What constitutes our right to belong?[1]

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During this relaxing conference dinner, it is my duty to introduce some indigestible thoughts, make what you take for granted, questionable, and call on you to consider problems associated with our being here end enjoying the occasion.

I am not talking about airplane delays or the conflicts some might have had to negotiate with partners who questioned why attending this conference was so important as against all the other ongoing domestic commitments. I want to question much more fundamentally whether we all have a right to be here tonight and to be part of this social gathering.

Such mental challenges might seem a bit of an affront given that this is not an actual working part of this symposium – after all, tonight is classed as a "social occasion," but listening more analytically to this term, "social occasion" – raises the question, what makes this occasion "social." This might seem obvious, the social is something we all enjoy together, but I am raising this strange question because we have entered into an era in which what is social has become so profoundly uncertain, as if it raised only nostalgic associations. Engaging in something social appears a bit off-beam – and yet, we still adhere to it, often with a bad conscience. Shouldn't we be working instead of being social, should we not relegate what counts as social to the private sphere and leave our public, official life governed by other criteria so as to become more efficient – and being social counts as a hindrance to efficiency. Can we still take it for granted that this dinner is a social occasion when all around us what is social has become so questionable? Or to put it another way: what gives us the right to participate in a social occasion, to be social, to belong?

We might take our being here for granted. Some scholars present here have been working together and have been friends for a long time, and particularly, the older ones might argue, thereby brush the question aside with this remark: we have always belonged to this group, have in this sense been here before, almost always. So being social is just a habit, a quasi-natural development over time, a right on account of its long tradition.

Another reference point is of course that we all had received an invitation – but on account of what? Were we friends with somebody important, or somebody just knew you, found you a nice, fitting person for this occasion, or rather, a nice person quite generally although you did not quite fit to this occasion and you would otherwise not have had the right to belong here tonight? It is good to have friends, friends in the right places who ensure our right to belong, on whom we can depend or on whom we are dependent?

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[1] This contribution is the transcript of the Dinner-Speech, held on the occasion of the Symposium on "Renegotiating Social Citizenship – Democracy in Welfare Service States," Hannover June 12th-14th of 2019

This is unfair; of course, it was rather your professional or academic reputation that constitutes your right to be here. You have worked hard to earn that reputation. Evidence for this is your long list of publications – how could anybody not invite you? The conference, and the dinner would not be the same without you. You deserve to be here; you are one of the deserving kind.

Or you are here because somebody "of your kind" was needed and it is not anything specifically about your personal qualities that brings you here, but because a representative of your discipline, of your country, more young people, more women were required to fulfil the conditions for this project. It would look bad, it would look unbalanced, it would smack of privilege to have a gathering of friends or of high achievers only, there has to be equality even, or especially, on a social occasion. Can we therefore look at each table: are there equal numbers of women and men, are the nations equally represented, the ethnicities? Must we do better next time?

Fortunately, on account of our sponsors, I do not have to consider another criterion for being here, to suspect that some of you are here because they paid for it and would otherwise not deserve to be here. If this social occasion were only available to those who paid their way in order to participate, as is normally the case with big international money-making conferences and their famous conference dinners, there would have been careful checks at the entrance to see that only those who had paid were allowed to socialize. In this case, you would have a right to belong only because you paid the fee – or because you managed to sneak in without paying…

Now that I have raised these awkward questions, do these various reasons why we are here and belong to this social occasion have an impact on the way we socialize? Looking around, I can see that you had a good time socializing (until I interrupted everything of course and can see you are eagerly awaiting to resume your socializing) regardless of the explanation what brought you here. It is only when somebody asks those awkward questions concerning the right to be here that the enjoyment of socializing is cast in a slightly different and, perhaps awkward, light. It seems as if being social takes place on a different plane from intellectual exercises, and, particularly, political debates of defining criteria as to where I should invest my feelings and with whom I should socialize, and to whom I should express solidarity.

Of course, even on trivial social occasions there is often this difficult moment when socializing suddenly becomes questionable, and I do not mean because the wine bottles have stopped circulating. Maybe somebody behaved in a way that the others find unacceptable, or has voiced a view that causes a deep split across the table. The social bonds seem broken, the socializing stops. What are we left with? How can we salvage the evening? This indicates that even a social evening requires preparation, care about the circumstances (yes, also the choice of wine), the skills to make conversation, and the will to understand the others. When it works well, we take those conditions for granted, but in complex societies, we can take nothing for granted. Such ruptures can become deep divisions.

With these questions I want to connect this dinner occasion with the topic of the symposium because this is what I was asked to do to justify my being here on this social occasion. My justification is that the questions of what makes an occasion social, what makes us belong to a social unit, and what gives us the right to belong are questions that are currently being raised incessantly, and certainly not only and not primarily, by academics. And the polemical way in

which those questions are being raised does not just spoil the enjoyment of social dinners – they spoil our way of living together in a society.

I am not saying the questions should not be raised, that what is social and to whom solidarity should be extended is beyond questioning. On the contrary, I want to focus on the necessity to raise these questions again in order to obtain an answer and re-establish grounds for "being social," and hence, enjoying social occasions.

