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The politics and poetics of cultural cleavage*

Notes on a narrative

Abstract: Cosmopolitans versus communitarians, liberal elites versus globalization losers: Diagnoses of a fundamental cultural division of society are circulating en masse. This article discusses some implications of current narratives of division based on the example of the German debate but also with references from France, Great Britain and the United States, and it formulates a criticism of all too simple patterns of interpretation. It shows that the assertion of a dichotomically structured cultural cleavage plays, not least, into the hands of the right-wing populist discourse, whose core narrative is the juxtaposition of ‘elites’ and ‘the people.’ In a second step, the narrative of the cultural cleavage is historicized: Using the example of the formative phase of scientific folklore studies in the second half of the 19th century, it becomes clear that diagnoses of division always fulfil certain functions within the cultural and scientific field. Finally, the article also states an increased need for cultural studies research in a field of discourse in which social problematic situations and political conflicts are time and again interpreted in cultural terms.

Keywords: cultural cleavage, social inequality, right-wing populism, globalization, anti-elitism, folklore studies

“Mind the Gap?” – An introduction

A conference was held at the Hafen City University Hamburg in April 2017 which, under the headline “Mind the Gap!,” examined current discourses on social divisions. The 2016 presidential elections in the United States and the Brexit vote in Great Britain were identified as starting points of recent narratives of division. As the organizers Alexa Färber, Yuca Meubrink and Inga Reimers write in the conference announcement:

Two elections broadened the public discourse on democracy with a new narrative in 2016: The result of the Brexit in the UK as well as the outcome of the presidential election in the US have been interpreted in a critical introspection as signs of a gap between actors of the public discourse and a part of the population which has

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been underrepresented and therefore misunderstood. (Färber, Meubrink, and Reimers 2017).

Particularly for disciplines who work ethnographically, such as European ethnology/cultural analysis, the question arises – as Färber, Meubrink, and Reimers state in their paper – how the narrative of the gap not only structures social debates but also concerns one's own scientific work because the classical ethnological difference between one's "own" and the "foreign" itself marks a gap which is negotiated in different variants:

This articulation of a gap raises different questions especially for a discipline that uses ethnography as the main research method such as Social and Cultural Anthropology, which deals with both the life experiences of the socially 'other' as well as the internal and external ascriptions and dominant constructions of the 'other'. (Färber, Meubrink, and Reimers 2017)

This contribution takes up the debate on narratives of social divisions and provides a sketch of the problem from the perspective of cultural studies. On the one hand, the current popularity of diagnoses of a gap will be investigated, as they are evident not only in scientific texts but also in feuilletons, reportages or autobiographies. On the other hand, the cultural logic of the narrative of division will also be illuminated by a brief historical example. The narrative of division is by no means just a narrative of the present; culturalist interpretations of social inequality were already tangible in the 19th and early 20th century that identify the social and symbolic cleavage between educational milieus and popular classes as a key social problem. An empirical cultural science that conceives of culture as the "other side of the social" (cf. Wietschorke 2012: 349–355) must feel challenged when public discourse is so extensively concerned with cultural divisions. Are we today experiencing another massive culturalization of the social, as Wolfgang Kaschuba criticized already in the early 1990s in his inaugural lecture in Berlin (Kaschuba 1995)?¹ How new is this practice of culturalization after all? And what difference does it make whether, in the current diagnosis of society, social inequality is understood as a problem of material resources and distributive justice, or whether the topic is discussed primarily as a question of education and alienation? In this sense, the discourse on cultural cleavage follows political cycles, but it also shows very specific poetics: Narrative modes and patterns that reveal surprising parallels throughout history. The following considerations are intended as a tentative exploration of a field whose relevance to the political debate can hardly be overestimated. They can also help to understand the reflexes and projections that have always been associated with the idea of the 'common people' or the 'ordinary people' – be it in the sense of a reflexive historical

1 On the culturalization of social inequality, cf. also the stimulative outline of the problem by Goetze (2006).

self-understanding of the discipline of folklore studies or in the sense of more recent and current conceptions of proximity and distance between ‘elites’ and ‘the people.’²

