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SOCIAL INCLUSION AND SOCIAL POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES

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Social inclusion is a process whereby individuals gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It ensures that they have greater participation in decision-making which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights.

—European Union, Joint Inclusion Report

The term “social exclusion” appears in the framework laws of the European Union and the laws of several nations. The boundaries of the concept are far from determinate, but at its core, social exclusion involves being shut out from social institutions and relations in ways that matter for one’s well being. The term is often used in discussions of social policy in nearly all of the wealthy nations of the West. Yet social exclusion is almost unheard of in the United States.

Now may be a particularly good time to introduce the idea of social exclusion to American audiences. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, there may be a window of opportunity to modernize social policy in ways that would have been unthinkable for budgetary and political reasons a few months ago. Introducing relatively new ideas like social exclusion at this time might help that effort for at least four general reasons.

First, the concept of social exclusion may improve our understanding of social issues by naming a phenomenon that isn’t adequately identified by existing terms. For example, *social exclusion* may do a better job than terms such as *poverty*, *inequality*, or *discrimination* of encapsulating the experiences of many of the residents of New Orleans who were left behind during the flood as well as the experiences of many of them before it.

Consider one of the more remarkable images from New Orleans in the days after the flood: a photograph of individuals standing atop a building surrounded by water and holding a sign with the words “we’re Americans too” on it. These individuals, like many others trapped in the city at that time, clearly understood their experience in terms of exclusion from the protections afforded other Americans. This suggests that that there is a strong case to be made that so-

cial exclusion offers conceptual advantages over other more familiar terms that are used to describe various types of deprivation.

Second, a new and evocative term like social exclusion might prick up the ears of some persons who have grown weary of older terms. Some of the key concepts in our current social-policy vocabulary, including poverty and discrimination, don't have the same resonance they did in earlier eras. It may even be counterproductive to understand events like Katrina from a perspective that too relies heavily on poverty and discrimination. Americans tend to attribute poverty to individual characteristics—such as lack of a work ethic; similarly, discrimination is often viewed as something that an individual “bad actor” does to someone else. The concept of social exclusion has the advantage of situating individuals in a social and relational context. Moreover, the experience of exclusion of some sort, unlike the experience of poverty or discrimination, is nearly universal.

Third, a focus on poverty, as has been evident in post-Katrina debate, has the effect of setting the bar for future social policy far too low. If the problem is defined as poverty or meeting basic needs then the question becomes “how minimal the minimum should be.” Social exclusion is a broader concept than income poverty—particularly as it is officially defined in the United States—or other forms of material hardship.

Fourth, the rapid social and economic changes associated with the Information Age and globalization may exacerbate and foster new forms of social exclusion. Political philosopher Michael Walzer has argued that “we live in a society where individuals are ... continually in motion, often in solitary and apparently random motion” and that we can best see the forms of “unsettlement” that result from this motion in terms of “Four Mobilities”: geographic mobility, social mobility, marital mobility, and political mobility. The effects of the Four Mobilities—which are both positive and negative and vary by individuals and communities—are intensified by the advance of knowledge, technological progress, and other developments. The concept of social exclusion may help to provide a common language for understanding the negative effects of these mobilities.

Of course, there are various barriers to its take up in the United States, as the fact that the term has yet to be widely adopted here suggests. These include its European origins, which some Americans are likely to argue should disqualify it *a priori* from usage here, its perceived definitional fuzziness, and the notion that it “goes against grain” of American individualism. As I explain below, I think these barriers can be overcome.

In summary, the concept of social exclusion has considerable potential to improve both our understanding of social issues and our social policies. It is worthy of a serious effort to introduce it here in America.

Such an effort has less chance of success—regardless of the merits of the idea of social exclusion—if it is only targeted on an academic audience. There have been a few attempts of this sort in the United States—most notably a small conference convened at Columbia University in

2001—but there is a little evidence that they have done much to increase the term’s currency here.

A more successful effort would need to be targeted on both academic audiences and broader public audiences. It would involve articles published in leading magazines and newspapers as well as papers presented at academic conferences and published in academic journals.

