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Social Exclusion with reference to  
Polarisation and Conflict**

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## **Resolving the Theoretical Ambiguities of Social Exclusion with reference to Polarisation and Conflict<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper addresses several ambiguities in the social exclusion literature that 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 deprivation. It is argued that these ambiguities arise from the fact that social exclusion is generally not differentiated from poverty, even though it is widely acknowledged that social exclusion can occur in the absence of poverty. In order to resolve these ambiguities, I propose a re-conceptualisation of social exclusion in a way that is not grounded with reference to norms and thus is not dependent on poverty for definition. Social exclusion is defined as structural, institutional or agentic processes of repulsion or obstruction. This definition is meant to give attention to processes of disadvantage (i.e. exclusionary processes), which can occur across a social hierarchy from any social position, rather than states of deprivation (i.e. the excluded) occurring at the bottom of a social hierarchy. I argue that this resolves most of the contention surrounding the concept. However, it also requires making a decisive shift of analytical dimension and abandoning much of the conceptual baggage that surrounds the term. In other words, if the social exclusion approach is to provide analytical value-added over and above the relative and capability deprivation approaches, it must be differentiated from poverty, thereby drawing attention to vertically-occurring processes that are not captured by the horizontal conceptualisation of poverty. This understanding is important because it corrects the common implicit tendency in much of the literature to blame inequality-induced conflict on the poor, even though we know that conflict usually involves considerable elite participation. An understanding of exclusion that is not anchored in poverty is therefore an important step in theorising why the non-poor may also come to be aggrieved by rising inequality.*

### **Introduction**

The theoretical exploration of this paper was motivated by my research on the ethnic minority areas of western China and on the conviction of the central government of the PRC that ethnic tensions and ethnic nationalism can be solved through the force of economic growth and improved livelihoods. This conviction implies that the 'ethnic problem' is the result of poverty and developmental 'backwardness'. However, conflictive ethnic tensions in Western China have not subsided in the face of growth and improved livelihoods. Rather, they have probably worsened, as evidenced by resurgent nationalist agitation since the late 1990s in

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Xinjiang (East Turkestan) and in Tibetan areas (Tibet Autonomous Region and substantial parts of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan). In all these cases real per capita GDP growth rates since the mid to late 1990s have usually been in excess of ten percent a year and rural household incomes have also been rising considerably, indicating that despite increasing inequality, the absolute standard of living of the average local person has been steadily improving.<sup>2</sup> The concept of poverty therefore seems ill-suited to explain the persistence of ethnic tensions amidst rapid growth. Instead, the concept of exclusion seems better suited, given that ethnically exclusionary processes appear to be intensifying alongside growth and despite improving livelihoods, thereby helping to explain why grievances might intensify parallel to poverty reduction.

The application of exclusion in this sense draws from the analytical framework of social exclusion. However, in attempting to see how this approach could add explanatory value to the situation of Western China, I was immediately faced by several unresolved inherent problems within the literature, which derive from an ambiguous association of social exclusion with poverty. In other words, most of the literature treats social exclusion as poverty. This association therefore leads to the valid charge that social exclusion is a semantic redundancy, already implied in various other approaches to studying poverty.

Insofar as we accept the standard ways of defining and operationalising social exclusion, particularly in the development literature, I agree with these criticisms. In particular, a multidimensional relative deprivation approach captures many of the aspects of relativity raised by social exclusion and remains a very powerful analytical lens from which to understand the inability of poorer strata of society to access the norms operating at middle and upper strata. Furthermore, as argued by Amartya Sen (2000), the capability approach already encompasses the aspects of relationality and social process, which are said to be the strengths of the social exclusion approach. Social exclusion can therefore be seen as an adjunct to these two approaches, describing various social causes or consequences of poverty, albeit with an extra emphasis on coercion and discrimination than is usually made by the more liberal strands in the poverty literature.

However, this does not resolve the issue that poverty, whether relative or absolute, is ill-suited to explain the dynamics of the situation described above. In particular, some of the strongest exclusionary pressures in Western China are arguably observed at the middle strata of the labour hierarchy, such as among state-sector staff and workers, or among high school and university graduates aspiring to enter these strata. In this respect, while relative deprivation is arguably the most powerful poverty approach to deal with issues of rising inequality, it only captures exclusionary dynamics operating at the bottom of a social hierarchy (i.e. the inability to access social or economic norms). It does not capture exclusionary dynamics operating higher up in a social hierarchy among the non-poor, even though these are perhaps more important than poverty for understanding conflict or social disintegration. The social exclusion approach can potentially provide this additional analytical insight into the non-poor, although only if it is differentiated from poverty.

This forced me to reconsider the theoretical groundwork of the concept of 'exclusion' and to break from standard approaches in the literature. 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. As argued by some gender scholars with regard to gender and poverty, exclusion should not require an association with poverty in order to legitimate our attention. The concept offers a valuable contribution to our understanding of marginalisation, disadvantage, discrimination and conflict, all of which can occur in the absence of poverty.

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<sup>2</sup> For more detail on the rapid development of western China since the mid-1990s, see Fischer (2005a).

Therefore, I have formulated an alternative working definition of social exclusion that is differentiated from poverty, in part as a way to find salience for applying the concept to my research, and in part as an attempt to resolve the ambiguities in the literature that my research brought to light. Social exclusion is here defined as structural, institutional or agentic 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 and is theoretically able to capture vertically-occurring exclusions across a social hierarchy regardless of position, rather than merely the exclusions that occur 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 of social exclusion) that exclusion is usually predicated on patterns of inclusion, or vice versa.

The value of this definition is that it adds insight to poverty approaches, in particular with reference to rising inequality. Rising inequality matters even if absolute poverty is falling, not only due to considerations raised from the perspective of relative deprivation, but also because of the exclusionary and thereby conflictive repercussions that occur at higher social strata and that are therefore not captured by standard poverty or inequality measures. This understanding is important given that it draws our attention away from the common implicit tendency in much of the literature to blame inequality-induced conflict on the poor, even though we know that conflict usually involves considerable elite participation. An understanding of exclusion that is not anchored in poverty is therefore an important step in theorising why the non-poor may also come to be aggrieved by rising inequality.

The paper begins with a critical review of the social exclusion literature in order to clarify the holes in the standard approaches that have plagued my own attempts to apply the concept. The second section then offers several perspectives on how social exclusion should be differentiated from poverty; first by clarifying how exclusion or disadvantage can occur in the absence of poverty and can even increase with rising levels of wealth, as argued in the critiques of the 'feminisation of poverty' by certain gender scholars; and second by examining certain aspects of relativity that are not captured by standard approaches to social exclusion but that render these approaches problematic. The third section elaborates on the working definition of social exclusion mentioned above. The last section demonstrates how this way of treating social exclusion, particularly in combination with polarisation, offers valuable insight into conflict.

## **I. THE AMBIGUITIES OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

There are three main problematics in the literature dealing with social exclusion that result in the ambiguities surrounding both the definition and the application of the concept. 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 its ability to bring attention to dynamic processes. This in turn leads to a further propensity in most of the work on social exclusion since the early 1990s to treat the concept as more or less the same as poverty, whether as a description of the social aspects of deprivation, or else as an alternative way of looking at deprivation, albeit with the implication that it is or leads to poverty. This association is usually made despite the fact that it is often recognised in the same literature that exclusion can occur without poverty. Or, in an attempt to differentiate exclusion from poverty, some authors treat the concept narrowly, for instance by focusing on identity discrimination. As a result, other important themes that originally inspired the concept are lost, such as structural economic transformation and the inability of welfare system to adjust to these transformations. Closely related to this last point, the third problematic is that much

of the theoretical imprecision of the concept derives from the use of the terms 'relative' and 'relational'.

### *Processes and states*

The concept of social exclusion was officially launched into the development studies discourse in 1993, when the International Institute of Labour Studies (IILS) of the ILO launched a research project on social exclusion with the support of the UNDP. The project was intended to contribute to the discussion at the World Summit for Social Development in 1995 and to explore ways in which the analysis 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, with the aim to refashion the concept from its roots in European social policy discourse to a wider, less Eurocentric global application. This involved reinterpreting the ways the concept had been used up to this point as a way 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.

Within this project, 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 the introduction of their summary of one key debate organised by the IILS, in which they define exclusion as both a situation or a process of marginalisation or the fragmentation of social relations, 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, in their comprehensive review of four main ways of defining and measuring poverty, Laderchi et al (2003) conclude that a key strength of the social exclusion approach, in comparison to the monetary, capability or participatory approaches, is that it 'is the only one that focuses intrinsically, rather than as an add-on, on the processes and dynamics that allow deprivation to arise and persist' (p.260).

However, this being said, attempts to operationalise social exclusion invariably end out treating the concept as a state, outcome or condition of being, rather than as a process. This tendency partly comes from efforts to render social exclusion into an exercise of identification and thresholds, i.e. to identify who, exactly, are the excluded, and below what point they should be considered excluded. The resultant search for an appropriate set of indicators inevitably leads to a static conceptualisation of social exclusion, which in turn is arguably in tension with a processual understanding of exclusion. In other words, we must question the degree to which methodologies of measurement and statistical analysis based on outcome indicators are capable of capturing the processual aspects of obstruction or repulsion that are important qualifications implied in social exclusion. Rather, more creative quantitative methods need to be explored in order to capture structural or institutional disjunctures or discrimination in a manner that conveys process as opposed to outcomes.