Cultural cleavage: The anatomy of a contemporary diagnosis

Wherever one turns at the moment, there is talk of social division. The long-standing polarization of the political landscape in the United States has allegedly become a “hyperconflict” since Donald Trump took office (West 2019); in Great Britain, the Brexit process has been accompanied by persistent diagnoses of division; and in France, observers such as geographer Christophe Guilluy are diagnosing new “Fractures françaises” (Guilluy 2013). Headlines and book titles from Germany also announce a “divided country” (Hagelükken 2017) or a “torn republic” (Butterwegge 2020). The German Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung n.d.) also reports a society moving apart. In all this, it is anything but a contentious issue that social inequality in European societies and on a global scale is on the rise. Ever since the financial and banking crisis of 2007 and 2008, the instability of late capitalist conditions and their social systems has been the subject of renewed discussion. Economist Thomas Piketty launched an international debate with his book *Le capital au XXI^e siècle* (2013) in which social inequality is recognized as a core topic of the present. And in the light of the growing electoral successes of right-wing populist parties, there is also increased talk of social inequality and the frictions of what Oliver Nachtwey has called the “*Abstiegsgesellschaft*” (‘society of social decline’) (2016). There is by no means a lack of figures to support all these findings, especially for Germany which, in the words of Hartmut Kaelble, has become

- 2 Research activities and contexts of discussion relating to this can currently be found in several sites of the discipline of folklore studies/European ethnology/cultural analysis. In addition to the Hamburg “Mind the Gap” workshop, the follow-up event in Klagenfurt can be listed here which was organized by Alexandra Schwell and Janine Schemmer in March 2018. Titled “Ethnography in Times of Populism. Mind the Gap 2,” one question discussed was how the restraint in ethnographic research regarding “boring white people” can be explained. Bernd Jürgen Warneken has expressed similar thoughts in his call for the critical examination of widespread views of the lower social and educational classes (cf. Warneken 2019: 127). Headed by Moritz Ege, an event titled “Gegen die Eliten – zur Konjunktur eines Krisenmotivs” (‘Against the elites – on the boom of a motif of crisis’) took place at the University of Göttingen in 2018/19, which studied the reflections between ‘elites’ and ‘the people’ in several instructive experimental designs. Further contributions and publications can certainly be expected from this context. In addition, a newly published special issue with contributions from the panel “‘I want to live like common people.’ Narratives, semantics and pictures of the popular within the populist transformation of political discourse,” organized by Sebastian Dümmling and Johannes Springer at the 2019 SIEF Congress in Santiago de Compostela, also documents a current research interest in the topic (Dümmling and Springer 2020). Finally, in 2021, a workshop by the informal network Kulturanalyse (‘cultural analysis’) on the topic of cultural cleavage will take place in Berlin – a research network which brings together empirical cultural studies and political economy and consists of representatives from both disciplines.

one of the most unequal societies in Europe since the 1980s. According to the German Institute for Economic Research, the 45 richest Germans own just as much as the poorer half of the population (Diekmann 2018). The Federal Government's Poverty and Wealth Report of April 2017 also found that social inequality in Germany is pronounced: While 51.9% of net wealth is concentrated in the richest 10% of the population, the poorer half can claim only 1% (Butterwegge 2020: 221). According to surveys as part of the German microcensus, the at-risk-of-poverty rate affects 15.8% of the population (Butterwegge 2020: 213). The trends in the European and global context, with very different national and regional patterns, also point to a further increase in inequality.³

