

Research Article

Having No Choice: Social Exclusion in the Affluent Society

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses social exclusion in the affluent society. It suggests a change of perspective from the typical focus on the generation of income and resources to the opportunities of using them, from means to ends. Therefore, an updated conception of affluent society will be outlined first. It is centred on the importance of having access to a variety of options and freedom of choice. Then, corresponding social positions of relevance to analyses of inequality and marginalisation, namely having choices, having to make choices and having no choices, will be distinguished. Having no choices will be shown to be an analytical criterion for social exclusion. This will be illustrated by the empirical example of charitable assistance by food banks.

Keywords: Social Exclusion, Affluent Society, Consumption, Freedom of Choice, Food Banks, Charitable Assistance, Poverty

INTRODUCTION

Debates on inequality and marginalisation in highly industrialised societies typically revolve around labour and employment as the main point of reference. On the one hand, this is certainly a legitimate focus since work has the intrinsic value for satisfaction in life, and on the other hand, in most cases income and social security are bound to employment. Of course, this tells us nothing about the uses to which the financial resources obtained through labour are actually put and in what way these resources are actually so important in regard to those (potential) uses. Resources do not serve as ends in themselves but must be conceived as means to specific ends.

If we think of the so-called urban riots in Great Britain in the summer of 2011, to refer to an example for purposes of illustration, we can see what is missing. Considering the focus of action, we find that the participants, especially in the looting of shops, went for goods and not for jobs. They did not seek means but had special ends in mind, and these ends are closely related to consumption. In such cases, consumer goods stand for participation or inclusion through realising options that are offered by the affluent society.

Since the 1980s, research on social inequality, starting with Bourdieu (1984), has taken matters of taste and consumption-related lifestyles into account. In the 1990s, a new debate on social exclusion surfaced in Western European societies that identified new sorts of disadvantages and marginalisation. These new phenomena cannot be adequately understood based on the traditional concepts of inequality alone. While the early Bourdieu could research different styles of consumption to show inequality, social exclusion indicates the loss of (not only) the consumer status itself, which will be exemplified in this article. Yet, this debate on social exclusion is again mainly concerned with employment and income, i.e., with the means – and not the ends. In order to define social exclusion, I therefore suggest a change of perspective from a focus on the generation of income and resources to one on the opportunities of using them, from the generation to the spending of money, from means to ends and from want and basic needs to the options to choose from in shaping one's way of life.

Contemporary affluent societies are characterised by permanently providing opportunities that reach beyond the demands of meeting basic needs. These broader ends are closely tied but not limited to consumption; in general terms, they can be described as the realisation and expansion of options for shaping one's way of life. Therefore, I prefer the term affluent society instead of consumption society. Since access to such options is a crucial factor in determining social inclusion or exclusion in affluent societies, the analysis of social exclusion has to consider options as a vantage point.

In the following, I will first discuss different understandings of affluence in order to define present-day affluence and outline an appropriate conception of contemporary affluent societies. This is obviously not to suggest that we have entered an era where society offers idyllic conditions to all. Rather, social problems either persist or re-emerge in new ways. In the next section, I will therefore turn to the task of conceptualising relations of inequality and exclusion in an environment marked by affluence. The proposed line of reasoning will then be illustrated drawing on an empirical research project on charitable assistance by food banks.

DIFFERENT MEANINGS OF AFFLUENCE AND THE CONTEMPORARY AFFLUENT SOCIETY

Historical Varieties of Affluence

The understanding of affluence generally refers to modern and economically prospering societies. Yet we find different forms of affluence in various historical eras. One reason for this is that affluence is a relational concept, connected to necessity and want, which can be interpreted in different ways.

