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Reconceiving social exclusion

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Creating and sharing knowledge to help end poverty

Abstract

Several ambiguities in the social exclusion literature – in both the fields of social policy and development studies – fuel the common criticism that the concept is redundant with respect to already existing poverty approaches, particularly more multidimensional and processual approaches, such as relative or capability poverty. In order to resolve these ambiguities and to derive value-added from the concept, social exclusion needs to be reconceptualised in a way that decisively opts for a processual definition, without reference to norms and/or poverty. Accordingly, a working definition of social exclusion is proposed as structural, institutional or agentive processes of repulsion or obstruction. This definition gives attention to processes occurring vertically throughout social hierarchies and opens up applications of the social exclusion approach to analyses of stratification, segregation and subordination in development studies, especially within contexts of high or rising inequality. Three strengths and applications include situations where exclusions lead to stratifying or impoverishing trajectories without any short-term poverty outcomes; where upward mobility of poor people is hindered by exclusions occurring among the non-poor; and situations of inequality-induced conflict.

Keywords: social exclusion, poverty, polarisation, stratification, conflict

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1. Introduction

A fundamental criticism of the concept of social exclusion, as it is commonly treated in most of the social policy or development studies literatures, is that it is synonymous with poverty in one way or another. This leads to the charge – as made by Amartya Sen (2000) – that the concept is essentially redundant, perhaps semantically useful, but already implicit within existing approaches to studying poverty, especially the capability approach that already deals with issues of relationality, for instance. Social exclusion can therefore be seen as an adjunct to this and other poverty approaches, describing various contextualised social causes and/or consequences of poverty, albeit with an extra emphasis on coercion and discrimination than is usually made in the more liberal strands of the poverty studies literature. Following early debates in the 1990s about the usefulness of the concept of social exclusion in development studies, the literature seems to have settled with this compromise. Research agendas have since moved on.

The criticism of redundancy is valid insofar as we accept the standard ways of defining and operationalising social exclusion. However, it is invalid insofar as we can identify situations where exclusions do not overlap with poverty, however measured, or where exclusions worsen with movements out of poverty. For instance, strong exclusionary pressures often occur alongside development among relatively non-poor and/or upwardly-mobile people. Examples include international migrants to the US or Europe, whose levels of education and/or financial means are often considerably higher than the average in their sources of emigration – and sometimes even higher than many residents in their destinations of immigration – but who often face a variety of subordinating obstacles as they integrate into the labour markets of their host countries, with outcomes that might not necessarily result in poverty. Other examples include ethnic minority high school and university graduates – such as those I studied in the Tibetan areas of Western China (see Fischer 2009) – who come from families with the means to finance their education, but who struggle to find appropriate employment due to cultural and linguistic biases operating in labour markets. Both examples are not necessarily reflected by capability or relative poverty, or even inequality.

In this respect, various poverty approaches are only capable of reflecting exclusions operating at the bottom of a social hierarchy, such as distance from (and, by inference, inability to access) social or economic norms. They do not capture exclusionary dynamics operating higher up in a social hierarchy among non-poor people, even though these are crucial for understanding processes of social stratification and related social processes such as marginalisation, disadvantage, discrimination and conflict, all of which can occur in the absence of poverty. The social exclusion approach can potentially provide additional analytical insight, although only if it is differentiated from poverty. If we are to salvage social exclusion as an analytical approach in its own right, we must jettison the cargo of poverty that is associated with the term.

This forces us to reconsider the conceptual groundwork of the social exclusion approach and to break from standard applications in the literature. Accordingly, an alternative working definition of social exclusion is here proposed as: structural, institutional or agentive processes of repulsion or obstruction. This definition integrates two insights. First, it is not grounded with a reference to norms. The definition is thereby not dependent on poverty, allowing for a conceptualisation of processes that occur vertically across social hierarchies regardless of position, rather than merely the exclusions that occur horizontally

at the bottom of a social hierarchy. Second, it stipulates that social exclusion is a process, in the sense that it does not refer to a condition of being excluded in an absolute sense, but that certain processes affecting a person's condition are exclusionary, in combination with others that might be inclusionary or neutral. This incorporates the often-noted insight (or even criticism) that exclusion is usually predicated on patterns of inclusion, or vice versa.[1]

This reconceptualisation adds value to poverty approaches by opening up much more potent applications of the social exclusion approach to analyses of stratification, segregation and subordination, especially within contexts of high or rising inequality. These applications include at least three obvious strong points. These include situations where exclusions lead to stratifying and potentially impoverishing trajectories without any obvious short-term poverty outcomes; situations where exclusions among non-poor social strata help to clarify obstacles faced by poor people attempting to enter these strata, which is particularly important when poverty reduction strategies are predicated on upward mobility (such as education); and situations of inequality-induced conflict. Notably, the last point offers an important corrective to the common implicit tendency to blame inequality-induced conflict on the poor.

The case for this reconceptualisation is made in four sections. Section 2 opens with a critical review of the social exclusion literature, in order to clarify the ambiguities in standard approaches to the concept. Section 3 then offers several perspectives on how and why social exclusion should be differentiated from poverty. Section 4 elaborates on the working definition of social exclusion mentioned above. Section 5 elaborates on the strengths and possible applications of this reconceived social exclusion approach, while the conclusion offers some final reflections on methodological implications.

2. Ambiguities of social exclusion

There are three main problems in the literature on social exclusion since the early 1990s that result in ambiguities. One is that most authors invariably operationalise social exclusion as a static description of outcomes, even though most also agree that the strength of the concept lies in the attention it brings to dynamic processes. This leads to a further propensity to treat the concept as a type of poverty, despite the fact that it is often recognised that exclusion can occur in the absence of poverty. Or, in an attempt to differentiate exclusion from poverty, some authors focus on identity discrimination, thereby losing much of the structuralist and institutionalist themes that originally inspired the concept. Closely related to this last point, the third problem derives from the ambiguous use of the terms "relative" and "relational".

2.1 Processes and states

The concept of social exclusion was officially launched into development studies discourse in 1993, when the International Institute of Labour Studies (IILS) of the International Labour Organization (ILO) launched a research project on social exclusion with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The project was intended to contribute to the World Summit for Social Development in 1995 and to explore ways in which analyses of exclusion could make anti-poverty strategies more effective (Rodgers et al., 1995, p. vi). A series of publications on social exclusion was commissioned by the IILS,

[1] For instance, see the poignant criticism of the social exclusion approach along these lines by Du Toit (2004) and the subsequent work on 'adverse incorporation and social exclusion' by Hickey and Du Toit (2007).

with the aim of refashioning the concept from its roots in European social policy discourse to a wider, less Eurocentric global application. Attempts were made to reinterpret the way the concept had been used up to this point, as a term to describe processes of marginalisation and deprivation in rich countries with comprehensive welfare systems and where the vast majority of the workforce is integrated into formal employment, to developing countries where universal welfare provisioning is mostly absent and formal employment usually only covers a small minority of the workforce.

Along these lines, social exclusion came to be defined as "a way of analysing how and why individuals and groups fail to have access to or benefit from the possibilities offered by societies and economies" (Rodgers, 1995, p. 44). On the basis of this working definition, most scholars came to agree that the value-added of the social exclusion approach, over other concepts of poverty or deprivation, is its focus on processes, particularly social processes. For instance, in their summary of a key debate organised by the IILS, Gore and Figueiredo (1997, p. v) argue that the concept focuses attention on processes that lead to disadvantage, impoverishment or ill-being, rather than an identification of excluded individuals or groups in an absolute sense. Similarly, Laderchi et al (2003, p. 260) conclude, from their review of four main ways of defining and measuring poverty, that a key strength of the social exclusion approach, in comparison to the monetary, capability or participatory approaches, is that it 'focuses intrinsically, rather than as an add-on, on the processes and dynamics that allow deprivation to arise and persist'." Most other studies also emphasise this strength.

