Closed Societies

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Millions of people migrate and flee, driven by war, poverty, environmental or climate disasters and political repression. At the same time, Europe and other regions are sealing themselves off by closing their borders and putting up fences. But even in societies that are supposedly open in terms of their social structure and politics, many women, the less well educated, people in poor health, and members of minority groups such as immigrants, are underrepresented in secure or higher-ranking positions and are shut out of the economic and political elite in Germany. In addition, the existence of economic, social and cultural boundaries of the upper class is demonstrated by professional, finance and leisure domains that are closed off, impenetrable security staff, and 'gated communities'. Many people also perceive the political 'system' to be closed, describing it as disconnected from 'real' needs. At the same time, in Germany, Europe and the rest of the world, many more people than in past decades are expressing themselves publically on the Internet, which for nearly all appears to be equally open. But in this area as well, the monitoring and 'security' of places, people and their data is being consolidated by private parties and from the side of the state. On the one hand, the overall suspicion that goes along with this is increasing the fear of openness in public; on the other hand, people are handling their data in an increasingly open and careless way.

Closed societies are not viable. Nor are open ones. Instead, societies, organisations, groups and courses of life are always characterised by an ambivalent state of being simultaneously open and closed. In observation, it is about processes leading to more opening or more closing. And for sociology it is about understanding the causes of opening and closing and their consequences. But over time, medial, economic, political and cultural dynamics on the one hand can be identified that have always opened new spaces in all areas of society in the past and today. On the other hand, a multitude of social closures in precisely these institutional, socio-structural and organisational areas continue to exist, or new closures emerge very quickly in opened spaces.

With the theme 'Closed Societies', the 38th congress of the GSA is focusing on a core are of the self-description of modern societies: They consider themselves for the purposes of critical enlightenment (Kant), Marxism or the rationalisation, differentiation and modernisation theories (from Weber and Durkheim, Parsons and Luhmann to Elias and Beck and multiple modernities such as at Eisenstadt or the postcolonial perspectives) as organisations made by people themselves. This means that modern societies consider themselves as open to design. And yet daily closures are made, and must be made. Par-

tial closure to the outside can serve to institutionalise rights and obligations, generate reliability of expectations, ascertain identity, develop efficiency and quite often also preserve or develop inner openness. Social closing and opening processes take place at all social levels, at the level of individual and collective activity, in small and large groups, in societies and communities, in organisations and systems. In the social constructs of sense and worth as well as in the struggles for recognition, it is always about the relationship between openness and closure. In conditions of scarcity, social closures are also an essential mechanism allowing access to social, economic and cultural opportunities for life, participation under competitive conditions to be controlled, and recognition and privileges to be allocated. In addition, closures are an opportunity to reduce complexity. The more complex the connections and problems, the more complex are often also the processing methods, and the more specialised groups of experts react in a closed manner. In societies, communities and organisation, participating men and women establish themselves via selection and exclusion mechanisms. For example, when a group succeeds in barring other social groups – openly or surreptitiously– from access to the resources of job markets, education and social systems based on a reference to origin or the claim of missing or inferior human capital. The sociological questions and empirical analyses on the causes and effects of social closures and openings are posed against this backdrop; we think only of Weber, Parkin, Collins or Bourdieu as anything but new, but they are respectively specific in space and time and particularly virulent (again) at the moment.

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"If you want to, you can!" An evening programme on German television began in the early 1950s with this call to programmatic action as the title upon the emergence of the social market economy. The material conditions of this normative imperative were favourable in all modern economies: For many people, economic productivity was increasing, economic and social prosperity was on the rise, and broader access was being provided to education and social systems; the cultural experiential space was augmenting, new ways to access information were opening up and social contacts were multiplying. At the same time, social closures continued to exist in many forms, systematically preventing individualisation and formative participation. Liberalisation and inclusion processes often and quickly come up against distancing and exclusion processes, as sociology always determines in empirical terms. 1. Firstly, this may be a case of manifest demarcation politics, such as when professions attempt to isolate themselves from the competition of other professional groups, the prosperity of groups and societies is guarded and protected, or when insurances and clubs create an inexpensive revenue/expenditure ratio by implementing strict membership rules, thereby ensuring the privileged status of a few. Organised groups, communities and societies always try to maximise and monopolise their advantages by limiting social rights or economic favours and opportunities to a closed circle of people. 2. Secondly, more frequently occurring are

institutionalised, closures that have become the norm and therefore culturally hidden. These are clearly much less challenged. These closures in everyday life are commonly perceived as predetermined conditions, as if they could no longer be available at all. This is the case with health, old age and gender norms, definitions of citizenship and nationality, qualifications for receiving social security benefits, division of labour or professional stages, in which rights and obligations and social dependence hierarchies are likewise determined.