Significant shifts in the discourse on social division have been observed in recent years. It is no longer just the growing social inequality that worries commentators in the arts, journalism and science but rather a new constellation of problems that can be summarized under the heading of cultural cleavage. Reference is increasingly being made to 'cultural' lines of division which overlap the social lines of division and call for new problem descriptions: On the one hand, the 'liberal elites' with a cosmopolitan attitude, on the other hand, the 'disconnected' globalization losers who do not want to or cannot orientate their lives in concert with the demands of flexibility and modernity. Sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, for example, does not stop at the observation that in late modernity we are (again) dealing with a class society because he does not understand this class society primarily as a political-economic fact but rather points out that it is also and especially about cultural classes (Reckwitz 2017: 275). Above all, he states, the new academic middle class and the new underclass are facing each other, and he continues that polarization at the level of education and cultural capital is the central characteristic that shapes the social structure of late modern society; while the type of educational attainment in the levelled middle-class society was hardly decisive for attaining a middle-class lifestyle, the contrast between the highly qualified and the low qualified is formative of structure in later modernity (Reckwitz 2017: 280). According to Reckwitz, upward and downward social mobility shape the (self-)perception of social groups in the new class society which, in his words, is a society of cultural class division (Reckwitz 2017: 277, 283).⁴

The dimensions of education, culture and lifeworld in many current narratives of division have, thus, moved to the fore, and the diagnoses show a clear bipolar

3 On the global inequality of wealth, see Piketty (2013).

4 Cornelia Koppetsch has criticized in her book review for the platform *Soziopolis* precisely this culturalist line of argument taken by Reckwitz and writes that where classical cultural sociology has still considered culture in its interaction with social structure, society seems to be graspable in Reckwitz' work only in the cultural, and that if everything becomes culture, the theory of society ultimately eludes empirical verification and becomes itself a work of art (Koppetsch 2017).

structure: While the anthology by Stephan Lessenich and Frank Nullmeier, published in 2006 under the title *Deutschland – eine gespaltene Gesellschaft* ('Germany – a divided society') still discusses 17 different constellations of division, which overlap in many ways (Lessenich and Nullmeier 2006a),⁵ parts of the public discourse have now developed into a much more concise interpretation of the present: A dichotomizing description of the state of affairs that is based primarily on educational differences and sees new culture wars (Manow 2019: 33) in progress. The diagnosis that the cultural and everyday distance between the 'liberal elites' and the underrepresented and misunderstood 'common people' has been increasing over the past decades, above all, in light of what Nancy Fraser has called progressive neoliberalism (Fraser 2017), has of course been in the air for some time. However, this diagnosis experienced a real boom in recent years in the context of the debate about the shift to the right in Europe and the United States – in short, in connection with the so-called right-wing populism. The shock at the election and voting results of the US presidential election in 2016, the Brexit referendum in the same year and the 2017 parliamentary elections in Germany, in which the "*Alternative für Deutschland*" (AfD) achieved a nationwide result of 12.6% of the vote, was deep. Many commentators felt prompted by the events to look for explanations that bring cultural orientations and conflicts to the fore. Deutschlandfunk radio titled one of its broadcasts in March 2019 "*Die alten Konfliktlinien gelten nicht mehr*" ('The old lines of conflict no longer apply') and introduced it by saying that it was cosmopolitans against communitarians, world citizens against nationalists, globalization winners against globalization losers, and that social controversies were moving along new lines of conflict (Breuer 2019). The French philosopher Guillaume Paoli even reported a fundamental transformation of man and his subjectivity. The blurb to his book *Die lange Nacht der Metamorphose* ('The Long Night of Metamorphosis') states that it is not the economic situation but the affiliation to a certain cultural ideal that has become decisive and, thus, the "progressive" and "tolerant" were contrasted with the "backward" and "those who are old school" (Paoli 2017). Bernd Stegemann juxtaposes the two "halves" of the population in affluent societies at the start of his treatise on populism and writes that while one half refines their manners and liberalizes everyday life, the other half is angry about how much their lives are restricted by the constraints of work and poverty (Stegemann 2017: 7). Even a rather sober observer, such as sociologist Cornelia Koppetsch, speaks of a completely new calibration of the space of lifestyles and writes that the gulf of social distinction now runs between cultural-

5 The opposing pairs discussed in this volume are: "poor – rich," "employed – unemployed," "secure – precarious," "capital – work," "old – young," "women – men," "parents – childless," "educated – uneducated," "elite – mass," "East – West," "North – South," "city – country," "Germans – foreigners," "believers – nonbelievers," "left – right," "mobile – immobile" and "winner – loser".

cosmopolitan and cultural-conformist forms of knowledge and appropriation (Koppetsch 2019: 115).⁶

