A society of migration: Poststructuralist perspectives on the constitution of society and the production of migration

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Abstract

This article addresses the gap in sociological theory concerning the politics of 'migration' – even though this area of politics and the debates surrounding it are of social salience and relevance. Both in social theory (the question of what society actually is or how it is constituted) and in the social analysis of modernity, the topic of migration plays a role no more than *en passent*. Nevertheless, there are sociological theories that allow us to shed light on debates, practices, institutions, and infrastructures of migration. The article focuses on poststructuralist and postcolonial theories in order to think modern society as 'society of migration', i.e. as a society which is *constituted* by the production of migration and migrants, as well as by the migrant subjects themselves.

The politics of migration and the constitution of society

Problematizations of migrants, the political imaginary, cultural difference: these terms summarize the three concepts of social theory that perhaps best allow us to sociologically

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clarify the societal importance of politics of migration, the controversial debates and organizations, and the political emotions associated with this topic. Looking on it differently, those theoretical concepts allow us to see the politics of migration as *socially constitutive*. In this sense, the following text is about the 'society of migration', implying that society is constituted in the different politics of migration. In this paper, 'theories of society' is thus understood as theories that pose the question of what a *society* actually 'is' or how society is constituted.[1] The concepts of problematizations, of the political imaginary, and of cultural difference or hybridity – unfolded in the works of Michel Foucault, of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and of Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, and Stuart Hall – complement each other. They focus on the classifications, institutionalizations, and the discourses on migration and migrants, on the different policies of migration between rejection and problematization of immigration and migrants on the one hand, and policies of solidarity and advocacy, of reception and asylum on the other. Additionally, 'cultural difference' and 'diasporic culture' make it possible to conceive of migrants and *their* practices and discourses as such, in which collective identity or society is created in the first place. Or, these theoretical vocabularies relate the *constitution of society* to migration policies and debates, laying the accent on the problematization, the discrimination and the Othering of the 'migrant', as well as on the policy of immigration; on collective identity debates about the 'migrant'; and on the constitution of society by the migrants themselves. With those concepts, migration studies can be or are focused on the intensity of affects; the enormous mobilizing potential that threatens modern liberal democracy and the contradictory attitudes associated with this topic; and all those classifying institutions, disciplines, and discourses that constitute the politics of 'migration'.

Only a part of these theories, and no other classical social theory deal systematically with migration.[2] The lack of a theory of migration in the sense of a theory of *society* has been pointed out particularly by German-language migration research (Bojadžijev & Romhild, 2014; Gutiérrez Rodriguez, 2010; Mecheril et al., 2013; Nieswand & Drotbohm, 2014), as well as in articles within this very journal (see note 2). For its part, the *European Journal of Social Theory* has more or less explicitly attempted to fill this gap, particularly concerning the concepts of the 'migration regime' and the social 'production' of migration. The nevertheless obvious lack of a theory of the constitution of society which focuses on migration can be understood if one takes into account the respective contemporary political and epistemic or political–theoretical contexts. First of all, the social problematization of migration only began to emerge in recent decades. This explains to some extent why the classic theoretical texts of sociology, as well as more recent theories of society developed in the 1980s, hardly address this issue. The lack of a social theory of migration since then can then be attributed to the traditions of thought that these thinkers opened up. To mention is also the fact that the theoretical debate since the 1980s has tended to abandon the concept of society as 'essentialist' (Delitz, 2020), in tendency basing 'the social' on the (individual) actor. Finally, the lack of a social theory of migration (in this sense, as theory of society) is also explained by the fact that sociological theories have long failed to reflect on coloniality – given that worldwide migration in many cases has a colonial legacy.

The considerations apply to a concept of society in which the phenomenon of migration and its problematization is to be understood as 'constitutive' for modern societies. To this end, I will elaborate thematic issues which become visible thanks to the mentioned theoretical works and their vocabularies. This applies first of all to the perspective of Michel Foucault. Migration research has already drawn on the vocabulary he created. With him, the 'political, economic, and legal conditions' in which migration first emerges as a social phenomenon come into focus (Redaktion movements, 2015, p. 2). The following section therefore demonstrates several concepts of migration elaborated in Foucault's work. On the one hand, it shows how Foucault himself addressed migration, in ephemeral but productive remarks particularly in his lectures on *biopolitics*. On the other, concepts that Foucault developed for other phenomena are brought into view – that of *problematization* and that of *constitutive exclusion*. With Foucault, the institutionalization of migration becomes conceivable in light of institutions that correspond to modern society, seeing modernity as being characterized by the two aspects of disciplinarity and biopolitics. Additionally, Paul Gilroy's concepts and metaphors of ships, passages, and routes will be mentioned: while Foucault urges to investigate *border* politics and discriminatory policies against migrants and migration, Gilroy accentuates *routes* as those which cause the modern nation state. Secondly, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's concept of society makes it possible to understand the politicization of migration as the result of discourses and practices in which collective identity or society is articulated. In addition to their concept of the 'constitutive outside', Mouffe's concept of the 'political imaginary' will be of central relevance here. These two concepts make it possible to understand the specific way in which society is constituted as a unit in modern democracies – and therefore why migrants in these institutions of society are at once excluded and included. While these poststructuralist theories focus more on the *discourses of* migration and the problematization of the 'migrant', the postcolonial theories of Homi K. Bhabha, of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy thirdly turn the migrant *him- and herself* into the key figure of any collective identity, in stating that cultural or collective identity is based on (practices of) cultural difference.

