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**Working Paper**

## New structures of inequality: some trends of social change in modernized societies

WZB Discussion Paper, No. FS III 99-405

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

WZB Berlin Social Science Center

*Suggested Citation:* Noll, Heinz-Herbert (1999) : New structures of inequality: some trends of social change in modernized societies, WZB Discussion Paper, No. FS III 99-405, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/50183>

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Veröffentlichungen der Abteilung *Sozialstruktur und Sozialberichterstattung* des  
Forschungsschwerpunktes *Sozialer Wandel, Institutionen und Vermittlungsprozesse* des  
Wissenschaftszentrums Berlin für Sozialforschung

FS III 99 - 405

## **New Structures of Inequality**

Some Trends of Social Change  
in Modernized Societies

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Februar 1999

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Paper prepared for the international workshop „Social Change in an Enlarging Europe: Welfare Development, Structural Change and Theoretical Approaches“, Collegium Budapest, May 15 - 16, 1998.



## New Structures of Inequality: Some Trends of Social Change in Modernized Western Societies

With my contribution I am referring to the controversial discussion on the old topic of social inequality, which the international sociological community has preoccupied during the last 15 years or so: Are the traditional concepts of social class and social stratification still valid or are they becoming more and more obsolete due to significant changes in the economic and social structure? Is a trend towards individualization eroding the traditional structure of inequality? Are new forms of inequality replacing the old ones (Hradil 1987) or, even, is the problem of inequality becoming less important if not outdated (Hondrich 1984)? Should we conclude that the end of the 20th century does not only face the end of ideology and history (Fukuyama 1992), or the end of a century of social democracy (Dahrendorf 1991) - as has been stated by some prominent scholars - but also the end of class and stratification? Or are conclusions like these largely overestimated or even artificial and more due to changes in the perceptions of social scientists than in reality?

Catchwords like "inequality without stratification" or "classless inequality" indicate that the debate is only about the structure of inequality, not about inequality as such or its degree. Even the most radical critics of the concepts of class or stratification do not postulate the disappearance nor a general reduction of the amount of inequality. There is ample agreement then, that social and economic change even in the most modernized societies has not yet resulted in an overall increase of equality. Although there are large differences across societies as far as - for example - levels of income inequality are concerned, indicators of income inequality show a remarkable stability across time. And interestingly enough, for some societies - not only those in the process of transition to a market economy, but also some of the most advanced Western societies - as for example West Germany - indicators even show a considerable re-increase of income inequality in recent years.

However, there is not yet a consensus of how to answer the core question of whether social classes and/or social strata as manifestations of a traditional structure of inequality are dying or are persisting social forces. In a recent rather comprehensive critical review of the traditional conceptualization of the structure of social inequality Pakulski and Waters (1996) postulate "The Death of Class". Others come to totally contradictory conclusions. Gordon Marshall (1997: 1) - for example - argues in his most recent book on "Repositioning Class", that "class inequalities in the industrialized countries have remained more or less constant throughout most of the twentieth century." To him "the central problem for class theory is not therefore ....to account for the demise of social class in advanced societies", but ..... "to explain why class has persisted as such a potent social force".

However, even proponents of the traditional perspective in their majority agree that class position and stratification over recent decades have lost some relevance compared to other dimensions of inequality. The notion that "the key social question at the end of the twentieth

century is no longer the class question" (Pakuliski/Waters 1996: 67) is almost common ground. On the other hand, it also seems to be rather undisputed that the individualized society is a trend at best, but not yet a common reality. And moreover it seems to be most likely that societies differ in the degree to which class positions still structure social inequality and class differences as well as class-sentiments are present in everyday life (Noll 1997: 121f).

Departing from these observations the international research group "Comparative Charting of Social Change" started a few years ago to address the question of a "New Structure of Inequality" from a comparative perspective. Following the general approach of this project, research deals with changes in the structures of inequality as part and consequence of the whole range of recent trends of social change in several advanced societies in Europe and North America. The results are going to be published in a volume which covers France, Germany, Quebec, the United States and sometimes also Spain (Lemel/Noll 1999). All of these societies are highly developed, but represent differences in history, cultural background, the role of the state, economic and political power as well as in their "routes to modernity" (Therborn 1995). There is also the pragmatic reason that these countries had qualified to participate in comparative studies by completing national profiles on *Recent Social Trends*, which include 78 trend dimensions grouped into 17 main topics. These profiles, covering the whole range of social change within each society also form important parts of the raw material for the studies on inequality. While focusing on structures of inequality these studies therefore are embedded in the broader scope and more complete panorama of significant trends of current social change<sup>1</sup>.