In light of the debate on right-wing populism, political science analyses are now increasingly reverting to the old cleavage theory developed in the 1960s by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (1967). As a central approach to party and election research, this theory serves to explain the fundamental formation of political camps within a society (cf. e.g. Bornschieer 2010; Oesch 2013). However, the old opposition between social democratic and Christian-conservative popular parties has been replaced by a new opposition between 'GAL' (Green-Alternative-Libertarian) and 'TAN' (Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist) orientations in the interpretation of the current political landscape. (cf. Manow 2018: 77). In the German context, therefore, the Greens, on the one hand, and the AfD, on the other, act as the new lifestyle-based leading parties between which the alleged new cultural divide runs. In this sense, the political science cleavage theory with its culturalist lopsidedness is being repositioned: Simon Bornschieer spoke of a "new cultural conflict" that underpins the new successes of right-wing populist parties (2010). According to the Swiss political scientist Daniel Oesch, the right-wing populist boom is not based primarily on a dispute about the economy and the fair distribution of resources but one about culture and the definition of identities (Oesch 2013: 34). This interpretation is a recognizable reaction to the findings of election research, according to which the new right-wing populist parties have been particularly popular in a traditional working-class milieu. However, if many workers no longer vote for the left, as the struggle for distributive justice and participation would require, then – so the conclusion goes – cultural and identity political motives must have moved to the forefront. In this way, traditional party ties have been replaced by camp formations in the lifeworld, as described by the conservative British journalist David Goodhart (2017) as a tribal conflict between the "somewheres" and the "anywheres". A recent study by King's College London and the Policy Institute quoted in the German weekly *Der Spiegel* found that the situation had even worsened, particularly in Great Britain in the wake of the bitter Brexit debates, to such an extent that the British were now split into two hostile blocks, and about half of the people do not even want to talk to the other side. It also stated that only 9% of the British population still feel something like a party affiliation, but 44% had developed a "Brexit identity" (Schindler 2019: 95). Even in the United States, a political camp formation is being stated that reaches deep into the structures of everyday life. Arlie Russell

6 The overall thesis developed by Koppetsch – that the rise of right-wing populism is to be understood as a consequence of what she calls the as yet unresolved epochal upheaval of globalization – favors cleavage-theoretical explanatory models from the outset since it automatically distinguishes between two cultural camps: Groups that benefit from globalization and those that are overburdened by it (Koppetsch 2019: 14).

Hochschild's brilliant study *Strangers in Their Own Land: A Journey into the Heart of the American Right* (2016) is just one of the countless publications that have contributed to what she describes as the increasingly hostile division of the United States into two large camps.

New “cultural struggles” as a challenge for cultural studies

Such an exacerbation of the narratives of division over the past few years must make one pause for thought. It is precisely the pronounced tendency of many commentators to interpret the social frictions that have arisen in parallel with the rise of right-wing populism as cultural problems that makes this connection a highly relevant topic in cultural studies. Lessenich and Nullmeier were still able to state in 2006 that the multiplication of lines of conflict and divisions went hand in hand with a standardization of conflict perspectives and patterns, and that instead of the end of distribution conflicts proclaimed in ‘post-materialistic’ times, all cultural differences, even deep ones, were translated into problems of economic distribution (Lessenich and Nullmeier 2006b: 17). Today, almost 15 years later, the logic in certain segments of public discourse seems to be reversed: Even problems of economic distribution are translated into a cultural grammar of value orientations and lifestyles. Not only material inequality but also cultural deprivation is seen as the main cause of social tensions.