'Problematizations' of migrants and bio-politics

Although Foucault himself hardly mentioned the topic (Fassin, 2011), there is a rich Foucauldian scholarship on migration, ranging 'from the investigation of the biopolitics of citizenship, borders and otherness to the humanitarian government of refugees, and from the surveillance and discipline of international mobility and labour migration to the genealogy of sanctuary' (Walters, 2015, p. 1).[3] Foucault made visible the institutional arrangements in which migrant subjects are produced as such – in the collection of knowledge about them, in institutions that classify and exclude certain subjects (as illegal or legal, as those with the right of residence, etc.), in the institutions of law and the police. The concept of 'problematization' (i.e. the declaration of certain individuals as a social 'problem') has also been connected to migration (Schwiertz, 2024). Likewise, a theory of migration and society can be unfolded from his early work, *History of Madness* (Foucault, 2006a[5]). Already there, Foucault turned his attention to the discourses, artefacts, and practices that divided and subjugated individuals in

'problematizing' them. Following this, the migrant could be understood as one of the contemporary figures whose *liminal* position, and the institutionalized practice of exclusion and integration s/he is subject to, seems socially constitutive. By the way, Foucault was himself active in political associations for the rights of immigrants: he supported the *Groupe d'information et de soutien aux* immigrés and the *Groupe d'information sur les asiles* (cf. Taga, 2014, p. 102).

Problematizations and subjectivizations

In order to show the continuity of his research in retrospect, Foucault did indeed use the concept of '*problematization*'.[6] He stated that his research was always concerned with the question of 'how and why certain things, conducts, phenomena, processes became a problem' (2019, p. 224). This question was not aimed at the problematization of an already existing object, but at all those 'practices that makes something enter into the play of the true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought' (Foucault, 1989b, p. 456f.), or of power. Thus, *History of Madness* was concerned with the question of 'how and why madness' had been 'problematized through a certain institutional practice' at a particular moment (Foucault, 1989b, p. 456). Subsequently, *Discipline and Punish* (1995) was concerned with the 'problematization of the relations between delinquency and punishment' (Foucault, 1989b, p. 456). The lectures on the *abnormal* focused on the way in which individuals in European societies historically had been problematized, namely initially (in the eighteenth century) in the guise of the human 'monster', and later in the guises of the 'individual in need of correction', among others (Foucault, 2003b, p. 60). In other words, Foucault located the commonality of his works in the question of the *subject*. He always was concerned with the modes by which a human being 'turns him- or herself into a subject', Foucault (1982, p. 777f.) also wrote. This analytical direction urges to investigate all those institutions and discourses in which individuals are problematized, in which they are divided into normal and abnormal, or in which they are made into subjects of knowledge and power. Disciplinary power is Foucault's later term summarizing these processes and institutions, in which the subject is produced as such (as subjected).

Following this vocabulary, a social theory of migration would have to ask how individuals are turned into *migrant subjects* or how and why they are 'problematized': which institutions, practices, and discourses characterize this transformation into an object not only of law the political, and the police, but also of the empirical sciences? With regards to subjects treated as migrants, what does their 'inclusion in the play of the true and the false' mean, and in what way is this socially constitutive? Which disciplines have been historically established around this 'problem'? These questions could in particular be linked to the form of that historical social analysis which Foucault presented in *History of Madness*, making visible in which way the 'madman has been the one whose discourse cannot have the same currency as others', whose word is treated as 'worthless' (1971, p. 53). If *History of Madness* is about the formation of 'normal' subjects to the exclusion of the "abnormal", so because the historical treatment of individuals defined as "mad" was a demarcation that was *constitutive* for society. As Foucault himself formulated, his *History of*