With this in mind, Sahlins (1974) described hunter-gatherer society as the original affluent society. According to his analyses, these societies actually had an ample food supply, at least periodically, and their members had to spend less time on activities to sustain their existence than people in industrialised societies. Even more important, however, is the relation between productivity and needs, for according to Sahlins, it is not production capacity per se that determines affluence but also needs and expectations. Since hunter-gatherer societies have much more limited needs, prosperity can already be achieved with low productive capacity. Yet it is not only the favourable ratio between needs and productive capacity that factors in, but the fairly simple tools and techniques are also much more easily accessible so that prosperity tends to benefit all to a similar degree as opposed to the situation in the far more differentiated and modern affluent societies of our time.

But even if we go along with the common understanding of affluence as material wealth, we still encounter the phenomenon repeatedly in the course of human history. Mauss (2002) described material affluence in so-called archaic societies as embedded in practices of ritual exchange. Because of this ritual embeddedness, wealth was regularly expended, i.e., distributed, sacrificed or destroyed. Such an arrangement inhibits any persistent and unlimited accumulation of wealth, while the most social recognition is to be gained by showing generosity. Here affluence is a cyclical phenomenon that serves the purpose of ritually strengthening social bonds.

In highly stratified societies, tremendous material wealth and affluence may also be found among the highest estates or castes; yet we would hesitate to speak of an affluent society in these cases as the great majority of the population is denied access to its riches by birth. Close to middle ages material goods became available to even more people in Europe's towns and cities. This first became manifest in an urban population that owned more than a few household necessities or a simple set of clothes (cf. Sennett, 2008). With the use of machinery and the industrial revolution came a continuous rise in the production and availability of material goods. At the same time, the enlightenment and the emergence of liberal ideas

undermined the legitimacy of the hitherto taken-for-granted privileged access to material prosperity by but a few.

The transition to the modern affluent society thus relied on both aspects: the abundance of material goods and common acceptance of the idea that everyone must have access to them in principle. Obviously, this has not led to egalitarian societies. What ‘everyone’ means in this context has remained controversial. Apart from the persistence of racism and patriarchal structures, the problem of socio-economic access has not been solved satisfactorily in two respects: in many Eastern (formerly socialist) countries, broad-based, ideologically legitimised egalitarianism was possible only at the expense of repression and the establishment of privileged elites nonetheless. In the Western world, democratisation could not prevent massive inequality and the reproduction of both poverty and wealth. Yet, the simultaneous existence of want and abundance is perceived as a troublesome paradox. This became clear early on as the affluent society began to take shape and especially during the ‘Great Depression’ in the USA. While poverty and need became rampant, surplus food was being destroyed at the same time. This phenomenon ‘was called ‘the paradox of want amid plenty’ or ‘the paradox of scarcity and abundance’ or simply ‘the paradox’ (Poppendieck 1986). Since durable solutions are yet to be developed, the perception persists that there exists a problem of ‘how to bring the blessings of immense natural wealth and staggering productive potential to every person in the land’ (Zinn cited ibidi).

We can sum up that societies historically display a variety of ways of interpreting and dealing with affluence. The opportunities they offer to access affluence vary accordingly. Keynes described the unique challenges posed by modern affluent societies early on: ‘thus for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, permanent problem – how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well (Keynes, 1930 cited in Stehr, 2008).

The Flexibilised Affluent Society

To describe Western industrialised societies as affluent societies has become commonplace for some decades now. Nevertheless, the concepts of affluence and affluent society have not been subject to much sociological elaboration yet. The taken-for-grantedness in our interpretation of these terms leads us to overlook the fact that our understanding of affluence has undergone considerable change over time.

As is well known, Galbraith (1998) popularised the concept of the affluent society in the U.S.A. in the late 1950s. In coining the term, he framed a broad debate

about social problems of a new kind. The realisation began to take hold that the (supposed) solution to the problems of scarcity has itself created a completely new set of problems. In Riesman's words, 'we are a generation, prepared for paradise lost, who do not know what to do with paradise found' (cited in Molitor, 1959). At the time, production in the USA had effectively reached levels ensuring that plenty was available to meet the basic needs of all. The diagnosis was accordingly optimistic, predicting that poverty had been overcome or at least would be in the near future. Of course, Galbraith was well aware of the fact that things are not that simple as far as needs are concerned. As production capacity increased, it quickly became clear that this was true for needs and wants as well, which soon raised doubts whether progress in material production would translate into progress in welfare: if growing productivity in material production faced higher demands and expectations, the real net gain might actually be small (cf. Hirsch, 1978).