If we take a look at the societal developments, we will observe that, as with the term 'globalisation', which is has been much used in political and socio-scientific discussions since the 1980s, the introduction of various opening and liberalisation processes was connected both among the nation states as well as within them. Globalisation was and is – at least additionally – understood as a liberating opening, as a triumph over growth-limiting regulations, planned economic ordinances, and pressure to achieve cultural conformity and normality. With the formation of transnational economic and social spaces and a broad differentiation of the economic and social world divorced from territory and geography and functioning at an accelerated pace, new forms of international governance and political control which were no longer attached to a nation state appeared to become reality. Sociological diagnoses of the education of a 'world society', the observation of unstoppable transnational socialisation and communisation processes and the dominance of multinational forms of business with global supply chains seemed to indicate a viable socio-structural foundation for a new model of order at all levels of society. In the integration of Europe, these developments, as a 'post-national constellation' with a high emancipatory potential, took on what was at first glance a stable institutional form in which an opening up to differences materialised as a guiding principle. But this new openness soon proved to be just one side of the coin, as globalisation and transnationalisation constituted an asymmetrical dictate at the same time. Openings and liberalisations as part of the policy of international organisations such as the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO were often perceived as an imposition. In many places in the world, the living conditions of people are characterised by (sometimes extreme) scarcity; at the same time, and in conjunction with this, entire regions close themselves off economically – for example, by imposing import restrictions. In this way, protectionism (closure) prevents developments (openness) in the excluded regions. Such instances of unequal integration sometimes trigger social protests and lead to the mobilisation of a global democratisation movement that calls for the right to participate in the formation of their society. Looking at these processes, the least that can be said is that truly open and integrated societies require a much greater social, political and cultural understanding than that which has been mobilised and implemented for them thus far.

From the perspective of social and institutional structures throughout the course of life, institutionally anchored access norms and dealings in organisations, especially in the education, professional and job system, are particularly relevant to social closures. In

various ways, different social backgrounds translate into unequal opportunities to participate, whether they are educational, job or income opportunities. In organisations with their goals, programs and membership rules, social closures can be well observed, such as when we witness the internal struggle for exclusive influential power within organisations, involving corruption, etc. (as is currently the case with FIFA). Or if we look at the extensive espionage activities (currently the NSA) or complex approval and decision processes (as is currently the case with the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership TTIP), which will neither make information openly accessible nor be open to discussion. The ambivalence of openness and closure is also apparent here. Therefore, when organisations try to close themselves off from protest groups and populism as the guardians of freedom, and in doing so cause open societies to become weaker, where they are in any case weak, they are constantly negotiating the common good based on a solid argument.

In the collaboration between people and organisations, institutions develop as closure. As such, socialisation and communisation processes and the conveyed appropriation of societal and organisational norms within the corresponding structures become stable. In addition, communisation processes also always necessarily involve openings, for example as a subjective, praxeological, even bodily obstinacy or as a creative, active appropriation of norms. At the subjective, biographical level, the simultaneousness of openness and closure can therefore also be understood. Moreover, and in connection with this, the opening of institutionalised closures can conversely be observed, if for example non-hegemonial practices become legal and institutional openings, such as with the equality of same-sex partnerships.

At all of these levels – globalised world society, transnational spaces, nations, organisations, groups, biographies – and in social, economic and cultural domains, disputes occur that not only but nevertheless revolve essentially around the degree of openness and closure in the given context. The analysis of opening and closing processes, their institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation, the struggle for their interpretation and evaluation, and the consequences in terms of motivation, the capacity for innovation, disappointment or protest, etc., have always been key sociological concerns. The fundamental questions concerning social closures and unequal allocations are of great importance for societies to develop in one direction or the other and are currently coming more strongly into the focus of social science. This concerns the drifting apart of prosperity levels and political involvement between societies, yet on the other hand also the spreading of the allocation of accesses to prosperity and the right to voice oneself within societies. Ultimately, social participation opportunities, even in purportedly open societies, still strongly depend on economic structural, social and ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental conditions, etc.

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The theme of the 38th congress of the German Sociological Association has been conceived in light of the current social dynamics and with awareness of the internal plurality of the subject. It is part of the self-conception of sociology to understand the causes of social closures and their mechanism of action for social development processes and individual life courses, to reveal contexts and define repercussions in order to provide actors with a reflexive knowledge about actions and the consequences of actions for the decisions they need to make. Given the cross-system change processes, sociology, which has its origins in the need to analyse increasingly dynamic and complex societies, is particularly qualified for that.

We would be pleased to have you contribute your theoretical, thematic and methodological perspectives to the debates at the congress. We hope there will be lively discussions of the results of empirical studies and theoretical positioning, and not the least, also to be able to provide those who implement sociological knowledge with a sufficient understanding of the causes and effects of opening or closing societies and communities.