What I am going to do in the following is, first, to discuss some of the major trends of recent social change in their possible impact on the inequality structure and second to summarize some selected results from an article on "class structuration" which is to be included into the volume just mentioned.

Accounting for the scope and intensity of social and economic changes in western societies during the last thirty years, the discussion about changes in the structure of social inequality is all but surprising. Referring to the results of the country profiles there is good reason to take a closer look at the consequences of the trends in terms of changes in inequality patterns and to reconsider the old and traditional concepts of social inequality. There are quite a number of general trends of social change, which are more or less challenging the traditional view of a structure of social inequality which is mainly or even exclusively based on economic relations. Among these trends the following seem to be particularly significant:

Far reaching changes in the demographic structure

Decreasing birth rates and an increasing life expectancy have resulted in radical changes of the demographic structure in many of our most developed societies. As a consequence of

these processes, the relative weight and status of age groups and generations have changed with obvious distributional implications too. The increasing financial burden resulting from health care expenditures and old age pensions and the respective pressure to change the related welfare state institutions is just one example. Thus age and generation may perhaps define new lines of distributional conflict and a form of inequality, which is likely to be of increasing importance. The recently published Swedish report on "Living Conditions and Inequality in Sweden" (Statistics Sweden 1997) comes - for example - to the result, that differences in welfare between the generations have been increasing during the nineties more than any other kind of inequality. Whereas the living conditions of the elderly did improve continuously, today's young people are to a large extent in a much less favorable situation. Many of them do not expect any more to reach the same level of living as their parents did. Thus compared to the traditional class inequalities, generational inequalities gained already in significance.

A dramatic improvement of the general level of living

During the last decades all our societies, at least the Western ones, saw a remarkable upgrade in the level of living of their populations, even if the extent and speed of progress in income, consumption and wealth differed among nations. Ulrich Beck (1986) used the metaphor of an elevator to describe this process of a tremendous increase of living standards. Although inequality distributions in terms of differences in income and wealth between status groups have remained remarkably stable in most of the advanced western societies, the question arises whether the meaning and consequences of inequality are the same at different levels of material wealth. Did inequalities at today's levels of living lose some of their earlier significance or is Toqueville's observation still true, that even if inequality in the long run declines in the course of social progress, the remaining dimensions and degrees of inequality are becoming even more visible and important?

An enormous expansion of the welfare state up to recent years

Regardless of differences between nations in concept, coverage and level, welfare state institutions and respective expenditures expanded considerably in most of our societies during recent decades. The reduction of inequality, limitation of poverty and compensation for disadvantages resulting from one's economic position belong to the explicit objectives of related programmes. As a result of an enormous growth and increasing spread of transfer payments, the individual's socio-economic status and standard of living became significantly less dependent on his occupational position and earned income (Lepsius 1979; Zapf 1981). The extension of citizenship to social rights through welfare state institutions did perhaps not result in the elimination of class but in a substantial abatement of its impact (Pakulski/Waters 1996: 33). Class position and socioeconomic status therefore may have



lost at least their former dominance as a structuring principle of social inequality. It is only recently that this process of an expansion of the welfare state is coming to a halt (Alber, Nübel, Schöllkopf 1998). The "growth to limits" (Flora 1986) and lack of resources in a rapidly changing world economy are now obviously forcing governments to rebuild or even dismantle welfare state institutions. But still the existence of developed welfare states obviously makes a difference in the impact of inequality and the importance and dominance of one's position in the economy and labour market as a structuring force of inequality.