However, this being said, attempts to operationalise social exclusion invariably end up treating the concept as a state, outcome or condition of being, rather than as a process. This tendency partly derives from efforts to identify who, exactly, are the excluded, and below what threshold they should be considered excluded. The resultant search for an appropriate set of outcome indicators inevitably leads to a static conceptualisation of social exclusion, which is arguably in tension with the affirmed emphasis on process. Moreover, the outcome orientation also tends to lead to a technique-driven influence on the definition of social exclusion. As noted by Levitas (2006, p. 127) with respect to work on social exclusion in the UK and EU, "the necessity of multiple indicators means that it is possible to draw up a provisional set without clarifying underlying definitions and relationships, and without any statement of priorities". In other words, operationalisation effectively becomes a means to avoid definition, to the extent of bordering on tautology. It is therefore no wonder that scholars have had difficulty in determining the applicability of social exclusion outside a European context, given that there is no clarity on the concept even within Europe.

The slip into static notions is comparable to a similar problem inherent in the capability approach. As pointed out by Laderchi et al (2003, p. 255), given that capabilities represent potential outcomes and are therefore difficult to identify empirically, "there is a strong tendency to measure functionings rather than capabilities (i.e. life expectancy, morbidity, literacy, nutrition levels) in both micro and macro assessments". They argue that "this risks losing the key insight of the capability approach, which is its emphasis on freedom," and "makes the approach virtually identical with the [Basic Needs] approach in the measurement of poverty." Social exclusion comes at the problem from a different angle (i.e. the measurement of processes, rather than potentials), although it ironically ends up in more or less the same predicament.

As a result, many definitions of social exclusion lack clarity as to whether social exclusion refers to a state or a process. Most authors treat it as both. Gore and Figueiredo (1997, p. 18) accept that the

dimensions of state and process overlap and they define social exclusion as both a situation or a process of marginalisation or the fragmentation of social relations. They suggest that this is not necessarily contradictory, given that the former offers a way of describing situations of permanent exclusion, whereas the processual focuses on the mechanisms that create or recreate exclusion, and on how poverty is associated with broader structural change. Laderchi et al (2003, p. 258) summarise this position by stipulating that "the definition of [social exclusion] typically includes the process of becoming poor as well as some outcomes of deprivation". While this seems a worthy compromise, it is nonetheless one that seeks a solution by grounding social exclusion in an understanding of poverty.

2.2 Social exclusion and poverty

The second problem in the literature is that the concept of social exclusion is usually collapsed into a concept of poverty, either as social deprivations or else as social processes leading to poverty. For instance, in their efforts to resolve how social exclusion should be differentiated from poverty, Gore and Figueiredo (1997, p. 10) argue that the former refers to processes of impoverishment, versus categorisations of "the poor". Similarly, Laderchi et al (2003) explicitly treat social exclusion as one of four poverty approaches. These definitions imply that, even if social exclusion can occur in the absence of poverty, it is mostly in the overlap with poverty that we should direct our attention.

Gore (1995, p. 1-2) nonetheless clarifies that the early French debates of the 1970s and 1980s did not necessarily equate social exclusion with poverty as such, but with processes of social disintegration. The concept only became more closely equated with poverty in the early 1990s after the European Commission defined social exclusion in relation to a certain basic standard of living, among other factors. Referring to this more recent heritage, Levitas (2006, p. 126) mentions the difficulty in distinguishing social exclusion from poverty in the UK context, which is "sometimes masked by references to 'poverty and social exclusion' as an inseparable dyad". Pantazis et al. (2006, p. 8) also point out that the 1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey for the UK proposed impoverishment as one of four dimensions for measuring social exclusion, alongside labour market exclusion, service exclusion and exclusion from social relations. Levitas (2006, p. 130-131) adds that most of the indicators proposed by the EU Social Protection Committee in 2001 relate either to income or to labour-market position, while those that were eventually adopted widen the scope to include deprivations in education, housing and health. Notably, all these attempts at quantification include notions of poverty (income and multidimensional) in their operational definitions.

Following these leads, most authors in the development studies literature define exclusion explicitly or implicitly as poverty or as processes leading to poverty. For instance, Gore and Figueiredo (1997, p. 17-18) summarise the variety of working definitions that were used in the series of country studies commissioned by the IILS in the 1990s, most of which implicitly defined social exclusion as a capability or entitlement failure. The India study defined social exclusion as a denial of the basic welfare rights that provide citizens positive freedoms. The Thailand study defined it as a non-recognition or disrespect for the citizenship rights on which livelihood and living standards depend. The Russia study defined it as material deprivation and infringement of social rights, defined mainly in terms of employment. The Tanzania study defined it as both a state equivalent to relative deprivation and as processes of socially-determined impediments to access resources, social goods or institutions. The Yemen study defined it as social segregation, whereby some individuals and groups are not recognised as full and equal members of society. The Peru study defined it in terms of the inability to participate in aspects of social life

considered important. Similar to these definitions summarised by Gore and Figueiredo (1997), Figueroa et al. (1996: 201) deemed that its analytical value comes from its elucidation of social processes which contribute to social inequality. In other words, all of these country studies essentially treat social exclusion as contextually-defined forms of relative or capability poverty.

The subsequent evolution of the concept in the development studies literature has continued along similar lines. In a workshop convened by the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex in 1997, de Haan thought that, despite its overlap with the concept of poverty, the concept of social exclusion could be useful because it focused on processes and because it was multidimensional in nature. However, he was doubtful whether these aspects made it different from poverty, particularly in light of recent debates on poverty that were concerned with similar types of issues. The distinction is only clear if one adopts a narrow view of poverty (cited in O'Brien et al, 1997: 3). Saith (2001, p. 14) makes a similar point and, in order to avoid a relabeling of poverty studies, she emphasises the processual theme of social exclusion. Bhalla and Lapeyre (1997, p. 413) argue that "social exclusion overlaps with poverty broadly defined, but goes beyond it by explicitly embracing the relational as well as distributional aspects of poverty". However, they then contradict themselves by arguing that the "broad concept of poverty… covers both the economic (distributional) and social (relational) aspects of deprivation" (ibid, p. 417). Their subsequent operationalisation of social exclusion essentially focuses on depth of poverty and income inequality measures, and various indicators that essentially amount to a measurement of various functionings (ibid, p. 425-426). In all these examples, the authors struggle to break free from existing poverty approaches, but ultimately return to the fold.

As noted in the introduction, this poses a dilemma in the application of social exclusion given that exclusion often occurs among the non-poor, whether poverty is defined in absolute, relative or capability terms. Some attempts have been made to avoid explicitly associating social exclusion with poverty, although these nonetheless tend to use an idea of norms to situate exclusion within a social context. For instance, Beall and Piron (2005, p. 9) offer a working definition of social exclusion as "a process and a state [deriving from exclusionary relationships based on power] that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights". Stewart et al (2006, p. 4) define it as a concept "used to describe a group, or groups, of people who are excluded from the normal activities of their society, in multiple ways". Both these definitions are probably influenced by the EU definition of social exclusion in the mid-1990s as a "process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live" (cited in Laderchi et al, 2003, p. 257). Besides the fact that these various renderings are tautological, in that they define exclusion as exclusion, the references to "full participation" or "normal activities" place the definitions into a metre of relative deprivation without explicitly stating this as such.

This point is made by several authors. Levitas (2006, p. 126) notes that even the aspects of social exclusion dealing with social relations, and which are deemed to be among its most important contributions, such as exclusion from social participation, were part of the earlier conceptualisation of relative deprivation by Townsend (1979). Room (1999, p. 167-169) also notes that the multidimensional, dynamic and community aspects often promoted as the novelties of the social exclusion approach all existed in the "classic" studies on poverty. He suggests that the more original element of social exclusion is found in its emphasis on relational issues (inadequate social participation, lack of social integration and lack of power), versus the primary emphasis of poverty on distributional issues. As noted above, Bhalla and Lapeyre (1997, p. 417) contend with his distinction, made previously in Room (1995), arguing that

the broad concept of poverty (i.e. relative and capability) covers both the distributional and relational aspects of deprivation.

