.g., worker: occupation, class, “honest worker”), whether and how they are expressed politically, cannot be answered from the differentiated institutions alone. In the systems theory versions of social integration, the unit in which integration takes place and in relation to which social disintegration is determined is already more or less fixed. In the constitutional perspective assumed here, integration and disintegration arise only in processes of societization and communalization.

A socially integrative bridge or link between micro and macro levels is the meso level. The conditions under which individuals are included in institutions are conflicting and in need of negotiation. This is where the intermediary organizations of interest come into play. They mediate between individual members and the public institutions in which interests must be brought to bear. The relationship between social structure or milieu, intermediary organization, and political institutions can be understood with the image of a “joint.” A joint transmits forces that it does not produce itself, and insofar it has a passive function. At the same time, however, it is active in the way in which it is constructed, as with the degree of its flexibility and mobility the possible leverage effects and power transmissions vary.

In the milieu-dominated pillarization of German society up to the Weimar Republic, the intermediary joint was largely “stiffened.” The associations and parties rooted in the densely networked contexts of life had hardly any room for maneuvers of their own. The transition from ideology-driven parties to catch-all parties is well described in political sociology. With the changing social structure after World War II, the intermediary structures also changed. The representative organizations reacted to the erosion of milieu-based lifestyles to more individual-based ones with a flexibilization of their offer. The mobility of the intermediary joint increases, and with it the ability to compromise and form coalitions in the political process. The close connection between characteristics of the social structure and organizational representation loosens or dissolves. Thus, every political party is electable by all socio-structural groups, albeit with certain electoral affinities. Compared with the postwar decades, the intermediary level has undergone a further transformation in recent decades (Streeck 1987; Wuthnow 1998; Kriesi 2007). The regular voter, the loyal member, is dying out. Patterns of participation are more flexible, more selective, more spontaneous, and less permanent. “Individualized participation” forces organizations to become more professional. Winning and retaining voters and members becomes an organizational task and effort. Processes of professionalization and bureaucratization of organizations are accompanied by a certain loss of profile, which makes identification with a particular organization more difficult. The intermediary joint is expanded organizationally and made more flexible, with a simultaneous thinning out of fixed relationships and ties to specific members. Joints that become too flexible lose their function as a directed power transmission is no longer possible. A medium constellation of socio-structural contexts and intermediary organizations conducive to social integration would lie beyond Weimar and today’s volatile political process. “Of central importance here is the constitution of particular collective identities, which must be strong enough to permit collective

action and decision-making, but not so strong that the organizations representing them could not, for the sake of achieving their goals, forego their full realization and agree to their integration into a broader (system) identity” (Streeck 1987, p. 490, author’s own translation). Too much integration at the bottom leads to disintegration at the meso and macro levels (parties’ inability to form coalitions), and too little integration at the bottom leads to over-integration in the middle and at the top (grand coalitions as a permanent condition).

This section and the next could let one assume that in the strict sense there is only political integration and disintegration. This is not the case, however. The introduction of different levels of “social integration” results from the skepticism toward the usefulness of the concept of society. “Society, however influential on daily lives, is not readily perceived as an object or as context by individuals. And if those lines of influence lack experiential reality, then the processes by which individuals are integrated into society and culture are equally indefinite” (Irwin 2016, p. 248). Sociologically, “social integration” means something different on each level. From categories that can be statistically described to relationships, milieus, and political organizations to the state order, the type and degree of consciousness of the actors involved vary. Following Max Weber’s interpretive sociology, one must be interested in the subjective representation of social phenomena, and this then makes a difference: whether, for instance, precarity is analyzed as a category that can be statistically described, as a segregated form of life (housing, education, health conditions), or as a political issue of discussion. Regarding statistically isolated precarious existences, one can be interested in their patterns of interpretation and find that they do not necessarily perceive their form of life as “precarious” (Weingärtner 2021, p. 577). In what sense then is there a “problem of social integration” if objectively identified precariousness and subjective perception do not coincide? The explicit thematization and clarification of what the problem actually consists of usually takes place in the political process. In this respect, Reinhard Kreckel’s call for a “political sociology of social inequalities” can also be applied to the problem of social integration. “But without studies of the political struggles of social inequalities [social integration, T.S.] we fail to understand their nature and process dynamics” (Schimank 2021, p. 492).

## 2.4 State Order, Political Action, and the Global Level

The nation-state defines the macro-context of social integration. Social and political cleavages, conflicts between religious communities, antagonisms between classes, and regional and ethnic conflicts were formed within it. They were institutionalized and more or less civilized through integration into a legal and political institutional order, as well as through nation building and citizenship (exemplary: Bendix 1964; Eisenstadt and Rokkan 1973). Against a tradition of thought from Tocqueville to Putnam, which sees the processes of social integration, milieus, and associations emerging and stabilizing “from below,” the constitutive importance of the order of the nation-state “from above” must be seen for the lower levels (Lepsius 1993, pp. 260 ff.; Streeck 1994, pp. 27–28; Skocpol et al. 2000; Kriesi 2007, pp. 31 ff.; Vo-



gel 2018).<sup>11</sup> Associations usually follow processes of state building, are conditioned by them, and not vice versa, the level of association brings about a state order from the bottom up.