In contrast to this early perspective, our current understanding of affluence has shifted away from the focus on productivity and satisfaction of needs. The key to understanding affluence is less the supply side of production than the mode by which that supply is used: '(...) affluence – a capacity and expectation to spend freely – increases the range and variety of people's experiences because surplus income gives people choice over the commodities and services they consume (Ransome, 2006). However, affluence today not only means an abundance of opportunities for consumption, but also means, in more general terms, the perception of a variety of options in shaping one's way of life in combination with freedom of choice (cf. Schulze, 1992; Gross, 1994; Bauman, 2000). Therefore, I prefer speaking of an affluent society instead of a consumption society even if options are often more or less linked with consumption. We need to consider that the difference between scarcity society and affluent society must to be distinguished from a work-based versus a consumption-based conception of society.

Assuming a close association of work with scarcity (society) and consumption with affluence (and affluent society) would suggest that the consumption society historically follows the work society, which is not convincing. First of all, the historical roots of modern consumption have been traced back to the 17th and 18th centuries. Commodity consumption has been an integral part of modern economic and social development from the onset (Schrage, 2012). Another equally important aspect is that the understanding of both labour and consumption as such has changed in the European post-war era; only since then the normality of labour as wage labour has become accepted or even appreciated (Castel, 2002) and consumption revolving around the satisfaction of basic needs gradually gave way to a greater emphasis on freedom of choice (Hilton, 2008). Furthermore, we observe that the shift in the meaning and significance of consumption does not

necessarily lead to work losing its significance. Work remains important because people find it attractive to work a lot in order to consume more (Ransome, 2006) while they may also expect to derive satisfaction from their job. As said above, the meaning of affluence to the members of society extends beyond consumption in the narrow sense, i.e., beyond the act of purchasing goods. It refers to the conduct of life in its entirety: we prefer to have choices in all areas of life (cf. Bauman, 2000), be it in the world of work, in selecting the type of school for the children, or in choosing friends and partners or even religious affiliation.

In a historical perspective, it is less a matter of a shift from production and work to consumption but rather from necessity to affluence, from meeting needs to having choices. In its reference to needs, the early conception of affluence (Galbraith, Riesman) was itself strongly influenced by the orientation toward necessity that it sought to overcome. In contrast, the key point of reference in shaping the conduct of life in present-day affluent society is *freedom of choice*. To mark the difference to the older conception of affluence, I prefer to speak of flexible affluence or of a flexibilised affluent society (Lorenz, 2012a), which is to indicate that its members face a flexible set of options for shaping their way of life from which they may choose flexibly (freedom of choice).

When I speak of options, I not only necessarily have actually existing ones in mind, but also – and especially – potentially possible ones. In conditions of flexible affluence, people are motivated by desire instead of satisfaction of needs (cf. Bauman, 2000). With needs, particularly with basic needs, we associate the idea of limits. Once needs are met, they no longer exist, at least temporarily, and cease to act as a driving force. The situation is different in the case of desire – desire knows no limits. There are always things that we can still long for no matter what level of consumption we have already reached. To the contrary, the more options in reach, the more we become aware of all else that could become possible.

