

Class

The existence of classes is one of the main features of modern societies, reflecting differences in status, power and wealth of the members of these societies. These differences are not unique to some modern societies, but occur in all societies, although form and visibility might vary strongly between modern societies. This existence of classes in all modern societies and their objective and partly subjective commonality is the first reason for transnational relations between the same classes in different societies, although the subjective consciousness of this commonality varies in time. Next to this commonality between classes in all modern societies, more or less members of some classes have developed stronger transnational relations as a part of their construction and self-identification, also depending on the international position of their nation state.

International variation in classes

There are many definitions of social classes, but most refer to differences in status, power and wealth/income, which are related to the occupations of the members of a modern society. Another general term of these differences is social stratification, referring to a layer-like buildup of societal inequality (strata). The early modern political philosophers and scientists (Montesquieu, Pareto) started to compare the social stratifications of various European societies, not only within Europe (France versus England), but also with non-European societies (Persia, China). The initial main aim of these comparisons was to criticize the political, economic or religious situation and inequalities in the thinker's own society. The American Revolution, the French Revolution and the Restoration gave extra impulses to these comparisons of political and social stratification in different societies, especially republican against *ancien régime* (for instance de Tocqueville), to understand the new dynamics of society. These cross-national differences in inequality or social strata became also an aspect of 19th-century modernization and industrialization theories (either authoritarian, liberal or socialist). They referred to both liberalization from the *ancien régime* (king, nobility, established church, guilds, etc.) and to the development of new economic strata or classes, for instance the capitalist and the labourer class (Karl Marx). According to these frames,

modernization and industrialization theories should be applicable more or less to all societies, and thus the strata and classes of these societies should be comparable. Therefore, societies, depending on their development and modernization, should differ in the nature of their social stratification and the amount of mobility between these strata. This should not only be true for European and American societies but also for 'stagnating' Asian societies, like India and China. The cross-national variations in classes and mobility between these strata became important to prove the correctness of the contradictory liberal and socialist modernization theories. The rise of new classes or strata at the end of the 19th century (managerial class, skilled labourers, white-collar middle classes) and the political decline of the last features of the *ancien régime* after the First World War in most European societies increased further this need for scientific study of strata, classes and the degree of their openness for persons from the lower classes, because they played a significant role in the ideological battles between capitalism, social-democrats, communism and fascism. The study of social stratification and mobility became (and still is) one of the core topics of a new science called sociology. Most studies of classes and strata remain restricted to one or a few national societies in this period (Max Weber is an exception). The American cultural dominance at the end of the Second World War, and the Cold War, intensified the need for comparisons, both between the US and Europe (meritocratic society versus class-ridden societies) and between Communist and capitalist societies. In the 1950s, this need triggered the first scientific cross-national comparisons of classes and mobility between classes. They have since evolved into attempts to build common scales for different societies across the globe.

Looking for universal class scales

Prestige scales are the oldest type of social stratification scales and, perhaps, the best known. Prestige scales refer to the symbolic domain of stratification. The purpose of these scales is to represent 'collective perceptions and beliefs' about the ranking of occupational hierarchies. The usual way to measure these perceptions and beliefs is to ask individuals or experts to rank a number of well-known occupations according to their honorific standing in society. These individual rankings are then

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combined into one scale: the occupational prestige scale. These types of scales have been built up in various societies since 1950, especially in America, Eastern and Western Europe and in Asia. Despite the differences between these societies, the similarities between these nationally based prestige scales are very large. Donald Treiman (1977) used these highly correlating prestige scales to produce one international prestige scale, which might indicate that the honorific standing of occupations is more or less equal in modern societies with large differences in stage of development, political-economic systems and historical backgrounds. Changes occurring in time in the relative scaling of occupations are smaller than expected if one compares various scales which were constructed in the same society in different decennia. The main problem with these prestige scales is the disagreement regarding the underlying causes of occupational ranking. One stance is that judgments about social standing are sensitive to honorific considerations (for instance based on pre-modern strata) which cannot be equated with socioeconomic factors like income and education, whereas the opposing camp argues that socioeconomic factors, like income and education, play a dominant role in ranking occupational perceptions, and that the prestige scale measures more or less the generalized desirability of occupations.