Insanity in the Age of Reason belongs to a 'history of limits' in which a 'culture' or a society produces something that 'will be the Exterior' as such, against which society makes 'its essential choices'. It is the 'division which gives a culture the face of its positivity' (2006a, p. xxix). By excluding the 'insane' (i.e. all those who do not work), a society has been constituted whose central values are reason and labour: that is Foucault's thesis. The individuals who were defined as 'madmen' in the seventeenth century, and who became the object of scientific disciplines in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries replaced others whose exclusion previously was just as socially constitutive – the leper. Madness took over 'the role of leprosy as a haunting in people's fears'. When both categories of subjects evoked the same reactions of 'division, exclusion, and purification' (Foucault, 2006a, p. 8); when the 'madmen' have been very different individuals (homeless people, sick people, and beggars, as well as mentally ill), all being defined as the 'most immediate threat' to bourgeois society (Foucault, 2006a, p. 379), research had to ask in what respect today it is the *migrant who occupies that borderline position*. In what respect the migrant represents the figure in whose exclusion society creates its identity, representing a 'haunting in people's fears' and evokes 'reactions of purification', what constitutive values are indicated by the hatred that the migrant evokes in parts of the population? Such an extension of Foucault's views would also have to extend the history of the 'asylum' (of its legal form, its administration and police control, the buildings and their enclosures) from the historical asylums that Foucault exposed – as the places that in the eighteenth century replaced the leprosaria 'in the landscape of the moral universe' as well as 'in the physical geography of haunted places' (Foucault, 2006a, p. 71, cf. 2006b). In the rejection and confinement; in the political, administrative, legal, and law-enforcement institutions of the classification and treatment of today's 'asylum'; in the classification and politicization of asylum seekers; in the question of its architecture; and, not least, the lack of *work* permits for asylum seekers: all this demonstrates moments of the constituting of a society whose central value is certainly still *work* (Foucault, 2006a, p. 71), and which is also constituted by the exclusion of the 'other', perceived as 'non-identical', as non-sharing an imagined culture and origin (that of the nation).

Biopolitics: limiting emigration, state racism, and human capital

In addition to the problematization of individuals, which Foucault later made visible as disciplinary techniques, his analyses of *biopolitics* should be mentioned here. It was through these concepts that Foucault brought the institutionalization of migration to light as something that – by limiting migration – possessed additional positivity. According to Foucault, contemporary society is constituted as one of 'population'. More precisely, there are three stages and facets of biopolitics that Foucault himself also made clear with regards to migration (wherever he actually wrote on the topic): first, in the exclusion of the 'other', or state racism in the name of the population; second, in the reverse limitation of emigration and the facilitation of immigration; and thirdly, in a newer form of politics in which the migrant appears as an 'entrepreneur of herself'. Foucault classified these three forms of migration politics historically, that is,

they are historical stages of biopolitics, as a social formation in which the life of the population becomes the object of power.

In *Security, Territory, Population*, modern society is interpreted as a form of power that corresponds to a new 'object and subject' of the political: the 'reality of the population' (2007, p. 25). In the eighteenth century, the *population* took the place of the sovereign. It became the subject of the political, the art of government is practiced in its name (Foucault, 1978, pp. 135–159, 2007, pp. 407–427). At the same time, the new reality of the 'population' also became an *object* of power. It became the object of security techniques, of techniques of 'normation', that is, the measurement of its 'normality' (2007, pp. 83–110). Biopolitics is a 'regulatory apparatus, that prevents emigration, calls for immigrants, and promotes the birth rate' (2007, p. 97). In *Society Must Be Defended*, a second consequence of biopolitics became visible with regards to migration: a power that seeks to enrich the life of the population corresponds to 'state racism' (cf. 1978, p. 137, Foucault, 2003a, p. 254ff.), which 'create[s] caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower' and which establishes and justifies the 'right to kill' (2003a, p. 225f.) that classically belonged to the sovereign. To a power that purports to enhance life, any killing initially appears alien; it therefore requires discourses that justify it – such as racism. At this point, Foucault mentions not only the facts that we all face when it comes to state racism, but also 'forms of indirect murder', policies that increase the 'risk of death' for certain individuals, such as 'expulsion, rejection, and so on' (2003a, p. 256). All policies that result in the non-admission of migrants and/or their expulsion can be understood as consequences of this form of biopower. This also makes it understandable why migration policy has exhibited both limitations on emigration and invitations to guest workers (labour immigration), as well as rejection and exclusion, insofar as all those architectures and institutions are associated with 'migration regimes' (cf. Bachmann-Medick & Kugele, 2018; Gebhardt, 2020). Finally, in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault used the analysis of neoliberal economic theories and their political implementation to mention a third form of institutionalization of migration and the treatment of migrants that emerged in the twentieth century. According to the concept of human capital, all social behaviour is interpreted 'in economic terms' (2008, p. 246); in these policies, society becomes understood as a company. In such a form of biopolitics – which US and British neoliberalism stand for – the fundamental element of power is no longer the 'population'. In this newer form of biopolitics it is now the individual who is at the centre of a new conception of society as a 'society of labour'. This means that labour has been problematized anew. It is no longer understood as the sum total of a working population (and those who do not work), but as an investment in personal 'capital'. Within a 'society made up of enterprise-units', the subject becomes the 'entrepreneur of himself', an individual who is 'his own capital' (Foucault, 2008, p. 225f.). In this framework, in which the entire society is interpreted as entrepreneurial, a new argumentation of racism (i.e. of exclusion and purification) becomes understandable, as well as the willingness to migrate, and the highly sought-after status of migrants (depending on their qualifications and origin). Emigration now appears, as Foucault (2008, p. 230) wrote, as an 'investment', and the migrant as 'an entrepreneur of himself'.