At first glance, the current diagnoses of a cultural cleavage or a cultural gap have some merits, but they are also problematic in several respects. This will be indicated in the following five argumentative steps: *Firstly*, it is the fundamental dichotomous structure of these diagnoses that fails to convince. Why should the manifold lines of conflict and tension of the present suddenly merge into a model that knows, first and foremost, two poles? Are the classifications of “cosmopolitan” and “communitarian” patterns of living not far too blurred? Can a diagnosis of society really take hold that treats what Manow calls general cultural resentments (Manow 2018: 79) as structure-forming factors? One of the authors who resists the temptation of making a simple dichotomous diagnosis of division is the Munich sociologist Lessenich mentioned above, who describes a complex dynamic of social closures of top against bottom, inside against outside, one against another and all against one. Lessenich shows that four axes are intertwined here: A vertical, horizontal, transversal and external axis on which various struggles for the distribution of positions of entitlement and legal claims take place (Lessenich 2019: 42). In addition, there are struggles at the level of late modern gender and age regimes, which, in turn, thwart the logic of the aforementioned axes. In short, Lessenich writes, modern democracy is a great game of closure, a complex and variable game of social inclusion and exclusion (Lessenich 2019: 81). The scheme of “cosmopolitans versus communitarians” falls far too short here.

Secondly, this dichotomous scheme ignores the enormous differences that exist between different national, regional and even local contexts. Philip Manow has pointed to the pronounced geographical variance of populist currents and concludes that for this reason alone, populisms in Europe and the United States cannot be explained by global references to new cultural cleavages between cosmopolitans, on the one hand, and communitarians, on the other, and that one cannot avoid dealing with political-economic realities and their histories if one wants to understand cultural affinities and political preferences (Manow 2018: 50). Against this background, it is astonishing that some current diagnoses of right-wing populism are read almost as cross-national analyses that allegedly contribute to understanding both Donald Trump's presidential election as well as the electoral successes of the AfD in Germany or the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* in Austria. One prominent example of this is Didier Eribon's autobiographical text (2009), which was published in France in 2009 under the title *Retour à Reims* but only became an international bestseller after 2016. The statement that *Retour à Reims* is a key work for understanding the social present in Europe and the United States, as the Berlin Schaubühne theatre claims in the accompanying text to its stage adaptation of the book,⁷ is now rather rejected by Eribon himself.⁸

Thirdly – and this is a particularly sensitive point – many cleavage diagnoses adopt the interpretation of society propagated by the right-wing populists, whose successes they are in fact attempting to explain. After all, the cultural bloc confrontation between the disadvantaged “common people” and the self-indulgent liberal elites is a central figure in the thinking of right-wing populists. This also applies to the special status ascribed to identity politics in this complex: Is it really the resistance against feminism and ‘genderism,’ against anti-racism and political correctness that drives voters into the arms of right-wing authoritarian parties? As Manow pointedly asks: Has populism really emerged from the new lines of conflict in identity politics, and are we not in danger of taking the consequences for the cause, the epiphenomenon for the phenomenon? Should it not be cause for reflection if the class with the maximum cultural capital diagnoses populist protest as primarily an expression of a lack of cultural capital? (Manow 2019: 37) In short, as Jan-Werner Müller puts it, one does the work for the populists if one accepts their culturalized descriptions of problems without criticism (Müller 2019: 23). More than that: One participates in the division of the political left along the axis of identity politics/class politics which is currently the subject of broad debate – with the clear danger

7 Accessed December 20, 2019. Available at: www.schaubuehne.de/de/produktionen/rueckkehr-nach-reims-2.html?ID_Vorstellung=2710.

8 Cf. the interview in the Swiss online magazine “Republik.” Accessed December 20, 2019. Available at: www.republik.ch/2018/02/19/interview-eribon-teil1.

that these two core left projects will increasingly be thought of as being detached from each other rather than as intertwined.⁹

Fourthly, the talk of cultural cleavage sometimes includes implicit role assignments regarding the political distortions of the present. As Oliver Marchart has shown, liberal anti-populism operating with cleavage theorems, in its specific re-actualization of the figure of the ‘elite’ versus ‘people’, can easily tip over into what he calls an elitist paternalism that, in an inversion of populist invocations, considers the elite as ‘pure’ and the people as ‘corrupt.’ By identifying the “modernization losers” and those “left behind” with the pool of voters of the right-wing populist parties, the “people” are again imagined as a “threatening mass” that endangers the (neo)liberal social consensus (Marchart 2017: 14). If one takes this line of argument one step further, one could even arrive at the conclusion that the sweeping talk of ‘the populists’ is less of an analysis of existing divisions and more of a creation of new ones. Populism is then practically presented as the other side of liberal political reason – while the success of some anti-populist conservative-liberal parties is in fact due precisely to the adoption of content from “right-wing populists.”¹⁰