Defining the Concept for American Audiences

Given its wide usage in Europe, it might seem natural to simply adopt one or more of the various European definitions. I think this would be a mistake. Particularly for American audiences, the European definitions often confuse more than they clarify. Consider, for instance, this explanation of social exclusion—the closest thing to an official government definition of the term in the United Kingdom—put forward by the Social Exclusion Unit, an agency created in the office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 1997:

Social exclusion happens when people or places suffer from a series of problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, ill health and family breakdown. When such problems combine they can create a vicious cycle. Social exclusion can happen as a result of problems that face one person in their life. But it can also start from birth. Being born into poverty or to parents with low skills still has a major influence on future life chances.

While the UK definition certainly explicates some essential aspects of social exclusion—particularly the causal factors that might bring it about—it fails to provide a succinct statement of what social exclusion *is*, a fact often noted in UK literature on social exclusion. In addition, its emphasis on overlapping problems is too narrow in my view, a concern shared by many analysts in the United Kingdom.

I believe it would be better to define social exclusion for American audiences by looking first at the plain meaning of its component parts: “social” and “exclusion.” If that exercise yields a simple, initial definition then one could move on to comparing social exclusion to other American terms that seem to have much in common with it. This would have the benefit of approaching an unfamiliar term from the vantage point of amore familiar one. After this foundation is laid, one can more safely mine the European literature for additional perspective.

To exclude means to deny access to some place or thing. And the term “exclusion” describes “the process or state of being excluded” from some thing or place. In other words, exclusion can be used to describe both a relatively stable state as well as a *process* leading to that state.

When used as an adjective, the term “social” means that something is of or relating to society or its organization. If society is understood as the more or less ordered life of a commu-

nity, then we have enough to hazard an initial definition of social exclusion: social exclusion is *the process or state of being excluded from the ordered life of a community*.

The ordered life of a community includes the following things:

- employment;
- education;
- market institutions;
- public services, benefits, and institutions;
- political and civic participation; and
- informal social associations (friendships and related social associations).

Thus, social exclusion refers to the process or state of being excluded from one or more of these or other elements of community life. More generally, social exclusion could take the form of what Adam Smith described as a key component of social life—not being able to appear in public without shame.

Our understanding of social exclusion can be broadened by comparing it with more familiar American terms that it has some relationship with, such as segregation and poverty. Segregation on the basis of race, gender, disability, or some other immutable characteristic is a specific form of exclusion, and, there is little question that social exclusion can result from segregation.

Both segregation and social exclusion are relational concepts. Segregation is most typically used to describe the process of *dividing or separating* groups of persons based on their race or gender. Social exclusion refers both to group-based exclusions and to the process by which a particular *individual* is excluded from social institutions or relations for reasons that may have little to do with their membership in a particular social group.

Similarly, poverty can be both a cause and effect of social exclusion. But income poverty—particularly as officially defined in the United States—captures only one dimension of exclusion. Moreover, a person with income above the poverty line can be excluded from social relations and institutions, and a person with income below it is not necessarily socially excluded. (But given the absolute nature of the poverty definition in the United States, a strong presumption that persons living below the poverty line suffer from social exclusion is reasonable. This is particularly the case with children).

There is another important distinction between income poverty as officially defined and social exclusion. The relational aspect of social exclusion distinguishes it from income poverty and forms of social deprivation that do not necessarily involve social relationships. While the *causes* of income poverty may well be relational (but are not necessarily so), poverty itself is not relational concept in the United States.

As this discussion suggests, it seems possible to develop a conception of social exclusion “from the ground up” that doesn’t rely heavily on European understandings of the term or on

what Amartya Sen has called, in an article that is otherwise supportive of the concept of social exclusion, “the somewhat disorganized and undisciplined literature” it has often generated. Of course, there is still much to learn from a careful mining of that literature.

The “American Individualism” Objection to Social Exclusion

Perhaps the most significant of the perceived barriers to the adoption of the idea of social exclusion in the United States is that it “goes against the grain” of American political culture. Janet Gornick, for example, argues that “individual and family responsibility are generally valued over social solidarity” in the United States and that the core American ideals of individualism and autonomy are “hard to reconcile with the relational perspective” of social exclusion.

In my mind, objections along these lines actually strengthen the case for the adoption of social exclusion in the United States, rather than weakening it. In his examination of the usefulness of the idea of social exclusion, Amartya Sen concludes that “the real issue is not whether the idea of ‘social exclusion’ deserves a celebratory medal as a conceptual advance, but whether people concerned with practical measurement and public policy have reason to pay attention to the issues to which the idea helps to draw attention.” Considered from this perspective, the most useful element of the idea of social exclusion may prove to be the focus that it places on the relational aspects of material deprivation as well as nonmaterial forms of deprivation, those aspects of deprivation that most tend to get insufficient emphasis in American policy discussions.

