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## NEW GERMAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

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Anyone who has been dealing with the analysis of social structure over the past few years, in particular with the analysis of social inequality in Germany, has had no cause to complain of boredom. The subject at issue and also the products of one's colleagues in the profession were certainly good for surprises. After a lengthier period of stagnation, an exciting phase of the sociology of inequality has set in since the eighties. New approaches have been emerging in ever quicker succession. Fruitful controversies are under way. New results, e. g. from research into situations in life, life courses, life styles and milieus, have significantly improved our knowledge of the structures of social inequality.

*The following article aims to summarize some of these new approaches and the results obtained through them, in order to make them better known to sociologists outside of Germany (Sections IV and V). To be able better to place the new features in context, the history of the German sociology of inequality since the Second World War and its principles are roughly sketched (I-III).*

The course of the German sociology of inequality since World War II has been divided into three phases. Each of them is characterized by one or two concepts (and appropriate models) to demonstrate the typical structure of social inequality of particular account in that period. This procedure enables an assessment of *those* aspects and problems which really mattered for people in the various eras since the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany.

### **I. From “middle-class society” to “social stratification”**

In the years immediately following the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany, society experienced enormous mobility, including massive processes of advancement and decline. It became clear that the nobility's position of social and political preeminence had been broken for good. A large portion of the property-owning bourgeoisie had lost its fortune. The “cultural capital” of the traditionally educated bourgeois intellectuals was partially devalued in the reconstruction situation of the post-war period. On the other hand, the ranks of qualified employees had grown rapidly. Many workers had experienced professional qualification and social integration. Since the 1950s, an improve-

ment in material living conditions and consumer opportunities and an orientation of one's life-style towards material prosperity had spread among nearly the entire population. As a result of all this, many observers got the impression that social inequality was on the way out.

In 1953, Helmut Schelsky reduced this interpretation down to the formula of the "levelled-out middle-class society". He diagnosed the "formation of a levelled-out, petit-bourgeois middle-class society which is just as little proletarian as it is bourgeois, i. e., it is characterized by the loss of class tension" (1953b, 218). Instead, he saw social levelling "advanced to a very broad, relatively uniform social stratum" (1953a, 64) which "is no longer to be understood in terms of the structure of the respective social stratification, but ... mainly in terms of mobility, the processes of social advance and decline and the appurtenant social mentality" (1953b, 228).

However, social research very soon demonstrated that this thesis, as a description of the post-war status quo, was far overdone. Empirical studies showed that "upper" and "lower" still continued to exist in West Germany (Mayntz 1958) and that mobility flows by no means included all members of society (Bolte 1959). Rather, it was quite possible to recognise groupings (Bolte 1963; summarised in Bolte and Hradil 1988, 203 ff.) - even if only unclearly in larger towns and cities - that lived relatively self-contained in everyday life, aware of their higher or lower "status" in comparison with others.

Many of the studies of that period referred to the inequality of social prestige. Initially described in terms of an "interaction prestige", i. e., with a view to everyday behaviour between persons of higher and lower standing (invitations, memberships, marriage circles), it was later more often conceived of as general occupational prestige by focussing at the general higher or lower "image" of occupational positions (Moore and Kleining 1960; Scheuch 1961).

All in all, empirical research of the post-war period thus did not confirm the model of a "levelled-off middle-class society" but that of a "stratified society". West Germany was regarded as an unequal society with segments of the population clearly perceived to be higher or lower in status. But, unlike previous inequalities, these advantages and disadvantages now appeared attainable via a "modern" path, i. e., equally accessible in principle to all, namely by educational credentials and occupational positions, a path on which advancement appeared to be measured in accordance with generally valid standards and seemed to be essentially dependent upon individual behaviour.

## II. From “stratified society” to “class society”

In the course of the sixties, with increasing prosperity it became ever clearer that reality was lagging behind the high expectations placed in achievement-oriented and stratified society. The model of social stratification thus increasingly turned into an instrument of criticism of the structure of inequality in West Germany on the basis of its own standards.

The concept of “social stratification” also changed in the sixties, albeit unnoticed in the beginning. “Strata” was used less and less to mean population groups regarded as standing higher or lower just by the reputation they enjoyed, either with regard to their occupation or on account of other features. More and more population groups classified their income or property and their qualification as being (dis)advantaged, independently of any assessment by their fellows; they were being described as “strata”.

“Objectively” useful resources which were linked more or less closely with the occupational position became decisive. They seemed better suited than prestige, with its basis in normative aspects, to get onto the track of those factual inequalities which did not correspond to ideas of equality-of-opportunity (e. g. the poor educational chances of workers’ children) of an achievement-oriented society. But nevertheless, prestige remained the important “subjective” dimension of social stratification. The former structural typification of a purely “subjective” (interactional or occupational) prestige stratification had been modified into the model of a “subjective”-“objective”, multidimensional socio-economic stratification.

This model of “socioeconomic status” has been the conceptual basis of “social stratification” since the sixties. It is structured multidimensionally (income, qualification and occupational prestige are regarded as the core dimensions), thus envisaging the possibility of inconsistencies in status (e. g., the high income and low prestige of a scrap-merchant). But if you take a closer look at it, this model is not all that multidimensional. As a normal case the parallelism of stratification dimensions, thus status consistency, is conceptually and methodologically reified (e. g., by additive indexes). Thus, what has been meant by stratified society from the 1960s to the present is basically “one-dimensional” with differing gratifications and resources within the occupational hierarchy.

Looking back upon important empirical findings on social inequality in Western Germany within the central dimensions of social stratification, one finds only slight changes with respect to income and occupational prestige, but



drastic changes in the distribution of formal educational credentials since the 1960s.

Table 1  
Stratification of net household incomes 1950 to 1984  
(income ratios in percentage of the national income)

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1988
1st (lowest income) fifth of all households	5.4	6.0	5.9	6.9	9
2nd fifth	10.7	10.8	10.4	11.2	13
3rd fifth	15.9	16.2	15.6	16.2	16
4th fifth	22.8	23.1	22.5	22.5	33
5th fifth	45.2	43.9	45.6	43.3	43

Source: Hauser and Glatzer 1989, 394; Hradil 1992 (b)

Table 2  
Occupational prestige stratification of the population  
of West Germany 1962 to 1974

	1962	63	64	65	66	67/ 68	69	70	71	71/ 72	72/ 73	73/ 74	74
U/UM	6	6	5	6	5	6	8	9	9	8	7	8	8
MM	10	9	10	10	10	11	11	13	13	13	12	12	12
LM	36	36	36	37	38	38	39	39	39	38	40	40	40
UL	29	29	31	31	31	30	29	27	27	28	28	27	27
LL	15	16	14	13	13	13	11	10	10	11	11	11	11
SO	4	4	4	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
U	=	Upper class/UM = Upper middle class											
MM	=	Middle middle class											
LM	=	Lower middle class											
UL	=	Upper lower class											
LL	=	Lower lower class											
SO	=	Social outcasts											

Source: G. Kleining, quoted from Bolte and Hradil 1988, 219

Table 3  
School affiliation of 13 year old pupils in West Germany

	1960	1970	1980	1990
Secondary Technical (Hauptschule)	70%	55%	39%	31%
Secondary Intermediary School (Realschule)	11%	19%	25%	26%
Pre-University School (Gymnasium)	15%	29%	27%	31%
Integrated Comprehensive School (Gesamtschule)	–	–	4%	7%

Source: Statistisches Bundesamt, Datenreport 1992, 64

All in all, the findings after the 1960s make it clear that social inequalities extend far beyond the “subjective” and symbolic prestige aspect, since they are also anchored in “objective” living conditions.