Socioeconomic stratification scales try to capture the cultural and economic resources connected with occupations. In their simplest but still effective form they represent an averaging of the mean income and educational level of all individuals within an occupation and the projecting of these averages of occupations into one socioeconomic scale. Comparable socioeconomic scales have also been developed in other societies. Based on the same logic Ganzeboom, de Graaf, Treiman and DeLeeuw (1992) have developed an international socioeconomic index, which is applied to many modern societies and is used in many cross-national comparisons, not only by academics but also by international organizations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to compare educational systems cross-nationally (see PISA-studies, www.pisa.oecd.org).

So the international variation of classes is relatively small. Despite various claims of the dwindling importance of classes in post-modern societies, the empirical proof of that

claim has not been more than anecdotal. However, the social and political importance of some classes (unskilled and semi-skilled labourers, small farmers) has declined as a consequence of economic and technological changes, which have undermined their position, while new classes (professionals in the public and service sectors) have been created by the same processes.

International variation in mobility between classes

The first empirical and comparative studies of cross-national variance in mobility ended in the conclusion that the overall pattern of mobility was 'much the same' in Western societies, contrary to the expectation of a huge difference between the US and Europe. These first empirical studies did not distinguish between two possible causes of cross-national variance in vertical mobility. The first cause for a change in intergenerational mobility in a society is the difference between the available positions for older generations and those for the succeeding generations. If, in a society, there are more high-ranking positions available for the younger generation compared to the older generation (due to changes in the socioeconomic development of that society), there is more upward intergenerational mobility, which is structural, because it originates from a change in the structure of occupations. The opposite is true if there are fewer high-ranking positions available for the younger generation compared to the older generation in a society. In that case, there is more downward intergenerational mobility which is also structural because it also originates from a change in the structure of occupations. The second cause for a change in intergenerational mobility is the contrast between two generations in the allocation and selection rules for the attainment of positions in the social stratification, for instance the increased importance of education or the decreased importance of birth. This is called a change in circulation mobility. Both causes of changes in intergenerational mobility can be relevant at the same time and, in studying mobility, one must try to disentangle those two causes. On the basis of this distinction between structural and circulation mobility, it was hypothesized that the latter was basically the same in all industrial societies with a market economy and a nuclear family system (both capitalist and socialist), while the

former could be drastically different. Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) confirmed this by finding basically the same circulation mobility pattern for Western and Eastern Europe, North America, Australia and Japan, rejecting both liberal and Marxist theories on the relation between industrialization and mobility. They also concluded that arguments for culturally caused differentiations in mobility are overstated, although to dismiss cultural influences on mobility entirely would be to go too far (for instance, they found some long-standing effects of the German apprenticeship system). They admit that political intervention (incomes policy, educational reforms) may be a source of cross-national differences in mobility, but without the necessity that this variation should systematically be related to regimes or governments of various types.

Recent studies have found more cross-national variations in circulation mobility. But even in these studies the similarities in the effects of the parental class on their children's educational and occupational attainment are large in comparison with the international variations in these effects. Moreover, these cross-national variations in circulation mobility do not coincide with simple distinctions between capitalist versus communist societies, or the US versus Europe.

Transnational commonality between classes

Given the large commonality of classes in different modern societies, one might expect many transnational aspects in the composition and self-identity of these classes. However, three caveats are necessary.

The first caveat is that one should distinguish between the transnational aspects in the behaviour and culture of individual members of certain classes and the transnational aspects of class itself. This important distinction is analogous to the classical distinction of Karl Marx between the 'Klasse an sich' (class in itself) and the 'Klasse für sich' (class for itself). Given that most classes are not well organized internationally or are very divided and that international organizations (notably the Socialist Internationals or international labour unions) did not survive nationalism, two world wars, decolonization, the Cold War, and globalization, one can hardly speak of any institutionalized and permanent

transnational characteristic of any class in modern society. Only the behaviour and culture of some individual members of certain occupations within classes is becoming more or less transnational. Today a transnational split within many classes and occupations can be found, leaving one part focused on the local or national scene and the other part on a regional or global context.

The second caveat is that changes in the degree of transnational characteristics of classes in a certain nation state depend also on the nation's position within the world system. In the last two centuries the core of the world system has travelled from France via the UK, Germany and the Soviet Union to the US. The latter's core position might be threatened by China and India. The same two centuries have witnessed the rise and decline of open colonialism in Latin America, Asia and Africa, a process which strongly affected the transnational characteristics of class in these colonialized and decolonized societies. Classes in societies like France and Germany, which lost their central position in the world system, might observe a drastic change in their transnational behaviours and influences, while classes in societies like the Netherlands, which had a semi-peripheral position during these two centuries, observe only a change in the direction of transnational influences (English instead of French as the international language; the US as the cultural point of reference instead of France, Germany or the UK). Classes in colonialized societies like India have experienced a very strong transnational influence by the colonial power on their construction and self-identification, while that influence has waned after their decolonization and might have been partly replaced by transnational influences from other societies, like the US or Russia.