Without the state framework, no social order would emerge from the diversity of intermediary groups and associations. Alongside function- and interest-specific sameness in the internal perception of the groups, an overarching perception as equal citizens of the state develops with the nation-state. Of course, the interest groups constantly argue about the distribution of competencies and resources, but only because they belong to a common framework with regard to social integration, which forms the boundary of the dispute. The boundaries of nations are boundaries of solidarity. There are German, French, American, Japanese teachers' associations, doctors' associations, and trade unions, even though they are a possible interest group across different countries. In order to become a group "in itself," the integrative political equality must precede the functionally conditioned equality of interests. The state order delimits the set of goods and privileges over which people fight. Those who are outside this pool of "citizens" are not able to create the same solidarity and willingness to dispute. Compared with the poverty situation of sections of the population in many countries, there are hot disputes here about minimal wage increases. Calls for solidarity with the poor of the Third World can only refer to the equality of human rights but not to political equality in the sense of Marshall.

On several levels and across several levels, the order of the nation-state has a socially integrative function: *culturally*, in that with the fusion of politics and culture, questions of inclusion in the institutional orders are not settled in a culturally neutral way; *legally*, in that with citizenship status a main threshold must be crossed in order to have full access to the other institutions; *intermediately*, in that it provides a necessary framework for the institutionalization of conflict between interest groups; *legitimatory*, in that the acceptance of an entire arrangement of differentiated orders is settled via the legitimization of the political order; and finally, it has an integrating function on the level of the *life course*, where it keeps individual inclusions connectable and contributes to biographical continuity and predictability (Schwinn 2019, pp. 125 ff.).

These considerations must not be misinterpreted as meaning that social integration can simply be established through state action. Looking at the degree of structuring and ordering across different levels means, on the one hand, emphasizing that social integration can be shaped. It is not something that happens automatically and passively, as it were, but requires political measures. In this context, we must also remember the responsibility and failure of political elites in particular (Vester 2008, pp. 194–195; Mau and Offe 2020, p. 364). The malleability of interpretive categories and perceptions of interests has already been explained. On the other hand, social integration cannot be shaped and controlled completely "from above." Where strong

<sup>11</sup> This is not only true for the intermediary level: "Even today it is not rare that political artifacts develop a sense of affinity akin to that of blood relationships. Very schematic constructs such as those states of the United States that were made into squares according to their latitude have a strong sense of identity; it is also not rare that families travel from New York to Richmond to make an expected child a 'Virginian'" (Weber 1978b, p. 393, 1980, p. 241).

connections to milieus exist, state interventions are hampered. Moreover, the measures for different problems and categories or groups do not converge: “for many members of the working classes transgender bathrooms or norms of gender-neutral speech do not constitute any significant improvement of their lives” (Illouz 2020, p. 6). Furthermore, the interrelationships of effects between the levels would have to be explained in more detail. Political measures often do not have a precise impact. For example, there are 905 gender-equality related measures at the 37 universities in North Rhine-Westphalia, and yet approximately only one in four professorships are held by a woman, and her salary also lags behind that of male colleagues (Klammer 2021, p. 176). Socially integrative political programs also have unintended effects: the welfare state not only mitigates the social question but also promotes a mentality of dependency; the expansion of education simultaneously creates losers of education and the devaluation of educational qualifications; and some integration policies for ethnic minorities at the same time contribute to parallel societies (Reckwitz 2020, pp. 246–247).

The importance of the state for social integration, which is emphasized here, could be regarded as “outdated,” as one reviewer of the manuscript has done. He argues that the state has long since lost its sovereign role in processes of globalization, and he even questions whether this state framework still exists at all. He is not alone in his assessment. In a mixture of empirical observation and normative demand the “breaking up of the exclusive structures of citizenship” (Lessenich, cited in Manow 2020, p. 157, author’s own translation) is claimed. This thesis has now been propagated for decades (see as early as Soysal 1994). Thus, it is not new but rather a little “outdated” itself. Now there is widespread skepticism with regard to the socially integrative significance of a “global society” (Münkler 2004, p. 22; Offe 2004, p. 49; Koopmans and Zürn 2019, pp. 21 ff.; Merkel and Zürn 2019, pp. 221 ff.; Schwinn 2019, pp. 159 ff.; Gerhards et al. 2020, p. 28). How is this to be assessed? There is no doubt that the nation state today is under considerable social pressure, from the world market, from migration flows, and from supranational institutions such as the EU. But has it lost its socially integrative significance as a result? There is some evidence to the contrary. Notions of a “breakup of citizenship,” a “post-national membership,” suffer from an analytical deficit. They emphasize the political, i.e., the cultural side, but fail to cast light on politics, i.e., the procedural-institutional side. There can be no scale-up of democracy from the national to the global framework without it losing its quality (Manow 2020, pp. 171 ff.; Merkel and Zürn 2019, pp. 221 ff.; Streeck 2021, pp. 11–12). This has been well studied for the EU, for instance, under the term “*Überkonstitutionalisierung* (overconstitution-alization)” (Lübbe-Wolff 2018, pp. 144 ff.). “The Court can only destroy existing national solutions, but it cannot itself create ‘Social Europe’” (Scharpf 2009, p. 198). Institutional developments depend on socially integrating membership contexts that legitimize them (Kielmansegg 1996), and these are still defined by nation-state citizenship. Thus, there is no EU citizenship without a national citizenship, the latter being the gate-keeper for the former (Joppke 1998, pp. 23 ff.; Gosewinkel 2016, pp. 606, 628). Empirically, moreover, attitudes favorable to the EU and globalization among so-called “cosmopolitans” depend on their privileged working and living conditions, which are protected from global market pressure precisely by institutions