Moreover, the outcome-based operationalisation of social exclusion also tends to lead to a methodology-driven influence on the definition of social exclusion. As noted by Levitas (2006) with respect to the 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' (p.127). In other words, operationalisation sweeps the definitional problems under the carpet rather than solving them. 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 or precision on the concept even within Europe.

The slip into static notions can be compared to a similar problem inherent in the capability approach. As pointed out by Laderchi et al (2003), 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’ (p.255). 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’ (ibid). Social exclusion comes at the problem from a different angle (the measurement of processes rather than potentials), although it ironically ends up in more or less the same predicament of being measured according to various static indicators of functionings or basic needs.

As a result of these issues, many definitions of social exclusion lack clarity as to whether social exclusion refers to a state or a process. Most treat it as both, i.e. as a state and/or a process. Gore and Figueiredo (1997) accept that the dimensions of state and process overlap and that this is not necessarily contradictory. They suggest that

...the former offers a way of describing social exclusion and can for instance be used to define situations of permanent exclusion. In the latter, the focus is on the mechanisms which create or recreate exclusion, and on how poverty and deprivation are associated with structural economic and social change (p.18)

Laderchi et al (2003) 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’ (p.258). While this seems a worthy compromise, it is one that seeks a solution by grounding social exclusion in an understanding of poverty.

### ***Social exclusion and poverty***

This leads us to the second problematic in the literature, which is that social exclusion is usually collapsed into a concept of poverty. In the effort to measure it according to a set of indicators, it is treated either as the social aspects of deprivation, or else as social conditions leading to deprivation. In other words, many definitions imply that if exclusion does not lead to some deprivation, it is therefore not exclusion, or else not one that warrants our attention, and that it is mostly in the space of overlap where we should direct our attention. For instance, in their efforts to resolve the debate on how best social exclusion should be differentiated from poverty, Gore and Figueiredo (1997) argue that the former refers to processes of impoverishment. ‘Its value then is that it enables causal analysis of various paths into and out of poverty, getting beyond the unhelpful lumping together of diverse categories of people as “the poor”’ (ibid, p.10). Similarly, Laderchi et al (2003) explicitly treat social exclusion as one of four main ways of defining and measuring poverty.

Gore (1995) nonetheless clarifies that the early French debates of the late 1970s and 1980s did not necessarily equate social exclusion with poverty as such, but with a process 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 (p.1-2). Referring to this more recent heritage, Levitas (2006) mentions the difficulty in distinguishing social exclusion from poverty even in the UK context, which is ‘sometimes masked by references to “poverty and social exclusion” as an inseparable dyad’ (p.126). For instance, the 1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) Survey for the UK proposes to measure social exclusion directly through four dimensions: impoverishment, labour market exclusion, service exclusion and exclusion from social relations (Pantazis et al, 2006, p.8). This selection thereby includes a notion of poverty into its implicit definition of social exclusion. Levitas (2006) adds that the same applies to the European treatment of social exclusion; 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 widened the scope to include deprivations in education, housing and health (p.130-131).

Following these leads, most authors in the development studies literature define exclusion directly as a deprivation or else indirectly as processes leading to deprivation. For instance, Gore and Figueiredo (1997) summarise the variety of working definitions that were used in the series of country studies commissioned by the ILS in the 1990s. Most of these 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, and in Appasamy et al (1995, p.238), these are defined as basic needs in education, health, water and sanitation, and social security; 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 and process, with the state being equivalent to relative deprivation, while the processes were socially-determined impediments to access resources, social goods or institutions; the Yemen study defined it as social segregation, where some individuals and groups are not recognised as full and equal members of society; and the Peru study defined it in terms of the inability to participate in aspects of social life considered important (Gore and Figueiredo, 1997, p.17-18). Figueroa et al (1995) deemed that its analytical value came from its elucidation of social processes which contribute to social inequality (p.201). Each of these country studies is presented in detail in Rodgers et al (1995) and some are further elaborated in the subsequent series of ILS publications, although the general definitional gist remains consistent throughout. For the purpose of this analysis of the literature, the main point is that all these studies treat social exclusion as either relative or capability deprivation.

The subsequent evolution of the concept in the development studies literature continues along these 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 nonetheless because it focused on processes and because it was multidimensional in nature. However, he was doubtful whether these aspects made it different from poverty. The distinction was only clear if one adopted a very narrow view of poverty, whereas 'much of the current debate on poverty, especially in developing countries, was concerned with wider concepts of relative deprivation, ill-being, vulnerability and capability', and was thus very similar to the social exclusion approach (O'Brien et al, 1997, p.3). Bhalla and Lapeyre (1997) 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' (p.413). However, they then drive their argument into an ambiguous quandary by showing how the 'broad concept of poverty... covers both the economic (distributional) and social (relational) aspects of deprivation' (p.417). Their subsequent operationalisation of social exclusion essentially focuses on depth of poverty and income inequality measures, and a variety of social aspects purporting to measure access but that essentially boil down to a measurement of various functionings and outcomes (p.425-426). Saith (2001) also explores the feasibility of operationalising the social exclusion concept in developing countries. She notes that efforts in this regard

...appear to largely result in a repetition of research that has already been conducted within frameworks that have developed in developing countries (basic needs, capabilities, sustainable livelihoods, risk and vulnerability, participatory approaches) in parallel to the 'social exclusion' concept in industrialised countries (p.1).

In order to avoid the relabelling of poverty studies, she suggests that 'rather than trying to transplant the concept, it might be worth concentrating on incorporating the advantages of

“social exclusion” like its emphasis on process into existing frameworks in developing countries’ (p.14). 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 the strongest exclusionary pressures in many situations are not necessarily faced by the poorest. For instance, the poorest in Western China are typically characterised as rural households whose livelihoods are based exclusively in agriculture and who possess some of the worst capabilities or basic needs in China, such as in education, health, access to tapped water and sanitation, or social security, as per the indicators identified by Appasamy (1995) mentioned above. In contrast, exclusionary pressures are perhaps strongest for rural-urban migrants. Although these migrants might be relatively poor in the urban areas, they are often relatively wealthy in the rural areas. Thus, insofar as exclusion is experienced in urban labour markets, wealthier rural households would be more exposed to exclusion than poor rural households.<sup>3</sup> This points to the fact that experiences of exclusion might be difficult to capture through standard basic needs, capability or even relative measures of deprivation.

In this regard, 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) offer an abbreviated 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’ (p.9). Stewart et al (2006) 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’ (p.4). Both these definitions probably derive from 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’ (Laderchi et al, 2003, p.257). However, beyond the fact that these various renderings define exclusion as exclusion, the understanding of ‘full participation’ or ‘normal activities’ places the definition 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 of its most important contributions, such as exclusion from social participation, were part of the earlier conceptualisation of relative deprivation by Townsend (1979). Room (1999) makes the same point 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 of relational issues (inadequate social participation, lack of social integration and lack of power), versus the primary emphasis of poverty on distributional issues (p.167-169). Bhalla and Lapeyre (1997, p.417) contend with this distinction (made in earlier papers by Room), arguing that the broad concept of poverty (i.e. relative and capability deprivations) covers both the distributional and relational aspects of deprivation referred to by Room (1994; 1995).

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). In other words, he paraphrases in the negative what he says about freedom in *Development as*

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, Goldstein et al (2003, p.776) note that wealthier rural households in the communities he studied in Tibet possess significantly more migrant labour than poorer households. Similar results also appear to hold for China more generally.



*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’ (ibid). 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’ (p.7).

However, by reducing the social exclusion approach into an analysis of relationality, Sen argues that its helpfulness does not lie in its conceptual newness, but that its influence focuses attention on the role of relational features in deprivation (p.8). For this reason, if the language of exclusion is to add value to our understanding of deprivation, ‘it is crucial to ask whether a relational deprivation has been responsible for a particular case of [deprivation]’ (p.9-10). He therefore concludes that, if understood in this way, 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.

Unfortunately, Sen seems possessed with an agenda of establishing the authority of his own capability approach rather than with distinguishing the social exclusion approach in its own right, to the extent that he almost appears defensive. For instance, in his rendition of social exclusion, he contends with an implicit criticism of the capability approach made by Gore (1995, p.9), arguing that there is nothing in the capability approach that would doom it to be excessively individualist and insufficiently social, and thereby causing it to miss a focus on the relational features of deprivation (Sen, 2000, p.8). Indeed, it is ironic that many of the efforts to clarify or elaborate a social exclusion approach, such as the ILS studies, have instead ended out adding operational rigour to the capability approach. Conversely, Sen avoids the concept of relative deprivation, even though it would seem better suited than the capability approach to deal with many of the concepts that he discusses in relation to social exclusion, such as the inability to participate in a community due to a lack of means relative to social norms. In any case, he offers no guidance on how to differentiate social exclusion from poverty.

Some attempts have been made to refine the concept of social exclusion along the lines of rights or choice. However, once the implications of such an approach become specified, it again becomes difficult to see how it differs in practice from either the capability or relative deprivation approaches, particularly given the emphasis on freedom in the former and the emphasis on norms in the latter. For instance, Schulte (2002) deals with social exclusion within a rights framework, treating it as the denial of a whole range of rights denoted by the concept of social citizenship. He stipulates that these include ‘the right to social security and economic wellbeing, to the right to a full share in the social heritage and to the life of a civilised human being according to the normal standards prevailing in that society’ (p.121). In other words, once he stipulates the meaning of social citizenship rights, his approach essentially seems to be a reformulation of the capability approach, with an emphasis on capabilities defined by the relative norms of a society.