Has this allowed affluent society to achieve the good life for all? Initial optimism has given way to disillusionment today. On the one hand, there is the burden of environmental problems, which have reached a global magnitude that could hardly have been anticipated in the 1950s. On the other hand, we have failed to master social problems, especially the problems related to poverty, in spite of the tremendous increase in societal wealth. Affluence hence no longer represents ‘paradise found’ (Riesman). It represents a material culture preoccupied with adding to the quantity of things, which has since long ceased to contribute to enhancing well-being. Socially, affluence also symbolises that the opportunities of accessing it are distributed extremely unequally. In Germany, for instance, an increasing income gap has been observed during the past two decades: in the most recent

decade, not only in relative, but also in absolute terms (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2010; Goebel *et al.*, 2010). An understanding of affluent society in line with today's realities must therefore be able to capture the existing relations of inequality; in such a view, poverty and social exclusion must not be conceived as separate problems of scarcity and want but as problems integral to the affluent society.

Relationships of Social Inequality and Exclusion

The conclusion to be drawn from this outline of the affluent society in regard to inequality and social exclusion is making choice and decision – as both an option and a requirement that actors are faced with in all areas of life – the key point of reference. How could we conceptualise relations of inequality and exclusion in conditions of affluence if we move choice to the centre of attention?

As indicated above, I am not proposing a completely new conception but rather *a change of perspective*. We can draw on understandings of social exclusion proposed by other authors, which need to be reformulated based on the conception of affluence used here (cf. Lorenz, 2012a). Against the backdrop of diversity in lifestyles, on the one hand, and persistently high levels of unemployment, on the other, research in the 1990s identified new forms of social exclusion, disaffiliation and marginalisation. Researchers typically observed phenomena that could neither be described satisfactorily in terms of distributional struggles nor merely in terms of differences in lifestyles. In Germany, besides the contributions of system theory (cf. Luhmann, 1995; Stichweh, 1997), the works of French scholars, especially Paugam (1998) and Castel (2000; 2002), were particularly influential (cf. Bude and Willis, 2008; Castel and Dörre, 2009; Scherschel *et al.*, 2012). Another proposal for conceptualising recent phenomena of social exclusion came from Offe (1996). He distinguished 'winners', 'losers' and the 'superfluous'. Whereas the winners and losers remain engaged in distributional conflict, the category of the superfluous indicates that some – at least in certain respects and at certain times – have no access to the arenas where such struggles take place. What is fundamentally called into question in their case is participation in and recognition as full members of society. The dynamics of this three-way arrangement gives rise to two lines of conflict that remain socially controversial. When, how and where a person turns out a winner or remains a loser, or perhaps fails to achieve even that much, has to be determined empirically. The advantage of this conception is its dynamic combination of the ongoing conflicts (distributional conflicts between winners and losers) with the phenomena of social exclusion.

These relations of inequality and exclusion can be used to analyse the flexibilised and polarised affluent society. Here the key criterion of integration is access to the variety of options and thus the opportunities of choice that society makes

available. This allows us to analytically distinguish three social positions: having choices, having to make choices and having no choices. *Distributional conflicts* occur at the boundary of having choices and having to make choices. Those who have sufficient resources at their disposal have considerable discretion in making use of the options that society provides. In contrast to those with fewer resources, for whom the variety of options frequently poses a problem. They feel pressure to ‘keep up with the Joneses’ and comply with the standards of consumption, for instance, in terms of clothing or technical equipment. Although this may in fact be accomplished more or less, one must nevertheless first manage to keep up; freedom of choice in reality is therefore rather limited: one is forced to make a choice. ‘Bad choices’ made in the process may also turn out to be very costly where there is a lack of discretionary resources to offset or cushion the impact. Having paid too much for a phone plan or a retirement plan may have long-lasting consequences.

In contrast, at the lower end the issue is rather whether access to the controversial *options of choice can be gained at all*. In keeping with the examples, if one fails to meet the requirements of a phone plan or if there is nothing left to invest in a retirement plan, one does not have to worry about the possibility of better terms.