At the end of the 1960s, in view of the problems accompanying the growth of the economy and the undesirable effects resulting from economic growth (environment, “private wealth - public poverty”), a fulminant *renaissance of Marxist class analysis* took place in conjunction with the “movement of 68”. West Germany was more and more frequently described as a *class society*. Its problems were attributed to private ownership of the means of production, the increasing concentration of wealth and power and the privileges of the propertied class.

The buzz word “class society” thus referred only in part to the description of the existing structure of inequality; it was mainly directed at its causes. These class relationships in West Germany were summed up in two major empirical studies by Marxist institutes as shown in survey 1.

Up until the end of the 1970s, the two structural typifications, class and stratified society, quite clearly dominated the analysis of the structure of social inequality in West Germany. They were by far the most widely used ones, not only in order to explain and describe unequal living *conditions* (such as: income, wealth, power and educational credentials), but also when the different *modes* of living were examined: From images of society to sexual behaviour, from socialization to political participation, from contacts to speech codes, from mobility to criminality - nearly everything seemed to be connected with the structure of social classes and strata. Extensive studies on “worker consciousness”, speech codes, socialization patterns, etc., appeared to confirm the notions of class society and stratified society.

Survey 1  
The class structure of West Germany in 1970<sup>1</sup>

Project class analysis (PKA)		Institute of Marxist Studies and Research	
Working class	65.0%	Working class	75.6%
– wage-earners of capital	60.1%	– employees in the private capitalist sector	49.1%
– wage-earners in non-capitalist production and circulation of goods (employees in small companies)	3.5%	– state employees	15.0%
		– commercial middle classes	8.5%
		– others	2.9%
Middle classes	31.7%	Middle classes	22.3%
– active state employees	5.4%	– wage-earning middle classes	3.9%
– passive state employees (e. g. pensioners)	7.9%	– intelligentsia	3.0%
– non-capitalist producers of goods (small-scale trade)	6.3%	– self-employed middle classes	15.4%
– persons with derived incomes (e. g. pensioners)	12.1%		
Capitalist class		Capitalist class	
– functioning capitalists	2.7%	– big/monopoly capitalists (managers, senior state officials)	0.1%
– capital owners	0.6%	– medium capitalists (functioning owners, managers, “bourgeois state groups”)	0.9%
		– small capitalists (agriculture, trade and industry)	1.2%

Source: Projekt Klassenanalyse 1973; IMSF 1973 ff.

1 The two analyses differ above in all in the fact that the PKA argues “purely” theoretically, whereas the IMSF argues less theoretically than pragmatically. The PKA proceeds by logical inferences: All inflows of income, regardless of their amount, are attributed to the middle classes if they represent indirectly “derived revenue”, such as officials’ income. Income from directly produced surplus value is attributed to the proletariat. The income coming from consumed surplus value belongs to the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, the

The structural models “class society” and “stratified society” did not only dominate West German social structure analysis. They also appeared to be completely controversial models. The “class society” seemed to be determined by economic positions of power, by “objectively” dichotomous class positions and antagonistic class interests, driven on further by proletarian contra bourgeois interests and corresponding political conflict groups. The picture of the “stratified society” was much more harmonious. Its core was seen not in power relationships, but in market ones, in occupational attainment and in the occupational hierarchy. Its structure appeared to be formed by gradations of “subjectively”<sup>2</sup> experienced living conditions, such as income, education and prestige. Specific ways of living appeared to correspond to these stratificational living conditions.

### III. Common features and common critique of the class and strata perspective

This situation has changed completely. Within the German discussion, the structural models “class society” and “stratified society” have retreated from their previous position of *dominance* into a *defensive* one. Their *conflict* has turned into a *coalition*. Today both of them are confronted by an abundance of new approaches. There is an intellectually exciting and highly mobile debate in progress between the representatives of traditional stratification and class approaches and the advocates of new theses and models. How has this transformation come about?

Firstly, since the 1970s the sociological concepts (or models respectively) of “class” and “stratum” have been quietly becoming more and more similar. More and more common features have crystallized out. And secondly, the features in common have also jointly attracted criticism, and contributed to the formulation of alternative theses, studies and structural typifications.

The concept of strata had already become “more classlike” in the 1960s. As explained above, it had developed from a term removed from economic factors, aiming at “people differently associating with one another”, to a concept

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IMSF, with its close communist party links, always argues pragmatically while searching for potential allies, with a view to the amount of income and the respective position of power, and assigning, for example, the heads of the state bureaucracy to the “bourgeoisie”.

2 Here this is, of course, a concept of subjectivity different from the one used above within the scope of stratification sociology.

close to the economy directed at “goods” provided by the occupation. In the 1950s, the concept of strata resembled Max Weber’s “Stände”. Since the end of the 1960s, the concept of strata has been similar to Max Weber’s “Erwerbsklassen”.

But silently the class concept has also moved closer to a “stratumlike”, more or less vertically graded concept of occupational groups. Already in the 1970s, the differentiation of occupational structures forced Marxist class studies in Western Germany (see above) to take account of “middle classes” and “middle strata”. Modern Marxist class schemes are more and more differentiated, especially with respect to the power and living conditions of the “middle classes” (e. g. Wright 1985).

## Survey 2

### Non-Marxist class model based on Goldthorpe

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I	Higher-grade professionals, administrators and officials; administrators in large industrial establishments, large proprietors
II	Lower-grade professionals, administrators and officials; higher-grade technicians; managers in small industrial establishments; supervisors of non-manual employees
IIIa	Routine non-manual employees, higher-grade (administration and commerce)
IIIb	Routine non-manual employees, lower-grade (sales and services)
IVa	Small proprietors, artisans, etc., with employees
IVb	Small proprietors, artisans, etc., without employees
IVc	Farmers and smallholders; other self-employed workers in primary production
V	Lower-grade technicians; supervisors of manual workers
VI	Skilled manual workers
VIIa	Semi- and unskilled manual workers (not in agriculture, etc.)
VIIb	Agricultural and other workers in primary production

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Source: Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992, 38 ff.