of the nation-state (Hartmann 2020; Rieger and Leibfried 2001). The more developed national institutions and the welfare state are, the better they can respond to global challenges.

The socially integrative function of the state order is lacking at the global level. At this level, there is no political order of associations, or rather a strongly underdeveloped one, that could provide a framework for socially integrative processes. The uncontrolled and unmanaged social inequalities are likely to be of central importance here. A renewal of the nation-state experience, in which socio-structural groups grew with reference to political institutions, is unlikely in the medium term. The global level is neither a socially integrative nor a political entity. The widespread normative demands for international justice lack a civil society and institutional foundation. The enormous objective inequalities produced by globalization processes are hardly followed by societization of inequalities. The chances that statistically ascertainable categories and differences turn into socially conscious ones that are capable of action are not the same for the different social classes on the global level and are only given to a small privileged class. Global inequality is to a large extent unarticulated and finds no institutional expression.<sup>12</sup> As long as there is no political world order that requires legitimization, inequalities are possible to an extent that would burst national social orders. This could prove to be a stumbling block for a world order. It produces problems without providing the necessary conditions for their solution. Inequalities that cannot be addressed tend to erupt or have uncontrollable effects.

The analytical strategy pursued here, namely, to identify the levels of communalization and societization relevant for social integration, and to clarify their different quality as well as their relationships, follows Weber's "Basic Sociological Terms." From action to social action, to social relationships via open and closed relationships to associations, and finally to the state order, a gradation of increasing structuredness and order of social integration emerges. This provides an answer to the initial question of what the various problems of social inequality, ethnic segregation, political populism, etc., have in common in terms of social (dis)integration. Social integration or disintegration is a phenomenon that has an independent structuring and ordering character into which the specific research results from the special sociologies must be translated in order to be able to assess their socially (dis)integrative relevance. If one knows the structural causes of poverty, one does not yet know whether it has a disintegrative effect. Beginning with social categories and statistical aggregations, one must, for example, follow up the ethnic or inequality issue across the levels of societization and communalization, clarify whether and to what degree consciousness exists among the actors, whether this is followed by social relationships, and in what forms. Compared with milieus, intermediary organizations represent a further degree of structuring of social integration: The membership role sets a clearly marked threshold that requires a decision and thus a clearly heightened sense of

<sup>12</sup> Of course, conflicts arise at the borders between North Africa and Southern Europe and Mexico and the USA, but they hardly find satisfactory transnational solutions, let alone an "institutionalization of conflict." They serve above all as material for conflicts that can be instrumentalized domestically in political disputes. On the other hand, the migrants themselves remain at the lowest level of societization: There are networks, but ultimately it remains a mass march of the isolated.

belonging. One cannot simply join without being noticed. This applies to an even greater extent to the political order. State action is oriented along constitutional orders, which sharpen the openness and closedness of social relations by necessities of decision. Social integration can be sanctioned by regulatory bodies. “Hence, elements of compulsion and coercion are present in the enforcement of the societal normative order that are absent in other cases. The equivalent of ‘resignation,’ which is emigration, entails a far heavier cost than does the relinquishment of other associational memberships. In principle it also entails accepting another societal-governmental order, whereas in the case of divorce, one need not remarry” (Parsons 1971, p. 24). The integrative impositions for the individual increase enormously. Thus, questions of belonging and membership arise to an extent and severity that are untypical for the other levels of societization.

