Social Inclusion: Inaugural Editorial

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About the Journal

Social Inclusion is a peer-reviewed open access journal which provides academics and policy-makers with a forum to discuss and promote a more socially inclusive society. The journal encourages researchers to publish their results on topics concerning social and cultural cohesiveness, marginalized social groups, social stratification, minority-majority interaction, cultural diversity, national identity, and core-periphery relations, while making significant contributions to the understanding and enhancement of social inclusion worldwide.

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Social inclusion is a concept that we all applaud. Normatively we tend to agree that it is a goal societies should pursue—and it is indeed a social and cultural value that most, if not quite all, societies profess to be based on. Social inclusiveness, cultural cohesion, communal values, a shared identity, mutual recognition, respectful dialogue, peaceful interaction, policies of integration: these are positively charged notions, aims indeed worth subscribing to.

Sadly, this is not a description of a factual state of affairs. Realities are starkly different, relegating the notions just outlined to a realm of relatively starry-eyed idealism. In the practical world, in the societies 'out there', things are very different. Beyond all the different *interpretations* of what social inclusion means and how it is to be achieved (not a trivial matter, giving rise, as it does, to heated debates and disagreements—see e.g. [1–3]), social inclusion encounters powerful opposition—cohesiveness battling division, communities experiencing multiple forms of fragmentation, individualism often trumping collective solidarity, integration facing counteracting tendencies of marginalization, people being forcefully displaced from their homes, and migrant flows challenging historically cherished national or ethnic identities. The normative ideals may well be those of inclusiveness, tolerance, and recognition, but, more and more, social, ethnic, and cultural units around the world—nation-states, local communities, urban conurbations, families—are cracking at the seams, under pressure from a confluence of centrifugal and cross-cutting forces representing complex cultural diversities, glaring inequalities, minority-majority conflicts, escalating marginalization, racial or sexual discrimination, and open manifestations of hostility and violence (for an overview of the field, see e.g. [4,5]).

Some would argue that this depressing list of antinomies is really no more than a characterization of the world as it has 'always' been, and up to a certain point they would be right: we have seen and heard all this before. However, there are indications both that the gap between ideal and reality is widening and that the challenges against social inclusion are multiplying. This is, somewhat paradoxically, due in part to the political attention (nationally and internationally) that key notions like social inclusiveness, diversity management, cultural integration of ethnic minorities, and recognition of differences have attracted over the last decades: the more these values have been promoted and spearheaded by political and community leaders, the more failures (and they are legion) to deliver convincing, sustainable and workable models for the social and democratic accommodation of differences have tended to produce sentiments of powerlessness, frustration, and anomie among members of the social (often national) fabric threatened by fragmentation [6]. In turn, this has led to new kinds of contestation at the political level, new forms of nationalist demagoguery, political discourses advocating cultural revanchism, the construction of new walls against the world, or a return to 'things as they used to be' [7,8].

However, though this is all true, by pointing to the incompatibility between political rhetoric and social achievement we have identified neither the root causes nor the gravity of the dilemma facing social inclusion. In that regard, it is necessary to point to (at

least) three factors that both individually and in combination weigh heavily into the equation: the current and persistent economic crisis; the impending implosion of the welfare state; global shifts and the changing world order. It is impossible to deal in depth with these comprehensive issues in this brief editorial, so a few observations and tentative conclusions will have to suffice.

The crisis, by its very nature, tends to highlight and deepen social divisions, due to scarcer resources, less available jobs, and a diminished disposition for social solidarity. Increased marginalization, in-group/out-group differentiation, and opposition to incoming migrants and refugees are reactions to be expected and can indeed be recorded [9,10]. An important question is whether the crisis is temporary or more permanent, a blip on the economic radar or more structural in nature. We might hope for the former, but indications are that the crisis is more protracted, endemic and structurally transformative than was first imagined; if so, social inclusion will prove to be a daunting task for many years to come.

This connects to the weakened capacities of the welfare state [11,12]. Although the crisis has clearly not supported the maintenance of a strong, redistributive, and egalitarian welfare state overseeing and guarding social cohesion, it should be acknowledged that even without the crisis, the welfare state (which exists in many guises, and in some regions of the world not at all) is facing serious difficulties, partly due to additional economic pressures (mainly deriving from soaring costs of social benefits, education, and health care), partly the erosion of national sovereignties, and partly the liberalization and transnationalization of economic flows, which erode the taxation basis of states [13]. This in turn implicates the third factor, generic global shift and flows, involving both a multipolar restructuring of global politics and massive demographic cross-border mobility—developments which challenge receiving societies (already weakened due to crisis effects and overtaxed welfare systems) to devise intelligent instruments and models for coping with novel and ever fluctuating diversity [14–16].

On this background, it is clear that there is a crying need for a scholarly outlet of the highest academic quality that will allow researchers from a variety of disciplines to swiftly and openly publish the results of their investigations into issues concerning social inclusion. As noted in the 'Focus and Scope' text, we invite contributions of a conceptual, historical, and empirical nature alike, and will give special priority to studies that offer academically motivated reflections on and proposals for solutions, strategies, and models for achieving social inclusion, whilst taking account of the intractability of the problems it presents and the multiple actors, interests, and attachments involved.

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