In affluent societies, social exclusion therefore has a different meaning than in societies marked by want and necessity. The transition to an affluent society has led to overcoming the widespread privation and existential hardships characteristic of other societies. This, however, has not caused poverty to disappear while new problems of exclusion have emerged – problems that are not properly understood in terms of want and privation. Want always refers to certain necessities of life that are not met. In a society that opens a horizon far beyond the realm of necessity, and in which the orientation toward options open to choice constitutes a core aspect of its identity, the *bare* necessities of life are no longer the primary point of reference. The kind of necessities at the centre of attention here no longer revolves around issues of meeting basic needs but around issues of shaping one’s way of life. For this reason, the satisfaction of basic needs alone is not a sufficient criterion for social participation and inclusion. Exclusion therefore means being confined to living conditions not exceeding basic necessities, at best, instead of having options to choose from in shaping one’s life. What is actually necessary is thus not (only) to fulfil basic needs but to enable social participation and give individuals the opportunity to shape their own lives. Social inclusion must involve the opportunity (options) to lead a self-determined life.

Although the conceptual triad of having choices, having to make choices and having no choices gives us a set of clear-cut analytical distinctions to work with, which can also be supported by plausible examples, it does not replace the need

for empirical analysis, owing to the fact that all three positions relate to one another: they are relational categories. In empirical reality, we can discern neither positions that are completely free to choose at will nor positions that allow absolutely no choice at all. In the case of the ‘winners’, the main issue is the need to make choices in the first place, and perhaps to make the most beneficial ones. In the case of the ‘losers’, in contrast, the choices are much more limited and tend to revolve around the lesser of evils. While the latter choices may be less attractive, this group nonetheless has opportunities to voice and assert their interests in principle – be it individually, via collective action, or through institutional safeguards. The excluded, on the other hand, lack access to important choices – in terms of their ability to meet social standards and expectations of normality. Let me illustrate this in the following section.

Social Exclusion From Market Access and Social Rights

The discussion so far has shown that while choice is often linked with consumption, we would be mistaken to reduce it to activities in consumer markets; rather, it potentially involves all areas of life and must therefore be understood in a more comprehensive sense. In this respect consumption is paradigmatic, but the same could be said of democratic politics as well. In particular, democracy is based on the promise of having control over how one chooses to live one’s own life. It therefore is no coincidence that there have been attempts to make the connection between politics and consumption, recently in the figure of the consumer citizen (cf. Kaela, 2007; Lamla, 2012). These considerations point to the existence of different kinds of resources that enable or restrict choice. Among those resources are not only the financial means that make consumption in the narrow sense possible, but especially also individual and collective rights, which grant, or deny, access to choices.

If we take this broader conception of resources into account, then we can see that the development of social inequality over the past decades has roots both in economic and political developments that define access to, and opportunities for participation in, the options that society offers – options that shape the relations of inequality and processes of exclusion. The access to earned income and social security systems, the existence of social rights and the nature of political-legal regulations, the level of civil society mobilisation and the availability of support systems may either be conducive to social inclusion or, in the absence of adequate arrangements, may restrict individuals in making use of potentially available options in shaping their lives. Questions of this kind are usually discussed within a work society framework. Studies in this vein frequently also provide ample examples of what the restriction of choice means in everyday reality. However,

studies on precarisation and social exclusion within the work society framework tend to focus on the threats to income and to rights ensuring social inclusion, for instance, from labour market regulations, administrative requirements and insecure employment. And of course such analyses are also important from an affluence perspective because these resources are still the basis for realising options. An important difference of the developed affluence perspective, however, lies in the systematic significance given the question of what kind of exclusions these threats entail, i.e. *from what* are those subject to exclusion excluded, namely from the choices available to others in shaping their lives. This will be illustrated below referring to the example of charitable assistance by food banks.

Charitable Assistance by Food Banks

The reflections on social exclusion presented here are not simply of a theoretical nature, but are also the product of empirical research, especially in the field of food banks (Lorenz, 2012a, b). In 1967, the first food bank was established by a local initiative in the USA. It became the model for a number of similar civil society initiatives in affluent societies: volunteers collect excess food and provide it to people with very little money. Since the 1980s, food banks and similar initiatives have spread all over North America and Europe (www.eurofoodbank.org), and in 2006, *The Global FoodBanking Network* (www.foodbanking.org) commenced operations with members and projects on all continents.