The revival of non-Marxist class concepts also fits into the picture of class and stratum models moving closer together. Non-Marxist class concepts are based on a tradition extending from Max Weber through Karl Renner, Theodor Geiger and Ralf Dahrendorf. The following scheme shows the most popular non-Marxist class concept in its latest version. Originally it was developed by John Goldthorpe in the seventies (Goldthorpe 1980). It has been used in Germany in a slightly modified version by Walter Müller, Thomas Herz (1990) and

Heinz-Herbert Noll, Roland Habich (1990) among others. Here "class society" means a type of society in which living conditions, modes of living, and mobility opportunities are formed by occupational power and market positions simultaneously. Non-Marxist class models thus occupy an intermediate position between (the more and more similar) Marxist class concepts and stratum concepts (see survey 2).

The second step towards a defensive coalition of class and stratum concepts was taken towards the end of the 1970s when the common features of the two even more similar models had become obvious and the criticism and counter-proposals focussed on common issues.

It became clear that both types of models agree in making a direct causal link and congruence between:

- (1) the hierarchy of occupational positions (classes)
- (2) the vertical structure of better or worse living conditions (strata) and
- (3) differences of modes of living (specific to classes or strata).

Both types of structural models thus contain the following assumptions:

- (a) The occupational position is of central significance for attaining (non)advantageous living conditions.
- (b) (Non)advantageous living conditions occur as a rule consistent with status and thus all in all as a vertical total structure.
- (c) These external living conditions shape the development of modes of living, i. e. thinking and behavior.

These assumptions were not questioned as long as they stimulated many empirical studies essentially conceptualized to verify them. However, since the seventies, there have been increasing doubts about the usefulness and validity of these data on specific patterns of socialization, speaking, consuming, voting, leisure etc. of classes and strata. Empirical studies with alternative approaches supported these doubts. Systematic criticism of the joint assumptions listed above (for more detail see Hradil 1987) forced class and stratification models of social inequality onto the defensive.

#### **IV. Individualized, pluralized and polarized structures of social inequality**

No finding and no argument which has been put forward since the late 1970s against interpretations of Western Germany as a class or stratified society claimed that these conventional interpretations were completely wrong. All



critics came to the conclusion that class and stratificational interpretations are not sufficient: they have to be supplemented and refined according to today's conditions. Therefore, on the one hand, findings will now be presented which plead *in favour* of the continuing importance of classes and strata. But on the other hand, results will also be shown which *point further*.

Recent class and stratification sociology argues that the *essential* social advantages and disadvantages are dependent on the occupational position attained. To a certain degree, this argument is correct. Essential (dis)advantages are linked with the occupational position. Table 4 shows that with respect to the educational opportunities of the children of large occupational groups in Western Germany, and diagram 1 demonstrates it with regard to the income opportunities of "occupational classes" (non-Marxist model).

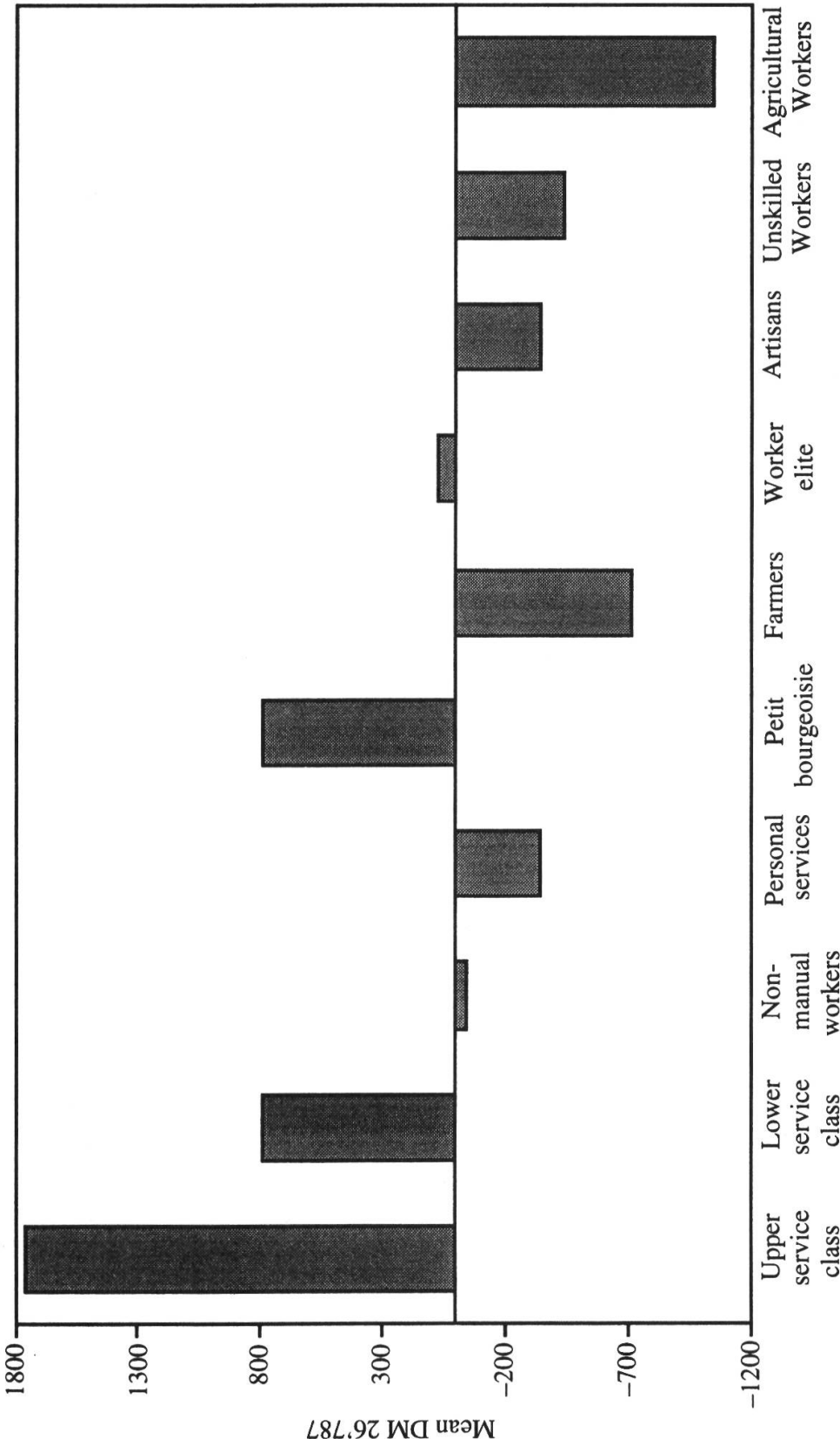
Table 4  
Educational opportunities and the father's occupational position