There is no continuous structural and ordering principle of social integration across the various levels of societization. One has to expect indifferences and breaks among the micro, meso and macro levels, without clear linear and proportional cause–effect relationships (Anhut 2002, p. 381; Scherr 2017, pp. 55–56). However, some general statements can be made. A robust finding of empirical social research is that satisfaction with and in the private sphere is at a higher level than satisfaction with the public sphere (Glatzer 1984; Lipset and Schneider 1987; Pollack et al. 2016; Schneickert et al. 2019; Mau and Offe 2020, pp. 360–361). How should this result be interpreted? Deficits at the macro level are compensated for by a reservoir of subjective life satisfaction. The private sphere is a buffer for dissatisfaction and frustrations with the institutional spheres. Social contradictions and conflicts are shifted to intrapersonal and small-scale copings and outlets. Individual social competencies, attributions of responsibilities, and frames of social comparison determine how macro contexts are dealt with. The close social environments are often more relevant for action than the “distant” institutions of “society” (Anhut 2002, pp. 384–385; Esser 2009, p. 359; Brand et al. 2020, p. 77). Admittedly, these compensations and shifting possibilities have certain limits. Without a conducive institutional context, subjective competencies and supportive micro-worlds will not be able to sustain themselves. Subjective satisfaction and quality of life cannot be controlled or directly “produced” by institutions, especially welfare state institutions, but they can provide the necessary frameworks and opportunities, e.g., to reconcile work and family life. Institutional options and restrictions must be translated into subjective satisfaction and quality of life through the social micro levels of family, partnership, and circles of friends, as well as lifestyle. This is not always possible, however. Sometimes alcoholism, drug problems, crime, or illness are involved. This makes it all the more important to focus on individual welfare, life satisfaction, and quality of life in their socially integrative macro relevance. This includes resources of socialization, mentality, and motivation on which all institutions depend, but which they cannot produce in their entirety. In the socialist, so-called “niche societies,” these private worlds were so far decoupled from the official institutions and political instances that this arrangement of order broke down. The macro framework was only restrictive and drained the reservoir of life satisfaction and the subjective willingness to translate it into public contexts.

### 3 Value Dilemmas or How Much Social Integration is Possible?

#### 3.1 Between Strong Consensus Premises and Normative Abstinence. What Can Sociology Contribute to the Analysis of Values?

The explanations given so far have concentrated mainly on the structural dimension, whereas the question regarding preconditions of norms and values has remained open. Social integration is not identical with stability, structure, or with organized conditions (Peters 1993, p. 92; Heitmeyer 1997b, p. 26; Friedrichs and Jagodzinski 1999, p. 17; Anhut 2002, p. 381). An entity may be stable, structured, and organized, and it may still be socially disintegrated. Assessments of the norm and value implications vary strongly. “I understand ‘social integration’ as a concept of success: integration can succeed – to a greater or lesser degree – or it can fail” and the “task of social science analyses is to reconstruct such standards of successful integration” (Peters 1993, pp. 92, 400, author’s own translation). Terms such as “solidarity” or “cohesion” also contain such strong value implications, which are set in contrast to “pathological conditions.” For Niklas Luhmann, this is “old European style!” “Integration, ..., is not a value-laden term, nor is it ‘better’ than disintegration” (Luhmann 1997, pp. 602, 604, author’s own translation). Here, the term integration merges seamlessly into that of “interdependence.” The social fabric is interweaved in the manifold communications and diverse operative couplings. However, even this minimalist comprehension of integration is not to be had without norms. Luhmann (1997, pp. 603, 605) understands integration as the mutual restriction of the systems’ degrees of freedom. “Degrees of freedom” and their “mutual restriction” are unlikely to be clarified without normative expectations and values. This problem is exemplarily formulated in Kant’s categorical imperative, and Habermas (1985, pp. 426 ff.) suspects here, not without reason, an “old European legacy” with which the newer systems theory struggles. Luhmann’s predecessors, Durkheim and Parsons, could not manage without value references, and Luhmann’s successors try to reactivate them. For Willke (1992, pp. 183 ff., 340 ff., author’s own translation), the “mere incrementalist muddling through” that Luhmann’s understanding of integration amounts to is not a convincing conception. Stichweh (2004, pp. 238–239, author’s own translation) considers Luhmann’s thesis of the primacy of the cognitive over the normative to be “practically falsified,” and Farzin (2006, pp. 106–107), in contrast to Luhmann, emphasizes the expectation- and structure-forming significance of values.

Proposals fluctuate between strong consensus premises and a broad abstinence from values. Sociology hardly offers an independent reflection and theoretical competence with regard to values. This is left to (political) philosophy. Thus, the extensive empirical research on social inequality has no elaborated theory of justice.<sup>13</sup> This is lamented (Honneth and Stahl 2013, p. 275; Turner 2016, pp. 11–12; Dear 2018, p. 211) or passed off as inevitable, “... is there a ‘right’ distribution? This question must be answered by a theory of justice; sociology is not responsible for this” (Berger 2004, p. 251, author’s own translation). Without the inclusion of norms

<sup>13</sup> Empirical justice research is to be distinguished from this, see Wegener (1992).

and values, an important dimension is missing and one will not gain a satisfactory understanding of social integration.<sup>14</sup> However, the later application of philosophical theories of values and justice to the empirical “material” collected before by sociologists is not a convincing approach.