A genealogy of migration policies or the asylum

Rethinking modern society as being historically connected with the policies of migration (as a statistical phenomenon) and with the 'problematization' of migrants (as individuals), a Foucauldian approach helps to overcome the 'presentist focus' of scholarship about migration (Walters, 2015, p. 1) – showing in which sense the migrant is the liminal figure in which a society constitutes its core values. As Foucault always is interested not only in discourses, but also in material cultures, a further research axis is opened up, at the same time: the question in which way the ('illegal' or 'legal') immigrant, the refugee and the asylum seeker is related not only to particular juridical institutions and discourses, but also to particular architectures and infrastructures. Or, it is the genealogy of the asylum as institution and as material artefact which should be of interest here. In *Les machines à guerir* Foucault and his co-authors (Foucault et al., 1979) have reconstructed the historical transformation of the institutions of charity in the name of the poor into institutions which produce 'utile subjects' in the name of the health of the social body. According to this research and in the eighteenth century, the architecture of the asylum of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has been transformed into the architecture of the hospital. The twentieth century would represent a further transformation of the asylum, now serving as a machine to classify human subjects as bearer of capital. In this respect, historical analysis would be attentive to 'migration' as a global, *statistical* phenomenon, and to the (legal or illegal) 'migrant' as classified subject. Likewise, research would also be focused on discourses and institutional practices, as in material cultures. It is in this vein that Walters focuses on the modes in which migration is being problematized 'at the level of its geographical and infrastructural routes' (Walters, 2015, p. 8f.), equally taking as a starting point the work of Paul Gilroy. In shifting the focus from borders to routes, Gilroy indeed seems complementary to a Foucauldian perspective. Although the latter urges to analyse exclusions as well as total institutions, Gilroy accentuates the migrant himself, and the migrant and slavery routes with which modern society is constituted as a 'fluid' system (1990, p. 119) – as a system of 'rhizomorphic, routed, diaspora cultures' (1993, p. 4). From here, the constitution of society as nation state is equally visible, together with the rejection of migrants in the overall desire for 'roots' (Gilroy, 1993, p. 28).

The migrant as the constitutive outside and as part of a democratic society

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe defined 'society' as 'impossible' object. Always contested, and always dependent on an 'outside', there is no society in sense of a defined whole. But just therefore, the determination of society or collective identity is necessary, and more precisely: the imagination of such an identity. Indeed, such a theory doesn't abandon the notion of society. It rather asks *which origins of a society's unity and identity are imaginarily instituted* – as Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort, and Marcel Gauchet have formulated. Mouffe partly expands on these works, allowing us to understand the enormous differences in attitudes, politics, and effects regarding migration. Like Foucault's, this theory of

society has already been made productive in the context of migration (e.g. Hansen, 2020; Mezzadra, 2004; Schwiertz, 2019, 2022). With it, society appears as something that is constituted *in opposition* to migrants (Schwiertz, 2019, p. 59). This reading tends to understand humanitarian or immigration politics as exceptions: even if there are 'pro-migrant elements' in modern democracies, migration is fundamentally 'demarcated, problematized, and disenfranchised' (Schwiertz, 2019, p. 60, my translation). Additional aspects can be formulated, given the complexity of this theory of society. It is necessary to briefly outline here, especially with regards to the 'constitutive outside', followed by passages which Laclau and Mouffe themselves addressed to migration, and by Mouffe's concept of the political imaginary, which allow us to understand the contradictory attitudes to migration within modern democracy.

Society as a hegemonic assertion of an identity and its outside

Hegemony and Socialist Strategy is concerned with rejecting any 'essentialist' notion of society (cf. Laclau & Mouffe, 2001a, p. 96). There is no fundamental structure that guarantees and substantiates an identity of society or of any other collective (of the working class). No 'ultimate foundation' precedes the social (2001a, p. 183, cf. p. 31f.). ''Society' is not a valid object of discourse' because there 'is no single underlying principle' which fixes the 'differences' (2001a, p. 111, cf. p. 95f.). Rather, society *exists* in discursive articulations (of identities and differences). As any identity is discursively constituted, society does not precede discourses. Likewise, it has no foundation. Rather, society is heterogeneous and contested in itself. Therefore, Laclau and Mouffe (2001a, p. 129) understand society as an 'impossible' object: it 'is never transparent to itself'. This notion of society as consisting of discursive articulations follows Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics, applying his ideas to the social (an operation largely shared by structuralist and poststructuralist approaches, cf. 2001a, p. 112f.). According to Saussure, meaning does not arise through a causal relationship to a designated reality (the signified), but rather in the difference between the signifiers. Thus, if language is a system of signs that do not refer to a transcendental signifier, then 'society' is also integrated into the infinite 'play of signification' (Derrida, 1978, p. 280). There is no escaping discourse. And since identity only exists in the difference to other signs, other, equally possible, discursive statements, society can never be thought of as an object underlying discourse. But, just *because of this*, assertion of an identity and a foundation of the social nevertheless is '*necessary*':