Fifthly and finally, the role assignments mentioned previously have questionable effects regarding the cultural representation of the “communitarian” underclass. For several years now, reports and popular texts have been circulating that claim to better understand the rise of right-wing populisms in Europe and the United States by focusing on “regions left behind”: on the “France profonde,” the Saxon province or the areas of the US Midwest where above-average election results of the Rassemblement National, the AfD or Donald Trump were recorded. A pointed example of this was the *Der Spiegel* reportage published in 2017 by the award-winning journalist Claas Relotius who, under the title “In einer kleinen Stadt” (‘In a Small Town’), portrayed the inhabitants of Fergus Falls in Minnesota as gun-loving rednecks with authoritarian character structures. Since Trump’s election, Relotius claimed, the whole world had been wondering who these people were – and he provided a series of images of “these people” wearing baseball caps that say “hillbilly” or “white trash,” who are sometimes called provincial, sometimes frustrated and sometimes lost and who can easily be believed to take the political option of a xenophobic gambler in the presidential office (Relotius 2017). This text was a fake, as has been extensively discussed, also by *Der Spiegel* itself. Not only were the details incorrect,

9 The edited volume by Richardt (2018) is representative of this critical perspective on left-wing identity politics. Cf. on this the differentiated analysis by van Dyk (2019).

10 The blatantly failed “black-blue,” conservative/far-right government in Austria is an example of this process: The *Österreichische Volkspartei* under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz paradoxically kept its ‘populist’ coalition partner, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, at a distance primarily by representing its agendas in refugee and domestic policy. Thus, it became possible that today, after the breakdown in the wake of the 2019 “Ibiza Affair,” there is hardly any talk of agreement and cooperation in terms of content but rather of squandered moral prestige.

but the overall picture was distorted – as the residents of Fergus Falls themselves also objected when they spoke out publicly. This text is exemplary of the sweeping discourse about the voters of right-wing populist parties. By emphasizing lifeworld attitudes and patterns of behavior, as can be found, for example, in the pertinent bestseller *Hillbilly Elegy* by J. D. Vance (2016), liberal anti-populism here shows a paternalistic gesture that tends to declare the “populist followers” to be self-inflicted losers. Such narratives can establish themselves particularly easily on the horizon of division theory and cultural cleavage: The emphasis on the gap is what makes the cultural distance to “them over there” truly plausible.¹¹

Cultural cleavages around 1900? Folklore studies in the process of formation

The assertion of a line of cultural division that runs through society is by no means new. In order to understand the current gap narratives, a look back at the history of social diagnostics can be helpful – also to recognize to what extent the articulated diagnoses correlate with very specific conditions of social contexts. Cultural lines of division were repeatedly discussed, especially in the period around 1870–1930: The formation of most social and cultural reform movements and modern pedagogy during this period is closely related to such diagnoses.¹² In the following, I will briefly show how arguments of division theory were put forward during the founding phase of folklore studies as an academic discipline. At the same time, I will tentatively explore the question regarding what this discourse might possibly have to do with the current discourse on cultural cleavage – in the sense of a diachronic experiment that promises insights into the current constellations.¹³

From the middle of the 19th century onwards, actors from the German educated middle classes began to advocate the scientization of folklorist practices of collection and documentation. At the same time, folklore studies were positioned as a reform project for dealing with experiences of loss in industrial society. Many arguments were based, not least, on a specific diagnosis of division which made the question of social inequality appear as a problem of education. Thus, Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, for

11 On this argument, cf. also Wietschorke (2019).

12 Kerbs and Reulecke (1998) is still recommended for an overview of the bourgeois social and cultural reform in Germany.