The authors of the Research Institute for Social Cohesion (*Forschungsinstitut für gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt*, FGZ) also struggle with this problem. One would like to start from a “normatively neutral concept of cohesion,” from a “normatively abstinent working definition.” At the same time, they recognize that “there can be no ‘neutral’ notion of cohesion” and that the FGZ researchers are quite “confident of normative positions on cohesion in a modern democracy” (Deitelhoff et al. 2020, pp. 19–20; Forst 2020, pp. 43–44, 49, author’s own translation). The authors envision a division of labor. The social sciences do not have the “normative resources” to satisfactorily address the question regarding cohesion. “This requires other resources, such as an ‘ideal’ of an integrated or solidary society,” which is sought in an “overarching narrative of social integration and cooperation,” even in an “overarching project” (Forst 2020, pp. 44, 50, 52, author’s own translation).<sup>15</sup> This leaves the sociologist somewhat perplexed as to what might be meant by this. The objections to the similar attempt by Rainer Forst’s colleague from Frankfurt, Axel Honneth, come from historians: “Initial constellations are fundamentally suspect to historians, especially if they depict ideal states” (Welskopp 2013, p. 43, author’s own translation); and from sociologists: “From ‘the plurality of all particular forms of life,’ [Honneth] informs us, he has ‘normatively extracted’ the ‘structural elements of ethical life.’ With the latter he believes we can attain ‘the most general norms possible.’ We hear echoes of the a priori. The revision of neo-Kantian critical theory still has not gone far enough” (Alexander 2000, p. 294).

What can we expect of sociology here? Certainly not the specification of a priori created or historically extracted “ideal states.” What cultural sociology can do, however, is analyze the existing values and meanings. The question of social integration must be completed by that of cultural integration. The cultural level has its own right and its own laws vis-à-vis the structural level. The socially integrative relevant interests resulting from the latter require recourse to cultural stocks for their interpretation and shaping. These, however, are not available at will. Unfortunately, sociology largely leaves the analysis of values and meaning to philosophy, and so Levine’s complaint decades ago is still appropriate today. “It is symptomatic of the gap between cultural theory and the theory of social structure that whereas the latter has available a rich and complex conceptual framework, analysis of cultural structure still proceeds ... at a level not far from common sense” (Levine 1968, p. 374; see Hoffmann-Nowotny 2000, p. 175).<sup>16</sup> In the many offers provided by social theory

<sup>14</sup> “In fact, social justice is not a question of absolute calculations, such as in the food supply of dairy cattle” (Vester 2008, p. 208, author’s own translation).

<sup>15</sup> Habermas (1985, pp. 434–435, author’s own translation), for example, speaks of “higher-level intersubjectivities,” “identity-forming collective self-attributions,” and of “collective societal consciousness.”

<sup>16</sup> Although the empirically dominated social structure research focuses on measurable indicators, the sociology of culture in recent decades has developed very much in a direction that Margaret Archer (1988, pp. 72–73) criticizes as “central conflation.” Culture and structure are contracted into practice, into “doing,” so that one can no longer adequately grasp the relative autonomy of the two sides. As a recent example, see

to differentiate between various dimensions of integration (Peters 1993, pp. 96 ff.; Kaufmann 1997, pp. 14–15; Heitmeyer 1997b, pp. 24 ff.; Esser 1999; Friedrichs and Jagodzinski 1999; Schimank 2005, pp. 237 ff.; Kalter 2008, pp. 20 ff.), the cultural dimension does appear, but it does not enjoy the attention given to the socio-structural and institutional levels. Accordingly, the theoretical capacity for an elaborate analysis is low.

An inventory of the cultural level reveals the enormous variety of values that are repeatedly activated in integration issues: justice, equality, achievement, identity, tolerance, solidarity, recognition, etc. The cultural resources are not available in one unit, as an “ideal state” to bind together and pacify the fragmented socio-structural interests and conflicts. Parsons’ confidence in a consistent integration of and by values has subsequently been disrupted and replaced among his students by the insight into the contradictions and paradoxes of modern values (Münch 1991, pp. 27 ff.). A counter-program with a multiplicity of value conflicts is offered by Max Weber’s *Intermediate Reflections* (*Zwischenbetrachtung*) (Weber 1978a, pp. 536 ff.), in which possible and also historically occurring value collisions are presented in an ideal-typical way, e.g., in the attempt to ethicize economic relations with “brotherhood” or “solidarity.” What the social sciences could and would have to accomplish would not be the creation of ideals but “testing the ideals against the fundamental demand for the internal *consistency* of what we strive for” (Weber 2012, p. 103, 1982, p. 152), as well as the “explication of the ultimate, internally ‘consistent’ value axioms on which the differing opinions are based” (Weber 2012, p. 316, 1982, p. 510).

### 3.2 Value Conflicts and Their Socially Integrative Effects

The value standards referred to in integration analyses are characterized by diverse contradictions and tensions, without these being clearly highlighted and elaborated. In the following, I will reconstruct the central value conflicts relevant to integration.

