Europe and the Question of Social Class

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Reviewed: Cédric Hugrée, Étienne Penissat and Alexis Spire, *Les Classes sociales en Europe. Tableau des nouvelles inégalités sur le vieux continent*, Marseille, Agone, 2017.

A recent French work addresses the issue of social class in Europe, considering the different profiles and distribution of working, middle and upper classes across the continent. Gilles Laferté contends that, by posing the question of whether a unified European social space exists, this study stimulates debate on the most relevant geographical scales—local, national, transnational—for analyzing social structure.

Étienne Penissat, Cédric Hugrée and Alexis Spire's book, *Les Classes sociales en Europe. Tableau des nouvelles inégalités sur le vieux continent*, pursues an original ambition, namely to chart the contours of different social classes on the scale of the European continent, going far beyond usual comparisons on the scale of nations. This question is fascinating for the social sciences and poses at least two challenges: first, how to approach the technical and statistical measurement of this European social space; and, second, on a more theoretical and empirical level, how to deal with the varying scales of analysis typically employed when considering the spatialization of social structure across this continent. Of course, this book cannot answer all these vast questions alone. On a separate point, the authors' sometimes politically situated tone—of which no secret is made—does not fundamentally detract from the very real scientific advances made by this book, which focuses on three objectives: providing a statistical snapshot of the class structure in Europe; questioning the degree of unity (or lack thereof) of this European social space; and encouraging the development of a spatialized approach to social structures.

A three-pronged statistical vision of the European social space

For a long time, any representation of a European social space remained technically impossible, as the existing statistical apparatus was very much developed for measurements at the level of individual countries. The European statistics that have gradually been built up over the years are still fairly unsophisticated, often limited to indicators of income and qualifications. In order for the authors to carry out their undertaking—to think as a French sociologist of social stratification, which means as a sociologist of class convinced of the primacy of socioprofessional categories in the definition of the social structure, against the tradition in English-speaking countries based solely on criteria of income and qualifications—the authors draw all the benefits of the recent ESeG ("European Socioeconomic Groups") nomenclature (comprising seven socioprofessional categories and 30 subcategories), resulting from the work piloted by the French statistics office, INSEE, at the request of the European Statistical Office (Eurostat). The book considers socioprofessional groups

to be essential for an analysis in terms of social class, and proposes a schema whereby European society is divided into three social classes. Although, empirically, the authors wish to reexamine the question of the contours of social classes following the structural transformations that the working population has experienced over the last 30 to 40 years (decline of industry in favor of services and trade, constant increase in managerial and intermediate occupations, development of mass unemployment), their theoretical schema nevertheless follows a classic path. This is the path opened up by Pierre Bourdieu, with on the one hand the central place of work and therefore of a socioprofessional nomenclature to characterize social position, and on the other hand the notion of social space structured by its two key axes, economic capital and cultural capital.

The first major result of the book is therefore to paint a picture of the European social space. According to the authors, the continent's social classes—constructed through the grouping of various categories, and whose limits are certainly debatable, as the statistics do not seem to clearly point to three distinct social groups—nevertheless present common characteristics that are valid on a European scale. In Chapter 2, the working classes—43% of the European population—are split into two groups. The first is composed of the most fragile populations: low-skilled workers and employees, and self-employed workers, mainly in farming. Of course, one might call into question the working-class rooting of the agricultural sector, as the rich farmers of northern Europe do not share much in common with Romanian farmers and cannot be classed as proletarian. However, it is easy to see that we need to grasp the broad outlines of this social category, where the mass of small farmers in the south is far greater than the group of gentrified farmers in the north. The second group of the working classes groups together more qualified jobs, workers and employees, with stabilized statuses. What the working classes have in common is that, wherever they live, they experience a social and cultural separation from other social classes—something that is particularly visible when it comes to access to consumer goods or health care, or even, for example, new technology—which the authors call the digital divide. They thus appear to be in a more fragile situation today than in the past, and more distant from the middle classes. These populations—in a position of vulnerability, particularly concerned by migration, and often politically demobilized—show themselves to be more resistant to the political process of European construction.