The third caveat is that any claim of an increased transnational character of classes at the end of the 20th century needs precise empirical scrutiny, because anecdotal evidence about classes in a global economy might be misleading and suffer from historical short-sightedness. The few internationally oriented members of the national business elite who get a lot of publicity can hide many nationally oriented members of the same national business elite, who are not so visible or vocal. The increase in the number of foreign-born directors of the major firms of a nation state cannot be equated with a decline of the

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national business elite, because the former can be just transients while the latter wields the real power in that society. Moreover, the purported newness and increase of the transnational aspects of class need to be placed in perspective. Before the nationalistic 19th century, universities, churches and nobility were more embedded in a transnational network than their nation state was. The level of international trade before the First World War was higher than for the best part of the 20th century. Evaluation of transnational class developments needs to have a longer time scale than just a few decades or centuries.

Despite a lack of sound empirical studies of the transnational characteristics of classes, I now try to sketch some examples of the changing transnational character of segments or occupations within the upper and middle classes.

Segments of the upper classes: transnational business elites and nobility

During the last two centuries, with the rise of the nation state, many members of the local elites of counties, provinces and regions became members of national elites of that state, as a part of successful nation building. Today one can see a development of a global economy, an increasing popularity of international business schools and the availability of international communication on a large scale. Nevertheless, although rather scarce, research shows that so far there are few indications of the rise of an international business elite. In the boards of executives in countries like France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States the overwhelmingly majority of members of these boards have the same nationality as the countries where these corporations are located. The only exceptions are foreign subsidiaries. Many executives have followed an educational career in their country of birth. This might change in the future, but until today it is very likely that top managers in the core countries of America, Europe and Asia have started in a mainly local career instead of a global one. However, top managers in the (semi-)peripheral core countries of America, Europe and Asia might start in a mainly global career, but it is debatable whether this is a sign of a global economy or a shift in the power balance within the economic world system.

Contrary to the case of business elites, European nobilities had long had a stronger

transnational dimension that went beyond politics and cross-dynastic weddings. This was obvious during the period before the rise of the nation state, as noble elites built and cherished family ties all across Europe. The rise of the nation state and nationalism decreased this level of transnationalism of the nobles, but until today the European nobility has shown a high degree of transnationalism, compared to other strata. With the de jure or de facto loss of nobilities' separate legal status and ascribed privileges during the 19th and 20th centuries, a noble title is assumed to have become an irrelevance in gaining an elite position in a modern nation state, because its social and cultural capital has become obsolete and unproductive. This de facto loss of its ascribed privileges is one of the best examples of a change of the allocation-and-selection rules for attaining positions within the social stratification, needed for a change in circulation mobility.

However, studies of the elite positions held by members of Dutch noble families in the 20th century have shown that they still have more elite positions than comparable members of high-bourgeois families. Moreover, the likelihood of an elite position being held by members of Dutch noble families has barely decreased for different generations of the nobility, also in contrast to the high bourgeoisie (patricians). There are empirical indications that this 'constant noble advantage' is also true for the nobility of other European societies. This advantage of the Dutch nobility in the 20th century contradicts a basic sociological assumption about the changes of the rules for attainment of the highest social classes in modern societies: high positions and professions have become increasingly more open to people with capacities based on their own achievements and less open to persons with only ascribed characteristics. The number of potential candidates for elite positions in modern societies has risen strongly, thanks to modernization and democratization and the ensuing changes in the allocation-and-selection rules. The resulting strong competition for elite positions among the many competitors can make 'old-fashioned' characteristics, like the transnational aspect of noble social and cultural capital, again relevant as an efficient and effective means for selection, while modern characteristics like education only become necessary but not sufficient conditions. The 'outdated'

transnational aspect of this noble social and cultural capital has become again an advantage and a productive characteristic in a globalizing world.