13 This example is taken from a context that I have discussed elsewhere. Thus, my current research interest in narratives of cultural cleavage is largely motivated by the fact that I was already familiar with some of the patterns of argumentation from the history of educational bourgeois discourses about the “common people” and the “gap” between academics and workers. In this sense, the diachronic experiment already lies in the logic of my examination of the subject. Cf. my comparative study on the settlement movement, the formation process of folklore studies and the discourse of self-reflection within German social democracy between 1900 and 1930 (Wietschorke 2010).

example, was convinced that, as he put it, the divorces of the estates were crossed by the great transverse line that merely divides an educated and uneducated society.¹⁴ Against the background of the vehemently conducted educational policy debate in the 1850s about the equalization of the *Gymnasium* (academic high school or grammar school) and the *Realschule* (middle school) – and, thus, about the upgrading of an education which is oriented more at practical applicability than at humanistic ideals – Riehl’s line of argument shows a fundamental ambivalence: On the one hand, Riehl turned against all approaches to educational popularization or popular education but, on the other hand, he strongly recommended that the educated approach the “people.” This amounts to an estatist-conservative approach to the question of education which attempts to both question and perpetuate the gap. By addressing the social inequality of his time primarily in the sense of a cultural distance, Riehl positions education as the key issue of the time and simultaneously underscores the existing distances between the holders of education patents and the “common people.” What emerges as Riehl’s ideal is an educated middle class which, after the experiences of revolution, symbolically opens itself downwards but is confirmed in its social leadership function precisely because of this action.¹⁵

Even fifty years later, educational reformers and folklore pioneers followed the antagonistic assessment of the situation along the cleavage between education and culture, formulated at the time, for example, by the national economist Gustav Schmoller, who stated that he saw the last cause of all social danger not in the difference between the opposites of possession but in the difference between the opposites of education (quoted after Rein 1896/97: 466). Anita Bagus has shown in a brilliant study that around 1900, several prominent actors with an interest in folklore studies used the argument of the cultural division to advance the establishment of folklore studies as an academic discipline. The continuing exacerbation of social inequality in Wilhelmine society was clearly recognized, but it was primarily reformulated as a cultural issue. An example of this is a passage from a contribution by the Leipzig philologist Eugen Mogk:¹⁶

It is a recognized fact that the gap between the common man and the so-called higher classes in Germany has grown wider and wider in recent decades, so that the best of our people have raised the question: Where will it lead to if it continues like this? Social conditions, which are certainly one of the principal causes of this divide, cannot possibly have created this divide alone and increase it. [...] For several ages, a foreign spirit has roamed among the educated, which, in many parts, contradicts

14 Quote after Bagus (2005: 245). Riehl’s 170-year-old diagnosis bears an astonishing resemblance to Andreas Reckwitz’ theses on cultural class division and the polarization at the level of education and cultural capital cited above.

15 Cf. in this context, the extensive discussion in Bagus (2005: 243–256).

16 For better readability, this quote has been translated from German.

the German spirit of the people directly, mocking what the simple man of the people loves and does, looking down from above on folkloristic custom and tradition. (Mogk 1899; quoted after Bagus 2005: 313)

The passage quoted is revealing: The distance between the “educated” and the “common people” is presented here as the effect of a “foreign spirit” and, thus, of a history of alienation that has overlaid and exacerbated the social contrast. The mutual cultural recognition and, thus, also the basic understanding of “what the simple man of the people loves and does” appears to be the basic recipe for social resolidarization. Albrecht Dieterich – another one of the prominent actors in the founding and institutionalization phase of scientific folklore studies around 1900 – also saw the main cause of social divisions in what he termed education that had become ill and recommended that the educated should have some understanding of the peculiarities of their people (cf. Bagus 2005: 381–382). Such statements are reminiscent of the current criticism of the arrogance and aloofness of the “liberal elites,” who allegedly hardly ever move out of their bubble formed by their education and have little interest in the concerns of the “common people.”¹⁷ Even the antagonistic images of city and country that are tangible in the current discourses on cultural cleavage can already be detected in the founding narratives of the discipline of folklore studies, for example, in Adolf Strack, who especially emphasizes the contrast between the peasantry and the educated middle class. As Anita Bagus writes in her commentary, the gap between the educated and the people is, thus, declared to be an urban-rural antagonism (Bagus 2005: 316). With a view to the entire discourse, Bagus sums up in her monograph that the thematization of the cultural gap between the educated and the uneducated population is one of the most significant features of scientific folklore studies when it comes to its public legitimation (Bagus 2005: 312).