Similarly, choice was emphasised in the adoption of an initial definition of social exclusion by the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE); ‘an individual is socially-excluded if he or she does not participate in key activities of the society in which he or she lives;... the individual is not participating for reasons beyond his/her control; and he or she would like to participate’ (Burchardt et al, 2002, p.30 and 32). However, it is again not clear how this emphasis on lack of choice (or un-freedom) is simply not a restatement of Sen’s position on capability failure, as discussed below. In any case, Levitas notes that once operationalised, this CASE approach becomes limited to the first of their clauses and sidesteps the issue of choice for pragmatic reasons (2006, p.134). In other words, this

approach also falls into the same predicament as the capability approach of reducing the measurement of potentials to that of functionings.

Kabeer (2006) makes a notable attempt to differentiate social exclusion from poverty by treating social exclusion as an analysis of processes of disadvantage, although she does this exclusively through the lens of identity-discrimination. She elaborates that it

...reflects the multiple and overlapping nature of the disadvantages experienced by certain groups and categories of the population, with social identity as the central axis of their exclusion. It is thus a *group* or collective phenomena rather than an individual one (p.3).

Thus, she contends that

...understanding the social dimensions of inequality, hitherto ignored in mainstream poverty analysis, provides new lens through which to view the issue of chronic disadvantage... These revolve around social identity and reflect the cultural devaluation of people based on *who they are* (or rather *who they are perceived to be*) (p.2).

In this sense, Kabeer frames the 'social' of social exclusion in terms of social groups and identities, rather than in terms of the social aspects of deprivation as it is usually referred to in most of the UK or EU oriented literature and which can operate at the individual level and without the intermediation of identity-based discrimination. Thus, 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 economic restructuring.

Furthermore, her treatment of disadvantage is explicitly connected to an analysis of poverty. She notes in the beginning that the 'durable nature of this form of disadvantage means that people bearing devalued identities are likely to be disproportionately represented among the poor, as well as among the chronic poor' (ibid, p.2). The rest of her paper therefore looks at social exclusion mostly from the perspective of an enriched processual understanding of the identity-based dynamics of poverty. Thus, it does not as such resolve the ambiguity between social exclusion and a wider multidimensional understanding of poverty, but implicitly accepts the fact that exclusions are only worthy of our attention if they exist in the overlap with poverty.

It is not clear why she asserts that these aspects have been ignored in mainstream poverty analysis, given that her approach more or less echoes certain strands with the IILS publications ten years previously. For instance, in the debate summarised in Gore and Figueiredo (1997), there were several suggestions to see social exclusion as the generation of multiple disadvantages. Citing the work of Waltzer, these can then further evolve into 'destructive synergies' or 'radical disadvantage' (p.43). It was further suggested that social exclusion be understood as a 'second-tier' concept of risk regime that expresses the interaction between social risk factors (such as unemployment, lack of access to social services, or family breakdown), the cumulation of these factors, and the diminished capacity of groups to respond to risk.

The notion of social exclusion is therefore not a broad notion of poverty which encompasses non-material aspects and deprivations which do not arise from lack of resources. Rather poverty is a part of social exclusion. It is one of various risk factors which together cumulate to form a risk regime (Gore and Figueiredo 1997, p.40-41).

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 offers the most essential contribution of social exclusion, in combination with its emphasis on relational elements. He argues that

...to use the notion of social exclusion carries the implication we are speaking of people who are suffering from such a degree of multi-dimensional disadvantage, of such duration, and reinforced by such material and cultural degradation of the neighbourhoods in which they live, that their relational links with the wider society are ruptured to a degree which is to some considerable degree irreversible. We may sometimes choose to use the notion of social exclusion in a more general sense than this: but here is its core (p.171).

This perspective certainly provides perhaps one of the most convincing distinctions of social exclusion from poverty, although it still ends out treating social exclusion as a catastrophic outcome occurring horizontally at the bottom of a social hierarchy, parallel to poverty. Indeed, he argues that it may be better to use the notion this way for it to be ‘useful as an analytical concept and as a point of reference for policy design, rather than to use “social exclusion” as no more than a synonym of “disadvantage”’ (ibid). However, his distinction along these lines 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 consistently argues. In other words, his own argument that the other aspects of exclusion can be dealt with through a multidimensional approach to understanding poverty could equally apply to his conclusion on catastrophic discontinuity.

### ***Relativity and relationality***

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

The latter meaning of relativity owes much to the work of Hilary Silver, who elaborates a threefold typology of the multiple meanings of exclusion inspired by the three models of welfare capitalism elaborated by Esping-Anderson (1990). These are situated in three different theoretical perspectives, political ideologies, and national discourses (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 purposely avoids offering a definition of 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 made a great advance in helping 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 in turn inspired the approach of the IILS, particularly considering that she was a central player in its initiatives of the 1990s. Thus, Gore argues that

...a precise definition of social exclusion depends on the paradigms of social integration and citizenship and the cultural environment prevailing in a society. These structure people’s sense of belonging and membership and consequently the perception of what is exclusion and inclusion in their society (Gore, 1995, p.8).

A similar line is taken up in the work of Atkinson (1998), who emphasises relativity as one of the three main characteristics of social exclusion, alongside agency and dynamics. Relativity in this sense refers to the fact that the meaning of exclusion is relative to a particular society,

and Atkinson argues that this is an important element that differentiates social exclusion from the concept of poverty (p.13-14). Similarly, Laderchi et al (2003) 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' (p.259). Similar to Silver, this sense of relativity is generally seen as one of the principle strengths of the social exclusion approach.

Silver does raise some important interpretative issues, although her avoidance of definition by way of typology runs the risk of rendering the concept into an entirely descriptive template and aborting the analytical project of understanding exclusion as a causal process in its own right. Moreover, the typological approach also avoids 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 ILS 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. Thus, while the various elaborations of social exclusion represent very valuable deepening of our understanding and measurement of deprivation, they do not solve the conceptual problem of differentiating social exclusion from poverty.

On a similar note, there is inconsistency in the literature on the exact meaning of the term 'relational' or 'relationality'. It is often referred to as a description of certain aspects of deprivation, such as in the way it is used by Room (1999). This sense of relationality need not imply an explicit act of exclusion per se, but merely that there is a break down 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 care or education. However, others such as Sen (2000) or Beall and Piron (2005, p.11) refer to the term 'relational' as an intended act of exclusion by an excluder towards an excludee. This latter usage, which is quite common, is actually closer to the term 'agency' used by Atkinson (1998). Regardless, we have to question whether exclusion necessarily needs to be intentional, insofar as impersonal structural dynamics can equally produce exclusion despite the best of relational intentions, as in the case of neighbourhood gentrification due to rising house prices. Indeed, when this aspect of agency is emphasized, as in Laderchi et al (2003), it seems forgotten that earlier conceptions of social exclusion were developed in the 1970s and 1980s in response to 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.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, even if we accept 'relationality' or 'agency' as distinguishing elements of social exclusion, these arguably also play an important role in the capability approach, as noted earlier.

### ***Is the social exclusion approach redundant?***

The dilemmas arising from the ambiguous merging of social exclusion with poverty are substantive and not merely semantic. Indeed, it 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 with already existing comprehensive formal labour markets and welfare systems to poor countries where, if the same metres of identification and measurement were to be used, the majority of the population would be deemed as

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<sup>4</sup> This obviously leads us into the sociological debate on structure versus agency, which I will not engage with here. Suffice to note that my own position is that heterogeneous and historical structures lead to disjunctures and constant disequilibria, which open the way for agency to operate systemically, rather than in an idiosyncratic manner. Accordingly, institutions can be understood to mediate and order this agency.

‘excluded’.<sup>5</sup> This criticism can be easily dealt with by either loosening the institutional specifications of the concept (implied by the work of Silver), or else by simply reversing the charge and noting that the intellectual origins of the concept might themselves have derived from the South in any case.<sup>6</sup>

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 deprivation is put into question. Moreover, much of the often noted scepticism that the concept deflects attention away from either poverty or inequality can be seen to carry some validity and should be taken seriously. Byrne (2005) 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 to assert a continued commitment to the values of social democracy, while on the other hand supporting globalization and neo-liberalism (p.60). For similar reasons, Clert (1999) warns that the ‘coexistence of different ways in which social exclusion discourse has been used to combat social disadvantage can only obscure policy orientations and generate false consensus’ (195). At a more epistemological level, Room (1999) cautions that

...while the newly fashionable notion of social exclusion provides illumination, it also holds certain perils. For example, it may encourage us to conceive of society – as it presently exists – as a moral community (albeit hierarchical) with networks of mutual support; social casualties lose touch with these networks and the task of social policy is to reintegrate them (p.171-172).

In other words, the social exclusion discourse can imply that the solution to exclusion is to intensify inclusion, whereas exclusion might actually arise due to the manner by which people are included. Moreover, given the aspects of agency and relationality that are typically emphasised, it can also lend weight to the tendency within the so called Good Governance Agenda to blame domestic elites for the market failures that allow exclusion to arise, rather than the more impersonal processes induced by international economic integration.<sup>7</sup>

Some criticisms of this general gist were made in the ILS debate summarised in Gore and Figueiredo (1997, p.41-42).<sup>8</sup> For instance, questions were raised whether those who were described as excluded were actually included on bad terms, such as in the case of the landless peasants working under exploitative conditions. It was suggested that what matters in determining poverty are the terms of inclusion and that one of the worst things about poverty was being included on terms which are terrible. Moreover, great inequalities are possible without exclusion (as under feudalism). Some noted that many conflicts, such as those in

<sup>5</sup> This criticism is addressed in detail in Gore et al (1995) and Gore and Figueiredo (1997). Hall and Midgley (2004, p.10 and p.54) also mention this criticism in passing.

