

# Changing Classes



STRATIFICATION AND  
MOBILITY IN  
POST-INDUSTRIAL  
SOCIETIES

Edited by  
**Gøsta Esping-Andersen**



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## Stratification and Mobility in Post-industrial Societies

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# Introduction

*Gøsta Esping-Andersen*

This is a study of emergent class formation in six advanced societies. Using both longitudinal and cross-sectional labor force data, our chief intention is to examine the validity of the currently reigning views of social stratification in post-industrial society: on one hand, the rosy picture of a meritocratic knowledge-based class order; on the other hand, the gloomy scenario of a swelling service proletariat.

The six-nation comparison which we undertake has a dual motivation. First, the literature has a tendency to assume international convergence; we suspect substantial divergence across nations. Secondly, taking the lead from an earlier work, our theoretical argument is that contemporary social stratification is heavily shaped by institutions, the welfare state in particular.<sup>1</sup> If this is true, cross-national stratification patterns should systematically differ according to the nature of welfare states.

This book should not be read as if it were the final word on post-industrial social stratification. Indeed, serious and systematic research on the phenomenon has hardly even begun. Hence, the work presented in this book could be regarded as a provocation or as an invitation to others to join in. A project which addresses an unfolding, not yet clearly visible, process can hardly ever be precise, let alone definitive. The concepts of class and post-industrialism that permeate this volume remain, therefore, somewhat nebulous. We may be sharply aware that the parameters which defined to us the essence of high industrialism are being irreversibly recast, and we are to some degree capable of identifying the broad contours of an evolving new order. In brief, we live in an era of transition, and cannot pretend to know what will result once the embryonic structural components are cemented and institutionalized. After all, the reigning modern theories of *industrial* society were forged long after the fact. If we are still around twenty or thirty years hence, we might be able to do better than patching the usual 'post-' to our past. I wish to emphasize from the very outset that our use of the

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terms 'post-industrial' and 'post-fordist' is purely heuristic. We also make liberal use of concepts such as the 'the service proletariat', again a matter of expediency.

Our agenda is both theoretical and empirical. Chapter 1 is an effort to construct a theoretical framework on the basis of which empirical analyses of post-industrial stratification can proceed. The aim is to hypothesize the driving forces behind the process of post-industrialism. Drawing liberally on the earlier insights of Jonathan Gershuny, I locate these in the recast nexus between households and work. In turn, I believe that the ways in which this nexus is recast depends on institutions in general, and on the welfare state in particular. Put somewhat differently, the core idea in this book is that we need an institutional theory of stratification.

The study of social classes often disintegrates into a battle of ideologies. This book is an empirical attempt to explore whether, and to what degree, post-industrial society promotes class closure. Whether classes exist is an open question, not a foregone conclusion. Just as none of the authors in this study is a sworn adherent to post-industrial theory, no one is dedicated to a particular class theory. The kind of open-ended approach we have chosen for this study could be criticized as naked empiricism. True, much of what we have done is to order and re-order the data in the hope of identifying whether or not there emerge the contours of a new class structure. But still, such an accusation would be unfair: unordered data will never reveal anything; our approach is to impose a preliminary theoretical scheme and examine its empirical validity. The second best to having a good and solid theory is to strive towards one. This is the chief purpose of Chapter 1.

Traditional class theory tends to be institution-less, assuming that classes emerge out of unfettered exchange relations, be it in the market or at the 'point of production'. Our study assumes the opposite. If the nexus of households and work is being revolutionized, and if the engines that generate employment function differently, it is because the labor market is now stretched between a set of towering institutions. Mass education, the welfare state and collective bargaining institutions were more or less unknown to Durkheim, Weber and Marx.