#### A continuous expansion of the service sector

The constant increase of the service sector is the major mechanism whereby industrial societies change to postindustrial societies. This structural change is accompanied by other changes like the transformation of the labour force from a predominantly male to a more gender mixed labour force, from blue collar to white collar work, from fordist to post-fordist organizations of work, and from a strongly unionized to a much less organized labour force. These are all changes, which may well have a weakening impact on the traditional inequality structure. Not the least, the expansion of the service sector has brought about a general upgrading of the occupational structure and has created large numbers of attractive administrative, managerial and professional positions in the upper parts of the class hierarchy. These processes of structural change towards the post-industrial society account for much of the recent increase in the total rates of intergenerational social mobility. Although there is not yet a generally accepted view of how inequality is structured in post-industrial societies, it is according to Esping-Andersen (1993: 7) quite clear that "the erosion of our traditional class structures is what many scholars associate with the coming post-industrial society".

#### A revolution in the participation in higher education

The trend of a huge expansion of educational systems and participation in higher education in all our societies raises more than any other the issue of the implications for the structures of inequality. Did the expansion of participation in higher education result in a levelling out of inequality of opportunities, and what are the consequences for social mobility, social classes, and social stratification? Is it true that the move towards meritocracy results in an "greater openness and equality of opportunity in the sense that individual's levels of educational and occupational attainment are becoming less closely correlated with the attributes of their families of origin"? This is - according to John Goldthorpe (1992: 126) - the optimistic assumption of liberal theory. However, the answer to this question is not yet clear. There seems to be some evidence, that the expansion of higher education indeed went along with a certain reduction of inequality of opportunities. Treiman (1992: 2093) - for example - claims, that educational attainment "has been less and less dependent on social

origins throughout most of the twentieth century". For Germany some recent studies have also shown that in the course of educational expansion starting in the sixties not only differences related to sex, religion and region have been reduced considerably, but to a smaller extent also differences related to family background in terms of class position (Müller 1998). On the other hand a recent large scale study of educational attainment in thirteen countries came to the conclusion, that the notion that educational expansion is generally accompanied by a decreasing association between family background and educational attainment does not come true. By looking at the thirteen countries covered, such a result turns out to be the exception rather than the general rule (Shavit/Blossfeld 1993). Moreover this study claims, that "educational expansion may even account for the stable pattern of educational stratification", because of the "well-known fact that the larger the pie, the less the conflict as to the relative size of the slices" (Shavit/Blossfeld 1993: 22). The authors - shavit and Blossfeld - conclude: "Thus, the modernization hypothesis that educational expansion results in greater equality of educational opportunity must be turned on its head: expansion actually facilitates to a large extent the persistence of inequalities in educational opportunity" (Shavit/Blossfeld 1993: 22).

#### Increasing Rates of Social Mobility

In most of our advanced societies absolute rates of intergenerational social mobility have increased significantly throughout the last several decades. For a large and growing part of the population its class of origin is no longer identical with its class of destination. For liberals - according to John Goldthorpe (1992: 135) - the mobility of individuals between different class positions is a process central to the 'social metabolism' of industrial nations". Moreover the evidence of increasing rates of upward social mobility has been interpreted as an indication of an increasing openness or social fluidity of our advanced societies which is going to undermine the potential for class formation. Thus for some scholars today's high rates of social mobility even challenge the reality of social classes in our contemporary societies in the sense of "classes, membership to which tends to be life-long, and to have clear consequences for life chances, values, norms, life-styles and patterns of associations (Marshall 1994: 336). I'll come back to this topic of social mobility in the second part.

#### A revolution in the labour force participation of women

The large increase in the labour force participation of women during the last decades is without doubts one of the major changes in the social structure of industrial societies (Noll/Langlois 1994), surely affecting, among other matters, the structure of inequality. One obvious consequence is the fact, that the socio-economic status and class location of families is becoming less clear and consistent, because of the growing numbers of so-called "cross class families". Of course the growth in female employment also affects the

distribution of the male labour force across occupational status categories and has an impact on career prospects and opportunities for intergenerational mobility of men. According to my knowledge it has not been shown yet, whether this trend of growing female labour force participation had a positive or negative effect on male opportunities for mobility and how it thus actually affects the traditional class structure.