<sup>6</sup> This is noted by Gore (1995); ‘...it has been suggested that the emerging social problems of Europe reflect a process of “Latin Americanization”, in the sense that European economies and societies are moving closer in their forms of organization to those of Latin America... As that occurs, the language to describe and analyse the situation in Europe is catching up to one already widely deployed in Latin America, where debates about marginalization were already vigorous in the 1960s...’ (p.4). Indeed, we need only recall that Latin American dependency theorists were using terms that are very analogous to exclusion since the 1950s and 1960s, such as marginalisation and peripheralisation, if indeed they were not referring directly to the term ‘exclusion’ itself. Notably, Celso Furtado, one of the foremost from this school, taught at the Sorbonne from 1965 to 1985 (Kay 2005, p.1204). He undoubtedly influenced his French colleagues. The presence in Paris during the 1950s and 1960s of other well known Third World scholars using similar terminologies is also noteworthy, such as Samir Amin. Similarly, René Lenoir apparently spent several years as a technical advisor to African governments prior to his 1974 publication.

<sup>7</sup> The same could be said, however, for much of the representations of poverty by the World Bank and other international agencies, as noted by Green (2007, p.27) in her anthropological discussion of poverty discourses.

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the contributors to the debate remained anonymous.

Africa in particular, were conflicts of ‘contested inclusion’. If ‘exclusion’ arises from a situation of contested inclusion, do people regard their situation as better when they are ‘excluded’?<sup>9</sup> In which case, in adopting social inclusion as a desirable policy goal, might we be taking for granted that the kind of society we want the excluded to enter is the desirable one, when in fact it may be corrupt and exploitative? The debate therefore prompted two important assertions: the process of exclusion is not independent from the process of inclusion, and vice versa; and processes of exclusion need to be analysed together with modes of incorporation (or modes of social integration).<sup>10</sup>

The ambiguous overlap between social exclusion and poverty also leads to a variety of methodological problems. For instance, if we conceive of social exclusion as a state or outcome, to be measured with thresholds, this ends out compounding many of the identification problems already associated with poverty, which itself is fraught with conceptual and methodological problems.<sup>11</sup> How can a person or a group be identified as ‘excluded’? Are we to construct an ‘exclusion line’? Given that exclusion is identified as multidimensional, are we to enter the murky waters of composite indicators, which are already contested in much of poverty studies? And how should this be done so that rural-urban, ethnic minority, generational, gender and other differences may be properly described and explained? Furthermore, if we can identify cases of exclusion without poverty or vice versa, are we then 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?

A simple example of these measurement problems can be illustrated from my research on Western China (Fischer 2005a). If we accept a standard absolute income poverty measure as an indication of exclusion, rural poverty in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), one of the poorest western provinces in China, officially stood at about 25 percent in 1999 and has since been apparently falling. Relative poverty is difficult to evaluate due to the lack of a standard metre for calibrating rural and urban incomes in terms of cost of living and other considerations. This raises methodological problems with regard to applying the relative poverty approach to many developing countries despite its arguable relevance. Turning to education as one important aspect of the capability approach, or as a multidimensional aspect of the relative poverty approach, illiteracy in the TAR apparently was 44 percent in 2004, whereas the proportion of the population with either no education or only some level of primary education was 84 percent. This last figure is perhaps the most relevant to assess the degree of disadvantage that Tibetans in the TAR face in competing for relatively skilled employment in the urban areas, although insofar as 64 percent of the labour force of the TAR was working in agriculture in 2004, it is difficult to know to how much of this 84 percent of uneducated or poorly educated population was actually facing exclusion in the urban areas. As a result, any authoritative assertion of headcounts or proportions of ‘the excluded’ are extremely dubious, far more so than equivalent estimates of poverty.

Many of these operational issues are the focus of contributions in Atkinson and Hills (1998), Hills et al (2002) and Pantazis et al (2006), as well as of Schulte (2002) and Stewart et al (2006), among others. However, from the perspective argued here, it is sufficient to note that most of these perspectives are tangled up by their operationalisation of social exclusion

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<sup>9</sup> A good example of this is made by Beall (2002) in her study of municipal sweepers in Faisalabad, Pakistan. She argues that ‘socially excluded groups can use their identity-based social exclusion to secure livelihoods... but in ways that are not necessarily sustainable, especially in the context of wider macroeconomic forces’ (p.47).

<sup>10</sup> An example of this type of critique is made by DuToit (2004) in his analysis of South Africa. He argues that ‘the most common usage [of social exclusion] often fails to capture how poverty can flow not only from exclusion but also from processes of integration into broader economic and social networks’ (p.987). Notably, Du Toit is contesting the use of the concept of social exclusion defined as a state, which he implicitly reveals by calling for ‘a move beyond the simple counter-positions of “exclusion” and “inclusion”’ (ibid).

<sup>11</sup> For an incisive critique of the six main approaches to measuring income poverty, see Saith (2005).

as an outcome, which in turn leaves the door open for exclusion to be treated as poverty. They thereby tend to add operational vigour to poverty studies rather than finding a way out of the ambiguous relationship between poverty and social exclusion.

## II. FINDING A WAY OUT OF THE AMBIGUITIES

This section reflects on several aspects of exclusion that might help us to find a way out of the ambiguities analysed in the last section. In the first case, it is useful to examine cases of exclusion without poverty in order to provide insight into how exclusion might be differentiated theoretically from poverty. In the second case, the meaning of relativity implied by social exclusion is further explored by analysing several dimensions of relativity that are not typically considered in the literature but that help to tease out a more processual understanding of exclusion, which is then elaborated in the third section.

### *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 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.

Many authors recognise that we can conceive of social exclusion outside poverty. This was mentioned on many occasions in the summary of the ILS debate in Gore and Figueiredo (1997), as well as in the IDS workshop summarised in O'Brien et al (1997, p.5-6). 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, as in examples from the Indian caste system, or else in classic cases of discriminated minority groups specialising in trade and commerce. Stewart et al (2006, p.5) elaborate on this, in tune with their focus on horizontal inequalities as a cause for conflict. They note that there are some groups who are privileged in some respects, yet still excluded from some important aspects of societal activity, particularly political participation, such as the Chinese in Southeast Asia or the Jews in Europe for many centuries. However, they make a distinction that those who are socially excluded are usually identified as having multiple deprivations, whereas these privileged groups suffer mainly from political exclusion, but they do not suffer multiple exclusions (ibid). By making this distinction, they seem to reduce social exclusion (as opposed to 'exclusion' more generally) back into a metre of poverty, thereby discounting the valuable insight that derives from these examples, which is that exclusion and poverty do not always work together.

Although these examples are usually framed within the context of developing countries, similar observations have also been made in OECD countries. Atkinson (1998) makes the point that poverty does not necessarily always go together with social exclusion, and he argues that confusion of the two concepts is one reason for differences of view about the role of social security benefits (p.9). Levitas (2006) also notes that, even in the UK, paid work itself may in some cases limit social 'inclusion' or that 'economic inactivity' does not, in itself, necessarily lead to exclusion from social relations (pp.123; 147). However, similar to the case of Stewart et al mentioned above, once this is recognised, there is still a tendency to reduce social exclusion back into some metre of poverty.

It is useful to further examine how, in some cases, social exclusion might even intensify with movements out of poverty, with the result that a singular emphasis on poverty reduction might in fact reinforce exclusionary dynamics within policy. For instance, as noted earlier, wealthier rural households in Tibet generally have more members working as migrant urban labourers than poorer rural households. Moreover, exclusion is largely experienced in the sectors of urban employment targeted by these migrants. Therefore, it is plausible to

argue in this context that exclusionary pressures might intensify as rural households become wealthier on the basis of their integration into urban employment.

I have found critiques from gender studies of the ‘feminisation of poverty’ to be a useful way to think through these points, particularly those from Jackson (1996).<sup>12</sup> Her arguments hold a strong parallel with the treatment of social exclusion elaborated here, although she also cautions against the integration of gender analysis with social exclusion (Jackson, 1999). However, this caution is based on her analysis of the way social exclusion has come to be conceived as a ‘binary and polarised formulation of inclusion and exclusion’ (ibid, p.132). The arguments here are made in a similar vein and thus heed her caution.

Jackson (1996) provides a compelling argument for why gender is distinct from, and sometimes contradictory to, poverty and class. She contends that the ‘arguments which show how women’s subordination is not derived from poverty need to be excavated to demonstrate the (liberal) fallacy that poverty alleviation will lead to gender equity’ (p.491). This is not to say that gender cannot overlap and reinforce poverty. Jackson acknowledges the importance of a gendered analysis of poverty, such as in the case of Indian households headed by widows experience that face higher than average levels of vulnerability and impoverishment (p.493). However, she also demonstrates that there is considerable evidence that gender relations are more equitable in poor Indian households than in wealthier households, in terms of women’s engagement with labour markets, contribution to total household income, control over income, and physical mobility. As a result, gender equity often appears to be inversely related to household income. She notes that studies of the Green Revolution have ‘shown a pattern of withdrawal of women’s labor from farm work and increasing dependence of women on men as household incomes rise’; other studies have shown that ‘some of the most severe discrimination against the girl child in India is found in high-caste rural groups, characteristically also high income’; and her own research in Bihar found that ‘higher caste farmers had very few surviving daughters whilst the juvenile sex ratios in low caste and tribal households of the same village were much more balanced’ (p.497).