Amartya Sen (2000) makes exactly this point in his own rendition of social exclusion. He argues that, by way of relationality, social exclusion constitutively describes one aspect of capability deprivation and instrumentally causes further diverse capability failures (p. 5). The key, then, is "to ask whether a relational deprivation has been responsible for a particular case of [deprivation]" (ibid, p. 9-10). He thereby converts social exclusion into a negative expression of his thesis in *Development as Freedom* (1999): the relational features of social exclusion "enrich the broad approach of seeing poverty as the lack of freedom to do certain valuable things" (op cit, p. 5). He notes that this emphasis is nothing new, and refers back to Adam Smith's concern with "deprivation in the form of exclusion from social interaction, such as appearing in public freely, or – more generally – taking part in the life of the community" (ibid, p. 7). However, in reducing the social exclusion approach in this way, Sen argues that its helpfulness does not lie in its conceptual newness (ibid, p. 8). Rather, the "perspective of social exclusion reinforces – rather than competes with – the understanding of poverty as capability deprivation" (p.46). In other words, he effectively relegates the concept of social exclusion to an adjunct position within his own theoretical project and, in so doing, offers no guidance on how to differentiate social exclusion from poverty.

Some attempts have been made to refine the concept of social exclusion in terms of rights or choice. For instance, Schulte (2002) treats social exclusion as the denial of a whole range of rights underpinned by the concept of social citizenship. However, once he stipulates the meaning of social citizenship rights as relative to the norms of a society, his approach is essentially similar to the capability approach. Similarly, choice was emphasised in a working definition of social exclusion by scholars at the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE), as presented in Burchardt et al (2002, pp. 30 and 32). Again, it is not clear how their emphasis on lack of choice is not simply a restatement of Sen's position on capability failure. In any case, Levitas (2006, p. 134) notes that, once operationalised, this CASE approach sidesteps the issue of choice for pragmatic reasons. Much like the predicament of the capability approach, in moving from conception to measurement, ideas of potential or choice are reduced to that of functionings.

Kabeer (2006) makes a notable attempt to differentiate social exclusion from poverty by treating social exclusion as processes of disadvantage, although she does this through the lens of identity discrimination, by looking at social exclusion as a group or collective – rather than individual – phenomenon. In this sense, Kabeer frames the 'social' of social exclusion in terms of social groups and identities – similar to certain strands of the IILS publications ten years previously – rather than the social aspects of deprivation as usually referred to in most of the UK or EU literature, which can operate at the individual level and without the mediation of identity-based discrimination. While her approach makes sense within the South Asian context, at least in terms of understanding one aspect of disadvantage, it is hardly encompassing of the broader dimensions of exclusion, particularly in terms of how the concept came to be used in the 1980s with reference to the erosion of the welfare state in a context of economic restructuring. Moreover, her treatment of disadvantage and social exclusion is mostly framed as the identity-based dynamics of poverty.

Some have also suggested reversing the conceptual hierarchy between poverty and social exclusion, whereby poverty becomes one part of social exclusion, rather than the other way around. For instance,

there was one suggestion in the debate summarised in Gore and Figueiredo (1997, pp. 40-41) to treat social exclusion as a risk regime. While the source of this perspective was not identified, it resembles arguments made by Room (1999) that the element of catastrophic discontinuity in relationships with the rest of society due to overlapping degrees of disadvantage and deprivation offers the most essential contribution of social exclusion, in combination with its emphasis on relational elements. This perspective is appealing, although it still ends up treating social exclusion as an outcome occurring horizontally at the bottom of a social hierarchy, essentially augmenting the experience of poverty. Moreover, his distinction is not made through precise definition, but rather through a complex consolidation and integration of five elements, most of which already exist in the classic studies of poverty, as he himself convincingly argues.

2.3 Relativity and relationality

The inconsistent meanings implied by the use of the terms ‘relativity’ and ‘relationality’ constitute a third problem in the literature. Relativity is typically used in two closely related ways: relative poverty (i.e. exclusion relative to social norms) and contextual relativity (i.e. exclusion depends on societal modes of integration). Laderchi et al. (2003, p. 258) draw a close connection between these two meanings, in that norms are determined by context.

The contextual meaning of relativity owes much to the work of Hilary Silver (1995), who elaborates a threefold typology of the multiple meanings of exclusion inspired by the three models of welfare capitalism elaborated by Esping-Anderson (1990). She calls these the solidarity, specialisation and monopoly paradigms. Without going into any detail on these paradigms (in part because their substantive content refers mostly to OECD countries), it suffices to note that Silver avoids defining social exclusion precisely because she sees the ambiguity as offering a window of opportunity through which to view conflicting social science paradigms and political ideologies. “This is because at the heart of the question ‘exclusion from what?’ is a more basic one, the ‘problem of social order’ under conditions of profound social change” (Silver, 1995, p. 61). In this regard, her work has helped to extract the concept of social exclusion out of its specific association with particular European contexts and to theorise it in more generic terms.

Her stance inspired the approach of the IILS, which is understandable given that she was a central player in its initiatives of the 1990s. Thus, Gore (1995, p. 8) argues that “the paradigms of social integration and citizenship and the cultural environment prevailing in a society… structure people’s sense of belonging and membership and consequently the perception of what is exclusion and inclusion in their society.” Atkinson (1998, p. 13-14) also emphasises relativity as one of the three main characteristics of social exclusion, alongside agency and dynamics, referring to the fact that the meaning of exclusion is relative to a particular society. Similarly, Laderchi et al (2003, p. 259) note that definitional problems “are especially great in applying the concept to developing countries because ‘normality’ is particularly difficult to define in multipolar societies, and because there can be a conflict between what is normal and what is desirable.” In general, this sense of relativity is seen as one of the principle strengths of the social exclusion approach.

However, this avoidance of definition runs the risk of rendering the concept into an entirely descriptive template and aborting the analytical project of understanding social exclusion as a causal process in its own right. Moreover, the deference to relativity usually results in an avoidance of the ambiguities between exclusion and poverty, which are not necessarily the result of relativity, but rather of conceptual

imprecision. Indeed, as noted above, the allowance for definitional plurality was so loose in the series of IILS studies that that the concept came to mean just about anything to anyone, so long as it generally referred to some negative sense of multidimensional deprivation or disadvantage.

On a similar note, there is inconsistency in the literature on the exact meaning of the term 'relational' or 'relationality'. As in Room (1999), a relational deprivation need not imply an intentional act of exclusion, but merely a breakdown in social relations due to some deprivation, or else that social isolation leads to other deprivations, such as when lack of social integration leads to poor health. Sen (2000) sometimes implies this meaning in his ritualised references to Adam Smith, as noted above, although he also refers to the term "relational" in the same publication as an intentional act by an excluder towards an excludee. This latter usage is quite common in the development studies literature, such as in Beall and Piron (2005, p. 11). It is actually closer to the term "agency" used by Atkinson (1998). Regardless, we need to question whether social exclusion necessarily requires intention, insofar as impersonal structural dynamics can produce exclusions despite the best of relational intentions, such as in the case of neighbourhood gentrification due to rising house prices. Indeed, an exclusive emphasis of agency tends to diminish the earlier conceptions of social exclusion in the 1970s and 1980s as describing processes of social disintegration related to technological change and economic restructuring. Any attempt to define the concept should therefore engage with these "non-relational" structural dimensions. Moreover, even if we accept "relationality" or "agency" as distinguishing elements of social exclusion, these also play an important role in the capability approach, as noted earlier.