> Even in order to differ, to subvert meaning, there has to be a meaning. If the social does not manage to fix itself in the intelligible and instituted forms of a society, the social only exists, however, as an effort to construct that impossible object. Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre. (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001a, p. 112)

As any such discourse remains a discursive practice, society is thus not to be thought of as a closed 'interiority' (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001a, p. 111), but as an *assertion* of such – depending now on the difference to an 'outside'. Following this argument of the

discursive constitution of society, the concept of a 'constitutive exterior' is introduced in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* – albeit only in the foreword of the German translation. In this foreword, Laclau and Mouffe defined the constitutive outside as a *discursive* one; and more particularly, as an outside that is present 'inside' a given (asserted) society. It is a society's 'possibility' of being itself different (2001b, p. 27, my translation). For instance, the signifier 'democracy' has a different meaning depending on which collective existence is juxtaposed with it: in a discourse that contrasts democracy with communism, its identity is different than when it comes to the opposition of democracy and fascism; and it is the question of which of these positions becomes hegemonic, which determines a given society's identity. In other words, society or 'social objectivity' is always a question of 'power' (2001b, p. 26f., my translation; Mouffe, 1993, p. 141) – the question is, which collectives and subjects are defined as Others.

In *The Return of the Political* (1993) and in *On the Political* (2005), Mouffe re-formulated the concept of the 'constitutive outside'. Here, she (2005, p. 15) defines collective identity as created by the 'demarcation of a "they"', by an 'exterior', that is the 'very condition' of a society's existence (cf. Mouffe, 1993, p. 85). If every collective or society requires an Other, it is never a neutral one. Distinctions between inside and outside, between 'we' and 'they' are 'always' asymmetrical (1993, p. 141). At the same time, Mouffe warns for any misunderstanding in stating that the constitutive outside is *necessary* for the emergence of a collective: the inside/outside-relation is the unsolvable tension between the 'possibility' and the 'impossibility' of collective identity. If the migrant is seen as outside, he or she serves as the 'symbol' for this impossibility (Mouffe, 2000, p. 12), he or she symbolizes the impossibility of a closed society.

Laclau and Mouffe on migration and migrants: logic of equivalence and of difference

Like Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe only mentioned migration *en passant*. On the one hand, those remarks indeed dealt with the constitutive function of exclusionary discourses: such discourses form a (temporary and hegemonic) collective closure, in that reference to the otherness of the migrant conceals the inner heterogeneity of the collective. On the other, the two authors also showed that solidaric discourses in relation to migrants create collectives. In this context, Laclau and Mouffe first distinguished between two opposing, ideal-typical forms in which collectives temporarily stabilize themselves: in the 'popular' *logic of equivalence*, a collective is created through the simplification of the political space by juxtaposing an opposite. The medieval, apocalyptic millenarian movements, for example, asserted a peasant community to be created as the strict opposite of the hegemonic, urban one (2001a, p. 129f.). In this logic, the social world disintegrated

> into two camps: peasant culture representing the identity of the movement, and urban culture incarnating evil. The second is the negative reverse of the first. A maximum separation has been reached: no element in the system of equivalences enters into relations other than those of opposition to the elements of the other system. There are not one but two societies. (cf. Balibar, 2009 for this example; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001a, p. 129f.)

All contemporary discourses that make migrant the 'other' of the 'people' follow such a popular logic of equivalence. In the *logic of difference*, on the other hand, the ideal-typical collective is determined by inner complexity. Here, social differences multiply internally, and collective 'identity' can then only be imagined as a 'point of intersection', as the result of a politics of alliance without a 'unitary basis' (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001a, p. 130). Such an ideal-typical form of collectives becomes real when new closures are created – when the internal heterogeneity is in turn confronted with an outside. Neoliberal discourses, for instance, attempt to unite all subjects in this way through 'an individualistic definition of rights' (referring to freedom or plurality), but at the same time these neoliberal discourses establish a new 'frontier of the social' when they describe welfare recipients – or asylum seekers, one could add – as 'parasites' of 'the' population (2001a, p. 176). A 'radically' democratic society, then, would be one that does not assert unity at the expense of others, that does not discursively or practically exclude either women or 'immigrants'. Instead, this society would be based on the 'equivalence between these different struggles' (Mouffe & Holdengräber, 1989, p. 42), and *particularly on solidarity with immigrants*. The