She offers some explanations for these findings, based on a longitudinal study of a village of Uttar Pradesh in the context of the Green Revolution. These explanations place much emphasis on processes of structural change associated with development, such as employment changes due to crop changes and mechanisation, which reduced employment for women. As a result, rising prosperity led to the withdrawal or displacement of women from wage work, the strengthening of *purdah* norms, and the inflation of dowries. The increasing dependence of women in upwardly mobile households therefore brought deeper aversion and higher mortality rates for girl children in these households (pp.497-498).

Jackson makes the point that these findings are not to suggest that women are better off poor, but that this ‘is one way of looking at the limited degree to which poverty and gender development can be approached synergistically with the same policy instruments’ (p.498). In other words, gender justice is not a poverty issue and this distinction is important to make given the tendency of development organisations to collapse all forms of disadvantage into poverty. She argues that rescuing gender from poverty analysis ‘...involves poverty-independent gender analyses and policies which recognize that poverty policies are not necessarily appropriate to tackling gender issues because *the subordination of women is not caused by poverty*’ (p.501, my emphasis). Moreover, she notes that non-poor women ‘experience subordination of different kinds... which make them important categories in their own right’ (ibid).

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<sup>12</sup> Chant (2007) also makes similar arguments as Jackson, although due to space, I will only deal with Jackson’s arguments. Levitas (1996) also explores gender from a similar angle of inequality, which Room (1999, p.170) suggests as an example of the relational aspects of social exclusion.



Indeed, her comments make us reflect on the reasons why social exclusion is so consistently collapsed into an issue of poverty. This is precisely because disadvantage and subordination are defined as deprivations within the social exclusion literature. Amartya Sen is especially guilty of this tautology, given that he defines social exclusion as constitutive of capability failure. However, this does not so much solve the problem as it simply defines it away. Instead, in the spirit of Jackson, we need to rescue social exclusion from poverty analysis. This can be done through an examination of the causal or positional relativity implicit in a processual meaning of exclusion, as explained in the following section.

### *Causal and positional relativity*

In differentiating social exclusion from poverty, we need to take seriously the implication that social exclusion is about processes of disadvantage, whether due to intentional discrimination or else due to structural or institutional disjunctures. However, an emphasis on process also requires a shift in analytical dimension; we are no longer talking about positions within a hierarchy, we are talking about downward pressures occurring along a hierarchy, whatever the position. This distinction is vital to make precisely because most of the theoretical ambiguities surrounding social exclusion come from considering the concept as a state or an outcome, and thus as a position within a hierarchy (and thus as poverty, with its attendant issues of identification and thresholds).

This processual emphasis in turn brings to light two often-overlooked dimensions of relativity that help to reach the crux of the definitional problems surrounding social exclusion. These can be called causal and positional relativity. They are to be differentiated from the two meanings of relativity commonly referred to in the literature as 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 even within a single society, group or person, what we define as exclusion is relative to the causal processes occurring with regard to a particular institution, situation or experience; it is not necessarily possible to essentialize the characteristics of this exclusion onto an overall identity or condition of the person or group in question. Positional relativity means that exclusion is relative to a person's position in a social hierarchy, both objectively and subjectively. This is analogous to insights from the well-being literature that one's subjective perception of well-being depend in part on one's position or situation relative to one's immediate surrounding, which serves as a basis of social comparison.<sup>13</sup>

Both meanings of relativity throw a serious wrench into the definition or identification of exclusion as a state or outcome, even once the norms of a society have been context-specified. Causal relativity implies 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. Again, landless peasants who are integrated into poorly paid and exploitative wage labour serve as a good example. Their inclusion into the labour market is predicated on their exclusion from other assets, such as land assets. Similarly, the increasing inclusion of Tibetan households into education systems or monetised forms of exchange often occurs in tandem with increasing exclusion in urban labour markets, particularly at the higher end of the labour hierarchy where the aspirations of graduates are aimed. The criticisms from the ILS debate summarised in the last section – that poverty is often more of a problem of inclusion on poor terms rather than exclusion – were essentially pointing in the direction of this form of relativity without naming it as such.

This is not simply another perspective on the multidimensionality of poverty. In the case of poverty, its definition as a condition is more or less straightforward even if its measurement is not (i.e. lack of means in relation to a relative or absolute metre, whether this

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, see Kingdon and Knight (2007) for a survey of this literature and its relation to poverty.

metre is one or multidimensional, or measured in terms of income, basic needs or capabilities). The definition of exclusion as a condition is more ambiguous because both exclusionary and inclusionary processes may be involved within any state or outcome. In this regard, the 'excluded' are almost always included in some ways, such as *Dalits* in India who nonetheless serve important functions in the labour hierarchy, even if these are subordinated and exploited functions. Similarly, perhaps the most 'excluded' from the modern urban economy in Tibet are nomads, and yet various aspects of their livelihoods are deeply integrated into these urban economies (and have been for centuries). Indeed, as I argue in Fischer (2006), it is often fallacious to assume that so called 'subsistence' modes of production are at odds with more commoditised or marketized modes of production. Moreover, such nomads may in many cases be far from poor in terms of assets and other forms of wealth, even while they are the most spatially excluded and worst off in terms of capabilities such as education or health. Therefore, to focus on one aspect or process for the purpose of identification risks missing the simultaneous and dialectical modes of integration and segregation that operate within actions and events, the results of which may or may not lead to states of deprivation, relative or absolute. Even if we would wish to choose one process in order to characterise a person as 'excluded', how do we make the choice between various contradictory processes? In some cases the choice is made obvious by our normative concerns, such as when many authors deem that a poor person facing various forms of disadvantage can be considered excluded. However, in many cases it is not.

Positional relativity also complicates identification because, in the simplest terms, a person can be an excludee and an excluder at the same time (which is typical of intrahousehold gender relations), and they will tend to perceive their exclusion (or inclusion) relative to the social strata immediately surrounding them. This relativity can therefore apply across many dimensions of comparison, such as ethnicity, class, caste, clan, occupations, gender, generation, or location. In other words, exclusion and inclusion reflect the constant creation and recreation of multidimensional hierarchical orderings within social and economic transformations, operating through objective and subjective comparisons among a multiplicity of social actors.

An example of positional relativity can be found in the case of recent anti-Muslim activism by Tibetans in Northwest China (Qinghai Province), as discussed in Fischer (2005b). This conflict is arguably a classic case of a subordinated group seeking to scapegoat another subordinated group for the perceived causes of their experiences of exclusion. In this context, Tibetans become both excludees and excluders. To further complicate matters, Muslims are targeted precisely because of their economic success, and thus their own exclusion is difficult to corroborate with poverty. Moreover, the perceived Muslim economic success within restricted ethnic niches draws a strong parallel with the situation of Jews in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, which further brings to light the vital importance of considering exclusions experienced by the non-poor. In other words, even though we might be tempted to consider only the exclusions experienced by the poor as morally worthy of our scholarly attention under the remit of the social exclusion approach, exclusions experienced by the non-poor are just as relevant given that they carry political weight and can serve a key triggers catalyzing conflict.

This type of relativity offers a way out of the ambiguity of social exclusion by implying that exclusion occurs vertically across a social order, whereas the concept of 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 dynamic from whatever their position. Without belittling the normative importance of situations where exclusion

overlaps with poverty, it is clear from an analytical perspective that even the rich can experience exclusion.

As noted previously, Room (1999, p.171) might disagree with this specification of social exclusion, given that he argues against treating social exclusion as simply another way of describing disadvantage. However, his own conclusions ironically point in this direction nonetheless. In arguing against the perils of neofunctionalist social theory, he suggests that society can be seen as

...a battleground of different social groups (based on social background, ethnicity, economic interest, gender, age, etc.), 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, rather than a label to be attached to the casualties of some impersonal process of urban-industrial change. Social exclusion is a normal and integral part of the power dynamics of modern society (p.172).

Thus, with this elegant passage, he seems to implicitly contradict his previous assertion that social exclusion should only refer to catastrophic ruptures if it is to be useful as an analytical concept.

One (unidentified) participant the ILS debate summarised in Gore and Figueiredo (1997) made a very similar point, referring to the grey area between social exclusion and social inclusion, within which most people in the real world live most of their lives at one point or another;

In another formulation, which was classically Weberian, it was suggested that society could be seen as multi-layered, like a kind of staircase, with processes of exclusion and inclusion occurring at all levels and executed by various kinds of organized groups and associations who are seeking on the one hand to exclude others, to defend privilege and limit competition, and on the other hand to counter exclusion. ...It also implied that in seeing social exclusion as a cause of poverty, it was important to focus on the exclusionary and inclusionary processes occurring 'at the bottom of the staircase' (Gore and Figueiredo 1997, p.42-43).

This formulation is useful to think through how exclusion can be constantly present for even those who live well above the poverty threshold, whether defined in relative or absolute terms, including elites who defend privilege or strive to limit competition.

In other words, even a relatively secure person (from a poverty perspective) can psychologically experience insecurity in a manner similar to a poor person, even if objectively speaking they would be considered far from vulnerable.<sup>14</sup> We treat the insecurity of a poor person with greater normative legitimacy, although from an analytical point of view we cannot assume that subjective emotive insecurity necessarily correlates with socio-economic insecurity. In some cases there can even be an inverse relationship, when privilege induces grasping and implies having more to lose ('the higher they rise, the harder they fall'). It was precisely this line of thinking that led me to rethink the way that social exclusion is conceptualised.

