

Questions of belonging

Some introductory remarks

Bettina Brockmeyer and Levke Harders

The cover of this issue's *InterDisciplines* displays two sides of a medal. On its front we see the profile of the British King George V wearing his insignia of power; on its back, two ships, a warship and behind it a smaller cargo vessel. Both ships sail under a blaring sun; the coastline in the background is hilly and sports two palm trees. This medal was made out of silver and hung from a necklace.¹ Designed in London in 1919, the decoration was conferred to »native chiefs« in the British colonies. The medal is therefore closely linked to questions of belonging: Which people—imagined as »native«—»deserved« it? Who was allowed to decorate himself—chiefs in the colonies and mandates were men—with a sign of British power, representing the kingdom and its empire, its military and commercial forces under the tropical sun? The King's Medal for Native Chiefs is a symbol of inclusion and exclusion at the same time. As a reward it made the colonial subjects »belong« to the empire. The iconography, however, is exclusive. »Africa« is depicted only by nature, while Great Britain is represented by a (powerful) person as well as by symbols of technological and economic strength.²

1 The King's Medal for Native Chiefs, picture by Ian Kington, Dix Noonan Webb, London, February 2015, image courtesy of Dix Noonan Webb Ltd.

2 George V acted as British king from 1910 to 1936. For the creation and purpose of the medal, see the file from the Colonial Office in London, National Archives London, MINT 20/651. For more information, see Brockmeyer's article in this issue.

Thinking about this medal, we find ourselves confronted by complex questions of belonging as well as questions of race, class, and gender. The categories that come into play via this symbol of power have had their own careers throughout history. In this issue, case studies from the nineteenth century to the present shed light on the historical trajectory of categories such as gender, class, tribe, nation, and religion. Our aim is to determine, firstly, the historical changeability of methods of inclusion and exclusion and, secondly, the historicity of the categories themselves. As an analytical tool we introduce and at the same time attempt to think beyond the concept of »belonging,« based on the work of Floya Anthias, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Nira Yuval Davis, and other scholars.

Within the context of categories of difference, belonging, we argue, can function as a flexible »meta-category« for the analysis of social inequality. As a social construction, belonging defines and produces difference and—simultaneously—power. As »belonging combines categorization with social relating« (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011, 203), it is not only a flexible research category, but it also admits agency. Unlike other categories, it is not necessarily rooted in the times it helps to explain; which does not mean, however, that it has not been used as a supposedly »natural« attribution throughout history. Pfaff-Czarnecka defines belonging as »an emotionally-charged social location. People belong together when they share values, relations and practices« (ibid., 201). If this emotional attachment is threatened it develops into politics of belonging, as Yuval-Davis (2011, 10) points out. These politics of belonging aim at »constructing belonging to a particular collectivity,« that is »all signifiers of borders and boundaries play central roles in discourses of the politics of belonging« (Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran, and Vieten 2007, 3). Politics of belonging include citizenship or other boundaries of political communities, but also the idea that »national« traditions—for example—are shaped by historiography.

Belonging is an important pattern of community and society and influences identity, family, migration, economic factors, and »emotional attachments as they are articulated in national, ethnic, cultural and religious affiliations« as well as in gender and class (ibid., 4). Hence

belonging must always be thought of as plural or multiple. This heterogeneity of belonging makes it hard to define. It also creates difficulties for its use as an analytical tool in the social sciences and the humanities, even though it is an important dimension of life. Nonetheless, we would like to further explore the category by transferring the theoretical and methodological concept of belonging to empirical research in history and sociology. Because this concept as we define it simultaneously includes the ways subjects relate to the world and the ways in which subjects are addressed, it can mediate between the micro level of agents and the macro level of society. Put more simply: belonging bears reference to both structure and agency.

The term belonging itself is part of a long-standing tradition of sociological as well as historical conceptions of society. It is tied to concepts like Ferdinand Tönnies' relation of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), Max Weber's *Vergemeinschaftung* and *Vergesellschaftung*, or Anthony Giddens' analysis of structure and agency (Welskopp 1997; Yuval-Davis 2011). Recent discussions of belonging draw on these theories but do not (yet) explicitly distinguish belonging from them. Moreover, belonging is quite close to what Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker have convincingly offered as »alternative analytical idioms« to the strained term »identity« (Cooper and Brubaker 2005, 66). Already in 1996, Stuart Hall asked »Who Needs Identity?« He and other scholars, however, came to the conclusion that for certain questions, the term still was of importance (Hall 1996, 1). Cooper and Brubaker share this view, but instead of using »identity« they offer idioms such as »identification and categorization,« »self-understanding,« and »commonality« (Cooper and Brubaker 2005, 70–77). By bringing the self, social relations, and structures together, they discuss similar components and processes, which we would like to describe as belonging. In sum, belonging is not a new concept and it remains an open question whether and how it can function as a useful category in (historical) research.