The often invoked postulate of “justice” is ambiguous. Should it be concretized by the principle of achievement or by the principle of need, and in which relation should both be balanced (Weber 1982, p. 505)? Equity of opportunity leads to inequity of outcome. There are various areas of debate on this: Criticism and counter-criticism of functionalist stratification theory; the controversy of the state of law versus the welfare state; or the discussion and critique of meritocracy (Schwinn 2019, pp. 187 ff.). Thus, neoliberalist tendencies in recent decades have been noted to include a “widespread shift in progressive thinking from equality to meritocracy” (Fraser 2017, p. 139). Attention then focuses on the proportion of women on boards of DAX companies. Their increase is seen as a political success, and less focus is placed on the specific problems of lower-class women. The options regarding meritocratic values determine entire theoretical approaches and research strategies. Although, for example, Randall Collins (1979), criticizing functionalist approaches, develops a theory of the education system that makes this the prey field of sta-

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the criticism of Andreas Reckwitz, a representative of the practice understanding of culture. Reckwitz’s analyses of the middle classes suffer from the fact that they “conflate the socio-structural and the cultural dimension” and thus his diagnoses are already conceptually deficient (Mau 2021, pp. 167 ff., author’s own translation).



tus groups seeking to realize their own advantages through strategic manipulation – “achievement as ideology” – the bulk of empirical sociology of education and the labor market sticks to the normative standard and tries to uncover the obstacles – without ever reaching the goal of closing the meritocratic gap (Schwinn 2019, pp. 187 ff.). This is really the definition of values: to be counterfactually stabilized. Social integration is therefore not identical with a stable state, but is a dynamic process.

Ethnic and gender studies refer to heterogeneous value axioms. A basic question and problem arises: is it possible to prevent the appreciation of diversity from resulting in social inequality? Assimilation theory denies this. To realize equality and justice, the value of diversity must be sacrificed. Supporters of multiculturalism do not see this conflict of values. It is possible, they argue, to retain the ethnic minority culture to a large extent and still create balanced living conditions. Of course, this controversial question must also be pursued empirically and clarified by concrete structural analyses. Here, however, we first have to focus on the value level. Axiological questions should not be mixed and confused with structural ones. This value dilemma also arises in the case of gender. The value of equality and justice has two dimensions: distribution and recognition. Women are economically worse off in the labor market, for example. Remedial strategies are aimed at negating the social meaning of gender as a specific category. It is about deconstructing and rendering this category for institutional participation irrelevant, the “undoing gender.” The strategy of recognition, which is only possible with the emphasis of group specificity, the “doing gender,” is aimed in the opposite direction. “But the bivalent character of gender is the source of a dilemma. Insofar as women suffer at least two analytically distinct kinds of injustice, they necessarily require at least two analytically distinct kinds of remedy: both redistribution and recognition. The two remedies pull in opposite directions, however, and are not easily pursued simultaneously. Whereas the logic of redistribution is to put gender out of business as such, the logic of recognition is to valorize gender specificity. Here, then, is the feminist version of the redistribution–recognition dilemma: how can feminists fight simultaneously to abolish gender differentiation and to valorize gender specificity?” (Fraser 2001, p. 289; see van Dyk 2019). This dilemma of distribution and recognition also arises for the ethnic problem. The “Black lives matter” slogan is associated with two tense demands: recognition of a special group and, at the same time, the expectation that this categorical characteristic should lose its relevance for social participation.

The dilemma leads to different strategies of disadvantaged groups. The identity politics of the homosexual movement is aimed at emphasizing the existing categories of sexual differentiation, queer politics at de-categorization, dissolution of forms of sexual differentiation (Fraser 2001, p. 291). The women’s movement engages in a forced upgrading of a specific group by demanding gendered language. They want to create consciousness and a gender-specific identity. The inclusion discourse with regard to disabled people with its demand for linguistic de-categorization points in the opposite direction: all words and terms that highlight group boundaries and identities are experienced as being discriminatory. “Already the professional designation of a disability is seen as a shameful and hurtful act that humiliates children. Disability is supposed to appear only as part of an extremely broad human diversity,

as one among diverse dimensions of heterogeneity, so that in the end, if possible, no distinction can be made between disabled and non-disabled students” (Ahrbeck 2020, p. 306, author’s own translation). This blurring of language and terminology can also be seen with regard to ethnic minorities, by not naming their skin color.

This tense value structure is associated with different effects and interactions that are not always symmetrical. Cultural devaluation and discrimination, on the one hand, and being economically underprivileged, on the other, complement each other very well, but cultural revaluation and economic redistribution do not necessarily do so. Welfare state distribution can actually generate the cultural devaluation of needy groups of people. “The result is to mark the most disadvantaged class as inherently deficient and insatiable, as always needing more and more. In time such a class can even come to appear privileged, the recipient of special treatment and undeserved largesse. Thus, an approach aimed at redressing injustices of distribution can end up creating injustices of recognition” (Fraser 2001, p. 292).