Considerable changes in the definition of gender roles and respective behaviour

Changes in conceptions of gender roles and behavior, which according to Norbert Elias belong to the general emancipatory trends of modern societies, have marked our societies in recent decades and establish another challenge to the traditional view of the inequality structure. Although gender related inequalities have been considerably decreasing rather than increasing in realms such as education, employment, the family and politics (Geißler 1998: 648), the sensitivity towards remaining gender related inequalities has grown considerably. Thus, gender inequalities have emerged not really as a new dimension of inequality, but as a dimension of inequality that received more and more public and political attention. In contrast to the prevailing trend of diminishing gender related inequalities in the advanced Western societies, the economic and political transformation in the former socialist societies of central and Eastern Europe seem to have brought about a re-increase of gender related inequalities.

A continuing if not even growing saliency of race, ethnicity and nationality

In recent years race, ethnicity and nationality - which all are ascribed status attributes - have had continuing or even growing salience. In many of the rich and thus attractive Western societies these attributes recently gained more and more significance due to growing immigration flows. Largely neglected by the class paradigm (Pakulsky/Waters 1996: 40f.), these social forces are thus likely to structure social inequality to a considerable degree in the foreseeable future and obviously are in part doing so already. The less favorable situation of many immigrants is only partially due to their on average lower educational level or to their labour market position, but also to exclusion mechanisms based on their race, ethnicity, nationality or citizenship respectively. Thus particular groups of immigrants and ethnic minorities increasingly form the "real" underclasses of our current societies.

The increasing importance of the cultural dimension of consumption, lifestyle and taste

According to some observers the mode of production is becoming less and less significant in contemporary societies while the mode of consumption is becoming more and more

significant. Some of the most important recent social changes are related to the fields of consumption, lifestyle and taste, which are less and less determined by class position. Because widespread affluence allows for a wide range of personal choices, lifestyles seem to increasingly differentiate social groups, more so than economic classes. Some have even argued that the stigmatization of the new underclasses "is a function not of its members' exploitation (in production; H.-H.N.) but of their incapacity to consume" (Pakulski/Waters 1996: 158).

There is ample speculation then, that all these trends - although in different ways, in different degree and perhaps also in different directions - affect the inequality structure. However, we do not know much about their impact in detail and their overall structural consequences so far. And although all these trends can be found more or less pronounced in most advanced societies, the differences between societies are still considerable. Only within the European Union<sup>2</sup>, the female labour force participation rate - for example - varies between 32 % in Spain and 69 % in Sweden (1996). Concerning the share of service sector employment, the range is from 56 % in Greece and Portugal to 73 % in the Netherlands. Measured by the equivalized net monetary income in purchasing power units, the level of living in Luxembourg - as the richest EU-country - is more than three times as high as in Portugal as the poorest and social protection expenditures in % of GDP as a measure of the progress of the welfare state vary between 15 % in Greece and 36 % in Sweden (1995). In money values the differences are even more pronounced.

Taking into account these large differences, it seems to be quite clear, that all kinds of global assessments of the current state and trends of change concerning the structure of inequality must be regarded as inappropriate. What is needed are more detailed, comparative studies focusing at specific aspects and dimensions of this structure.

In the following I am going to discuss some preliminary results of work on an article still in progress, which addresses the crucial question of the structuring effect of classes (Kingston, Langlois, Lemel, Noll 1998). It is the result of a collaboration of four people: Paul Kingston from the University of Virginia, Simon Langlois from Laval University, Quebec, Yannick Lemel, INSEE, Paris and myself. I don't have the time to go into methodological questions, but I should say at least that we are not in the situation to be able to use just one single comparative empirical database. Rather, we are using empirical evidence from various national and international sources at an aggregate level.

Following Giddens (1973: 20) suggestion of "rather than speaking of the 'existence' or 'non-existence' of classes, we should speak of types and levels of what I shall call class structuration", we have made an attempt in our paper to examine to which degree classes are still structuring social inequality in two European and two North American societies: Canada, France, Germany and the United States. We are analyzing the structuring effect of class in six dimensions: patterns of social mobility, interaction, cultural orientations, class sentiment, political action, and consumption and quality of life. For time reasons I am going to concentrate here just on the first dimension, patterns of social mobility.

