Guest Editors' Foreword **Open Access**

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Current Views on Social Class, Status, and Mobility

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Both recent and past scholarship have sometimes debated the relevance of social class (at least in some of its operationalizations) for individuals' lives and identities (e.g., Pakulski & Waters, 1996b). Such debates have implications for social scientists' research approaches, using class (or related measures of social position) for explaining other outcomes of interest. At the same time, in a context characterized by prevailing, or even rising inequalities in life opportunities and outcomes, it is important to understand how various measures of social position operate and to what degree they constitute substantively meaningful predictors of various outcomes of interest to social scientists and for societies at large. This special issue brings together a collection of studies that discuss current issues in measuring social class and social stratification variables and present research that examines the role of these variables in explaining outcomes such as people's perceptions about economic inequality or risk of entry into poverty, or examining topics such as social mobility regimes in a cross-national comparative perspective and inequality of educational opportunities.

The question of whether social stratification variables are losing ground as important explanatory variables for different outcomes might be approached from different viewpoints: either class position itself has become disassociated from or loosely linked with individual's lives and identities (Clark & Lipset, 1991; Kingston, 2000; Pakulski & Waters, 1996a) or the measures of social class and social status position we use in social stratification research are no longer suited to capture the conceptual meaning of individuals' social position in society (Weeden & Grusky, 2005), or maybe a combination of both.

There are various options that have been traditionally or more recently used in social stratification studies to measure social position. These options reflect differences at the conceptual level but also in the empirical approach taken to construct measures of social position. Is it better to operationalize social position as a single dimension or multiple dimensions (Alwin & Wray, 2005), is it a continuous measure, a collection of continuous measures, or is it a discrete variable (Weeden & Grusky, 2005)? If it is a discrete variable, how many class categories are sufficient for capturing groups that are sufficiently different from one another, but homogenous within? Some schemes use three classes, others use seven or eleven, and still others (the micro-class approach) use more than one hundred groupings (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Weeden & Grusky, 2005). Are we talking about groups that are clearly delimited from one another, or, rather, about fuzzy groups with flexible boundaries? Is one measure enough to capture education? The same question applies for other measures such as occupation or social origins. Recent recommendations in the literature and the use of models with latent variables in social stratification research have suggested that it is better to use multiple indicators to measure each of these, in order to account for measurement errors (Ganzeboom, 2009; Ganzeboom & Treiman, 2003; Kerckhoff, 1984). For researchers adopting a model in which social origins and social status are latent variables with multiple indicators, a further question is: should the model be a reflective indicators model, or a formative indicator model (Alwin, 1988; Blau & Duncan, 1978; Hauser, 1972; Hauser, Tsai, & Sewell, 1983; Heise, 1972; Tufiș, 2010)?

There is no best way to approach the conceptualization and measurement of social position, and each of the above strategies has strengths and limitations depending on the research question being tackled. In the landscape of available options for conceptualizing and measuring social positions, the multidimensional approach (Alwin & Wray, 2005) and the micro-class approach (Weeden & Grusky, 2005) seem to be the most complex and to have a better conceptual grounding. The former would be better suited to capture social status in conceptual frameworks that take into account various capitals (cultural, material, social,

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human, honorific) and it is also better adapted to capturing situations of status inconsistency. The latter is designed to delimit classes with a high degree of structuration that would more accurately capture the relationship between class and life conditions, in comparison to conventional big-class schemes. However, these two approaches also have extremely high demands in terms of required data in order to construct these measures and we do not always have the available indicators. Furthermore, at the moment, the micro-class scheme is only available for the U.S. context and the scheme would need to be adapted for use in cross-national comparative research.

The authors of the articles included in this special issue take different views on how they measure class or social position, but one thing they have in common is the conclusion that social position still matters for the outcomes they analyze. The special issue opens with an article by Josh Curtis and Robert Anderson („How Social Class Shapes Attitudes on Economic Inequality: The Competing Forces of Self-Interest and Legitimation"). The authors look at the interplay between household income and social class, on one hand, and the amount of inequality at the country level in influencing people's attitudes towards economic inequality. They test the economic self-interest thesis, according to which people's support crystallizes around things they perceive to be in their interest and they argue that this process is accompanied by effects of the degree of inequality in the societies people live in. The paper discusses research that suggests that income inequality has drastically risen over the past two decades and that people in more unequal societies tend to identify more closely with their class position. In this context, the authors ask whether increasing inequality is not also creating a context in which attitudes towards economic inequality are more closely linked with class position and their results suggest that this is, indeed, the case. They analyze individual and country-level effects on two separate measures of perceptions of inequality: the desire for change in income inequality and perceptions of the fairness of wealth inequality. The results show that while in more equal societies preferences tend to be more polarized among social classes regarding the desire for change in the amount of inequality, in more unequal societies attitudes of different social classes on this matter tend to converge. A different pattern is apparent for the second measure, the perception of the fairness of wealth inequality. There are consistent, but weak differences between social classes on this measure, regardless of the level of income inequality in the society, but the analyses show that as the level of inequality in society rises, all people tend to become more accepting of inequality, regardless of social class. A final conclusion the authors draw, based on their results, is that perceiving current inequality levels in society as just does not necessarily equate with the opinion that the inequality level should remain unchanged.