Of course, these value dilemmas do not unfold automatically; they require actors who take them up and instrumentalize them politically. Arlie Russel Hochschild uses this to explain Donald Trump’s electoral success. In the perception of many Americans, certain parts of the population have benefited unduly from government programs, so much so that they have supposedly passed them by. Trump aggressively served his voters’ need for recognition. “So it was with joyous relief that many heard a Donald Trump who seemed to be wildly omnipotently, magically free of all PC constraint. He generalized about all Muslims, all Mexicans, all women – including that all women menstruate, a fact Trump declared ‘disgusting.’ (He famously described Fox News newscaster Megyn Kelly as ‘bleeding from whatever.’) Trump jovially imitated a disabled journalist by physically shaking his arm in imitation of palsy – all deeply derogatory actions in the eyes of Trump’s detractors but liberating to those who had felt constrained to pretend sympathy. Trump allowed them both to feel like a good moral American and to feel superior to those they considered ‘other’ or beneath them” (Hochschild 2016, pp. 227–228)<sup>17</sup>.

Here, different dimensions of integration are pitted against each other. However, the extreme example of Trump has a more general significance that goes beyond him: social integration in the sense of the understanding of solidarity tends to be of limited reach. This applies not only to the relationship between the privileged and the underprivileged but also to the disadvantaged among themselves. The labor movement did not stand up for the rights of homosexuals, and the gay movement did not take to the streets for the steel and coal workers. The negative situation as a colored, male migrant or white, unemployed male person does not usually trigger solidarity with a gender-related situation of disadvantage – not even, or rather especially, not with one’s own wife, mother, sister, or daughter. And feminists with a pronounced consciousness of discrimination against women are therefore not fundamentally above suspicion of harboring ethnic prejudices or class conceits (Schwinn 2019,

<sup>17</sup> Riesebrodt (2016) sees the perceived lack of recognition or devaluation and fears of relegation as the main reason for the emergence of fundamentalist movements. Lengfeld (2017) explains the voting preferences for the AfD in Germany with cultural deficits regarding recognition and not with distributional deficits of losers of modernization.

pp. 102 ff.). Solidarity is not required for social integration. Rather, it is important to keep the problems and conflicts associated with the several categories and inclusions separate and to grant them specific forums and opportunities for institutionalization. In doing so, conflicts about disintegration are fragmented, and far-reaching cleavages are prevented. Solidarity among all underprivileged social categories, as improbable as it is, would have disruptive and disintegrative consequences.

Another value dilemma can be called the “theorem of dilution.” Durkheim and Parsons gave us the insight that a differentiating society can only be integrated by value generalization. Both believed that the zero-sum game between community and society, and between individual freedom and social integration, could be overridden by a mutual increase of both sides. There is, however, a trade-off between value generalization and the dilution of the willingness for solidarity (Giesing 2002, p. 186; Habermas 2004, pp. 225–226; Stichweh 2004, p. 264; Berger 2004, pp. 258 ff.; van den Daele 2004, pp. 273–274). The more extensively boundaries of integration are drawn, the more lacking in content integration becomes. This dilemma of dilution is played out in philosophy between liberalism and communitarianism (Forst 1996; Alexander 2000). Communitarians criticize the impoverishment of integration owing to liberal and general value principles. In contrast, an attempt is made, in the sense of a “theorem of thickening,” to delineate contexts in which “strong” motives for belonging can be activated. Political sociology even identifies a new cleavage along this dilemma, namely, cosmopolitanism versus communitarianism (De Wilde et al. 2019; Gerhards et al. 2020, p. 243; Schäfer and Zürn 2021). Discussions in political philosophy revolve around the question of how to solve the conflicting relationship between the two theorems, without, of course, offering a convincing solution. Thus, there are already three Frankfurt variants on how to deal with this dilemma: Axel Honneth (2018) tries to do so via recognition, Rainer Forst (1996) via justification, and Matthias Mahlmann (2014) via human dignity, each trying to distinguish his concept as the basic one while criticizing the other two.

The liberal, fundamental principles of freedom and dignity of human beings are regarded as central to the “dilution” of value bases. They are very broad and largely blind with regard to differences. They hardly discriminate, within democratic constitutions, between preferable forms of life, but rather force and encourage a wide variety of lifestyles. Since the 1970s, citizenship rights have increasingly become a reference point for individualistic demands for the recognition of difference (Gosewinkel 2016, pp. 17 ff.). They also protect expressions of ideas and actions that must be tolerated but are hardly conducive to integration. For example, according to the European Court of Human Rights, even the possibility of expressing oneself in an offensive, insulting, shocking, and disturbing manner is covered by freedom of expression, “because one must accept that the unjustifiable, the stupid, or the repulsive can be an expression of human personality that one has to live with if one really wants to respect that human personality. Whatever humans may be made of, they are in any case not fully rational beings with merely benevolent and just intentions for action. On the contrary, human beings often entertain strange ideas about the structure of the world, surprising conceptions of what is right and good, and sometimes self-destructive conceptions of what human flourishing might mean. In such a world, freedom without original control of its substantive use is an ex-

pression of humanity's existential patience with its own weaknesses" (Mahlmann 2014, p. 21, author's own translation; see also Nußberger 2014). Respect for human dignity is a value that cannot be thought of in terms of integration; it belongs to all people, beyond all social ties. It can never be more or less valid with regard to contexts.