The impact of large institutions is difficult to discern in a one-country study. Maybe this is why most stratification theory fails to see them. We have chosen the comparative approach because this is the only means by which their influence can be gauged. Fortunately, the literature is saturated with comparative analyses of welfare states and industrial relations thus providing us with a solid basis for nation-sampling. From the point of view of maximizing institutional

variation, and taking into consideration the inevitable constraints of data availability and expertise, our choice fell on a comparison of Germany, Great Britain, the two North American countries, the United States and Canada; and two Scandinavian countries, Norway and Sweden.<sup>2</sup>

The research strategy was chosen by objective constraints. It would have been physically and mentally impossible for anyone to conduct systematic cross-national comparisons alone, even with the aid of a sizable army of research assistants. The data for each nation are complex and assume a particular expertise. For this reason we chose the research-collectivity option. With the aid of two intense workshops (both held at the European University Institute in Florence), a common theoretical and methodological formula, and concurrent back-and-forth communication, we have done our best to conduct and present the research as a unified and coherent whole. Still, no two authors are identical; the contributors use varying analytical techniques, and come to the project with their own unique sociological imaginations. We could not aim for strict comparability.

Chapter 1 serves to present the basic theoretical and conceptual framework for the subsequent empirical analyses. All individual nation-analyses address the same underlying questions and hypotheses, utilizing as far as possible the same concepts and classification system.<sup>3</sup> The actual methodology of the nation-studies will differ; each country's data set stipulates to a large degree what is methodologically appropriate. Thus, the Norwegian study uses merged censuses for 1960, 1970 and 1980; the Swedish analyzes a panel constructed by merging surveys around 1980 and 1988; and the German study also benefits from long panels. In turn, the Canadian and US analyses were constrained by the unavailability of panel data that bridge more than two years. This heterogeneity of data sources, as well as the differences in years covered, obviously diminishes our capacity for sweeping comparative generalizations. The collaborating authors also employ different methodological techniques. Gershuny's study of Britain is, for example, an innovative and unorthodox application of time-budget analysis, while the other nation-studies generally utilize occupational mobility tables coupled with (typically) logistical regression analysis. Again, strict comparability is not possible but we are, nonetheless, convinced that comparative conclusions are warranted as long as we remember that the entire undertaking is meant to be explorative.

The empirical section of the book opens with a comparison of the evolving occupational structure in the six countries (Chapter 2). The aim is to highlight the chief differences in the nations' employment

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structure so as to provide a framework within which the subsequent case-analyses can more easily be understood and compared. The evidence does confirm that countries cluster. The Scandinavian countries exemplify an extreme case of a gendered, welfare state service-led trajectory; Canada and the United States, in turn, are characterized by their large low-end consumer service labor market. Germany (and, to a degree, Britain) remains comparatively much more industrial and traditional in its employment profile. These differences can be traced to the impact of their respective welfare state and industrial relations institutions, and are important to keep in mind when evaluating the results from the individual case-analyses.

The individual empirical chapters are grouped according to the clusters that emerge in Chapter 2. Since the principal focus of the study is to explore post-industrial class closure, our choice was to center the analyses on the bottom and top of the post-industrial class hierarchies; we are therefore mainly concerned with the potential for a new post-industrial service proletariat, on one hand, and class closure within the professional 'knowledge class', on the other hand. The empirical chapters all present a rich and complex picture of class mobility patterns, some mainly emphasizing the issue of class closure at the bottom; others offering a more general analysis of class mobility. The results that are presented obviously do not condense into a neat and unequivocal finding. Common to all the countries is the degree to which the post-industrial hierarchy is gendered; the female bias is perhaps heaviest at the bottom, but permeates all the way to the top. This does not mean, however, that everywhere a dual gender-distinct class system is evolving.

There is clearly a 'Scandinavian model' insofar as the huge welfare state labor market generates a heavily gendered (female) mobility hierarchy, marked by a large share of unskilled service jobs. The tendency towards class closure is, however, not strong. The Norwegian study, in particular, emphasizes the upward mobility chances for the unskilled service workers; the Swedish, in contrast, suggests that mobility chances of unskilled service workers, while high, are not that different from mobility behavior in the traditional industrial order. This may very well be true, but there emerges nonetheless a strong commonality between Norway and Sweden: the emergence of a distinct, female-biased, career hierarchy in the welfare state.

This stands in sharp contrast to Germany. Here, unskilled service jobs emerge as largely dead-end careers, a closed secondary labor market that is, again, predominantly female. Unlike Scandinavia, these women's mobility chances are few, and low-end service jobs