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Minorities and Majorities, Marginality and Centrality

An Introduction

The volume you hold in your hands (or have opened on your screen) is a result of the editors' observations and perhaps initially also only of the assumption of a current shift in societal understandings of majorities and minorities. Groups we had so far thought of as part of the majority, as part of what in German is labelled the *Mehrheitsgesellschaft*, have recently positioned themselves as threatened minorities to claim rights. We are well aware that the *we* of the observer's position is of special importance in such a statement and that such statements are fundamentally bound to one's own affiliations. This is certainly also true for William Davies, whom we cite here as an example, because he makes similar observations quite accurately and rightly refers to debates about recognition: "The struggle for recognition has turned into an arms race, in which majority cultural identities deploy the language of minority rights in their defence. In contexts such as Brexit, liberals have also engaged in demands for identity recognition, with street protests, flags and claims of cultural marginalization." (Davies 2021: 85)

Societal liberalisation, an increasing equality and successful politics of recognition of certain minority groups have led to a situation in which it seems much more difficult to determine who belongs to the *Mehrheitsgesellschaft* – and thus is located at the metaphorical centre of society – and who is not. To make it clear: it has never been easy to distinguish between majorities and minorities. It only seemed easier for two reasons: first, the predominance of white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able-bodied individuals was not questioned as widely, and they were often seen as representing the broader or even whole society. Second, reducing individuals to only one group identity made the categorisation into minority and majority seem more obvious before. Only preferring one categorisation over another

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makes it possible to count and to determine numbers which are transparent indicators of majority and minority belonging. We can, for example, clearly say that when only 287.933 inhabitants of Finland were Swedish speakers in 2021 while 4.800.243 were Finnish speakers, the Swedish speakers formed a minority group (see Statistikcentralen 2022). We also know that most of these 287.933 individuals identified as either men or women and by that group categorisation were neither a majority nor a minority in the Finnish context. Furthermore, we can assume that most of them identified as Finns, which made them a self-evident part of the *Mehrheitsgesellschaft* in Finland. But even the language question is complicated by political categorisations: to start with, who is counted as a Swedish speaker and why? For example, the statistics do not take bilingual individuals into account. Furthermore, Swedish – regardless of its actual low number of speakers – is not officially considered a minority language in Finland. It is one of the two national languages by law (see Institutet för de inhemska språken n.d.).

It is the pluralisation of heterogeneous societies that calls for a shift in the gaze from minority/majority towards marginality/centrality or even to marginalisation/centralisation. Terms like *majority*, *minority*, or especially the *Mehrheitsgesellschaft*, are powerful concepts that can be used to assert and to enforce privileges and rights. The democratic logic of majority voting systems supports the kinds of claims which lend rights to majorities and positions them in the centre. This becomes clear in the following examples: the majority of the population in Germany supports the introduction of a speed limit on the motorways. Then politics should consider the introduction of a speed limit, shouldn't it? If the majority of a population supports the idea that a certain religion should be privileged over others, should politics consider privileging that religion? While democratic rule is by far the most advantageous political system for minorities as the protection of minority rights is seen as one cornerstone of liberal democracy, this logic also leads to contradictory frictions within democratic societies. Thus, the importance of minority rights in democracy also makes it possible to claim rights by asserting minority status for one's own group.

A shift from minority/majority towards marginality/centrality might thus disentangle the idea of democratic majorities from questions of justice and equality. Of course, marginality/centrality are always situationally bound; they are not understood by us as stable localities. It is precisely for this reason that we believe this shift will support a more nuanced perspective on fragile, multiple, and partial belongings of individuals to groups as it suggests less of a binary categorisation. Minorities and majorities are seen as distinct entities while marginality and centrality form a spectrum. Thus, the latter categorisations cannot be quantified as easily. Quantifications carry an aura of truth and are thus much more difficult

to question. A shift from minority/majority towards marginalisation/centralisation, furthermore, emphasises the importance of the processes by which belonging to a majority or to a minority is negotiated and thus reflects the instability of categorisations and belongings.