2.4 Is the social exclusion approach redundant?

The dilemmas arising from the ambiguous association of social exclusion with poverty are substantive and not merely semantic. Indeed, ambiguity is a more serious criticism than the charge of Eurocentrism in the application of social exclusion to developing countries. The criticism of Eurocentrism contends that there is little to be gained from applying a concept formulated in rich post-industrial societies to poor countries where, if the same metres of identification were to be used, the majority of the population would be deemed as "excluded".[2] This criticism can be dealt with by loosening the institutional specifications of the concept (as implied by the work of Silver), or by reversing the charge and noting that the intellectual origins of the concept might have derived from the South in any case.[3]

However, the same cannot be said for the ambiguities underlying the social exclusion approach, which apply to both South and North. If the concept is redundant, then the whole project of trying to establish it as more than simply an adjunct way of describing various social aspects of poverty is put into question. Moreover, the often noted scepticism that the concept deflects attention away from poverty and inequality carries some validity and should be taken seriously. Byrne (2005, p. 60) warns that the "babble – no other word is strong enough – by political elites about exclusion can serve as a kind of linguistic trick", on one hand presuming a continued commitment to the values of social democracy, while on the other hand supporting globalisation and neo-liberalism. For similar reasons, Clert (1999, p. 195) warns that the coexistence of different ways of using social exclusion discourses can serve to obscure policy orientations and generate false consensus. Indeed, the typical emphasis of agency and relationality can also lend weight to the tendency within mainstream development policy to focus exclusively on the

[2] This criticism is addressed in detail in Gore et al (1995) and Gore and Figueiredo (1997).
[3] For instance, Gore (1995, p. 4) reminds us that debates about marginalisation were already vigorous in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s.

failures and abuses of domestic policies and domestic elites rather than, for instance, the economic austerities imposed by structural adjustment programmes or by international economic integration.[4]

Moreover, the social exclusion discourse can imply that the solution to exclusion is to intensify inclusion, whereas most cases of poverty in developing countries are better described as arising from the manner by which people are included. This point is emphasised by Du Toit (2004) and Hickey and Du Toit (2007), echoing similar concerns made in the IILS debate summarised in Gore and Figueiredo (1997, p. 41-42) and by Room (1999, pp. 171). In the IILS debate, it was emphasised that adopting social inclusion as a desirable policy goal in situations where poverty is due to the terms of inclusion (i.e. low wage rates and poor working conditions) rather than exclusion (i.e. unemployment), we might simply exacerbate poverty rather than alleviate it, pushing people into situations that are exploitative. Indeed, these people might regard their situation as better when they are "excluded".[5] This discussion prompted two important assertions: processes of exclusion are not independent from processes of inclusion, and vice versa; and processes of exclusion need to be analysed together with modes of incorporation (or modes of social integration).

The ambiguous overlap between social exclusion and poverty also leads to a variety of methodological issues. For instance, if we conceive of social exclusion as a state or outcome, to be measured with thresholds, this ends up compounding many of the conceptual and methodological problems already associated with poverty. Are we to construct an 'exclusion line', based on a multidimensional composite indicator? Are we to construct a typology of descriptive states, i.e., poor and excluded, poor and not excluded, not poor and excluded, and not poor and not-excluded? Many of these operational issues are the focus of contributions in Atkinson and Hills (1998), Hills et al. (2002), and Pantazis et al. (2006), among others. From the perspective argued here, it is sufficient to note that most of these perspectives treat social exclusion as an outcome, which in turn leaves the door open for exclusion to be treated as synonymous with poverty. They thereby tend to add operational rigour to poverty studies, rather than finding a way out of the ambiguous association of social exclusion with poverty.

3. Finding a way out of the ambiguities

Several aspects of social exclusion serve as useful entry points to resolve the ambiguities analysed above. First, reflecting on how exclusion can occur in the absence of poverty provides insight into how exclusion might be differentiated from poverty. Second, several dimensions of relativity that are not typically considered in the literature can help to tease out a more processual understanding of exclusion.

3.1 Is exclusion the same as poverty?

A simple way to break out of the ambiguity deadlock is to examine how social exclusion in many cases is not, or does not lead to, poverty. Given these cases, when exclusion can be associated with poverty, we are dealing with an overlap. However, it would be wrong to then integrate this overlap into the very definition of exclusion, thereby reducing social exclusion to its most restrictive case.

[4] Green (2007, p.27) makes this same point with regard to poverty discourses of the World Bank.
[5] For instance, see Beall (2002) for a study of municipal sweepers in Faisalabad, Pakistan, who used their identity-based social exclusion to secure livelihoods.

Many authors recognise that we can conceive of social exclusion outside poverty. This was mentioned on many occasions in the summary of the IILS debate in Gore and Figueiredo (1997) and in the IDS workshop summarised in O'Brien et al (1997). In both cases, it was recognised that it is possible to be poor and not socially excluded, but also to be socially excluded and not poor, with examples taken from the Indian caste system, or from classic cases of discriminated minority groups specialising in trade and commerce, such as the Chinese in Southeast Asia or the Jews in Europe for many centuries. In OECD countries, Atkinson (1998, p. 9) notes that poverty does not necessarily always go together with social exclusion. Levitas (2006, pp. 123 and 147) points out that, even in the UK, paid work may in some cases limit social "inclusion" or that "economic inactivity" does not, in itself, necessarily lead to exclusion from social relations. Hence, the twain do not always meet.

It is useful to examine further how social exclusion might even intensify with movements out of poverty. Migration in China serves as an intuitive example. The poorest in China today are typically characterised as rural residents whose livelihoods are based exclusively on agriculture and who possess some of the worst capabilities or basic needs in China, such as in education, health or social security. In contrast, processes of exclusion – i.e. restricted access to existing employment or various social services (rather than a lack of employment or services) – are arguably most strongly faced in the migration of rural residents to urban areas through institutionalised systems of residency status (Ch. *hukou*). Although these migrants might be relatively poor in the urban areas (although in many cases they are not),[6] in general they were relatively wealthy in the rural areas before migration, in line with the widely accepted observation in migration studies that migrants, on average, tend to be wealthier, more educated and more entrepreneurial than the norm in their sources of emigration. In contrast, the rural poorest avoid these urban exclusions by virtue of their entrenchment in agriculture. According to this logic, wealthier rural households – which tend to be more integrated into urban employment systems via one or more family members – would be more exposed to exclusion than poorer rural households, and movements out of poverty through the predominant vehicle of migration might intensify rather than alleviate experiences of exclusion among these wealthier households. Similarly, anti-poverty policies oriented towards encouraging urbanisation would tend to aggravate these exclusionary processes. These implications would be difficult to capture through standard income, basic needs, capability, or relative measures of poverty, or even through inequality measures.

This point – that poverty and exclusion are often poorly correlated – is similar to criticisms of the 'feminisation of poverty' made by certain gender scholars. For instance, Jackson (1996) argues that gender is distinct from, and sometimes contradictory to, poverty and class.[7] This is not to say that gender inequity cannot overlap and reinforce poverty, but that gender equity often appears to be inversely related to household income, such as in rural India, where there is considerable evidence that *purdah* norms, the inflation of dowries, and the withdrawal of women from wage work have strengthened as a result of rising prosperity. Jackson makes this point not to suggest that women are better off poor, but that the subordination of women is not caused by poverty and, thus, poverty reduction policies are not necessarily appropriate for tackling gender issues (e.g. see p. 501). This distinction, she contends, is important, given the tendency of development organisations to collapse all forms of disadvantage into

[6] See Hussain (2003, pp. 19-21), who finds lower poverty rates among migrants than among local residents in one third of cities of a 31-city sample in China in 1999.

[7] Note that Jackson (1999) cautions against the integration of gender analysis with social exclusion, although this caution refers to a conception of exclusion as a state and, hence, is similar to the analysis made here.

poverty and because the subordination of women is important in its own right, even when it occurs in the absence of poverty.

However, in recognising this difference, we must also beware of the twist side danger of treating exclusion as synonymous with disadvantage, as signalled by Room (1999, p. 171-72). In the spirit of Jackson, we need to rescue social exclusion from poverty analysis, while at the same time differentiating it from disadvantage. The idea of relativity implicit in a processual meaning of exclusion can help to pry open this puzzle.