### III. WORKING DEFINITION OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

In order to capture the vertically-occurring and processual aspects of social exclusion in a way that does not rely on a notion of poverty, the following working definition of social

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<sup>14</sup> Recall, for instance, the psychological trauma that was unleashed in the US following 9/11 among Americans who were far removed from any threat.

exclusion is proposed: 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 by which various social processes create or compound multiple disadvantages for particular categories of people, particularly with respect to how macro changes filter through society to effect the fortunes of individuals, households or groups. Structural and institutional processes also allow for exclusions that are non-intentional as well as intentional. In other words, structural or institutional disjunctures that repel or obstruct people from certain sectors of an economy or society might be unintended, or else they might be purposely discriminatory, whether for purposes of ethnic segregation (as in the case of Apartheid South Africa), of developmental objectives (as in the case of restricting the legal residential status of rural migrants in Chinese urban areas), or for political purposes (as in the case of linguistic requirements for government employment). Agentive processes refer to direct discriminatory actions by one actor against another.

‘Structural’ refers to structural transformations that disadvantage certain individuals or groups, as in the connotation of social exclusion in the 1980s with respect to globalisation and industrial restructuring.<sup>15</sup> Spatial disadvantages could be included in this category, such as when growth and employment occur in certain sectors or urban areas that are difficult for rural dwellers to access or that are ill-suited for the skills of local employment.

‘Institutional’ refers to disjunctures in the formal and informal systems, rules, and norms structuring and governing the social order, which obstruct, marginalise or expel people from various systems such as social service provisioning or public employment. 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 unsynchronised 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. gradually improving education levels and increased wage employment), thereby implying improvements in capability deprivation or poverty, out-of-synch changes may in fact exacerbate exclusionary dynamics despite these marginal improvements. A focus on incremental improvements can therefore be deceiving, particularly where groups are marginalised from political power and thus from direct means to attenuate institutional disjunctures.

It should be noted that while the IILS literature is fairly clear in its definition and treatment of institutions, it is much less clear with regard to structure, and how these two overlap as concepts. For instance, Gore and Figueiredo (1997, pp.10-11) identify institutions as the ‘structural properties of societies’, as well as the structuring of social organisation (or what might be understood in Polanyian terms as the *instituting* of social order). This approach to institutions is similar to historical or sociological institutionalisms, whereby rules are treated as modes of social integration or segregation, rather than the more utilitarian sense attributed to rules by ‘rational choice institutionalism’.<sup>16</sup> However, this again leads into the definitional dilemma, which seems to pervade this literature, that institutions are defined as both structured outcomes and structured processes.

The ambiguity in fact helps to clarify the difference between institutions and structure along the lines of process and state. Institutions can be understood as the ongoing processes of constructing (or maintaining or destroying) a social order. Structure can be seen as the

<sup>15</sup> For a review of these approaches and their intellectual development, see Gore (1995, p.1995).

<sup>16</sup> See Hall and Taylor (1996) for a typology of ‘the three institutionalisms’.

*constructed* social order at a particular point in time, or the inherited outcome of instituted (structured) processes. For instance, whereas the institution of the labour market can refer to the rules and norms that produce a particular structuring in the organisation of labour, the structure of the labour market refers to the outcome of this structuring at a fixed moment in time, such as a particular constellation in the distribution and segmentation of employees, employers and sectors of work, wages and employment practices, organisations that represent or regulate labour relations, and so forth. Obviously, there is still an overlap between the two concepts, in the sense that we refer to institutional structure, although this nonetheless clarifies the fact that institutional theory is primarily concerned with processual rules and norms rather than static outcomes (despite the currently popularised emphasis in much of the mainstream policy literature on discrete institutions, i.e. on ‘getting *the* institutions right’, which should really be referred to as ‘getting the incentives right’).

As stated above, agentive processes refer to intended discriminatory actions by one actor against another, such as identity-based discrimination or segregation. Agency here is used in the same sense as elaborated by Atkinson (1998), or in the way that some authors use the term ‘relational’ to imply agency, as discussed previously. For instance, Beall and Piron (2005, p.8-9) draw on this relational theme in their identification of different axes of social exclusion, such as sets of social barriers that can be identified as either ‘relational barriers’ or ‘institutional barriers’, which refer to the third and second processes stipulated in this definition. They also identify similar axes whereby exclusion results from either social identity or social location, which refers to the third and first processes here.

The terms ‘repulsion’ and ‘obstruction’ in the second half of the definition specify that exclusion involves either outright repulsion from positions of access or benefits, or else obstruction of entry, upward mobility, and so forth (i.e. the ‘glass ceiling’). Both repulsion and obstruction could be intentional or non-intentional, or active or passive in the words of Sen (2000, pp.14-18), which refers essentially to agency. Both could result in either a downward movement in the social hierarchy, or else an inability to rise in the social hierarchy from a lower position. Similarly, a downward movement or a blocked upward movement is due to exclusion only if it occurs through structural, institutional or agentive processes of repulsion or obstruction.

This is similar to the emphasis on choice in the CASE definition discussed in the first section. If someone experiences a downward movement in the 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 in order to earn money, 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 conditioned by structural, institutional or agentive repulsions or obstructions. Exclusion in this sense implies a lack of self-determination, but not the poor results that might result from a particular course of self-determined action. However, unlike much of the development literature on social exclusion, exclusion need not only occur through explicit discrimination, but can also happen through the unintended consequences of structural change or institutional disjunctures, as discussed above.

Finally, the fact that this working definition is not grounded within a metre of poverty (relative or capability) is meant to give attention to processes of disadvantage (i.e. exclusionary processes) that can occur across a social hierarchy at any social position. It is for this reason that I avoid using the terminology of norms in the definition; as noted in the first section, as soon as we refer to norms or a sense of ‘full participation’, exclusion is immediately positioned within a social hierarchy and thus loses its causal and positional relativity.

#### IV. POLARISATION, EXCLUSION AND CONFLICT

The implications of this definition of exclusion are poignantly illustrated through an exploration of how exclusion interacts with polarisation and conflict, particularly in terms of how polarisation produces exclusions across a social hierarchy, and in turn how these exclusions catalyze or reinforce conflict. My way of conceptualising the first link between polarisation and exclusion (as well as exclusion as process), was inspired from reading a suggestion by Townsend (2002, p.7) that inequality and poverty correspond to the idea of state, whereas polarisation and exclusion correspond to the idea of process. Inequality 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), whereas polarisation describes increasing inequality within the distribution over time and exclusion describes the downward pressures faced by one part within this distribution over time. This can be clarified by the following table.

**Table 2-1: A Typology of Negative States and Processes**

	Distribution		
		Whole	Part
Dimension	State	Inequality	Poverty
	Process	Polarisation	Social exclusion

Polarisation here refers to processes of increasing inequalities or asymmetries (as is logically implied by the suffix ‘-isation’), rather than a polarised state (i.e. two humps rather than one in a static cross-sectional income distribution). The former usage represents how it was used in early development economics.<sup>17</sup> The latter usage represents how it has come to be used in current mainstream economics, such as in Duclos et al (2004), who define polarisation as a density function to describe income distributions (i.e. a *polarised* distribution, rather than polarisation).<sup>18</sup> Here, the interest is in the former.

Rising income inequality is a straightforward way to conceptualise one possible dimension of polarisation (i.e. polarisation in income distribution), although the concept includes many more dimensions. For instance, it was often used in early development economics to describe an increasingly wide spread of productivities or technological levels across different sectors of an economy or within the international economy.

Other polarisations include spatial, remunerative, institutional, and social dimensions. Spatial polarisation includes widening disparities between rich and poor regions, or urban and rural areas. Remunerative polarisation refers to increasing disparities between remunerative rates at the upper and lower strata of the labour hierarchy. It can derive either from a polarisation of productivities, as mentioned above, or else from a polarisation of power, which allows the upper strata to inflate their own remuneration while suppressing remuneration in lower strata. This may or may not involve increasing income inequality depending on how employment and production are distributed across households (or countries). Institutional polarisation occurs when increasingly complex rules and norms at the upper strata of a social system diverge from those operating at the lower levels, and is usually

<sup>17</sup> Such considerations of polarisation explicitly or implicitly underpinned much of early development economics, including the CEPAL structuralist tradition, the various reformist or radical versions of dependency theory, or the works of economists such as Lewis (1954; 1955), Singer (1950), Nurkse (1953; 1959), and others. Notably, Prebisch (1950), Hirschman (1958), Furtado (1956; 1964; 1973), Myrdal (1957), Amin (1968; 1970; 1973), and Sunkel (1973) all dealt explicitly with polarisation in the manner treated here.

<sup>18</sup> Duclos, Esteban and Ray (2004, p.1737) propose a ‘measurement theory of polarization for the case in which income distributions can be described using density functions’. Their resultant ‘polarisation index’ is constructed in essentially the same way as a Gini index.

based on intensified concentrations of power, ownership or decision making. Social polarisation refers to growing social distance between groups, or when social strata become more regularised and pronounced due to the convergence of multiple forms of inequality, such as disparities in education converging with wealth disparities.<sup>19</sup>

Townsend (2002) did not elaborate on the methodological or even epistemological implications of considering exclusion as process. However, it is clear that the idea of process implies a movement over time (akin to concepts such as velocity or acceleration in the physical sciences), whereas a state is a moment captured in time. Indeed, short of some extremely controlled pseudo-experimental settings, economics has no way of measuring process in this sense, but instead infers it through measuring two static points in time and comparing them. Perhaps it was this implicit constraint that conditioned Duclos et al (2004) to consider polarisation as a state, although I would counter that this is precisely why we need to leave econometrics behind and embrace interdisciplinary social science approaches within economics itself.