One of the goals of our cooperation, which brings together the expertise in minority research from Åbo Akademi University with the innovative interdisciplinary work on contradiction in the framework of *Contradiction Studies* at the University of Bremen as well as the research network *Language and Power* at Stockholm University, the research centre at the University of Warsaw on intercultural pragmatics and interdisciplinary studies, and a research focus on diversity studies at the TU Dresden, is to foster interdisciplinary discussions of these concepts and thereby to further an understanding of marginalising and centralising discourses and processes. As many of us come from linguistics, the role of language – the discursive and symbolic arenas – are of special interest to us and we believe that especially naming, i.e., linguistically categorising a group or a phenomenon, is part of giving it an existence in the social world. Nevertheless, we also consider the materiality of bodies and the materialisations of discursive categorisations. We are interested in the (strategic) use of a metaphorical spatial order of society – across national borders and throughout history: who has been imagined as being at the centre as well as at the margins? On what grounds? How is this displayed in the way groups in societies represent themselves? What consequences does this have for individuals' and groups' influence in society as well as for the allocation of rights, assets, and resources?

To even begin to ask these questions, analysing them empirically and in detail, as well as theorising them can also shed light on current discussions on identity politics. Is identity politics about showing that one's own group is the marginalised group that needs to be compensated for past and present injustices? Or is it about using one's own group as an example to show the effects of marginalising discourses and to oppose these kinds of processes in general? Or might it be both? Historically speaking, the second option seems to be more accurate. The first use, or one of the first, of the term *identity politics* comes from the 1977 *Combahee River Collective Statement* in which the authors write:

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough. (Combahee River Collective 2017: 19)

Starting from their own multiple or intersectional oppression (see also Crenshaw 1989), these women asked to be recognised as human and as equals. They speak of *recognition* here, possibly forming one of the starting points of something that Nancy Fraser (2000: 109), with reference to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Charles Taylor, has discussed as the *politics of recognition*. She warns against a politics of recognition replacing struggles for redistribution, but the *Combahee River Collective Statement* resonates well with Fraser's call for a status model instead of an identity model of recognition that would serve to avoid replacing redistribution:

I shall consequently propose an alternative approach: that of treating recognition as a question of social status. From this perspective, what requires recognition is not group-specific identity but the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction. Misrecognition, accordingly, does not mean the depreciation and deformation of group identity, but social subordination—in the sense of being prevented from participating as a peer in social life. To redress this injustice still requires a politics of recognition, but in the 'status model' this is no longer reduced to a question of identity: rather, it means a politics aimed at overcoming subordination by establishing the misrecognized party as a full member of society, capable of participating on a par with the rest. (Fraser 2000: 113)

Research on marginalising and centralising discourses, which is correspondingly dynamic, will enable us to understand if claims for recognition are aimed at overcoming subordination and what use they make of certain markers of group belonging. The larger entities within which marginalising and centralising discourses and processes are thought to take place are essential for an understanding of these discourses and processes. In the German word the *Mehrheitsgesellschaft* the larger entity is explicitly named: marginalising and centralising metaphorical ordering takes place within *society*. But what is the extend of *society*? What categorises this meta-group?

In this volume we focus on two categorisations – nationality and religion – which, often quite unnoticed, make up the context of the metaphorical spatial order, the meta-group within which individuals and groups are ordered according to race, class, gender, sexuality and ability. What we call *society* can be the nation state or it can be a religious community. Thus, we have chosen here to focus on marginality and centrality with respect to national and religious belonging. Nationality and religion are two markers of belonging with a very long and entangled history which have often been used to normalise metaphorical spatial orders. Protestant Christianity has, for example, been seen as making up the core of the Nordic nation states, thus legitimising the exclusion of individuals and groups from other religious traditions. At the same time, religions – also Protestant Christianity – were and are seen as inherently transnational.

Part of what the authors of the contributions to this volume do is to establish which understandings of nationality and religion exist and have existed in different historical and regional contexts. The authors explore similarities and differences between mechanisms of inclusion into and exclusion from, as well as centralisation and marginalisation within national and religious communities. How did these concepts get into conflict, contradict each other and also align? How did they intersect with other concepts? Here, the authors examine the interdependencies between these categorisations as well as their interdependency with other categories such as race, gender, and class. These processes of marginalisation and centralisation are often contradictory in character. We identify and describe these contradictions and ask if they are representative of inclusive and exclusive discourses.