Indeed, one of the most important developments in American social thought over the last two decades has been what could be called the “communitarian correction” to liberalism. The essence of this correction is its highlighting of the fact that human beings are more than isolated rights-bearing individuals motivated only by their own self-interest; they also are members of families, communities, and other associations, who are motivated not only by self-interest but by the values and interests of their associations. Francis Fukuyama neatly captures the nature of this correction when he explains that “the United States . . . has historically been a high-trust, group-oriented society, despite the fact that Americans believe themselves to be rugged individualists.”

The idea of social exclusion could be thought of as part of this correction. The social relations and institutions that one can be excluded from are among the various forms of “social capital.” For Robert Putnam, the man most responsible for social capital’s recent prominence here, the importance of the concept of social capital lies in its central idea that “networks and the associated norms of reciprocity have value.” The recent proliferation of work by Putnam and others on social capital strengthens the case for the usefulness of the idea of social exclusion in the United States by helping to show the negative effects that lack of social capital and other forms of exclusion are likely to have on individuals and society. Thus, just as the communitarian correction to liberalism and the idea of social capital are important precisely because they “goes against the grain” of American individualism so is the idea of social exclusion.

Potential Research and Policy Applications: Social Exclusion and Low-Wage Work

A key application of social exclusion in Europe has been its usefulness in focusing attention on the problem of long-term unemployment. Because most western European countries have safety nets for the unemployed that are considerably more generous than the United States, the negative effect that unemployment may have on an individual's well-being is likely to be due to matters other than their ability to meet basic consumption needs. A social exclusion approach to unemployment can be useful in understanding the variety of ways that unemployment can have negative social impacts.

In the United States, there is much less need than in Europe for new concepts that help convince policymakers and others that unemployment is problematic. The United States has lower rates of joblessness among the working-age population than most European countries, and as the debate over welfare reform has shown, there already is considerable consensus that increased employment is an important policy goal.

However, looking at the relationship between social exclusion and employment still has much to offer in policy debates in the United States. In Europe, employment is seen as the primary avenue to social inclusion for good reason. Wages are higher for workers in the low end of wage distribution in Europe than they are in the United States. And European workers enjoy more employment protections than workers in the United States, as well as much higher rates of unionization.

In the United States by comparison, employment arguably offers a less secure path to the inclusion than it does in Europe. In a recent Newsweek article, Jonathan Alter provides an example:

Consider the case of Delores Ellis. Before Katrina turned her world upside down, the 51-year-old resident of New Orleans's Ninth Ward was earning the highest salary of her life as a school janitor—\$6.50 an hour, no health insurance or pension. Pregnant at 17 and forced to drop out of high school, she went on welfare for a time, then bounced around minimum-wage jobs. "I worked hard all my life and I can't afford nothing," Ellis says. "I'm not saying that I want to keep up with the Joneses, I just want to live better."

.... Like almost all poor evacuees interviewed by Newsweek, [Ellis] has no bank account. Before the storm, she did own a stereo, refrigerator, washer and dryer, two color TVs and a 1992 Chevy Lumina with more than 100,000 miles on it. This, too, is common among the poor; like more comfortable Americans, they spend on consumer goods beyond their means. But these are often their only assets.

Employment in United States may make it possible to meet basic consumption needs for housing and other basic consumer goods, but it doesn't necessary bring along with it health in-

surance, a pension, or any guarantee of “living better,” all of which are elements of secure social inclusion.

The limitations of the American employment model when viewed from the perspective of social exclusion are not limited to persons like Ms. Ellis who suffer from multiple disadvantages, but extend more generally to a broad range of workers. Consider Francis Fukuyama’s description of the German employment model:

... in return for workers who are willing to learn new skills and occupations, employers provide a high standard of living and the training that allows the unneeded worker to move into a different job where he or she can be productive.

Fukuyama concludes that “obligation is a two-way street, and those managers who hope to get loyalty, flexibility, and cooperativeness out of their workers without giving anything in return, whether in the form of security, benefits, or training, are being exploitative.”

The concept of social exclusion could help to focus more attention on the relationship between work and community life in the United States. Viewed from a social exclusion perspective, “living wages” might be seen as important not only because they help individual families make ends meet, but also for the broader positive effects they may have on the building of social capital.