Schools attended by children aged from 10 to under 15 from intact-families in accordance with the family head's occupational position in 1972 and 1989, in percentage

School type	Family head gainfully employed							
	Self-employed		Publicly employed		Salaried employee		Blue-collar worker	
	1972	1989	1972	1989	1972	1989	1972	1989
Primary, secondary (Volksschule)	63.3	45.0	45.9	34.5	51.6	39.5	80.1	68.4
Secondary (Realschule)	16.2	19.8	15.1	16.0	17.4	19.9	11.5	17.9
High school (Gymnasium)	20.1	31.8	36.8	45.3	28.7	35.5	5.6	9.0
Integrated comprehensive school	—	3.4	—	4.2	—	5.2	—	4.6
No details	2.4	—	2.2	—	2.3	—	2.9	—
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Federal Minister of Education and Science, quoted from the Federal Statistical Office (ed.), Data report 1992, 86

Diagram 1  
Household income and class positions. Deviations from the average (in DM) – with check of age, sex and nationality



Data basis: Das Sozio-ökonomische Panel, Welle 1, Welle 3

### 1. *"Horizontal" inequalities: non-occupational (dis)advantages*

Nevertheless, looking just at occupational positions and the corresponding living conditions only shows part of reality. Since the seventies, people in Western Germany have become sensitive to additional "*new*" *dimensions of social inequality*, not at all or only indirectly linked with their occupational position. The most important among the "*new*" dimensions are: social security, leisure conditions, housing and environmental conditions, working conditions, access to "public goods" and the infrastructure provided by the state, health conditions, contacts, integration opportunities and "unequal treatment". As far as we can see, this broadening of the perception of social inequality is a result of economic prosperity, increased welfare-state activities, "changed values", the emergence of "new social movements" (such as the women's, peace, alternative and ecology movements), and so on.

These "*new*" dimensions of social inequality amplify the spectrum of advantages and disadvantages (of income, qualification and occupational prestige) observed in class and stratification sociology. They do not replace it.

Of course, most of these dimensions of social inequality are not really new. Only some of them are: for example, in the course of the expansion of the welfare state up to the mid-seventies many "public goods" and expansions of state infrastructure were introduced. Because of necessary socialization preconditions and because of regional distances these installations are not equally accessible. Most of the "*new*" social inequalities (e. g., unequal working conditions and unequal social security) are very old. But nowadays they are perceived with greater sensitivity, and that is what is "*new*" about them. For example, inequalities in social security have acquired new significance as a consequence of continuous mass unemployment since the mid-seventies.

In the past few years, empirical research in Germany has proved very clearly that the access to many advantages and disadvantages within these "*new*" dimensions, but also within the "*old*" dimensions (e. g., income opportunities), is not only opened or closed by the occupational position. Additional "*new* status allocation criteria" have proved to be paths to social advantages and disadvantages: sex, age, period of birth (cohorts), nationality, residential region, the number of children, and so on. So inequality in the standard of living in Western Germany is more dependent on your number of children than on your occupational position (Bertram 1981). This status allocation power of the "*new*" criteria may be new in the sociology of social inequality. It is by no means new for the public.

Inequalities depending on those criteria (e. g., between men and women) have been called “horizontal inequalities”<sup>3</sup> (R. Kreckel). Nowadays they irritate people much more than the “vertical” ones linked with their occupations. That is also “new”, at least for West Germany. In recent years political elections have been fought on the inequalities between men and women or between Germans and foreigners. But hardly on the inequalities between blue-collar workers, salaried employees, officials and the self-employed.

Recent sociological research (for greater detail see Hradil 1987, 87 ff.) shows that a great deal of this irritation and political relevance is empirically justified. The “new status allocation criteria” are nearly as mighty as the occupational position:

- On average women earn only about 70% of the income of men, though having the same qualifications and working hours.
- Foreign workers form a “substratum” beneath the Germans in the majority of dimensions of social inequality.
- The per capita household income is even more dependent on the household size, and thus on the number of children, than on the occupational position (see above).
- Regional inequalities in West Germany, e. g., educational opportunities, have hardly changed since the early sixties despite all the endeavours of educational reform and regional planning policy (Bertram 1990). Regional inequalities between West and East Germany are uppermost in people’s mind.
- Even the (for the most part purchasable) living space and the comfort of your flat or house are just as much a question of sex, age and nationality as of your occupational position (Noll and Habich 1990: Tab. 3).

## 2. *Combinations and accumulations of (non)advantageous conditions of living*

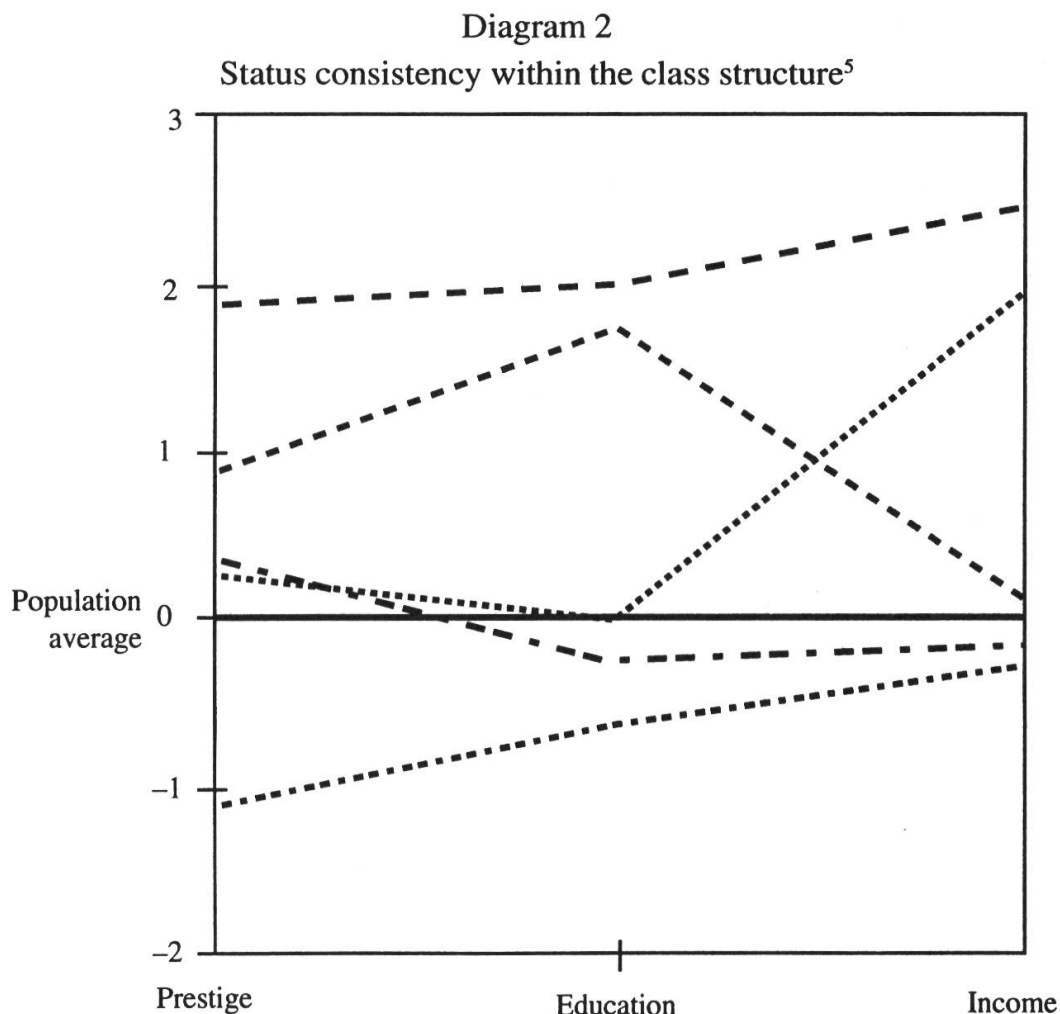
Conventional empirical studies of stratification and class imply, from their conceptual approach to their methodological details (e. g., in the construction of additive indexes), that advantages are accompanied by advantages and dis-