Once the distinction between state and process is established, we can see that processes are established independent of their starting position. This is clear in the case of income polarisation; polarisation can be attributed to increases in inequality regardless of the starting point. Polarisation can occur from a very equal starting position (i.e. China at the beginning of the reform period or Russia at the collapse of Communism) or else from a very unequal starting position (i.e. rising inequality in most of Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s despite some of the highest levels of inequality in the world).

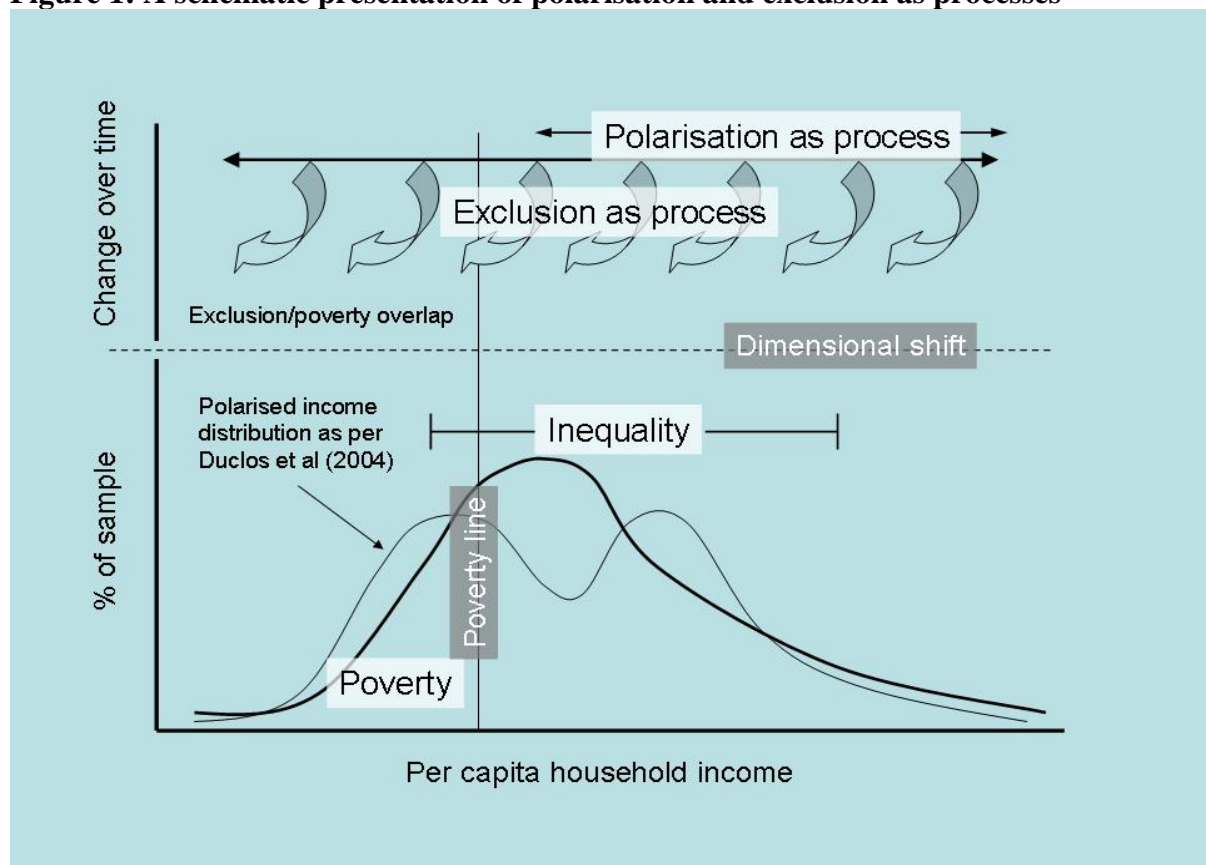
To translate this insight into an understanding of social exclusion as a process, exclusion in this sense refers to downward pressures of obstruction or repulsion that occur along one or many dimensions of a social hierarchy *regardless of position within the hierarchy*. Exclusion might result in actual downward movements within the hierarchy or else restriction of upward movements, although in analytical terms these results can happen to anyone within the hierarchy. In other words, exclusion occurs vertically throughout a social hierarchy, whereas poverty occurs horizontally at the bottom end of a social hierarchy. The only difference between absolute or relative poverty, capability failure or even participatory approaches to identifying poverty, is in the way of determining this bottom position. In contrast, exclusion must be theoretically differentiated from all of these approaches given that it can occur in absence of poverty, however poverty is defined.

Following this logic, exclusion can overlap with poverty, but it is not poverty. Exclusionary processes do lead to a variety of states or outcomes; absolute poverty may be one such outcome, or else may be a factor leading to exclusion, but not necessarily. Also, in contention with Sen (2000), exclusion cannot be defined as constitutive of capability failure, except if one tautologically defines exclusion itself as a capability failure, and it may or may not be instrumental for capability failure. Nor can exclusion be defined as relative deprivation, in the sense that it is possible for the relatively non-poor to face exclusionary obstructions or repulsions, as discussed above with regard to gender. Thus, exclusion is not the same as these other concepts given that it can be identified across a social hierarchy (or income distribution), whereas poverty only exists at the lower end of a hierarchy.

These various insights can be summarised through the following figure, expressed in terms of income distribution for the sake of simplicity and clarification.

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<sup>19</sup> I am indebted to Peter Townsend for pointing out these two meanings of social polarisation.

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

The thicker line in the lower part of the diagram shows a typical household income distribution, such as that of rural China in the late 1990s. The thinner line shows a polarised household income distribution in the sense used by Duclos et al (2004). To give an example, this polarised distribution describes well the rural household income distribution of Qinghai, particularly after a drought in 2000 (see Fischer, 2005a, p.100). From this basic data set, a variety of inequality measures can be calculated. The poverty line could be determined absolutely or relatively, or it could be hypothetically determined along a variety of other dimensions not shown here. The upper part of the diagram shows the processual dimension corresponding to the static dimension below. Polarisation represents a stretching out of the distribution, while exclusion represents downward pressures across the distribution. The upper left hand corner represents where exclusion leads to and thus overlaps with poverty, which is where most work on social exclusion has been focused.

This way of 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. This precise point is made by Jackson (1996) with regard to gender. Moreover, an exclusion that does not necessarily lead to any particular deprivation may 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. Again, Jackson makes this point with respect to gender, arguing that

...the position of nonpoor women is also relevant to poor women in both positive and negative ways. By changing societal perceptions of women's roles and identities the achievements of nonpoor women can positively influence



gender bargaining, ideologies and opportunities for poor women through changing societal perceptions of women's options.

The roles, identities and behaviour of nonpoor women also have negative influences on poor women. One significant example from India is the ways in which 'sanskritization,'... carries with it particular gender ideologies centered on the dependency of women... It could be argued that addressing dowry practices among middle income groups is one of the most important gender issues in India today. A poverty focus misses the range of interconnected gender issues across classes and socioeconomic strata... (ibid, p.501).

This perspective is subtly but powerfully different from the more common assertion that we need to understand the relationship of more advantaged groups to the socially excluded. For instance, Room (1999, p.172) argues that the former have an important influence in shaping the exclusion of the latter, or in limiting and preventing appropriate policy responses. This is an important point, although it is again based on a binary categorisation of excluders and excludees. Rather, here the emphasis is on how exclusion or disadvantage experienced by those higher up in the social hierarchy can itself lead to a variety of dynamics, both vicious and virtuous. This wider view of exclusion among both the poor and non-poor is important for understanding issues such as social disintegration and conflict, as discussed below.

### ***Polarisation and exclusion as related processes***

Following this treatment of exclusion, it is clear how exclusion can be generated by polarisation. A simple conceptualisation can be made in terms of income distribution. When income polarisation takes place, there is effectively a thinning out of the distribution, which typically occurs at the middle of the distribution, and possibly at the upper end as well (in terms of numbers of people rather than value of wealth). Although there will obviously be churning due to some upward mobility, on average this thinning takes place through downward movements in social, labour or wealth hierarchies.<sup>20</sup> As defined above, these downward movements can be considered exclusion when they occur due to structural, institutional or agentive processes of repulsion or obstruction (which could also be part of the cause of polarisation in the first place).

Indeed, this example reveals the importance of distinguishing exclusion from deprivation, given that it is often the middle strata that potentially face the greatest relative downward displacement in the process of polarisation, as in the case of the US under Bush Junior (Weller and Staub, 2006) or Britain under Blair (Dorling et al, 2007). The lower strata will experience more competitive pressure due to the downward movements of those from above, or else due to restrictions of upward mobility, and this will induce considerable churning within the lower strata. However, not all poor will necessarily experience exclusion in the sense defined here. Indeed, many might be insulated from churning at higher levels, such as in the case of nomadic households with little or no integration into urban labour markets. Among those in the lower strata who do experience exclusion, they will more likely experience it as obstruction of upward mobility rather than repulsion from upper strata, and their relative position within the social hierarchy might remain unchanged. Rather, the greatest insecurity in terms of loss of relative position is often faced by various middle strata competing within urban areas or within growth-inducing sectors of the economy.<sup>21</sup> It is in

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<sup>20</sup> The work of Hills (1998) on income mobility would have strong application here.