The second article in the issue („Social mobility in China and Britain: a comparative study") focuses on a comparison of social mobility in China and Britain. The authors (Yaojun Li, Shun Zhang, and Jianxun Kong) set out to answer the question whether the two mobility regimes are becoming more similar over time and they also look at the effects of one of China's unique institutional arrangements, the household registration system (hukou), on individuals' mobility chances. The paper addresses this issue and other related questions regarding the role of family backgrounds in class reproduction, effects of rapid economic development versus a history of strong redistributive policies on social mobility in China and gender inequalities in the two societies. The authors present analyses of absolute and relative mobility regimes and an analysis of access to the higher social classes. Their results suggest that while there is a convergence trend in total mobility (rates) in the two countries, China is characterized by higher and rising levels of inequality in terms of relative mobility, in comparison to Britain. The authors attribute part of this difference to the effects of the hukou system in China, which acts as an additional barrier to mobility in comparison to Britain. The paper also argues that taking the hukou status into account, by separately analyzing the rural and urban sectors in China, reveals more similarities in social fluidity between China and Britain.

Cinzia Meraviglia and Maarten L. Buis, in the article titled „Class, status and education: the influence of parental resources on IEO in Europe, 1893-1987" discuss issues in conceptualizing and measuring parental background in inequality of educational opportunity research. If we are to use a reasonably good operationalization of social origins, which types of resources should be included and which parent should provide the information on the social position of the family of origin? The authors advocate using an operationalization of social origins that is multidimensional, including economic, symbolic, and cultural dimensions, and taking into account both parents, bringing the measure closer to its original conceptual meaning. The recommendation to use a multidimensional measure begs the question of being able to compare effects of this multidimensional measure on other variables across countries and across time. Using parametrically weighted regression models, the authors find that what is important in defining parental social background not only varies across countries, but across time, within

most of the countries, as well. While this would hinder cross-national comparisons of effects of social origins on other variables, using a simplified operationalization of social origins using just one resource and just one parent would lead to biased conclusions, especially in research on inequality of educational opportunity. On the other hand, usually, the amount of detail researchers are able to use when constructing their social origins measures is often dependent on the availability of these multiple measures in the datasets they analyze. In the subset of countries analyzed here in which the mix of resources composing social origins is stable over time and temporal trends can be analyzed, the authors find that inequality of educational opportunity has decreased over time, at least in the period following World War II, and that cohorts born until the 60's experienced a more marked decrease.

The final paper in the issue, „Social class, life events and poverty risks in comparative European perspective" by Leen Vandecasteele approaches the topic of the relative importance of social class, compared to certain life course events such as changes in the household composition or changes in the employment situation for predicting risks of poverty spells. The article opens by discussing previous conflicting accounts in the academic literature regarding the weakening link between poverty risks and social stratification variables, and the idea that life course events might have surpassed traditional social stratification variables as predictors of poverty risk and duration. This article examines the interplay between the social stratification context and the poverty triggering life events in European countries, grouped according to their welfare regime, over the period 1994-2000, using data from the European Community Household Panel. Using random effects discrete time hazard models, this paper finds that social class and life events both play an important and direct role in influencing poverty entry. Among the life events studied here, the author finds that leaving the parental home has a substantial effect on poverty entry odds in the majority of the European countries under study. Poverty entry hazards are not equally spread in the population, but rather vary with traditional social stratification determinants. Results presented in this paper show that France and a number of Southern European countries are characterized by the typical manual/non-manual divide, with the non-manual classes being more protected from the risk of poverty entry, while in some other European countries the significant distinction is between the higher and lower professional classes, on one hand, and the other classes.

We hope that the articles included in this issue will help the readers form an image of the role of social stratification variables in individuals' lives today and in the past, as well as provide interesting insights for those interested in the methodological aspects regarding the measurement of social position.

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