Mogk’s line of argument is illuminating in another respect: It demonstrates, almost in passing, how the propagators of a new education, oriented to the ideal of the “popular,” have positioned themselves in the cultural field of their time. Mogk ranks himself implicitly among the “best of our people” whom he invokes and are concerned about social division and called upon by him to take sides with the “German spirit of the people” and to distance himself from the “foreign spirit” that has moved in with the “educated” of his time. With this form of educational criticism, actors in the new discipline of folklore studies tried to assert themselves in the field – not least by crediting themselves with the symbolic benefit of the genuine “folk spirit.” This constellation reveals something about the specific dynamics of the upgrading and downgrading that the “common people” have played in the history of the discourses of self-positioning of the educated middle class – or, to use Bourdieu’s words, if a certain clarity is to be brought into the discussions about concepts such

17 For a pointed discussion of the figure of the “liberal elites,” cf. Strenger (2019).

as 'people' and 'popular,' one must remember that these concepts are, first and foremost, objects of dispute among intellectuals (Bourdieu 1992: 167).

Conclusion: The "common people" between proximity and distance

The "mirror effects" of statements about the "people" come into focus from the concept of the people as an object of dispute between intellectuals as a perspective of analysis. In the context of a renegotiation of the concept of class within growing social inequality and right-wing populist electoral successes, this question regains topicality: Who speaks about and in what context of the "common people"? Who speaks *for* the "common people," and who speaks *in their name*? What does it mean when they are perceived as "modernization losers" and notorious "communitarians"? After the cursory passage through current and historical variants of the discourse of cleavage, it has not yet been possible to offer a crystal clear assessment of the topic. A need for cultural studies research becomes evident here because so many assumptions are implied in the antagonistic assessments of the situation mentioned previously that should be of interest to us as scholars in cultural studies: Assumptions about the elites and the popular classes, about globalization and localization, city and country, inclusion and exclusion, home, community and education. In short, the theme leads to the center of the cultural negotiation of society. It should be cause for playing out one of the strengths of ethnographic and cultural studies: The ability to, as Rolf Lindner has put it, inquire locally in specific contexts whether the major social and cultural claims are true at all (Lindner, Jöhler, and Tschöfen 2004: 169). In addition, there is certainly the special competence inherent in folklore studies and the successive disciplines associated with it to critically examine ideological appropriations of the concept of the people just as critically as classical patterns of elitist contempt for the people.

It may be possible to record one finding: The diagnosis of a division of society into two camps is not well suited to doing justice to the complexity of contemporary society. In fact, it seems particularly susceptible to problematic constructions of the "elites," on the one hand, and the "common people," on the other. As I have tried to show in this contribution, almost all diagnoses of an alleged cultural division of society into two antagonistic camps are connected to specific representations of the "common people" – the underprivileged, those left behind, the uneducated or "educationally deprived" milieus. Narrating social inequality as cultural cleavage, therefore, almost always means circulating cultural attributions which are highly indebted to this narrative of division. Thus, certain chains of equivalence can be observed which are established in the current discourse and which link units of meaning, such as "right-wing populism," "province," "country," "local ties" and "underclass." In many cases, specific interests and discursive strategies underlie the narratives of division: The historical example of the long founding phase of scientific

folklore studies which was briefly discussed here is at least a reminder that social inequality is declared a cultural problem not least when “cultural professionals” can hope to benefit from certain generalizations. The history of the discourse on and perception of the “common people” is, therefore, always also a piece of intellectual history. It is – perhaps especially – a piece of the social and knowledge history of folklore studies. This brings us full circle, because the gap which has recently been the subject of increased discussion in the discipline is ultimately a permanent topic of epistemology in folklore and cultural studies. This alone is reason enough to reflect in detail on the talk of cultural cleavage from a cultural studies perspective.

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