In Germany, the largest charitable food organisation is the *Bundesverband Deutsche Tafeln* (German Federation of Tafel Initiatives); *Tafel* might be translated literally as dinner table. The first *Tafel* initiative was founded in 1993. Today there are more than 900 *Tafel* initiatives in which about 60,000 volunteers distribute food to some 1.5 million people.

This kind of charitable food assistance provides an allegory of the outlined boundary between having access to affluence and choices and having no choices. In purchasing goods, consumers make choices. Where choices are made, that which is not chosen becomes leftovers. This regularly results in a surplus of food and food waste. Those visiting *Tafel* outlets or similar facilities do not participate in these choices. That which has been left over by those making the choices is provided to those having no other choice than voluntary social assistance. Making choices and creating surplus and thereby waste, on the one hand, and having no choices, on the other – this is the boundary drawn and represented in such practice, in an allegorically pure form so to speak.

Assistance by food banks, therefore, is an indicator and symptom of social exclusion. And exclusion in general means: having no choices – or more precisely,

not having an assured share in the choices that society normally offers those in other positions, even if they are only unevenly distributed.

We would be mistaken, however, to imagine *Tafel* users simply as people suffering from hunger (Lorenz, 2012a). That they are offered food is primarily due to the fact that there is surplus food, and left over food is hence available as a resource. For *Tafel* users, this affords an opportunity to save money for other things. If other goods were made available – which it oftentimes is, as in the case clothes or household goods – they might take advantage of these opportunities instead. The problem therefore is not one of being threatened by hunger, but of not having enough money to get by, i.e. of market access being highly restricted.

It is things like the ability to buy the ‘proper’ clothes for one’s children to wear to school or the hair dye that one prefers that make the difference. These things involve costs that cannot be shouldered without cutting back on expenses for goods that may appear to be more essential, such as food. But hair dye may in fact be perceived as just as essential if it contributes to being an accepted member of one’s peer group and facilitates participation in social life by symbolising freedom of choice and individual autonomy in the way one lives one’s life. Preferring hair dye at the expense of food is an obvious example for the significance of changing the perspective to the use of resources and to freedom of choice as aspects of utmost relevance to social in- and exclusion. The point of reference here is not basic needs but another kind of need for participation in a world of choice and self-determination.

In *Tafel* settings, there is an awareness of this line of conflict between having and not having choices. Sensitivity to this difference is indicated by the fact that *Tafel* users are often referred to as ‘customers’. Speaking of customers recognises the great significance of the customer role in society and that *Tafel* users should be granted customer status – just as it is granted everyone else. Simulating market relations by simply calling users customers of course fails to accomplish this. *Tafel* outlets are assistance facilities existing *beside* the market, and *real* customers go there and not to a *Tafel*. In this sense, *Tafel* use is more a symbol and act of social exclusion than a contribution to overcoming it.

We observe a similar situation in regard to social rights. For many, visiting a *Tafel* outlet evokes a sense of shame (cf. Selke, 2008). This is less so especially when users assume that they have a (legal) right to such assistance (cf. Lorenz, 2012b). *Tafel* initiatives nourish this perception, for instance, by issuing so-called *Tafel* passes. Practices of this kind, which resemble the customary procedures of the welfare state, again recognise the great significance of such rights and demonstrate that *Tafel* users should actually be able to rely on social safeguards of a binding

nature. Such safeguards should ensure some minimum level of participation in the opportunities society provides to live a life of one's own choosing.

This, however, is precisely a type of guarantee that initiatives based on volunteer commitment cannot give. The inherent tension here is a frequent source of conflict when dedicated volunteers reject the 'entitlement mentality' of users – after all, the former are providing voluntary support and are inclined to expect gratitude and recognition for their work rather than be faced with demands to provide their services. *Tafel* initiatives offer assistance *beside* the welfare services provided by the state and are not in a position to compensate insufficient levels of social protection.