## 4 Concluding Remarks

A theory of social integration has to start from the differentiated structure of modern societies. In this way the categorical differentiations in the population, workers, employees, women, ethnic minorities, etc., emerge. To the extent that the individualistic integration program succeeds, these social categories do not develop an independent relevance for social relations and order. Modern societization starts with the individual. It promises everyone a life course defined by institutional participation, independent of ascriptive criteria. This rarely succeeds in a perfect manner, and particular difficulties arise for certain groups of the population. This is the subject of inequality and social structure research, the sociology of education and the labor market, gender research, and the sociology of ethnic minorities. The several inclusions fit together only to a limited extent, and some not at all, such as the structural ruthlessness of economy-related versus family-related roles, which is "solved" via gender inequality; or the selectivity of educational institutions toward certain socio-structural groups such as lower classes and ethnic minorities. This creates a potential to set in motion dynamics of societization and communalization that were traced in the first part across different levels. Processes of social integration and disintegration develop a momentum of their own, which can no longer be simply deduced from the initial problem of impeded or denied institutional inclusions. "The volume of protest is thus not a simple function of the magnitude of the 'evil'." (Parsons 1971, p. 120). It is in these disputes that socially integrative standards are defined and developed.

The individualistic integration program and the levels of societization, categories, relationships, milieus, intermediary organizations, and the political regulatory framework are embedded in and related to the value dimensions that we dealt with in the third section. Values cannot patch up and heal the problems that arise in the structural dimension. They themselves are fragmented and characterized by dilemmas and conflicts. Demands for inclusion and protest against obstacles require justifications through reference to values. Thus, actors are confronted with their ideational tensions and dilemmas. Values and structures have to be put together. "Who puts it together for us? The institutions. The institutions are organizationally concentrated value relations endowed with validity of action in identifiable contexts of action" (Lepsius 2004, p. 272, author's own translation). In the health care system, for example, an institutional balance between equality and income must be found and concretized. Those who can pay more should not also receive better treatment. There is a plethora of legal regulations that offer solutions to the conflicting value references of practical life problems and make them binding. The institutional level would require an additional section that would go beyond the scope of this arti-

cle. Of course, even institutions cannot stop and completely pacify (dis)integrative dynamics.

A sociology of social integration would have to follow specific constellations of structural, cultural, and institutional elements and test them for their theoretical generalizability. Thus, for the right-wing populist tendencies of the working class, it would be necessary to clarify how the economic threat to their situation, the cultural devaluation of their way of life, their demographic shrinkage, and the neglect of their concerns by social democratic and labor parties correspond to their political preferences. Their characteristics have shifted across all levels of societization: categorical changes of the characteristic “worker” through service capitalism; erosion of ways of life shaped by milieus; decoupling tendencies of intermediary interest organizations; change of welfare state conditions. Why don’t they articulate their perception of deficits in class language and in the election of left-wing parties but in a rejection of ethnic minorities and a tendency toward right-wing populism? For England, Evans (2017, p. 218) provides a convincing explanation: “New Labour had become associated with a continuation of the Conservatives’ economic strategy, as well as a progressive social collaboration between white middle-class aspiration and Black and Asian multiculturalism. This left the white working class in postindustrial neighborhoods in a political vacuum working out how to fight for equality when solidarity within the labor movement no longer appeared to be an option. The only solution seemed to be the multicultural bandwagon, learning how to compete with Black, Asian, and white immigrants for resources and cultural equality. This meant that the choice facing white working-class voters was either to aspire to middle-class status or to learn, in the multicultural climate, how to be ethnic too.”<sup>18</sup> We asked the question what role the social sciences play in the public and political discussions and debates about the problem of integration. The researchers of the FGZ dare to take “normative positions on cohesion.” Certainly, we cannot be arbiters, for instance, by awarding ideal states. We do, however, have knowledge about complex constellations of social (dis)integration that provides orientation for intended and unintended effects across different structural levels and in the activation of different value dimensions. It guards against cheap simplifications that are inadequate to the problems at hand. That is quite a lot!

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<sup>18</sup> For similar explanations for the USA see Hochschild (2016) and Inglehart and Norris (2017); for France Eribon (2016). Riesebrodt (2016) has used the examples of the USA and Iran to show how middle classes threatened by decline also become susceptible to religious fundamentalism. The correlation between situational characteristics and cultural patterns of interpretation exhibits great variance. On the discussion of the current middle class, see Kumkar and Schimank (2021), Reckwitz (2021) and Mau (2021); on political representation deficits with regard to the lower class, see Manow (2020) and Schäfer and Zürn (2021).

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