The middle classes, which make up 38% of the European population, are divided into four groups: two in the public sector, differentiated by qualification level, with the most highly qualified placed in the upper strata (teachers, intermediate professions in health and law, etc.) and the least qualified placed in the lower middle classes (police, military, counter jobs, etc.); and two in the private sector, also divided according to a hierarchy of qualifications that distinguishes between, at the top, business managers, IT specialists, and technicians, and, at the bottom, security guards (whom we would personally have placed in the working classes, which just goes to show how porous class boundaries can be) and, above all, office workers. These middle classes are distinguished from the working classes by their level of material comfort, as they are mostly homeowners, as well as by their cultural aspirations, reading habits, access to new information and communication technologies, and even the occupation of political positions, especially in the case of teachers, taking them them closer to the upper classes. Lastly, this chapter on the middle classes questions the political role that this social group will play in the European project, which it does not yet perceive as a project of social emancipation.

The upper classes, which account for 19% of the continent's population, thus form the most Europeanized social classes, as reflected by their way of life, their contacts, and their travels, as well as by their general interest in Europe, as they benefit so much from the European project and globalization. The authors choose not to define a narrower elite within this group, such as the ultra-wealthy studied by the Pinçon-Charlots,[1] on the basis that these broadly defined broad upper classes constitute a system of concentric circles that work in the same way with the same objectives, and share a way of life and cultural affinities. Three "segments" can, however, be identified: at the very top, senior executives who occupy important managerial roles in companies and governmental or

[1] Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot, *Dans les beaux quartiers*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1989.

administrative bodies, and who are responsible for managing many employees; next, highly qualified individuals in intellectual, scientific and artistic professions (academics, engineers, etc.), including the liberal professions (doctors, lawyers, etc.); and, finally, the diretors of small and medium-sized businesses, and entrepreneurs, who form "the bottom of the top." From the standpoint of income, the boundary between the upper middle classes and the lower upper classes seems very difficult to draw. With the exception of those on very high incomes, the distinction between the upper classes and the middle classes is therefore more reliably made by considering cultural capital, and in particular the level of qualifications and the acquisition of international resources (mastery of foreign languages, knowledge and experience of cultures other than their own national cultures, contacts and acquaintances in other countries, leisure activities, qualifications and training, and forms of professional sociability). Furthermore, it is these upper classes that increasingly monopolize political functions, thus confirming their position of dominance.

To what extent does a unified European social space exist?

We have now established that describing a European social space is a statistically feasible endeavor. But what sense can there be in comparing a Romanian manual worker with a Danish executive in a territory where political institutions do not seem to unify societies fully? Admittedly, the idea that social borders stop less and less at national borders militates in favour of the formation of a European social space. The study of geographical mobility is, of course, an essential complement to the territorialized analysis of social structure. These forms of mobility, which are a reality for exectives (in the context of both business travel and leisure tourism), pensioners (more and more of whom are moving to the shores of southern Europe), and the working and middle classes from the poorest countries (who migrate to the richest countries for service jobs), are gradually building up a common social space.

On this point, we wholeheartedly share the authors' view. But from what point, and at what level of interconnection, could we truly talk about a European social space, and what would be the essential components necessary, as a minimum, for its realization? To what extent are the social classes we are talking about here interrelated and interdependent? Does Brexit take the United Kingdom out of this European social space? If not, then why stop at the current borders of the European Union? Will this European social space gradually gain in strength and importance, and eventually replace national social spaces, or should we be thinking in terms of a system of interlocking social spaces, depending on the territorial focus adopted? Consequently, should we not put social structures in the plural, with a view to reasoning in terms of social structures that vary according to the scale of analysis? The authors are cautious in this regard, and do not tackle the question head-on; but they do offer partial responses to these essential issues. For example, they do make reference to a unified space when they place the working classes of eastern Europe at the bottom of the European social space. By all accounts, this section of the social space still includes many farmers, especially from Bulgaria and Romania. Similarly, the lines of thinking suggested by the authors to analyze the nesting and interlocking of national social spaces are still somewhat sketchy, but they do propose a system of equivalence to compare the situations of different national social classes based on the simple criterion of the percentage of households in each country that can afford a week's holiday. It is at this point that we discover that the Swedish working classes appear to have a higher standard of living than the Romanian upper classes.