3.2 Causal and positional relativity

Two often-overlooked dimensions of relativity help to shed light on the conceptual problems surrounding social exclusion. These can be called ‘causal’ and ‘positional’ relativity. They are to be differentiated from the two meanings of relativity mentioned in the last section, i.e. relative poverty (as per Sen) and contextual relativity (as per Silver).

Causal relativity refers to the fact that there are multiple often contradictory processes at work within any condition or state of being, such that a person might face both exclusionary and inclusionary processes at the same time. The observation from the IILS debate summarised in the last section – that processes of exclusion are not independent from processes of inclusion, and vice versa – essentially points to this form of relativity without naming it as such. For instance, the inclusion of landless peasants into poorly paid and exploitative wage labour might be predicated on their exclusion from land assets. An excellent example is also found in the work of Roulleau-Berger (1999), who describes how young minority people in France pass several times a day and on a daily basis through situations that could be described as either ‘excluded’ or ‘included’. Hence, the identification of exclusion in these situations depends on which causal process we decide to focus on.

This is not simply another perspective on the multidimensionality of poverty. The conception of poverty as a state of being is more or less straightforward, even if its measurement is not (i.e. lack of means in relation to a relative or absolute metre, however measured). The definition of exclusion as a state is more ambiguous, because both exclusionary and inclusionary processes are usually involved within any state or outcome; the ‘excluded’ are almost always ‘included’ in a variety of ways. To focus on one aspect for the purpose of identification risks missing the simultaneous and dialectical modes of integration and segregation that operate within social processes, the results of which may or may not lead to states of deprivation (unless we tautologically define an exclusion itself as deprivation). Even if we would wish to prioritise one process in order to characterise a person as ‘excluded’, how should we choose between various contradictory processes? In some cases the choice is made obvious by our normative concerns, although in many cases it is not.

Positional relativity refers to the fact that exclusion is relative to a person’s position in a social hierarchy and to the position of others as well, both objectively and subjectively. In other words, a person can be an excludee and an excluder at the same time and will tend to perceive their exclusion (or inclusion) relative

to the social strata immediately surrounding them.[8] This relativity can apply across many dimensions of comparison, such as ethnicity, class, caste, clan, occupations, gender, generation or location. For instance, a man might face forms of exclusion outside a household, while at the same time practising forms of exclusion towards women within the household. Similarly, anti-Muslim activism by Tibetans in Western China presents a classic case of a subordinated minority group practising various forms of exclusion towards another subordinated minority group, partly as a reaction to their own perceptions of exclusion (see Fischer 2005). In this sense, exclusion and inclusion reflect the constant jostling for social position within hierarchical social orderings. This confers with the suggestion made by Room (1999, p. 172) that society can be seen as "…a battleground of different social groups… seeking to maintain and extend their power and influence, in a zero-sum struggle with other groups who they seek to exclude. 'Exclusion' is the result of this struggle... Social exclusion is a normal and integral part of the power dynamics of modern society."[9] Indeed, this approach is useful in thinking about how exclusion can be constantly present for even those living well above a poverty threshold, however defined, including elites who defend privilege or strive to limit competition.

Both meanings of relativity throw a serious wrench into the definition or identification of exclusion, even once the norms of a society have been context-specified. However, they also offer a way out of the ambiguity of social exclusion, by implying that exclusion occurs vertically across a social order, whereas poverty occurs horizontally at the lower end of a social order (even though we might also sometimes talk of certain aspects of deprivation experienced by the rich). In other words, all individuals or groups can perceive or experience an exclusionary process from whatever their position.

This emphasis on differentiating social exclusion from poverty is not simply semantic. Even if the normative reasons for focusing on the poverty-exclusion overlap are compelling, exclusion is an important concern in its own right that should not require an overlap with poverty in order to legitimate our attention, similar to the point made by Jackson (1996) with regard to gender. Moreover, an exclusion that does not necessarily lead to any particular poverty outcome might still have a very powerful effect on various social processes. This is especially the case if exclusion happens at the upper end of the social hierarchy.

The challenge, then, is to differentiate social exclusion from disadvantage rather than from poverty, as mentioned above. Again, a processual lens helps to conceptualise how exclusion and disadvantage interact, and how exclusion may or may not arise from or lead to a disadvantage. Exclusion can create disadvantages (say, by excluding certain people from certain types of education, thereby leading to later disadvantages in labour markets), or else can be reinforced by existing disadvantages (such as when linguistic competency is used as a selection criterion in a multilingual setting dominated by one hegemonic linguistic culture, such as Chinese in China or English in the US). Distinctions between exclusion and discrimination can be made in a similar manner.

[8] This is similar to insights from the well-being literature that one's subjective perception of well-being depends in part on one's position or situation relative to one's immediate surroundings, which serves as a basis of social comparison. See Kingdon and Knight (2007) for a survey of this literature.

[9] This elegant passage nonetheless somewhat contradicts his previous assertion (as discussed in the previous section) that social exclusion should only refer to catastrophic ruptures if it is to be a useful analytical concept.

4. Reconceptualising social exclusion

In order to differentiate social exclusion from poverty, it is important to emphasise both the vertically-occurring and processual aspects of social exclusion in a way that does not rely on notions of poverty or norms, as discussed above. Moreover, an emphasis on process also requires a shift in analytical dimension: we are no longer talking about positions within a hierarchy, but of movements along a hierarchy, regardless of position. This distinction is vital because most of the ambiguities surrounding social exclusion come from considering the concept as a position within a hierarchy (and thus as poverty).

A focus on the dimension of income helps to clarify these points. This is not meant to imply that social exclusion is primarily concerned with income and economic outcomes, but simply that the analytical implications of a processual approach are easier to conceive through this one-dimensional lens. Indeed, this conceptualisation is inspired by the suggestion of Peter Townsend (2002, p. 7) that inequality and poverty correspond to an idea of state, whereas polarisation and exclusion correspond to an idea of process. While Townsend did not elaborate on the implications of a processual approach, the idea of process implies movements over time, whereas the idea of a state implies a moment captured in time.

Table 1: A typology of negative states and processes

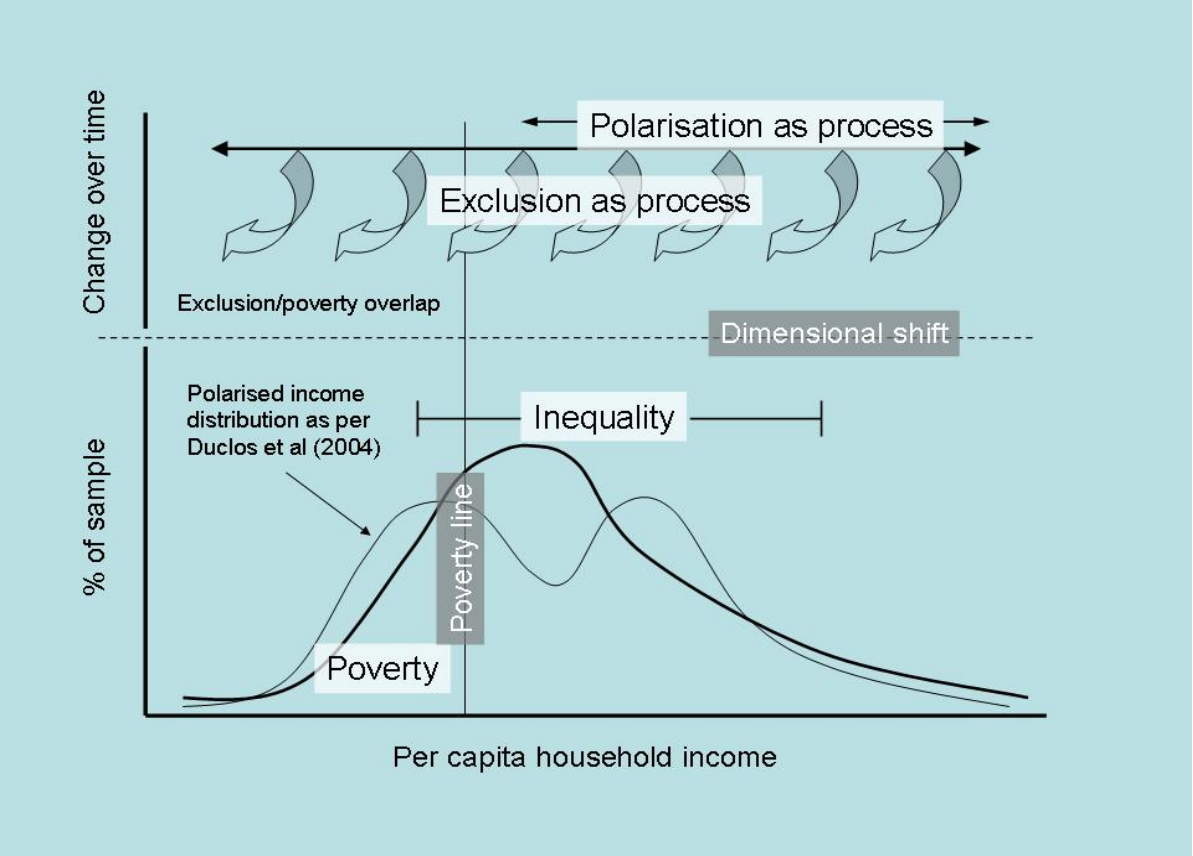
		Distribution	
Analytical dimension		**Whole**	**Part**
	State	Inequality	Poverty
	Process	Polarisation	Social exclusion