> construction of differential identities on the basis of total closure to what is outside them is not a viable … political alternative. It would be a reactionary policy in Western Europe today, for instance, for immigrants from Northern Africa or Jamaica to abstain from all participation in Western European institutions, with the justification that theirs is a different cultural identity. [A]ll forms of subordination and exclusion would be consolidated. (Laclau, 2007, p. 29)

In other words, while right-wing populists constitute the 'people' in such a way that they exclude 'numerous categories' of people, above all immigrants (Mouffe, 2018, p. 23f.), left-wing populism also has to define a common opponent – the exploiting oligarchy (and right-wing populism, it should be added). But first and foremost, this collective existence is based on the 'formation of chains of equivalence': constitutive is the integration of various demands, including those of immigrants (and not only of workers, Mouffe, 2018, p. 43ff.). In a second respect, migrants are shortly mentioned, now with regards to *their* collective identity and its defining outside: if 'white workers' derive their identity from racist convictions rather than from their class affiliation, then racism determines *their* identity as well as that of migrants: migrants in turn experience themselves first and foremost as migrants (rather than as workers; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001a, p. 141).

Imaginary foundations, or the democratic paradox

Based on the previous arguments, Mouffe furthermore addressed the question of how collective identity is created in modern democracies. In reference to Claude Lefort (1988; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001a, p. 155; Mouffe, 2000, p. 1), she adopted a historical perspective at this point which allows to understand the controversial nature of migration. The point is the reference of the collective identity to imaginary grounds. At this point, we have briefly to mention Lefort and Gauchet's respective concepts of society. In *Permanence of the*

Theologico-Political?, Lefort defined the political as the paradoxical movement of a division of society, even while society is expressed as a whole. A society can 'relate to itself only through the experience of an internal division which … generates its constitution' Lefort (1988, p. 226) writes. It is in the splitting off of a 'place of power' that an instance emerges that 'stages' society as *one* (1988, p. 230). The specificity of modern democracy, then, lies in the fact that it preserves plurality. Although unity is expressed and there is a place for the political, this place remains 'empty' thanks to the institutions of the election and of political discourse (1988, p. 225). In other words, the 'division' of society does not 'refer to an outside that can be assigned to the Gods, the city or holy ground', nor it refers 'to an inside that can be assigned to the substance of the community' (1988, p. 226). Instead, collective identity is asserted and at the same time contested: the people as well as the nation are thought of as 'pole[s] of identity', but this very identity 'remains latent' (1988, p. 230ff.). There is the idea of a centre or a foundation of the society, but in the most decisive moment, the political subject (the people) is 'dissolved' into the multitude of votes (1988, p. 230). Likewise, the nation is asserted as well as it is subjected to political discourse. Such notions (the nation, the people) are according to Cornelius Castoriadis[7] imaginary foundations of society, central imaginary significations which '*denote* nothing at all', and '*connotate* just about everything' (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 143). Such central imaginary significations also are foundation in the democratic institution of society, as Marcel Gauchet as well as Chantal Mouffe address – together with the fact that two *contradictory* signifiers serve as an imaginary social signification. Marcel Gauchet showed this twofold imaginary foundation of collective identity as following its precedence, the theological–political legitimation of the king. Modern democracy transfers and dislocates this theological 'matrix' of power (Gauchet, 1989, p. X), when the new institution of society had to replace the monarch with an equally unquestionable foundation. Therefore, in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* from 1789 the sanctity of the *individual* was asserted; and it was 'the people' who become the *sovereign* (1989, pp. XI, 25ff.). It is this twofold imaginary foundation in which a democratic society founds itself – and which can explain the likewise twofold affects towards migrants:

> On the one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed, and popular sovereignty. (Mouffe, 2000, p. 2f.)

The tension between the two imaginaries makes it possible to understand why migration is so controversial, why there are not only the policies and effects of exclusion and rejection, but also those of acceptance and solidarity. Democratic society institutes itself by invoking 'the' human being, in advocating and establishing asylum, but also in creating a *demos* and its exclusions. Against the background of these several concepts for and thoughts about migration, Laclau and Mouffe are less visible in scholarship on migration. Yet as mentioned, Schwiertz (2019, 2022) uses their concept of radical democracy while showing how struggles of migrants and refugees for democratic rights are part of the democratic institution of society. In view of a 'victimization' of the migrant in migration

research, Schwiertz accentuates migrants and refugees as being part of the *demos*, as being part of the 'chain of equivalence', in which a new articulation of the collective identity is formulated. Politically needed is 'a chain of equivalence among the demands of the workers, the immigrants and the precarious middle class'', Mouffe (2018, p. 43) wrote in *For a Left Populism*.