The volume is structured into three parts. Part I *Marginalising and Centralising Discursive Practices* focuses on nationality (and related concepts such as race, peoples, ethnicity) and religion as mutually reinforcing centralisations. In the first contribution, historian Gábor Egry analyses the marginalised within two rival nation states as the most authentic and thus central part of the discursive construction of group belonging in his study on Székely and Moji in and between Hungary and Romania. Literary scholar Svante Lindberg shows that, in Prussia, the emergence of the German “nation” as Protestant against a rival Catholic French nation enabled a contradictory central-marginal positioning of exiled French Protestants in this context. In the last contribution of this part, disciplinarily located between linguistics, history, and religious studies, Hanna Acke uses the example of Swedish Protestant missions in Congo and China to point to a centralising effect that was achieved when Sweden as a marginalised nation state within Europe was inscribed and anchored in hegemonic European discourses through Christian universalist belonging and the marginalisation of other religions.

The second part has *Intersections of National and Religious Belonging* as a theme. Both Esther Jahns, a linguist, and Mercédesz Czimbalmos, a scholar of religion, discuss centrality and marginality within religious minority communities, the Jewish communities in Berlin and Helsinki, respectively. The metaphorical space within these rather different religious communities is partly ordered by national belongings and specific national groups seen as “original” maintain a central position despite their numerical minority position. Political scientist Maya Hadar points to contradictory and surprising effects when belonging to a nation state is measured quantitatively. Using Israel as an example, she shows how support for one’s own nation state rises in case of violent conflicts regardless of religious belongings that might question this affiliation. All three contributions take as a starting point how the collapse of the Soviet Union as a political event

has changed the discursive landscape of marginalisation. The final contribution, by linguist Herbert Rostand Ngouo, looks at the role and the use of religion in social media debates in the context of a violent struggle about national belonging when analysing the Anglophone separatist movement in Cameroon.

The third and final part of the book is dedicated to the topic of *Contradictory Operations of Marginalisation and Centralisation*. Linguist Christopher M. Schmidt asks whether the members of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland marginalise their language and themselves in a contradictory way through their linguistic behaviour as well as their metalinguistic statements. Diana Hitzke, a scholar of literature, looks at contradictory positionings of a national minority in society through literature, using the case study of Sorbs in Germany. The last chapter, on Jewish characters in Danish literature from the nineteenth century, is also written by a literary scholar. Katharina Bock describes the contradictions that emerge when individuals seek to move through the metaphorical spatial order from the margins towards the centre.

We return here to the research foci of our own institutions. Using the example of *Contradiction Studies* (Warnke/Hornidge/Schattenberg 2021; Lossau/Schmidt-Brücken/Warnke 2019a, b; Warnke/Acke 2018; Junker/Warnke 2016), we would like to conclude by pointing out that empirical individual studies make an important contribution to the critique of models of majority and minority, and that a dynamic view of the unstable relation between centrality and marginality is empirically much more appropriate. However, we have to bear in mind that this should also be associated with a questioning of unambiguous affiliation. In case of a distinct because measurable, mapping of belonging, attention should also be paid to grey areas. These grey areas are characterised not least by tensions and contradictions. Privileges from one affiliation can at the same time be counteracted by a lack of privileges from other affiliations; the renunciation of unambiguity can clearly stand in the way of coherent perceptions of one's own positionality. Plural and heterogeneous societies produce spaces of contradiction that cannot simply be resolved and should even best be left unresolved. In other words, diversity is about contradictory belongings. This is where the actual resistance of liberal democracy to authoritative forms of questioning polyphony comes to the fore. Contradictions arising from multipositionality should be endured in order to be able to live well in complex dynamics of centrality and marginality.

And here, language comes into the picture once again: the tendency of speech to unify the world lexically or propositionally, or at least to understand language in this way, stands in the way of an acceptance of the contradictory. It is not the unambiguous naming of identities that makes contradictions livable, but their dynamisation in a society whose members perceive themselves as

dynamically positioned in a mesh of centrality and marginality and thereby not least exercise their political, and that also means discursive, rights to recognition.

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