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Introduction to the first issue

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We are currently experiencing a deep social divide. This is not only to be observed in Western societies; it is a global phenomenon that has been progressing inexorably for several years. It can be observed in conflicts over economic and climate policy issues as well as identity politics – which are ultimately to be located in the area of the change of social value systems – but also in connection with interstate conflicts, military interventions and, above all, refugee policy. All of these discursive struggles have already been dominated by policies of socio-political inclusion and exclusion and, concomitantly, by the struggle for interpretive sovereignty over the identities and affiliations ascribed in these contexts (left, right, (national)-chauvinist, solidarity, progressive, (anti-)globalist, etc.). These conflicts are underpinned not least by the increasing economic dislocations in the (former) Western welfare states. They have led to profound skepticism in parts of Western populations toward political subsystems, especially the functioning of representative democracies and the media system.

Since March 2020, however, this division has accelerated once again and gained a new quality in the process. At its core, this results from increasingly irreconcilable perspectives on how to deal politically, medially, socially and economically with the manifold (and multiplying) crises of our time. A state of exception that threatens to become normalized is also accompanied by a hardening of discursive demarcations and an increasing exclusion of counter-hegemonic perspectives. Free public communication and democratic voting hardly or no longer take place at central places of contestation, fundamental dislocations in discourse and logic gain little public attention, and argumentative rationality suffers. The political in the sense of constructive agnostic dispute about rules and norms of an open society increasingly gives way to restrictive social antagonism and authoritarian technologized biopolitics. In this context, in addition to the crises already mentioned, we are also experiencing an existential crisis of the rule of law, which finds expression not least in the increasing public questioning of its modes of operation.

The first issue of the “Journal for the Critical Study of Society” brings together voices from different disciplines and with diverse perspectives. They are all united by the desire to critically reflect on the current social upheavals and the underlying logic of the crisis situation from their respective perspectives and with the toolbox of their academic field. Based on this reflection, these contributions point to more fundamental and longer-term developments and deeper currents of social, political as well as philosophical thought and develop the first approaches of an interdisciplinary research program that can grasp the crisis-driven transformation in its complexity, classify it, and point to possible solutions. In this respect, they also point the way for future issues of this journal.