Cultural difference, or diasporic constitutions of society

A further concept has been offered by the work of Homi K. Bhabha, as well as by that of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. Those works make the postcolonial migrant as well as his/her diasporic cultures the starting point from which any collective identity or society is to be conceived – as being a fragmentary, differential, hybrid identity in the space 'in-between' of cultures, in which any identity is constantly performed, redefined, and 'renegotiated' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). Likewise, both Hall and Gilroy offer the 'undertheorised idea of diaspora' (Gilroy, 1993, pp. 6, 15) in order to put the migrant at the centre of modern society.

In Bhabha, migrants appear as those group of *people*, whose practices (of writing novels or of faith) 'dislocate' and redefine the history and thus the identity of the nation. It is the metaphorical migrant voice, which stands for the general fact of the permanent translation, transformation, and shifting of signification and identity – that is, for difference in the Derridean sense, in which

> difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* cultural or ethnic traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2)

Again, this conceptual vocabulary is the result of a linguistically informed theory of the social. Collective identities exist discursively, within articulations of difference: this is Bhabha's point of departure, when stating that societies or cultures are 'symbol-forming and subject-constituting, interpellative practices', never 'full unto themselves' (1990, p. 209f.). If the 'in-between spaces' (1994, pp. 4, 17) is where societies or cultures create their respective identities, this idea of difference should be understood less in an antagonistic mode of 'us vs. them'. Instead, Bhabha's approach is one of translation, that is,

> a process by which, in order to objectify cultural meaning, there always has to be a process of alienation and of secondariness in relation to itself. In that sense there is no 'in itself' and 'for itself' within cultures because they are always subject to intrinsic forms of translation…. The 'originary' is always open to translation so that it can never be said to have … an essence. [C]ultures are only constituted in relation to that otherness internal to their own symbol-forming activity which makes them decentred structures. (Bhabha, 1990, p. 210)

Because every culture or society is defined by its relation vis-à-vis all others, it has no identity itself. It *is* a 'process of hybridity' (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211). Yet, Bhabha is less

concerned with determining what a culture or society is. Rather, political motivation is the decisive element. Bhabha's goal was to replace the socio-theoretical and political concept of cultural diversity with a concept of cultural difference, in the rise of a renewed 'cultural racism' (Balibar, 1991) that consists of thinking of cultures as closed spaces. In 'societies where multiculturalism is encouraged, racism is still rampant', Bhabha (1990, p. 208) noted; fantasies of assimilation and 'of purity and persecution' were responses to migration (Bhabha, 1994, p. 166). It is in this situation, that Bhabha gave *the migrant* voice a key position. It is migrant knowledge that is 'most urgently needed' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 214), since migrants in their position on the 'borders between cultures and nations' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 176) generate less exclusive identifications (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 68–169) and new histories of national identity, histories of 'margins' and exile (Bhabha, 1994, p. 139). In addition, migrants generate a new spatial conception of the state-instituted society: the colonial space enters the 'imaginary geography' of society (Bhabha, 1994, p. 168). In short, migrant voices make it possible to formulate a new 'social imaginary' and reshape the idea of society as one that would then consist of numerous 'differential, even disjunctive, moments of history and culture' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 177). The post-colonized society is thus literally conceived as a *migrant's society*, that is, as one in which migrant knowledge is central. The presence of migrants, for example 'changes the polities of the metropolis, its cultural ideologies and its intellectual traditions, because they … displace some of the great metropolitan narratives of progress and law and order' (Bhabha, 1990, p. 218). It is (migrant) literature which is conceptualized here as the main cultural practice, because literature creates 'projections of 'otherness'' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 12) and stories that do not converge into a homogeneous form but remain incommensurable. In migrant literatures, metropolises appear as one of those 'third spaces' in which – in the person of the migrant – different cultural elements 'enter into negotiation with each other and with external forces of community formation' (Bhabha, 2017, p. 65, my translation). If groupings of dispersed people in metropolises seem to be crucial to a new construction of collective identity or society, then it is also necessary to examine the colonized societies. The modern nation is rearticulated there as well; not only the colonized but also the colonizers gain a new identity (as Frantz Fanon had pointed out earlier). The 'third space' is especially visible in colonial situations in which subversive practices of alienation and the reoccupation of colonial texts take place. 'The questions of the natives literally transform the origin of the book into a riddle', explained Bhabha, describing a scene in which missionaries in India distributed Bibles. The Bible is then 'received in awe by the natives both as a novelty and as a household deity' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 117), in order to immediately test the 'English text' for compliance with their own dietary regulations. Resisting the 'miraculous equivalence of God and the English', demanding an 'Indianized Gospel', the colonized Indian peasants 'are using the forces of hybridity to resist baptism and to put the project of conversion in an impossible position' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 118). In this example – in the 'space' that occurs between the peasants and the missionaries – the cultural identity of the colonial authority has changed as much as that of the colonized.