Let's start the next reflections with a really awkward question: are there any people from Britain here and, if so, do you still want to belong to what seems to be primarily a European gathering here? Now, this is of course grossly unfair because the people of the UK (and I am well aware that they are not all British) expressed in their infamous referendum of 2016, only what quite a number of people in other countries of Europe would like to express, which is that belonging to this abstract, bureaucratic entity of Europe and having to socialize with all those foreigners has gone too far, has become a burden. It has questioned our own right to belong and therefore our own sense of identity because it dissolves the boundaries and our right to draw boundaries. There are now too many people who think they have a right to belong and who make claims on our social support systems when in fact they are not "really" part of our social fabric.

The questions I asked you about this social occasion are not just the questions that create embarrassing moments at dinner parties, they make being part of a contemporary society awkward. Raising those questions, trying to establish the right categories of belonging calls into question the taken-for-granted basis of our social living together.

The different answers implied in the questions I raised follow classical but, today, very questionable categories.

- The social can be defined as being constituted by people who are familiar with each other; they do not necessarily have to be friends, but they get on with each other, share the same jokes, like the same kind of topics, in short, they share the same cultural habits. How often and how vehemently is this cultural card being played in current discourses on belonging?!

- The other category is, of course, that belonging has been earned by efforts: a club, a business, a country needs people who have something to offer, who are achievers, entrepreneurs who make something of themselves and do not wait until somebody takes them into their social circles. Being social requires an effort.

- The third option is to see what is social as a kind of imposition, an engineering trick to make agglomerations of people look social because there is something presumed to be unsocial when certain groups of people are excluded, something abstract like justice and equality oblige us to be social, even if this infringes our freedom to be individuals.

How have these questions arisen? Does raising these questions attack and erode, make unnecessarily complicated what was – or is - fundamentally quite a simple thing, "the social?" Is it the fault of the questioners, i.e. us academics dealing constantly with social questions, that things are so complicated?

The term, the understanding of what is social, is currently in danger of being deprived of its comprehensive meaning which is to me: the quality of well-being in community. This comprehensive meaning is being driven apart, fragmented into either superficial and ultimately trivial notions of spontaneous conviviality, a notion that conjures up the pub- or party-atmosphere where some people count as particularly social because the pay for a round of beer or make other people laugh. The embodiment of this notion to me is that sickly smiling instigator of Brexit, Michael Farage. Brexit for him is just a bit of a laugh, a means of playing with a notion of Britain becoming a type of club, if possible, a club of clones of Farage. The right to belong becomes based on club membership – the members decide whom they want to admit and whom to exclude so that their social atmosphere can continue undisturbed, chanting Rule Britannia…

Or 'social' counts, and is being instrumentalized as a negative attribute of people and circumstances where the essential means of well-being are lacking. Social welfare, social assistance, 'being on social' in slang, being a social case, having the 'social welfare' (i.e. social workers) calling on you, are all circumstances to be avoided at all costs. With providing social assistance here comes an intention of deliberate stigma, meaning paradoxically, that people should not be social, but act as individuals. Whoever does not live up to his or her personal obligations, which count as social obligations, is a scrounger, somebody who ultimately does not deserve to belong, who has not earned the right to belong. The embodiment of a social case nowadays is the refugee for whom it is made as difficult as possible to receive social assistance.

The third impersonation of somebody who counts as social is the complete opposite, somebody like Microsoft's Bill Gates or Amazon's Jeff Bezos. On account of their wealth, they can afford to be social, to fund social projects – Bezos wants to single-handedly eliminate homelessness in the USA – and they count as social in the philanthropic tradition. Again, paradoxically, their being social places them apart from the ones whom they give social attention. They themselves belong to an elite of super-rich who live in a reality unreachable for literally the rest of the world.

What I mean to indicate with these stereotypes is that the question of what is social, or rather 'the social question' itself, is inseparable from the question of who has the right to belong. And while in the past this question has been answered within the framework of the nation-states with the production of basically the three types of welfare states, but with the intention of somehow incorporating and balancing out the three conditions of belonging, the cultural aspect, the meritocratic aspect ,and the equality and justice aspect, I see politics today splitting these three elements. The 'social' is not so much disappearing as being fragmented. Politics is using taken-for-granted notions of what social means for gaining popularity in certain circles thereby renouncing on the responsibility to even hold a fundamental political debate on what actually constitutes the right to belong to a social entity, be that the state or the European Union. We experience this fundamental uncertainty because conditions for belonging are simply laid down and are being essentialized – instead of being put up for public debate. Belonging is a complex issue and politics is dodging that complexity and resorting instead to Twitter simplifications.

And I think this challenge is what brings us together on this occasion, our commitment, our responsibility to finding a new, comprehensive grounding of the right to belong because the past principles and criteria are not only exhausted, but are driving our societies further and further apart.

What I wanted to show in this social part of our conference is that social questions are all around us and require us to give accountable answers – otherwise we are in danger of contributing to the further erosion of what it means to be social.

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