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3 For these inequalities, for instance between single earners with many children and “Dinks” (double income no kids), between men and women, between Germans and Turks, the apparently nonsensical term “horizontal inequalities” has gained currency. It can only be understood if one sees the axis of occupational hierarchy and the inequalities running parallel to it as “vertical” and the inequalities running “at an angle” to it, e. g., those specific to age or sex, as being “horizontal”.

advantages by disadvantages (that, for example, well-paid occupational positions are also highly qualified and prestigious).

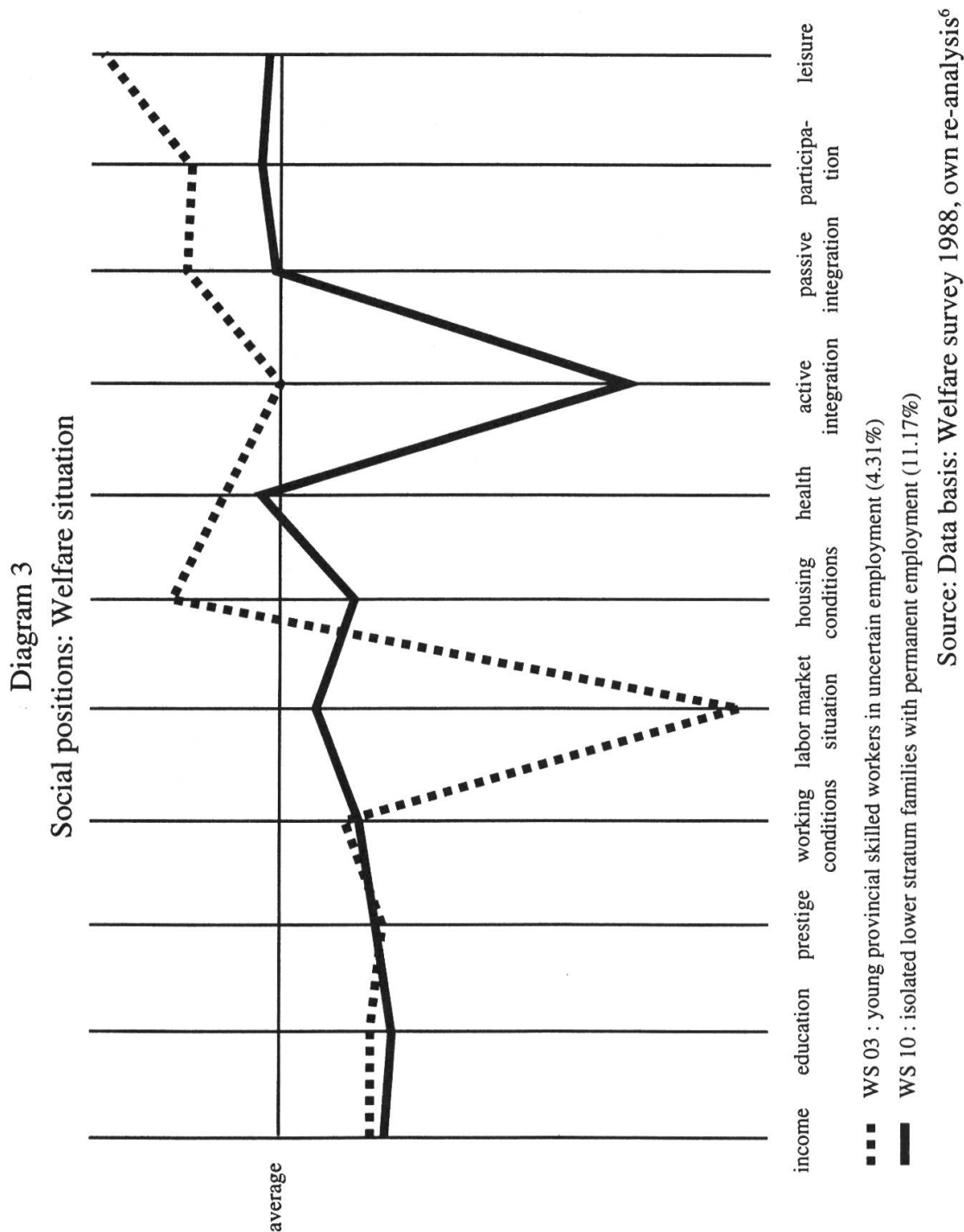
Empirical studies of the past few years have shown that this assumption of status consistency and verticality is frequently *not* correct, even if you restrict your attention to the stratificational dimensions, income, qualification and prestige. Particularly in the “middle” of the social hierarchy we find, on the one hand, large groups with a relatively high level of education, but only average income, on the other hand, groups with a high income and just an average standard of education. The following diagram shows clearly (on the basis of cluster analyses of the data of the welfare survey 1988<sup>4</sup>) the status profiles of these “educated middle class” and “income middle class”.



Source: Riede and Berger-Schmitt 1993: Figure 1.

4 Carried out by the author together with Thomas Riede and Regina Berger-Schmitt, Special Research Unit 3 at the University of Mannheim.