Divided occupations of the upper middle classes: professors and lawyers

Professors at national universities are in principle members of two communities. Their first community is their own society. Universities are paid more or less by their government which regulates them more or less. They are supposed to teach in the national language and to study topics which are relevant for their own nation state or important actors within that society. They also serve often as members of important councils, committees and other bodies of the government, political movements, employers and business organizations. Their second community is international scientific networks. They present the results of their studies in international conferences and journals, cooperate or compete with their colleagues from other societies in their research and have to keep in touch with their foreign colleagues to update their knowledge for research and teaching. This dual relationship with the national society and the international community of scientists forces university professors, especially from the smaller or peripheral countries, often to make a choice: either they orient themselves to their own society but have a less strong orientation to the international community of scientists, or they orient themselves to this latter international community but are less visible and useful for national society. The contradictions between this dual membership of professors grew during the 20th century. Universities and sciences have become more internationally oriented because research-oriented firms and enterprises became internationally and multinationally orientated. This globalization changed the nationally based laboratories of research-oriented firms into truly international ones. But this trend meant also that scientists connected with these laboratories were forced to compete on an international basis instead of a national one. The same trend can be seen in those industrial and service sectors which depend heavily on the applied results of science. As a consequence of globalization, the firms of these sectors are no longer fully dependent on the cooperation of universities within the country of their establishment, but they can get these applied

results of science from many part of the world, with comparable costs and benefits.

Professors in nation states who have retained their own national languages experience an even stronger contradiction between this dual membership, because of the minority status of their language. We only point here to the fact that this unimportance is not restricted to the scientific sector, but is also true for the industrial, trade and service sectors. The number of publications in international peer-reviewed scientific journals and the number of citations of these publications in the same journals have become important criteria, both for obtaining a slice of the financial resources and for promotion within the academic hierarchy. This decline of their national language can affect the transnational construction and the self-identity of the academically and culturally oriented upper middle classes.

The law has always been strongly connected with that of national states. The main reason for this strong connection is the national state as the source of law making and law enforcement. The monopoly of the state on the use of force and violence, and on taxation, goes together with the importance of the national state in all juridical affairs. This development also focused the activities of most lawyers on the national law, both civil and penal. International law was very weakly developed and in any case not an important part of the juridical system. In the middle of the 20th century, most lawyers who were inscribed as members of the Bar worked as independently established professionals or as partners within a small law firm. These firms had only a small number of non-partner lawyers, mostly freshly recruited from university and still in training on the job. Between these firms and independently established lawyers some division of labour had emerged, however informal and non-public.

During the second half of the 20th century, the importance of European, supranational and international law increased. This importance grew as a consequence of the rise of the European Union and the globalization of the world economy. The rise of the European Union means that an important part of the civil law is more and more formulated outside the national state by the Union (European Commission, European Parliament). Also, normal lawsuits do not end any longer within the borders of the national state, but can be

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continued at the European level, often with results which strongly affect the national arena. National European lawyers are forced by this rise of the European Union to include European law and regulations as an important aspect of their juridical activities. But by offering these European services to clients they also meet competition from other European law firms outside their own countries which can offer the same services. Thus as a consequence of the rise of the European Union, national law firms meet more and more competition from other European law firms and one possible answer to this competition is cooperation or even fusion between law firms from different European states.

The globalization of the world economy promoted the rise of multinational firms, and more cooperation or growing fusion between firms from different societies, also outside Europe. This increased the degree of contact between the different juridical systems of different parts of the world and the importance of supranational law (especially trade law). The growing demand for this juridical knowledge also forces law firms to specialize further and to cooperate with law firms in those societies which are important for their clients. The consequence of this internationalization of a part of the activities of national lawyers in big law firms is that their orientation is no longer only directed at the national state but has become divided between the traditional national orientation to national law and the developing international orientation to European and supranational law and on laws of other societies. This decline of the national orientation of a proportion of lawyers will affect the transnational construction and the self-identity of the academically and culturally oriented upper middle classes.

These examples show that there is not a new and clear-cut relationship between class and transnational influences on the social situation and self-identity. Old characteristics might revive and classes and occupations split into a local and an international part. This is not only true for upper- and middle-class occupations, but might also be applicable for occupations of the lower classes, like truck drivers, plumbers (also

the non-Polish) and other skilled labour occupations, which have become scarce due to the democratization of non-vocational education.

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Related essays

capitalism; Cold War; consumer society; contract and indentured labourers; convergence and divergence; decolonization; domestic service, honour; European civil servants; executives and professionals; family; femininity; gender and sex; higher education; humanities; industrialization; intellectual elites; international schools; language; law firms; legal order; life and physical sciences; management; Master of Business Administration (MBA); sexuality; social sciences; socialism; transnational; Westernization; workers' movements