The use of social mobility as an indication of the structuring effect of class can be traced back to Max Weber and his concept of classes as categories characterized by large mobility inside their boundaries, but at the same time establishing strong barriers for mobility across their boundaries. Starting from such a point of view, one would come to the conclusion, that the more mobility across class boundaries we observe, the less we would assess the degree of classness of a society.

Actually there is - according to John Goldthorpe, one of the leading social mobility researchers - "no shortage of evidence .. that in industrial societies the amount of class mobility is substantial" and even increasing (Goldthorpe 1992: 136). In our comparative paper, we restrict ourselves to intergenerational mobility and exploit among others the dataset produced by the CASMIN project, which covers only three of the four societies, unfortunately not Canada.

As can be seen from table 1, the total mobility rate, which in this case is the percentage of sons, who did not end up in the same class category as their fathers, amounts to more than 60 % in France and West-Germany and even more than 70 % in the United States based on a 7 category schema. In other words: only a quarter to a third is staying in the same class as that of their family. This general result of a large amount of absolute social mobility across class boundaries can be interpreted in two different ways as evidence against classness.

- (1) From an inflow point of view high rates of mobility affect the demographic identity of classes, which in turn is supposed to have consequences in terms of class consciousness, class identity and political action. Looking at our data from this perspective, self-recruitment rates indicate that the members of most of the classes - only farmers form an obvious exception - in all the three countries have quite diverse origins. This result demonstrates quite clearly that today's classes in our advanced societies are no more homogeneous social groups. As can be seen from table 2, the degree of selfrecruitment differs somewhat between the three countries: class reproduction tends on average to be somewhat lower in the U.S. than in France and Germany, which turn out to be rather similar in this respect. An outstanding case is the class of skilled blue collar workers in Germany, which is characterized by the highest level of class self-recruitment among the non-farm classes in any of the three societies.
- (2) From an outflow point of view, high rates of social mobility are also being interpreted as an indication against classness, since they are taken as evidence for the openness of a society and the rather unrestricted opportunities of its members. Looking at our data, we find again rather impressive rates of mobility and in particular of upward social mobility. The upward mobility rates shown in table 1 are about 30 % for France and Germany and 40 % for the U.S.. Although comparison across time and countries is rather difficult from a methodological point of view, there also seems to be "clear evidence of increasing ... upward mobility" (Goldthorpe 1992: 136) - if we are using absolute rates as indicators.

Table 1: Summary Measures of Outflows: France, Germany and the U.S.  
(Based on the seven category version of Goldthorpe's class schema.)

	Total Mobility Rate <sup>1</sup>	Total Vertical	Total Non- Vertical	Total Upward <sup>2</sup>	Total Downward
France	65	44	21	32	12
Germany	62	47	15	33	15
U.S.	73	55	18	40	15

1 The percentage 'off the diagonal' in a seven-category matrix.

2 Total vertical mobility (column 2) is divided into upward and downward mobility.

Source: Erikson, R., Goldthorpe, J. (eds.), 1992: *The Constant Flux. A Study of Class Mobility in Industrial Countries*. Oxford.

However, it is quite controversial, whether increasing absolute rates of mobility are indications of a declining class structuration or increasing openness of a society. Erikson, Goldthorpe (1992), Marshall (1997) and other class analysts claim that they are not. This is due to the fact that - as Goldthorpe points out - "rising rates of upward social mobility are not merely favored by the changing shape of the class structure but are attributable almost entirely to structural shifts" in the economy, in particular the expansion of the service sector and the respective growth of administrative, managerial and professional positions.

Thus, in order to study the degree of openness, social fluidity or classlessness, these researchers insist to measure social mobility net of the effects of structural change by using relative rates of mobility. By the way: This approach also is far from being undisputed. Saunders (1990: 80) - for example - has criticized, that class analysts have "moved the goal posts" by using relative rates, and Stein Ringen (1997: 6) concludes in a recent article on "the open society and the closed mind" that "in these relative approaches, some elements, which common sense would see as included in inequality are 'controlled away' in the process of measurement.