Indicators of this type need to be multiplied, though. For example, a dual indicator set might consider each of the social classes in both their national and European contexts. So, for instance, the Romanian upper classes, which are dominant at national and subregional levels within Romania, become dominated at the European level, occupying essentially middle-management roles for the dominant senior managers of western and northern Europe, primarily in Germany, France and the United Kingdom. From this perspective, eastern and southern Europe appear to constitute the workshop, vegetable garden, and granary of northern Europe. Depending on the social space of

reference, and depending on the scene of interaction, the principles and rationales of social domination are therefore reversible. This is a result that is little emphasized, but which would appear to be particularly important: specifically, the idea that several social spaces overlap and interlock—at the very least, European and national spaces, and even perhaps subnational spaces—and that social structures are accordingly plural. Finally, this raises the question of the objectification of social structures, which in fact always relate to the implicit geographical boundaries of the social spaces being considered. In any case, the denationalization of social space seems to be under way, even though sociology as a whole has until recently remained very nation-centered and dependent on the statistical construction of nation-states in particular. In order to continue the analysis beyond these statistical intuitions, it would be necessary, for example, to collect data within large companies so as to understand the chain of dependence between the different sites of European corporations. One could also imagine ethnographic studies focused on multi-sited social classes to demonstrate causality. As things stand, it is understandable that, for the authors, the European social space is implicitly hypothesized. It does not replace national social spaces, but rather sits atop them, bringing with them supranational structures of dependence, many of which have yet to be objectified.

For a geographical sociology of social structure

The other point that can be surmised from reading this book is that, ultimately, the articulation between social structure and geographical space occurs perhaps not so much at the comparative scale of nations as at the scale of types of territories and their specialization within the productive chain. On several occasions, the authors suggest the role of metropolization in this process with, on the one hand, dominant cities of the European social space (such as London, Paris, Brussels and Frankfurt, but other global cities perhaps also play a role in structuring the European social space), which concentrate the dominant social categories, at the top of the chains of both decision-making and social distinction, and, on the other hand, more dependent spaces, at the bottom of the chain, formed by the rural areas of eastern and southern Europe, the geographical location of the lower end of the European social space. This intuition is essential for us, as it makes the geography of social structure(s) all the more complex—others have also written about it, particularly in the field of social geography[2]—but here it is expressed on a European scale, with social spaces nested within a larger system, in which the degree of metropolization and concentration of economic and political decision-making activities plays an essential role, as the center of the center, that until very recently used to played by the large cities of each nation-state.

As it stands, unfortunately, the availability of European statistics is particularly patchy from a geographical point of view (the so-called Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics, or NUTS, system only zooms in as far as the level of counties/provinces/*départements*, whereas the required level of precision would ideally be the municipality, or even individual neighborhoods), which means it is difficult to advance this hypothesis much further. Nevertheless, this idea is essential. It invites us to look beyond the boundaries of urban sociology, which focuses on disparities within a metropolis and sees little evidence that the hyperconcentration of higher categories is only possible if working-class categories in other social spaces are sometimes controlled from a very long distance. Similarly, a whole sociological tradition overlooks the fact that social positions are in fact not fixed, but multiple, depending on the space in which this position is situated, be it European, national, (sub)regional, urban, rural or local. In this sense, the rigidity of statistical representations of social spaces is to be taken with a pinch of salt, as the focus of observation relativizes classifications and categorizations. There exists not so much one objective social structure as multiple representations of social structure. The ethnography of social class must make it possible to enrich these initial efforts at statistical objectification of a European social space whose places of

[2] Fabrice Ripoll, *Sur la dimension spatiale des rapports sociaux : inégalités, dominations, mobilisations*, habilitation thesis, Paris-Est Créteil University, 2018.

social distinction will probably never be unified, leaving a whole field open for the constitution of a geographical sociology of social structure that not only observes territorial disparities, but enters into their causality, their dynamics and their political consequences.

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His research focuses on rural spaces and communities, the history of the social sciences, economic sociology, and the analysis of social classes. His recent publications include: *L'Embourgeoisement, une enquête chez les céréaliers* (Raisons d'Agir, 2018); with co-authors Paul Pasquali and Nicolas Renahy, *Le Laboratoire des sciences sociales* (Raisons d'Agir, 2018); and, with co-authors Ivan Bruneau, Julian Mischi and Nicolas Renahy, *Mondes ruraux et classes sociales* (Éditions de l'EHESS, 2018).

To cite this article:

Gilles Laferté, translated by Oliver Waine, "Europe and the Question of Social Class", *Metropolitics*, 29 May 2020. URL: https://www.metropolitiques.eu/Europe-and-the-Question-of-Social-Class.html.