In order to study belonging, Yuval-Davis suggests considering either social location or emotional attachments or shared values (Yuval-Davis 2011, 12–18; see also Anthias 2013 and Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013).

Researchers using the category of belonging are able to look at social and economic locations of individuals, at emotional attachments as created through narratives, and at ethical and political values. At the same time, the empirical focus could be on the politics of belonging as processes of inclusion and exclusion. These politics can be analyzed as power relations or as symbolic power orders (Yuval-Davis 2011, 18–21), for example as expressed through a colonial award. Anthias (2013) argues in addition for an intersectional, translocational, and transnational approach to »broaden the scope of analysis of ›othering‹ processes illuminating both the differential placing of actors within and across national borders and the often contradictory and complex processes involved« (16). The intersectional approach enables us to comprehend the social construction of belonging—and not belonging—as a process shaped by gender, race, class, religion, nationality or migration, depending on the specific situation.

This issue aims to further our understanding of the shifting discourses and practices of inclusion and exclusion through the construction of belonging. By applying the concept of belonging to (historical) case studies, we would also like to inspire the theoretical discussion. As our examples show, belonging comes to the fore—and is transformed and (re)defined—in crises and conflicts, and at points of fracture and rupture. Moreover, this issue of *InterDisciplines* contributes to the methodological conception of belonging and politics of belonging by connecting it to biographical and micro-studies. The authors emphasize the dynamic and processual character of belonging, i.e. creating or »doing« belonging. To what extent did concepts of race, class, gender, religion, nation or ethnicity contribute to both the construction and processes of belonging from the early nineteenth century to the present? How did these social constructions intersect in the case of mobile or migrating subjects? How did individuals, state and local actors alike negotiate belonging? This empirical research strengthens the theoretical model of belonging inasmuch it analyzes the complex and often contradicting processes of exclusion and inclusion in specific local and temporal settings.

Bettina Brockmeyer's article on a colonial biography and **Stefan Manz's** investigation of several »German« settlements outline processes

of belonging in colonial and global settings. Their studies advance research on the German Empire, while broader studies on colonial lives outside the British Empire are still a lacuna. If metropole and colonies are understood as entangled spheres, questions about the transfer of ideas, objects, and especially subjects become all the more important and can help us understand varying forms of entanglement (Conrad and Eckert 2007, 22–23). Consequently, Brockmeyer follows the traces and belongings of an African biography during European colonization in order to introduce new and more plural voices into colonial history. She thereby offers a closer reading of the making and effects of colonialism, and of the entangled histories of Tanzania, Great Britain, and Germany. Manz's analyzes discourses of inclusion and exclusion in the diaspora as important aspects of German nation-building. His contribution focusses on contested belongings regarding politics, religion, class, and language in different communities around the world and their function for the German Empire.

Whereas race, class, or nationality primarily structured belonging in these colonial and global settings, **Karolina Bargłowski** and **Levke Harders** focus on processes of belonging in the case of inner-European transmigrants. Bargłowski explores the creation of ethno-nationalist belonging in the context of a long historical tradition of Polish migration to Germany. The narratives of contemporary migrants show clearly the importance of emotional attachments and not only structural hindrances or advantages as an aspect of (researching) belonging. Harders' article, on the (unsuccessful) strategies of a craftsman to belong in Northern Europe in the 1840s, considers state and local actors alike to understand the construction of alterity and belonging along the lines of class and gender as more relevant than emerging ideas of national citizenship. All case studies reflect in different ways on the concept belonging to assess whether it could function as a useful category not only for sociological but also for historical research.

To make proper use of the theoretical and methodological gains of belonging, additional empirical studies, especially in history, are needed. A conceptual history of the term belonging might also be valuable to

analyze its flexibility, which is probably engrained in its semantic denotation; not containing, but mediating between structure and the individual. Future research could also discuss belonging in the context of existing conceptions of both society and identity to more clearly define its potentials and limits. Could belonging bear some advantages compared to other concepts, not least because it carries less theoretical baggage (Anthias 2013, 7)? Is it less static than »classic« ideas of community and society, understood as purposeful and conscious processes? We think that belonging is an open concept, one which is changeable over time and which can include multiple belongings. And, finally, politics of belonging are not only »prone to effecting social exclusion, but also the opposite—widening borders, incorporating, defining new common grounds« (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011, 203). Focusing on belonging also means keeping the possibility of change in mind, since belonging is constantly renegotiated.

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