These implications are presented in Table 1 above. Inequality as a state describes an entire distribution at one point in time and poverty describes one part of this distribution, also at one point in time (a bottom part, however defined). Polarisation as a process describes increasing inequality within a distribution over time, regardless of a starting position of greater or lesser inequality. Polarisation in this sense refers to change (as is grammatically implied by the suffix '-isation'),[10] rather than a polarised state (i.e. two humps rather than one in a static income distribution).[11] For instance, polarisation can occur from a very equal starting position (e.g. China at the beginning of the reform period or Russia at the collapse of Communism), or else from a very unequal starting position (e.g. rising inequality in most of Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s). Accordingly, exclusion as an (income) process would describe downward pressures faced by one part within this distribution over time, also regardless of the starting position of this part within the distribution. This conceptualisation is illustrated in Figure 1 below, again expressed in terms of income distribution.

[10] This dynamic understanding of polarisation was common in the work of many early development economists, particularly the CEPAL structuralists, such as Raul Prebisch, Osvaldo Sunkel and Celso Furtado.

[11] A static understanding of polarisation predominates in current mainstream economics, such as in Duclos et al. (2004), who define polarisation as a density function to describe income distributions. Their 'polarisation index' is constructed in essentially the same way as a Gini index.

Figure 1: A schematic presentation of polarisation and exclusion as processes



The thicker line in the lower part of Figure 1 above shows a typical household income distribution. The thinner line shows a polarised household income distribution, in the sense used by Duclos et al. (2004). From this income distribution data, a variety of inequality measures can be calculated. The income poverty line could be determined absolutely or relatively. The upper part of the diagram shows the processual dimension corresponding to the static dimension in the lower part. Polarisation represents a stretching out (and flattening) of the distribution, while exclusion represents downward pressures across the distribution. The upper lefthand corner represents where exclusion leads to and overlaps with poverty. This is where most work on social exclusion has been focused.

Following this distinction of analytical dimension, we can see that processes need to be conceived independent of starting positions. In other words, exclusionary processes can be identified vertically throughout a social hierarchy, whereas poverty outcomes occur horizontally at the bottom end of a social hierarchy. The only difference between various poverty approaches is in the way of determining this bottom position. In contrast, social exclusion must be differentiated conceptually from all of these poverty approaches, given that it can occur in the absence of poverty, however poverty is defined. In this sense, exclusion cannot be defined as a capability failure, nor can it be defined as relative deprivation, in the sense that it is possible for the capable and the relatively non-poor to face exclusions. Exclusion can definitely overlap with or lead to poverty, but it is not poverty.

4.1 A working definition of social exclusion

On the basis of the above reasoning, a working definition of social exclusion is proposed as: structural, institutional or agentive processes of repulsion or obstruction. The first part of the definition is drawn from the suggestion by Gore and Figueiredo (1997, p. 27) that structure, institutions and agency constitute the key mechanisms driving exclusion. Consideration of structural and institutional processes also allows for consideration of exclusions that are non-intentional as well as intentional. Indeed, structural processes that repel or obstruct people or groups from certain sections of a society or economy are usually not directly intentional. For instance, this was the predominant connotation used in the European social exclusion literature in the 1980s, with reference to globalisation and economic restructuring.[12]

Similarly, institutional processes might or might not be intentionally exclusionary. 'Institutional' in this sense refers to the formal and informal systems, rules and norms structuring and governing the social order, as per its usage in institutionalist social theory.[13] It corresponds to various institutional modalities that obstruct or expel people from social service provisioning, public employment, or other arenas of social interaction. This meaning comes closest to the original conception of social exclusion by Lenoir (1974). An example of this, as suggested in Gore and Figueiredo (1997, p. 43), includes poorly synchronised changes in education systems and labour markets, which end up compounding multiple disadvantages, due to a mismatch between the skill sets produced by the education system and those demanded by the changing norms of employment in the economy. Thus, even when there is general improvement in both sets of institutions (i.e. improving education levels and increasing wages and/or employment), out-of-synch changes might in fact exacerbate exclusionary processes for certain groups of people. Notably, such institutional disjunctures could be or could appear to be intentionally discriminatory, but they could also be the unintended consequences of other dynamics, particularly in situations where groups are marginalised from political power and thus from the means to attenuate disjunctures.

In contrast to the structural and the institutional, 'agentive' processes refer to intentional forms of exclusion practised by one actor against another, such as identity-based discrimination. This meaning of agency is the same as that elaborated by Atkinson (1998), or that some authors imply by the term 'relational', as discussed previously. As discussed in the first section, much of the development studies literature on social exclusion has focused on this meaning of exclusion.

The terms 'repulsion' and 'obstruction' in the second half of the definition specify that exclusion involves either outright repulsion from positions of access and/or benefits, or else obstruction of access, entry or upward mobility. As discussed above, both repulsion and obstruction could be intentional or non-intentional – or "active" or "passive" in the words of Sen (2000, pp. 14-18), referring essentially to agency. Hence, a downward pressure or a blocked upward movement in a social hierarchy is exclusion only if it occurs through processes of repulsion or obstruction. If someone experiences a downward movement in a social hierarchy due to a bad business decision, is laid off from a job due to negligence or poor discipline, receives poor health services due to an unwillingness to access available services, or has poor education due to a decision to drop out of school, this is not the result of exclusion unless it can be shown that these choices or results are somehow involuntary and/or forced, due to their being

[12] For a review of this earlier literature, see Gore (1995).
[13] See Hall and Taylor (1996) for a typology of three variants of institutionalist theory in political science.

conditioned by structural, institutional or agentive repulsions or obstructions. Exclusion in this sense implies a lack of self-determination, not the poor results that might result from a particular course of self-determined action.

As a final note, this working definition is not grounded within a metre of poverty (relative or capability), nor within a metre of norms. This is meant to give attention to processes that occur across a social hierarchy from any social position. As noted in the first section, as soon as we refer to norms or notions of 'full participation', exclusion is immediately positioned within a hierarchy and is therefore reduced to a 'state' dimension. Moreover, the definition purposely avoids referring to context (i.e. exclusion from what?) in order to preserve the conceptualisation of social exclusion as an analytical device describing processes, applicable to any number of contexts.