5 Re-analyses of earlier data (Bertram 1990) indicate that groupings standing similarly



“juxtapositioned” also existed earlier. But in the period of the predominance of class and stratification models they were not taken into account very much.

6 Together with Thomas Riede and Regina Berger-Schmitt; some data are to be regarded as approximate figures since the number of cases is statistically not sufficient.



For logical (because more possibilities of combination are given) and empirical reasons, combinations of advantages and disadvantages are to be found the more frequently, the “more new” dimensions of social inequality are taken into account in addition to the usual dimensions linked with an occupation. If one also respects, for example, job (in)security and leisure conditions of members of society in addition to their income situation, standards of education and occupational prestige grades, then apparently homogeneous strata disintegrate into quite different groups.

Diagram 3 shows two of these, once again in the form of a profile. If one looks only at the dimensions of social stratification printed on the left, then the living conditions of both groups appear status-consistent and practically identical. One could summarise them as two parts of the “lower stratum”. However, if one also looks at the (un)favorable living conditions noted further to the right, then two clearly differentiated sub-groups become apparent, each with a specific combination of better or worse living conditions. One group we have called “young provincial skilled workers in uncertain employment” on account of their most striking living condition “bad labour market situation” (= an “active”, defining variable) and of the typical demographic features of the population (= a “passive”, illustrative variable). Its members have high job risks which are probably hardly outweighed by their satisfactory housing conditions. The other group has a roughly average labour market situation, but it is relatively disintegrated. We have designated them “isolated lower stratum families with permanent employment”.

There are many other examples of important social inequalities within social strata. Consequently, the concept of a purely vertical structure of social inequality conceals decisive inequalities. Heterogenous combinations of advantages and disadvantages are characteristic for the social positions of many members of society. It is important to register this concurrence and combination of favourable and less favourable living conditions and to understand it precisely to be able to comprehend the various positions within the structure of social inequality (e. g., of a self-employed person insecure in his job situation, with a lot of money and little leisure, compared with a low-ranking official with a secure labour market position with much leisure, but very little money, or an unemployed juvenile with very little income and an excessive amount of “leisure”).

The living conditions of *problem groups* are not to be characterised by combinations of advantages and disadvantages, but by various accumulations of disadvantages. Such groupings in Germany have been increasing steadily in size since the 1970s. These problem groups include, among others,

- the poor (1992 in West and East Germany approx. 8 million<sup>7</sup>),
- the long-term unemployed (approx. 1 m.),
- asylum seekers (1988-1992: 1.2 m.),
- the homeless living in emergency accommodation (approx. 1 m.),
- city tramps (approx. 0.1 m.),
- drug addicts,
- the handicapped (approx. 6 m.), and
- the elderly (mainly women) with inadequate support.

How much some of these problem groups have grown may be illustrated by the ratio of the poor population. Until the mid-1970s, it had been constantly sinking and in 1973 it totalled just 5.5% of the whole population of West Germany. Since then, as a result of mass unemployment it had risen to approx. 10% by 1990. It is within this range that the much discussed “new poverty” fluctuates from a sociological point of view.

In contrast to the industrial proletariat of the 19th century, the problem groups in Germany are for the most part protected by the welfare state. They are much smaller in number - all in all quite certainly smaller than suggested by the buzz word “two-thirds society”. But on the other hand they are more heterogenous, hardly capable of being united, and hardly capable of being organised, and - in contrast to workers - they have hardly any social and political power.

Some indicators show that a development analogous to the segregation of problem groups “at the bottom” is also taking place “at the top”. But there is very little exact data available. The given data proves a constantly growing income gap between the nine-tenths who are wage earners and the one tenth self-employed persons since the mid-1970s. The growing concentration of ownership of corporate assets also points in this direction. Probably *relatively small groups with accumulations of advantages* are distancing themselves from the majority of the population.

Taking all the above mentioned approaches and findings together, the structure of social inequality in Western Germany has been moving towards pluralization and polarization simultaneously. On the one hand, ever larger shares of the population are concentrating in middle class living conditions, but in very differentiated ones. On the other hand, the distance between this majority and various problem groups on the one side and favoured groups on the other is

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<sup>7</sup> Operationalization: the poverty line is 50% of the average income for a specific household size.

apparently increasing. So the development of social structure is showing “more equality” and “more inequality” at the same time.

Accordingly, the most problematic inequalities are no longer to be found among wage earners,

- such as between an impoverished working class and a small favoured and predominant bourgeoisie, as in early industrial society,
- also no longer between an unqualified, poorly remunerated lower class of manual “blue collar” workers and the middle class of qualified, better paid “white collar” employees and officials, as in developed industrial societies,

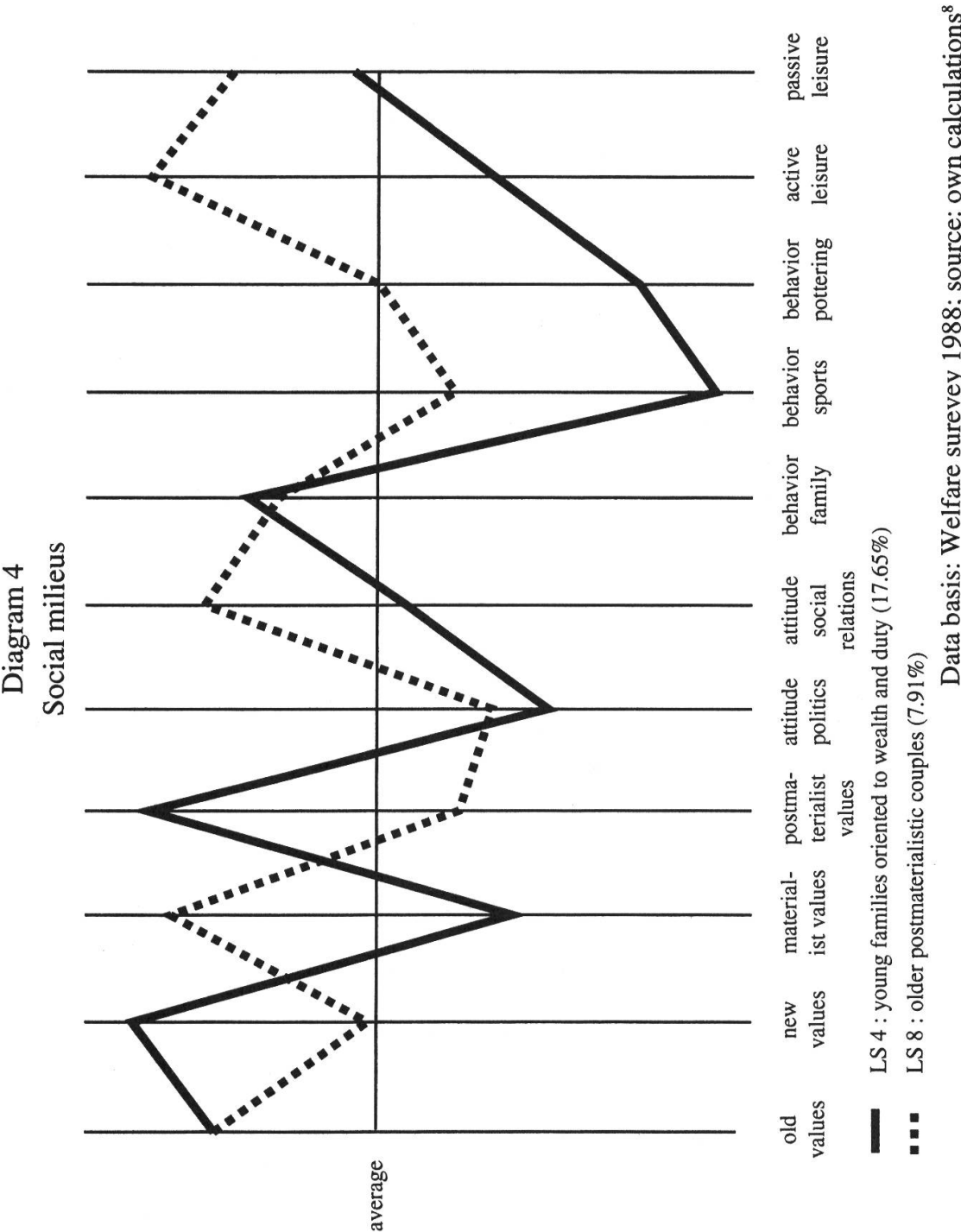
but *between the wage-earning majority of the population and very heterogenous problem groups, standing on the fringe of, or outside gainful employment.*