<sup>21</sup> I include formal workers in the middle strata given that they are a relatively privileged minority of the workforce in most developing countries, including China. Thus, being laid-off could be seen as a severe form of repulsion from these middle strata of the labour hierarchy.

this sense that it is often possible to see intensifying exclusionary pressures even in the context of growth and decreasing poverty.

A poignant example of this can be found in research by one INGO on Chinese government efforts to resettle nomads into towns in Qinghai.<sup>22</sup> The INGO researcher noted that, among his sample, those who lost most and were most disgruntled seemed to have been the richer nomads with large herds, who fell from an independent and rich subsistence situation to one dependent on government welfare in small town ghettos. However, poor nomads, with previous herd sizes too small to guarantee a minimum level of subsistence, seemed much happier with the change, even though they were possibly even worse off in the small towns than the rich nomads, given that they had started with much less capital from the sale of their herds. In this and similar cases, we would expect the strongest resistance to government policies to emerge from the richer members of a community, even through their deprivations might be less than those of the poorer members. In other words, it is about from where, why and how far one falls, rather than where one lands.

### *Linking up polarisation and exclusion to conflict*

The dislocating effects of such exclusions, if unmitigated, can be seen to fuel impulses for social protection.<sup>23</sup> Suffice to point out here that we cannot assume that subjective emotive insecurity necessarily correlates with objective socio-economic insecurity. This is important because it implicates middle and upper strata into an understanding of how inequality might produce conflict. In other words, perceptions of risk, insecurity and loss of agency are relative to the perceiver and transcend social position; once an accepted, socially-constructed and subjective threshold of risk is broken, rich and poor alike can suffer from an exacerbated sense of insecurity.

The methodology of poverty and inequality analysis tends to divert attention away from vertically occurring disadvantages that cut across hierarchical social orderings (such as class, rich and poor, and so forth), even though disadvantages occurring at the upper ends of the hierarchy might be vital to understand some of the wider social implications of changing inequality. In contrast, an understanding of exclusion as a process that can be experienced by rich and poor alike sheds light on how increasing inequality can affect social responses, not merely by pressuring the poor, but also by pressuring the non-poor and, in particular, elites. Indeed, this resonates with the analyses of Polanyi (1944) and Arendt (1951) on 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 the concept of poverty in understanding social conflict.

Thinking about exclusion this way is also a useful way to move scholarship away from the tendency to blame inequality-induced conflict on the poor. If increasing inequality is evoked as a cause of conflict without any further elaboration, this can result in a reactionary phobia or revolutionary hysteria that the poor are rising up, given that rising inequality raises their relative disparity and thus their discontent. These types of sloppy evocations are

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<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Jampel Dell'Angelo for allowing me to use this example from his research.

<sup>23</sup> This refers to the concept of double movement from Polanyi (2001[1944]). The double movement is effectively Polanyi's version of a dialectic tension operating within market society, which is 'constituted by two opposing movements – the laissez-faire movement to expand the scope of the market, and the protective countermovement that emerges to resist the disembedding of the economy' (Block, 2001, p.xxviii). Notably, as opposed to Marxist thought, Polanyi argued that this countermovement did not carry any deterministic class logic, but was an impulse that cut across class, involving business groups as well as workers movements. 'In a word even capitalists periodically resist the uncertainty and fluctuations that market self-regulation produces and participate in efforts to increase stability and predictability through forms of protection' (ibid). Thus, the double movement can result in reactionary, reformist or revolutionary protective responses, and indeed, Polanyi used this analysis to explain the emergence of fascism, the welfare state, and socialism in the twentieth century.

unfortunately common in the globalisation literature, even if many authors probably do not mean to imply such a crass causality.

From a more sophisticated angle, Stewart et al (2006) make an explicit effort to connect social exclusion to the broader project of identifying 'horizontal inequalities' (i.e. inequalities between groups rather than individuals) as a critical determinant of inter-group conflict, as originally laid out by Stewart (2002). As noted earlier, they opt for a definition of social exclusion as involving multiple deprivations, rather than single deprivations such as exclusion from political participation. They argue that the 'socially excluded are generally severely economically deprived and lack access to political power. Because of their economic situation, they appear to have little to lose by taking violent action' (Stewart et al, 2006, p.6). Obviously, there is no doubt that the poor can always serve as a reserve army, literally or economically. But the very poor are often too poor or too unhealthy to fight, and sustained violent conflicts, similar to migration, usually require resources and organizational capacity, something that the very excluded presumably lack. Moreover, the only really hard examples used by Stewart et al to substantiate their arguments are cases of discriminated, typically minority, cultural or religious groups. Here again, we must question whether those who do manage to join the fight are necessarily suffering from severe deprivations due to multiple exclusions. In particular, any cursory study of conflict will reveal that the most important actors in almost all conflicts, especially at organisational levels, are usually from middle or elite strata. Indeed, Stewart et al argue this point as well, noting that leadership plays a critical role in emphasizing and accentuating particular identities, and that leadership emerges out of the middle classes rather than the deprived in most of the conflicts they studied (p.7-8).

However, the problem with this horizontal inequality approach is that it tends to treat intra-group dynamics in an overly functionalist or instrumentalist manner, particularly with respect to how common grievances might form within a group. Certainly, Stewart (2002) tends to treat groups as homogeneous units in order to determine inter-group inequality. Stewart et al (2006) improve on this via the language of social exclusion;

To summarise, social exclusion provides the grievances that generate potential support for protest. Leadership which helps transform these grievances into protests is mostly likely to arise when there is political as well as economic exclusion, and when a potential middle class leadership is denied access to political power. Cultural affinities combined with leadership turn these latent grievances into actual protest, which may become violent (pp.9-10).

Despite this improvement, their approach is nonetheless still hindered by the consideration of social exclusion as horizontally-occurring at the bottom of the social hierarchy, thus creating a dualistic representation of social hierarchies. As a result, the 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. Perhaps as a means to overcome this dualism, they refer to a complicated mixture of exclusions, some of which are single deprivations and thus, as they argue previously, do not count fully as social exclusions. However, given that they refer to Tibet as one of their examples, my own study of Tibet suggests that such dualistic representations of social action across a hierarchy are far from clear. Indeed, the aggrieved socially-excluded in many cases are actually people who are best characterised as middle strata, such as high school and university graduates or enterprising migrants from rural areas, who are frustrated by obstructions to their aspiring upward mobility, or offended by being forced into types of labour that they deem undignified.<sup>24</sup>

Rather, reframing social exclusion as vertically-occurring processes of disadvantage comes closer to prying open the puzzle on how social dislocations may have very different

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<sup>24</sup> See Fischer (2005b; 2006).

impacts within different levels of an intra-group hierarchy, yet still may provide for a basis of common grievances within the group. This is similar to one line of inquiry on murderous ethnic cleansing by Michael Mann (2005, p.5). He theorises that 'ethnic hostility rises where ethnicity trumps class as the main form of social stratification, in the process capturing and channelling classlike sentiments towards ethnonationalism.' He therefore argues that 'the most serious defect of recent writing on ethnonationalism has been its almost complete neglect of class relations', or else 'wrongly [seeing] class as materialistic, ethnicity as emotional.' The vertical occurrence of exclusion can precisely provide a clue to the challenge he posed, to understand the processes whereby class-based perceptions of grievance transmute into ethnic-based perceptions. In contrast, poverty or even inequality analysis would be limited in this regard.

The vertical occurrence of exclusion therefore presents possibilities 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 so forth. The actual experience of exclusion or insecurity will obviously differ considerably across these horizontal groups, but the similar axes of disadvantage 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. A heightened sense of insecurity can occur among upper social strata in line with multiple deprivations among lower social strata.

The perception of shared adversity might be the overriding consideration that forges vertical bonds of solidarity within a group, in contrast to differences in the experiences faced by various social strata. Common perceptions of cause, rather than common outcomes, allow for common narratives to emerge across social classes. These can be used to interpret the reasons for shared experiences of adversity and to collaborate within common remedial strategies. The fact that such vertical bonding might preserve a sense of familiar social hierarchy further reinforces a countervailing sense of security, contributing all the more weight to its momentum. This understanding of social exclusion therefore helps to move towards a more nuanced position that understands the actions and ideologies of both rich and poor alike as instrumental and normative at the same time.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to resolve the theoretical ambiguities of the social exclusion approach through a lengthy deconstruction and re-conceptualisation 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 discussion of process and that social exclusion can occur without poverty, most attempts to operationalise the concept end out more or less reducing it to a description 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 to just criticisms that the term is ambiguous or redundant with respect to already existing concepts of poverty, particularly more multidimensional and processual concepts of poverty such as relative or capability deprivation.

It is precisely in order to break out of this theoretical and operational imbroglio that I propose a new way of conceptualising social exclusion by making a definitive choice to consider it as processes of disadvantage, which I argue 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 also 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 can be seen to occur at all levels

of a social hierarchy, not merely at the bottom as implied by concepts of poverty. Similar to critiques of the feminisation of poverty from 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 may 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, as analysed in relation to the interaction of polarisation and exclusion and their impact on conflict. 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.

Most importantly, exclusion understood in this way avoids the tendency to blame inequality-induced conflict on lower social strata, which is perhaps inadvertently but unfortunately implied by numerous references in academic, policy and journalistic circles that inequality and poverty might induce conflict. Instead, given that we know elites are usually substantially involved in many forms of social conflict, particularly those involving contestation of the state or of other elites, we need social theory to address how elites themselves might find grievance with inequality, lest we fall into the 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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