5. Strengths and applications

This reconceptualisation of social exclusion adds insight to poverty approaches by opening up much more potent applications of the social exclusion approach to analyses of stratification, segregation and subordination, especially within contexts of rising inequality or where inequalities are becoming entrenched at high but stable levels. These applications include at least three obvious strong points. This first includes situations where exclusions lead to stratifying and potentially impoverishing trajectories without any obvious short-term poverty outcomes. The second includes situations where exclusions among the non-poor shed light on obstacles to upward mobility faced by the poor. Finally, this approach corrects the common implicit tendency to blame inequality-induced conflict on the poor.

5.1 Exclusions as processes of stratification and subordinated inclusion

The first strength deals with understanding how processes of subordination, stratification and segregation can lead to various forms of disadvantage, discrimination, or long-term poverty trajectories even when there are no obvious short-term poverty impacts. Such considerations are especially important in contexts of structural change such as urbanization and migration, rising education levels, or changing livelihoods patterns, during which the exact distributional implications of such changes might not be obvious, but where powerful stratifying social processes might nonetheless be at work. They also apply to situations where exclusions in certain domains allow for subordinated (or adverse) inclusion/integration in other domains, such as in labour markets or in cases of financial exclusion/inclusion.[14] This latter point is similar to the concept of 'adverse incorporation and social exclusion' proposed by Hickey and Du Toit (2007), except that their treatment is restricted to the space of poverty. The approach proposed here widens consideration to processes occurring across social hierarchies.

This strength particularly applies in contexts of polarisation. Drawing from the conceptualisation in Figure 1 above, when income polarisation takes place, there is effectively a thinning out of the income distribution, especially in the middle of the distribution. In the process, middle strata potentially face the greatest relative downward displacements. Lower strata will experience more competitive pressures due to the downward displacements of those from above, or reduced opportunities for upward mobility, and

[14] See an excellent example of exploitative processes of financial exclusion and inclusion in Dymski (2005).

this will induce considerable churning within the lower strata.[15] However, as discussed previously, many poor people might be insulated from churning at higher levels, such as rural dwellers with little or no integration into urban labour markets. Among those in the lower strata who do experience exclusion, they will be more likely to experience it as obstruction of upward mobility, while their relative position within a social hierarchy might remain unchanged. Rather, the greatest insecurity in terms of loss of relative position (rather than poverty) is usually faced by various middle strata. It is in this sense that we often see intensifying exclusionary pressures among middle classes in contexts of unequal growth.

An example of this application comes out of my own work on Tibetan areas in Western China, in my attempt to understand intensifying exclusionary processes within a context of rapid growth, falling poverty, rising education levels and other developmental improvements (see Fischer 2009). Most conventional measures of exclusion offer little insight into this situation, except perhaps inequality-based measures given rapidly rising inequalities alongside rapid growth. However, inequality measures put the focus on the poorest strata of Tibetan society, whereas I came to realise during my fieldwork that some of the most intense exclusionary pressures – as well as grievances and political frustrations – were faced by relatively elite and/or upwardly mobile Tibetans, such as Tibetan high school and university graduates (only about five percent of the population had a high school or university level of education). In particular, the implementation of competitive labour market reforms and educational campaigns exacerbated exclusionary pressures among this elite educational stratum by accentuating the linguistic and cultural disadvantages faced by these graduates in competing for public employment correspondent with their educational achievements and employment expectations. Notably, these particular pressures were not faced by Tibetans with lower levels of education; the 'excludees' in this case had among the highest educational achievements of their respective communities, they came from families with the resources to be able to finance these levels of education, and they had the ability to perform relatively well at these levels (although not enough to compete with Chinese graduates). As discussed below, the resultant exclusions offer important insights into recent tensions in this region, in addition to the more blatant proximate causes, such as discrimination or political repression.

Indeed, these observations led me to rethink the social exclusion approach, precisely because the concept of exclusion seemed salient to describe experiences on the ground, even though these experiences were not reflected through any of the conventional absolute or relative poverty measures. Moreover, while this example definitely implicates practices of discrimination, it also brings to light how processes of structural and institutional disjunctures can lead to effective discrimination, even though discrimination might not be necessarily intentional. The methodological challenge, then, is to find ways of identifying these structural and institutional disjunctures across hierarchies and to differentiate them from intentional practices of discrimination. Notably, similar challenges also confront work on identifying social and economic rights abuses or on structural violence more generally.

Another poignant example of this application is in the study of immigration. For instance, when more stringent rules and procedures are imposed on immigrants to North America or Europe, including profiling or the criminalisation of illegal immigration, it is unlikely that the increased stringency stops – or is even intended to stop – such immigration, which continues to be demanded in a widening variety of employment sectors. Hence, the tightening rules are unlikely to exclude immigrants, in an absolute

[15] With respect to churning, Hills (1998) makes the important insight that high mobility is not necessarily contradictory to high levels of inequality.

sense. However, stringency allows for stronger mechanisms of subordination and segregation during the integration of such immigrants into the receiving labour hierarchies. This result might or might not be the intended purpose of such rules – the rules themselves might have evolved out of impulsive political reactions within the receiving societies, themselves undergoing a variety of exclusionary displacements among middle strata, due to rising inequality, for instance. The important analytical point of this example is that these processes often have little correlation with poverty, given that the targeted immigrants are often well educated and are often not poor, even according to the standards of the recipient countries. Nonetheless, despite the lack of correlation with various measures of poverty, these exclusionary processes are very important for understanding the resulting stratification of labour hierarchies, which could well lead to future trajectories of impoverishment, discrimination or disadvantage.

5.2 Obstacles to mobility

The second related strength of the approach proposed here is that the obstacles faced by poor people attempting to escape poverty through upward mobility are clarified by exclusions occurring in the non-poor social strata that these poor are attempting to enter. This is especially important in situations where poverty reduction strategies are predicated on upward mobility, such as education or entrepreneurship, versus improving the terms of labour. For instance, the idea that education is good for poverty reduction is largely based on the presumption that those receiving education will subsequently move into higher strata of employment, such as from farming, menial wage labour, and informal petty trade, to formal public employment (the most coveted option) or formal white-collar private sector employment. However, this idea is problematic when these targeted sectors of employment are already subject to strong exclusionary pressures. Indeed, this insight puts into question the mainstream human development emphasis on absolute levels of education without corresponding emphasis on employment generation and upgrading – such as in the MDGs – particularly in contexts of high or rising inequality, as noted in the first point above.

This perspective is different from the more common assertion that we need to understand the relationship of more advantaged groups to the socially excluded, as suggested by Room (1999, p. 172), which is still based on a binary conceptualisation of excluders and excludees. Rather, here the emphasis is on how exclusions experienced by those higher up in a social hierarchy can lead to a variety of knock-on effects lower down in the social hierarchy. Warren and Tyagi (2004) make this point with regard to the importance of looking at the pressures on middle classes in the US. It is also evidenced in my Tibet research mentioned above, whereby the difficulties experienced by Tibetan and other minority graduates in obtaining appropriate formal employment were in part due to labour market reforms occurring more generally across China, which intensified competition within such employment between more advantaged Chinese graduates. Related points have also been made with regard to gender by Jackson (1996, p. 501), who argues that the experiences of non-poor women are relevant to poor women through role modelling and changing social norms, in both positive and negative ways. Similarly, exclusions occurring within middle strata could have ideational and demonstrative influences on the poor, such as by signalling the importance of cultural assimilation versus political assertions of language rights and affirmative action. Notably, this wider view of exclusion is important for understanding issues such as conflict.

5.3 Inequality-induced conflict

The third strength of this approach to social exclusion is in its contribution to understanding conflict, particularly with respect to correcting the common tendency in much of the literature to implicitly blame inequality-induced conflict on the poor. For instance, if increasing inequality is evoked as a cause of conflict without any further qualification, the implied presumption is that rising inequality raises the relative disparity of the poorer sections of the society in question, thus raising their discontent and their propensity for engaging in conflict. However, we know from actual studies of conflict that most conflicts involve a considerable degree of elite participation, especially in leadership and also in core support. Obviously, there is no doubt that the poor often serve as a reserve army, literally or financially. But the very poor are often too poor or too unhealthy to engage in sustained violent conflicts. Similar to migration, such engagement usually require resources and organisational capacity, things that the very poor presumably lack.