In the extent in which this theory of culture and society is focused on the 'processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 19), both the works of Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall are likewise to be mentioned. Their notion of

cultural difference is that of a *diasporic culture* which substitutes any idea of centre and periphery, of identity versus difference. Diasporic cultures are according to Hall (2016, p. 48) 'translated societies', allowing us to recognize that any collective is constituted by 'difference' (1990, p. 234). Within this general condition of the social, diasporic or migrant cultures are marked 'by a profound sense of 'loss'' (Hall, 2016, p. 51). Also, Paul Gilroy (1993) speaks of diasporic cultures, using the images of routes and of ships in order to focus theory of society on the constitutive circulation of ideas, peoples, and artefacts. In each of these theories of society as cultural difference one should read *différance* (Derrida), that is, chains of concepts in which every concept (e.g. identity, culture) 'refers to the other concepts', making identity 'a shifting system of similarities and differences' (Hall, 2016, p. 52f.) or a permanent process of 'hybridity' (Gilroy, 1993, p. 2), in which power is at stake. At stake is 'the struggle to bring to an abrupt closure the 'play' of *différance*' (Hall, 2016, p. 53). It is in this context of power, that the migrant became 'a symbolically-constructed constitutive outside, whose extrusion from the system was supposed to guarantee and stabilize identity, especially national identity, within it' (Hall, 2016, p. 53). In these concepts two opposite tendencies of modern societies are envisioned: the processes of migration as being culturally constitutive on the one side; and the violent and painful counter-movements of essentialist notions of, and longings after collective identity on the other. Numerous approaches to postcolonial studies have explored such diasporic cultures, either in explicit reference to the discussed authors (with Gilroy Roy, 2023) or not, and not uncritically (Dayan, 1994).

Conclusion: societies of migration and migrant's societies

These three theoretical vocabularies, each with a different focus, allow a sociological theory that places debates and policies concerning 'migration' at the centre of society itself. They allow us to think modern society as being instituted by migration – in several ways. Following firstly the Foucauldian notions of *problematization*, of *biopolitics* and of *governmentality*, historical and contemporary techniques and policies of immigration or the rejection of migrants would represent the way in which modern society is instituted, first of all: in this view, migrants substitute the figures of the mad, for they are the individuals which are the object of exclusion, allowing the definition of the 'normal' population. The Foucauldian notion of biopolitics allow us to focus on the practices, the discourses, and the buildings of the asylum system and of the juridical regime of migration, as well as on state racism – as being of central relevance for a historical society which defines itself being at the service of 'population'. Migrants themselves come into view, as entrepreneurs of themselves. Secondly, with the theory of hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe), the articulation of 'migrants' serves as *constitutive outside* in order to hegemonically define the collective identity. In the same function, politics of solidarization are intelligible, including political practices of the migrants and the refugees themselves – both due to the paradoxical institution of society in the imaginary of human rights, and of the *demos*. Such poststructuralist theories of society make contradictory voices and policies in relation to migration and migrants understandable, as well as the emotional intensity of such debates; they allow for an understanding of those practices and discourses which aim at enriching the 'population' or conversely at

purifying the 'people'. With postcolonial vocabularies (Bhabha, Hall, and Gilroy), thirdly, collective identities and societies are defined in cultural processes of difference, of translation and negotiation – processes in which migrants are seen less as objects than as subjects of society, hereby being focused on the processes of colonization and the institution of national identities, as well as on the defining cultural activities of migrants. It is this vocabulary which gives migrant voices a central position to colonial as well as to postcolonial societies, being constituted in translation, in cultural difference, being hybrid identities or society in-between. Overall, the three vocabularies allow us to see modern society as a *society of migration*, as in manifold ways being *constituted* by discourses and practices of 'migration' – and as *migrant's society*, respectively, encouraging historical research on institutions, discourses, material cultures, agencies.

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Notes

1. For this reason, the following does not focus on action-theory – it is not about Georg Simmel, the Chicago School or relational approaches. It is about theories that ask about the constitution of society.
2. Of course, there are other approaches that can contribute to a social theory of migration. This applies to Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995), particularly with regards to the "primordial" code of collective identity. Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995, p. 72) also noted the lack of a theory of migration.
3. See Vol. 13 (3), and herein the editorial (Friese & Mezzadra, 2010) and – for the Luhmannian approach – Cvajner and Sciortino (2010).
4. See, for example, Karakayali (2008); Tazzioli and Walters (2014); Walters (2015); Mezzadra (2017); and Irrera (2017) (on the question of colonialism).
5. This paper refers to the 2006 edition of *History of Madness* (Foucault, 2006a), instead of *Madness and Civilization* (Foucault, 1965), which follows the abridged French version.
6. See, for example, Foucault (1984, 1989a 1989b). On the concept of problematization, see, for example, Potte-Bonneville (2004); in relation to migration, see Bigo (1998). The concept of biopolitics to analyse debates on migration is taken up in Schwiertz (2024), among others.
7. For the relation between Mouffe, Laclau, Castoriadis, and Lefort, cf. Tomès (2019).

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