This kind of assistance demonstrates the social divide between positions of having choices and of being excluded thereof but does not overcome the rift. The relations of inequality in no way restrict the options of those who discard goods, now perhaps with greater ease as it fulfils a good purpose. Those, on the other hand, who are relegated to the position of having to rely on assistance in the form of surplus goods make no headway in terms of the ability to participate in the choices society has to offer.

These considerations are of interest in regard to transnational developments as well. While international aid organisations such as Oxfam proclaim to abandon food aid in poor countries, we are witnessing a trend to charitable food assistance by food banks in prosperous societies. And only in these societies do we observe a mass of surplus goods that can serve as resources for this kind of distribution. The 'demand' for such charitable assistance has increased as well in the wake of the social cutbacks witnessed since the 1980s. The worldwide spread of such assistance schemes is an indicator that affluent societies are emerging all over the world – and socially polarised ones at that. For instance, the *India Foodbanking Network* has been established in recent years with the assistance of the *Global FoodBanking Network* (www.foodbanking.org). The stated goal is 'to have each district of India accessible to one FoodBank by 2020' (www.indiafoodbanking.org, 03/08/2014). The emergence of support systems of this kind indicates, and in fact relies on, an increasing availability of surplus goods in India for distribution, on the one hand, and the persistence of poverty and social exclusion to be alleviated by excess goods, on the other. Having or not having choices is congealing into a persistent pattern of inequality.

A NEW AFFLUENT SOCIETY

This article has proposed to conceive and conceptualise social inequality and exclusion in affluent society in terms of access to options for shaping one's life and the freedom of choice to make use of them. For this purpose, I have distinguished three social positions: having choices, having to make choices and

having no choices. Here, affluent society does not stand for the optimistic concept of the past that was based on the belief that social problems, especially poverty, have largely been overcome. The concept proposed in this paper makes clear that the problems of poverty and social exclusion in affluent societies must be defined differently than in societies marked by want and necessity. The concept does not claim that the problems of ensuring basic levels of social protection have been resolved. Quite to the contrary, it shows in which ways they have not, while demonstrating the importance of establishing basic safeguards to ensure social inclusion. Only once the latter is achieved does it become possible to enter the arenas where social struggles over matters of distribution take place.

It stands to reason that society must restrict some options to some degree. Environmental reasons can be cited in support of this but also reasons of social justice, for instance when some individuals exercise their freedoms at the expense of others. If there is unlimited freedom of choice there will probably be ongoing incentives in making choices regardless of the social consequences. However, analysing these issues is beyond the scope of this article. The issue addressed here is the situation of those at the lower end of relations of inequality, where social exclusion takes place. Based on examples, I have illustrated what it means specifically to be in a position of having no choices. Further empirical analyses in different fields would be needed to show what social options need to be expanded and for whom.

In the light of current debates on sustainability or post-growth, the boundlessness in the cultural logic of desire and freedom of choice remains a fundamental problem. It is therefore fair to assume that the social and environmental problems to which this boundlessness gives rise cannot be resolved within the confines of the relations of the flexibilised affluent society described above, but only once we succeed in breaking the underlying pattern of unlimited growth as such. I have described some of the alternative interpretations that have prevailed in the past and the approaches to affluence that they entailed. They range from egalitarian frugality, through the ritualised prevention of accumulating wealth, the granting of privileges to a 'chosen few' or a dominant orientation towards basic needs, to attempts at resolving the paradoxes of modern affluent societies. Although we cannot simply apply past solutions to conditions today, the comparison does demonstrate that alternative conceptions of affluence and social practices are indeed possible. What these alternatives might look like requires additional research.