Relative mobility rates are usually treated in terms of odds ratios, indicating the "net association .. between the classes of origin and of destination (Erikson/Goldthorpe 1992: 86). Studying relative rates of social mobility shows first of all, that opportunities to get access to the privileged positions are far from being equal across classes of origin:"More room at the top has not been accompanied by greater equality in the opportunities to get there" as Marshall (1997: 5) concludes. For Germany, Hartmann (1998: 61) for example came recently to the result, that the chance to get access to the upper service class of a son who's father belonged to the upper service class is even ten times as high as the chance of

Table 2: Class Self-recruitment Rates (Inflows): France, Germany and the U.S.  
(Based on the seven category version of Goldthorpe's class schema.

	Service Class (I,II)	Routine Non Manual (IIIa, b)	Petty Bour- geoisie (Iva, b)	Farmers (IVc)	Skilled Workers (V, VI)	Non-skilled Workers (VIIa)	Agricultura l Workers (VIIb)
in %							
France	33	14	39	90	31	21	30
Germany	31	7	37	93	48	28	30
U.S.	26	13	23	80	24	32	22

Source: Erikson, R., Goldthorpe, J. (eds.), 1992: *The Constant Flux. A Study of Class Mobility in Industrial Countries*. Oxford.

a son of an unskilled or semiskilled blue collar worker if changes in the occupational structure are taken into account. Even if it turns out that Germany is somewhat less open than the United States, but similar open or closed as France, it is quite clear, that the picture we get using relative rates is quite different from that based on absolute rates. It does not only show much smaller crossnational differences, but even more few changes in terms of an increasing openness of the class structure in advanced societies. Thus Marshall (1997: 8) concludes: "the evidence from social mobility studies indicates a substantial association between class origins and destinations, and one that is largely stable across .. countries and time".

What are the conclusions we can draw from these considerations and results in terms of the question of changes in the structure of inequality? One obvious answer is that it is much easier to postulate the "death of class" or raise of new structures of inequality in the context of a "datafree sociology" than to present empirical evidence for these kind of changes. Also much depends on the point of view from which one departs and the perspective of analysis. Taking into account the considerable cross national differences in many relevant variables, it seems to be almost impossible to give a straightforward global answer as yet. And the case of social mobility as a proof of the degree of class structuration has shown, that the answer to the question to which degree class is dead or alive, depends heavily on whether we look at inflow or outflow tables and if we use absolute or relative measures of social mobility.

From the discussion of trends of social change in their impact on the inequality structure one could perhaps conclude, that a weakening of class effects and a transformation of the traditional structure is most likely overall. But still it is quite unclear, how a new structure could look like. We can speculate at best about the growing importance of attributes like generation, gender, ethnicity and citizenship. But even if this would be the case, we have to be aware, that "the birth of new sources of inequality does not imply the death of old ones" (Hout, Brooks and Manza 1993: 270).

Taking together the available evidence then, there are quite many indications, that the structure of inequality will be less class based in the future. The structuring effects of class - although still considerable by now - are obviously declining over time. Thus, at least the notion, that sociology is a science with only one variable, class, as some have said, will - although it of course not has been true in the past - certainly be even less true in the future.

## Notes

1 See for France (Forsé et.al. 1993), for Germany (Glatzer et.al.1992) for Quebec (Langlois et.al. 1992), for the United States (Caplow et.al. 1991). In addition two others for Russia (Boutenko, Razlogov 1997) and Italy (Martinelli, Chiesi, Stefanizzi 1998) have been published meanwhile or are in press respectively.

2 Figures taken from Eurostat 1998.



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## Abteilung „Sozialstruktur und Sozialberichterstattung“

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Die Abteilung *Sozialstruktur und Sozialberichterstattung* hat einen grundlagenwissenschaftlichen Schwerpunkt in der Analyse des sozialstrukturellen Wandels moderner Gesellschaften und einen anwendungsorientierten Schwerpunkt in der Sozialberichterstattung; die Forschungsaufgaben liegen in der Dauerbeobachtung des sozialstrukturellen Wandels und der Wohlfahrtsentwicklung. Die theoretischen Orientierungen stammen aus der Modernisierungstheorie und der Theorie der Wohlfahrtsproduktion.

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