### 3. *Individualised and pluralised forms of life*

Until the 1970s, the predominant structural models of social classes and strata assumed that the occupational position did not only shape the external living conditions, but also the inner attitudes and much of everyday behaviour. Accordingly, much sociological attention has been paid to the emergence of “proletarian” ways of life, of “working class consciousness”, of speech codes, educational styles, patterns of participation and criminality specific to strata. Inequality of available resources, processes of becoming accustomed to living conditions specific to classes and strata, as well as inevitably arising objectives and motivations of people living in certain “objective” class or stratification conditions have been assumed to be the causes of those processes of “subjective” formation.

But since the 1980s more and more empirical evidence indicated that behavioural and mental differences within classes and strata, as well as common sociocultural patterns across class or strata lines, were proving to be considerably more frequent than sociologists had guessed at the beginning of the seventies. (For a summary, see Hradil 1992). Firstly, these findings drew attention to the *persistence of pre-industrial sociocultural differences*, as regional and local milieus (“homeland”), family traditions, denominational cultures, and different kinds of life styles.

Secondly, theses on the dissolution of traditional as well as of industrial cultural patterns attracted much attention. Ulrich Beck (1986) in particular diagnosed the erosion of socio-cultural collectives, the separation of people from common cultural backgrounds and, all in all, massive *tendencies to individualisation*. He saw the reasons for this, among other things, in the growing



8 Together with Thomas Riede and Regina Berger-Schmitt, Special Research unit 3 at the University of Mannheim. Some data are to be regarded as approximate since the number of cases is statistically not sufficient.

trend for women to be engaged in gainful employment, in increasing individual mobility, in more competition, in rising prosperity and improved social security. According to the individualisation thesis, autonomy and anomy are growing: people can and must plan their lives themselves, make their everyday arrangements themselves and develop their objectives in life themselves, often lacking any models for it.

Thirdly, since the beginning of the 1980s, attention turned increasingly to *new modes of life*. (Kommission Zukunftsperspektiven 1983; Hradil 1987; Zapf et al. 1987). One gained the impression that not only traditional modes of life were being revitalised but also that new milieus and life styles came into existence which are different from traditional or industrial ones: they are more consciously and purposefully lived; they are less “deeply” anchored in the unconscious and the habitual; they do not take up the whole “breadth” of existence; they are combinable (e. g., in the form of a “working” and a “weekend style of life”) and mixable; their social boundaries can only be vaguely defined; they are limited to relatively small groups, surely smaller than the lower class or the middle class; they are socially more ephemeral and individually more unstable than for example strata or class affiliations.

Theses such as these have brought about a veritable boom in cultural sociology and in empirical research into styles of life. In the 1980s these studies became a real sociological fashion in West Germany. But they have been more than a fashion: they have followed a genuine shift in social attention to questions of social milieus, life styles and making one’s life (*Lebensführung*). Sociological findings on the topic attracted considerable attention, e. g., on “forms of life and phases of life” (W. Zapf et al. 1987), on basic orientations of “social milieus” (H. Nowak and U. Becker 1982; Hradil 1987; Schulze 1992) and on “life-style groupings” (Gluchowski 1987, 1988; Lüdtke 1989, 1990).

In a recent study, we isolated eight “social milieus” in Western Germany, two of which are shown and named in the following diagram. In this study, “social milieus” are defined by typical complex syndromes of values held, of general attitudes to politics and family, and of behavioural patterns in leisure time (see Diagram 4).

All in all, the results sketched and quoted show a high degree of *plurality in modes of life* in West Germany towards the end of the 1980s. This plurality is threefold:

Firstly, people think and act in general *more independently of external social determinants and of stratification and class membership in particular* than had been previously assumed. Admittedly the educational level, the stratum affi-

liation, the age and the position within the family cycle (especially the existence of small children) do influence life style differentiations even today. But not too much: Even among people of the same education, stratum, age and family type there are considerable, probably increasingly greater differences in modes of living to be registered (Gluchowski 1988; Lüdtke 1989: 124). Evidently there are considerable degrees of freedom for selecting and shaping one's own milieu and life style.

Due to the lack of suitable theoretical and empirical studies, we still know too little about the causes of this relative freedom. However, according to the findings made up to now many people have a relative autonomy to mould their lives because

- they have more resources with which to act and make choices (increase in real income, expansion in education, social security)
- everyday restrictions decrease (fewer children, more freely disposable income, less strict everyday norms, e. g., with respect to sexuality and forms of cohabitation),
- the spectrum of legitimate objectives of action and values is getting broader (e. g., through the emergence of post-material orientations),
- people must bring contradictory requirements (e. g., the career of both partners, leisure and the wish for children) in everyday life “into line” and thus are forced to make flexible arrangements.