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Notes

- 1) A current and programmatic look at excess – rather than affluence – is provided by Abbott (2014). However, he is interested in historically independent reflections about his point that ‘the central problematic of social life is not having too little of something, but having too much of it’ (ibid.) and he mentions poverty only in the outlook. In my article, affluent society is regarded as a term of determining contemporary societies and the focus is on their relationships of inequality and exclusion.
- 2) While this opens the opportunity to interpret (kinds of) work as an option that one might choose (or not choose) out of a range of other options in shaping one’s way of life in the affluent society, Ransome nevertheless adheres to the idea of linking work with necessity and basic needs ‘(...) since work is the primary means of satisfying our survival needs’ (Ransome, 2006) as well as to the corresponding idea of a consumption-based society as the historical successor of the work-based society.

Of course, means and ends are relational categories, which is an important aspect in understanding the necessity-affluence difference. In the relationship of work/production and consumption, work provides the means to the ends, and these ends are consumed goods. In other perspectives, work may also be regarded as an end in itself (work as a satisfying action), and consumption normally serves as a means to other ends in shaping the way of life.

- 3) Similarly, Bauman (2004) speaks of excessive or redundant people.
- 4) In contrast, the system theory approach misses a link to inequality analyses and Castel conceptualises his ‘zones’ as ‘modes of social existence along a gradation’ between poles (Castel, 2000) rather than contested social positions.
- 5) Offe (1996) sketches his conception in only a few lines. In building his categories, he refers especially to ‘Recht oder materiellen Ressourcen’ [law or material resources] and postulates five essentials of social participation (Offe, 1996), of which the first is work while consumption or other categories of options (ends) are not mentioned at all. This is the reason why Offe’s conception needs to be adapted and reformulated to account for the particular nature of the developed affluent society.
- 6) This is particularly apparent in the area of forced migration although it has been mostly neglected in this context due to the long-prevailing national focus in debates on social inequality and exclusion. For instance, the social security benefits available to asylum seekers in Germany are lower than the minimum

assistance level granted German citizens. Furthermore, benefits to asylum seekers are partly granted only in kind and not in cash, which restricts freedom of choice. At the same time, legal provisions constrain access to the labour market, preventing them from gainful employment and thus from earning income of their own (cf. Scherschel, 2011).

- 7) The figures are given by the organisation itself, see <http://www.tafel.de/die-tafeln/zahlen-fakten.html> (03/08/2014).
- 8) This can also be plausibly explained from another angle. Research on waste behaviour shows interesting connections between a great variety in the supply of goods and the waste produced (Rathje and Murphy, 1992). Private consumption results in little thrown away food if the typical diet consists of only relatively few basic foods – which is the exact opposite of a variety of options. There is another interesting aspect, however. In times when food is in scarce supply, more and not less food is apparently wasted. In such circumstances, there is a tendency to stockpile food, which results in more spoiled food to be disposed of. Hence, a strategy of simply cutting back on food supply to reduce excess food and waste would not only be difficult to implement but would not solve the problem either.
- 9) The *Tafel* initiatives are often not aware of this and communicate the need to fight hunger. By framing the problem in this way, they define the recipients of aid in terms of basic needs. Instead of advocating the need to expand the options of those seeking help, they fall short of what social security schemes have already achieved historically (cf. Möhring-Hesse, 2010; Lorenz, 2012b).
- 10) Market access in this sense comprises not only food shopping but all forms of participation and activities with a price tag attached, for instance buying a ticket for public transit to visit family or friends. Here we could easily add observations on financial exclusion (cf. Stewart, 2010).
- 11) The fact that assistance is provided in kind instead of in cash is another factor that figures in here; aid in kind serves a certain pre-defined purpose whereas cash is open to flexible use according to self-defined criteria. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between charity and social rights, see Lorenz (2012c) with reference to Poppendieck (1994) among others.
- 12) ‘From the perspective of critical wealth research this means, first of all, that ‘market incomes’ should be distributed more equally. A salary cap at the top and a minimum wage at the lower end are indispensable to achieve this’ (Mäder *et al.*, 2010; translation).

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