Hence, refocusing our attention to include exclusionary processes occurring at middle and upper ends of a social hierarchy is vital to understand why the non-poor might also come to be aggrieved by rising inequality, thereby clarifying the inequality-induced social dynamics that might also contribute to conflict. In particular, as discussed above, the dislocating effects of polarisation can be seen to be most intense at the middle strata of a social hierarchy in terms of relative downward displacements. In the event that these displacements are caused by exclusion, whether perceived or real, these experiences of exclusion can turn into potent focal points for grievance and rallying points for political agitation, particularly when they occur among politically active people. This perspective is important because it implicates middle classes and elites into an understanding of how inequality might induce conflict. Indeed, it resonates with the theses of Polanyi (1944) and Arendt (1951) regarding the social origins of fascism in Germany; they both identified economic insecurity among the middle classes as a critical factor. It is precisely this angle that gives the concept of exclusion (as treated here) an edge over poverty and inequality approaches in understanding social conflict, given that the methodologies of poverty and inequality analysis tend to divert attention away from vertically-occurring processes that cut across hierarchical social orderings.

This approach to understanding conflict is arguably superior to the more static ‘horizontal inequality’ approach (i.e. inequalities between groups rather than individuals), as laid out by Stewart (2002). Indeed, Stewart et al. (2006) make an explicit effort to connect social exclusion to their broader project of identifying ‘horizontal inequalities’ as a critical determinant of inter-group conflict. However, they operationalise social exclusion as involving multiple overlapping deprivations and argue that, because of economic deprivation, the “[socially excluded] appear to have little to lose by taking violent action” (Stewart et al., 2006, p. 6). Interestingly, the only solid examples used by the authors to substantiate this contention are cases of discriminated, typically minority, cultural or religious groups, including, among others, Tibetans. Here again, we must question whether those who do agitate are necessarily suffering from severe deprivations due to multiple exclusions. For instance, as discussed above, the Tibetan case suggests that the aggrieved socially-excluded are actually, in many cases, people who are best characterised as middle strata, squeezed by both downward competitive pressures and obstructions to upward mobility.

Indeed, Stewart et al. (2006) qualify their argument in this respect, noting that leadership plays a critical role in emphasising and accentuating particular identities, and that leadership emerges out of the middle classes rather than the deprived in most of the conflicts they studied (ibid, p. 7-8). However, the problem

is that they end up treating different strata in arbitrarily different ways with respect to how common grievances might coalesce within a common cross-strata group cause. Lower strata tend to be treated in a functionalist manner with respect to grievances or cultural affinities, while leadership is treated in an instrumentalist manner, using these grievances and affinities to enact political ends (e.g. see pp. 9-10). Perhaps as a means to overcome this dualism, the authors refer to a complicated mixture of exclusions, although in their attempts to operationalise social exclusion as poverty, they appear to convolute rather than enhance their otherwise interesting discussion of conflict.

Instead, by conceiving social exclusion as vertically-occurring processes of obstruction or repulsion, we come closer to prying open the puzzle of how social dislocations might occur in very different ways across different strata of an intra-group hierarchy, yet still might provide for a basis of common grievances within the group. For instance, this approach addresses the puzzle posed by Mann (2005, p. 5), regarding why, in situations of murderous ethnic cleansing, class-like sentiments come to be channelled into ethno-nationalist ones. This requires an understanding of the possibility for vertical social bonds to form in the face of a commonly perceived adversity, crossing over the horizontal loyalties that are presumed to exist in conceptualisations of class and other forms of socio-economic status. The actual experience of exclusion or insecurity would differ considerably across these horizontal strata, but processes of exclusion that cause deprivation at the lower end of a social order can, in many cases, also cause an erosion of economic or political power or social status among certain elites.

Hence, a heightened sense of insecurity can occur among upper social strata in line with multiple deprivations among lower social strata, thereby allowing for a perception of shared adversity that forges vertical bonds of solidarity within a group, in contrast to differences in actual experiences faced by various social strata within the group. Common perceptions of cause, rather than common outcomes, allow for common narratives to emerge across social strata, which can then be used as mobilising focal points for organising common remedial strategies, as observed, for instance, with the rise of the Tea Party in recent US politics. This understanding of social exclusion therefore helps to move towards a more nuanced position that understands the actions and ideologies of rich and poor alike as both instrumental and normative at the same time.

6. Conclusion

This article has sought to resolve the conceptual ambiguities of the social exclusion approach through a deconstruction and reconceptualisation of the concept, particularly in terms of its integration with the concepts of polarisation and conflict. Despite the fact that most of the literature agrees that the value-added of social exclusion is found in its treatment of processes and that social exclusion can occur without poverty, most attempts to operationalise the concept end up reducing it to a description of certain aspects of poverty. It is usually formulated in terms of multiple and cumulative disadvantages that lead to or reinforce multiple deprivations, or else as a description of various social aspects of deprivation. This opens the way for valid criticisms that the concept is redundant with respect to already-existing concepts of poverty, particularly more multidimensional and processual concepts of poverty, such as relative or capability deprivation.

In order to break out of this conceptual and operational imbroglio, social exclusion needs to be reconceived by decisively opting for a processual definition that is not grounded with reference to norms

or poverty. This resolves most of the contention and ambiguity surrounding the concept. Along these lines, a working definition of exclusion is proposed as: structural, institutional or agentive processes of repulsion or obstruction. However, this definition requires making a decisive shift of analytical dimension and abandoning much of the conceptual baggage that surrounds the term. If we are to take the implications of a processual definition seriously, exclusion needs to be understood as occurring across all strata of a social hierarchy, not merely at the bottom, as implied by concepts of poverty. Similar to criticisms of the feminisation of poverty by certain gender scholars, social exclusion must be differentiated from poverty in order to do justice to the study of exclusion, given that exclusion and poverty do not always go together. This insight is important because an exclusion that does not necessarily lead to poverty might still have a very powerful effect on social processes such as conflict. Indeed, exclusions at the upper end of a social hierarchy are especially powerful. Exclusion is therefore a pressing concern in its own right and it should not require an overlap with poverty in order to legitimise our attention.

The strengths of this approach centre on the insight that many processes of subordination, stratification and segregation, particularly within contexts of high or rising inequality, are not effectively captured by poverty or even inequality methods of analysis. In other words, absolute and even relative indicators often tell us little about processes of exclusion and marginalisation. If they do, they usually only do so by providing clues about the spaces within which exclusionary processes might operate. Indeed, standard statistical sampling methods based on outcome indicators might be poorly suited for capturing the processual emphasis of the social exclusion approach, which would be better served by more inductive methods that are able to trace subtle social dynamics rather than cross-correlations across divergent people. This would include interdisciplinary analyses of structural and institutional disjunctures and asymmetries operating not only across social hierarchies, but also among comparable cohorts within a social hierarchy, for instance, with similar levels of educational achievements and employment expectations. Ultimately, the social exclusion approach also calls for a shift of methodological and even epistemological dimensions.

Most importantly, exclusion understood in this way avoids the tendency to blame poor people for a variety of perverse social dynamics that emerge across social hierarchies in response to rising inequality, which can be easily misattributed as stemming from poverty due precisely to their association with inequality. Conflict is an obvious example, given the common assertion in academic, policy and journalistic circles that increasing inequality will exacerbate conflict. While this might be true, it is equally important – indeed, it is an ethical responsibility – to also remind ourselves that the conflicts we refer to usually involve substantial elite participation, particularly in leadership positions. Hence, we need social theory to address how elites themselves might find grievance with inequality, lest we fall into a trap of crude instrumentalism. The poor have enough to deal with; they do not need the additional burden of our implicit blame or paranoia.

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