Secondly, the empirical studies show a greater *differentiation in the manifestations of modes of life*, i. e., smaller socio-cultural groupings and more diversified ways of life than usual class and stratification patterns. In addition, according to many findings, these modes of life are multidimensional, often contradictory in themselves and multicentred constructs in the individual's view. Depending on the situation, on the sphere of life, on the objective envisaged, differing facets come to the fore. Political and occupational milieus, leisure and family life styles do not tally. Contradictions in the above empirical results on social milieus and life styles can be explained to a large extent by their polycentrism. Consequently, many young people do not grow up in homogenous cultural worlds, but in combined life worlds. Plural identities become more and more frequent. In addition, many findings prove that milieus and life styles cannot be clearly separated. The boundaries between them are mostly “artificial”, drawn by sociologists for purposes of classification. In reality only transitional areas are to be found.

The growing plurality of modes of life is also manifested in organizational and regional (meso) modes of life (e. g., the trade union milieu or homeland milieu) playing an ever greater role in sociology, and in society as well, “below”



the level of macro milieus and life styles. The same applies for (micro) milieus and life worlds, i. e., for personal networks and relationships, groups of friends, neighbourhoods etc., which have proven more important and more useful than stratification and class, i. e., the great groups of industrial society.

Thirdly, empirical research has also shown that *belonging to milieus and life-style groupings is nowadays an important determinant for everyday action*. A variety of forms of practice can be explained by belonging to, for example, the “promotion-oriented milieu” or a “post-materially” oriented grouping. Socio-cultural determination of this kind has proven to be more effective in many respects than membership in a stratum or class. Electoral decisions, consumer behaviour, political participation, etc. are shaped nowadays, to a considerable extent, by an individual’s *mode of life* and not so much by her or his *conditions* of life.

## V. On the way to the “plurally differentiated affluent society”

The empirical results of recent social structure analysis in Germany prove that indeed, as the criticism since the end of the seventies had suspected, at least three common assumptions of the sociology of class and stratification are exaggerated: (1) (Dis)advantageous living conditions are dependent on the occupational position to a lesser degree than assumed; dimensions of social inequality relatively independent from the occupation and non-occupational criteria of status allocation, such as sex and nationality, are of greater importance than had been assumed. (2) Social inequality is not structured status-consistently and vertically; rather, for a majority of the population combinations of advantages and disadvantages are typical. (3) Finally, important social differences in thinking and acting are very loosely connected with the occupational position, and with the class and stratification position, as well as with other external living conditions; instead of this, ways of living have proved to be very often selected by the individuals themselves; they occur in a great variety; and they are, for their part, formative for numerous modes of practical thinking and acting.

There is at present no lack of *new theories* explaining the new structures of social inequality (e. g., problem groups or new urban styles of life). But there is a lack of systematization and of comparison between these explanatory attempts (cf. Müller 1992). When surveying the abundance of new social structure theories, you will notice that most of them do no longer look for the causes of social (dis)advantages exclusively within the economic sector. Even *labour market segmentation theories* and *centre-periphery theories* (see sum-

maries in Bolte and Hradil 1988; Berger and Hradil 1990), the most economic oriented among the new explanations, proceed on the borderline of economy, they explain social inequality by being “inside” and “outside” of gainful employment. A further type of theory (see Hradil 1989) disregard economy completely: here the *welfare state* is seen as a producer of unequal living conditions, creating, for example, “welfare support classes” (“Versorgungsklassen”, Lepsius) or “disparities of life domains” (“Disparitäten von Lebensbereichen”, Offe). Finally, a *cultural type of theory* is becoming very popular. Cultural patterns are regarded as causes and not just as effects of social inequalities. In his theory of structuration Anthony Giddens deals with “rules and resources”. The “habitus theory” by Pierre Bourdieu concentrates on one’s becoming accustomed to the living conditions of class(fractions). Alain Touraine proposes that the “new social movements” are the legitimate successors to the “classes”, and values, attitudes, and ways of life have replaced economic interests.

*Structural typifications* that try to sketch the results of the causal processes emphasised by the explanatory theories mentioned, structural typifications that *attempt to describe the present social structure as a whole*, are difficult to be formulated and are accordingly rare. Karl Martin Bolte’s characterisation (1990) of a “plurally differentiated affluent society” comes very close to a survey of the approaches, and the empirical findings summarized above. According to this typification, “plurally differentiated affluent societies” are based on three essential factors:

- “There are many and diverse criteria by means of which inequality is manifested, as well as clear – in part intended, in part inadvertently – features of inequality of persons and multiples of persons (families, households, partnerships). *Germany thus appears as a society crisscrossed by multidimensional inequalities.*
- Life styles and orientations of interest in Germany are by no means independent of inequalities (e. g., of income and standards of education), but run to a considerable extent at an angle to them and overlap them. *The inequality structure thus appears to have many and diverse styles of behaviour superimposed, being partially veiled by the same.*
- In historical comparison, the living standard in Germany is quite high; compared with the twenties more than three times as high (Miegel 1983). Even poverty lies – apart from extreme cases – markedly above the starvation level and has hardly anything in common with the poverty of past history or in the countries of the Third World. The mass of the population is in the middle layers of the inequality structure and thus, among other things, in a materially relatively good and secure situation (despite all the existing life

risks: Beck 1986). With regard to the distribution of life chances, Germany thus appears as a society formed by prosperity.” (Bolte 1990, p. 44)

In one respect, Helmut Schelsky was right with his thesis of the “levelled-out middle-class society”: West Germany (*not* East Germany) really is a *middle-class society* in so far as large parts of the population are nowadays concentrated in these affluent positions. But in two other points Schelsky was wrong: The social structure of Germany is not characterised by levelling out, but by pluralisation in the sense of a juxtaposition of varied and inconstant positions of social inequality, as well as of heterogeneous social movements, milieus and life styles, partly independent of “objective” inequalities. But the concentration of the population in middle class positions has not prevented *polarisation* in so far as today minorities are excluded “downwards”, perhaps - but sociology knows very little about this - also separated upwards.

This present account of new approaches in social structure analysis and new findings on social inequality in Germany has followed a sequence of popular structural concepts, as well as appropriate models and empirical studies founded upon them. So we have changed our frame of reference several times. This procedure hampers, it is true, the analysis of social change. New aspects came into focus all the time. But the sequence of structural concepts and of corresponding interpretations, attentions and definitions of problems is in itself a considerable part of social change (Hradil 1990d). Not all aspects of social inequality were always important to people. It was social integration, occupational success and the prosperity of families in the post-war period, and it was also the equality of opportunity in education in the period of prosperity, nowadays it is also the equality of man and woman and (in West Germany) the freedom to shape one’s individual life, plus (in East Germany) simply to find a job which, are regarded as essential and decisive. In order to record these processes of change and be able to remain true to life, the viewpoints and frames of reference in this article were adapted to suit the structural concepts characteristic of their time.

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