

Meso-social Structures and Stratification Analysis - a Missing Link?¹

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1. Is there anything between the macro- and the microsocial? A theoretical and empirical query

Social stratification, understood as a stabilised system of inequalities, has always been a major issue in sociology, as it has been in socio-political debates. Our Big Theories are mainly illustrated by the way they analyse and locate this issue. Some of them put it at the centre of their concerns, others avoid it or go as far as to deny its relevance or even its very existence. It is not unlikely that a careful analysis of theoretical and thematical fluctuations in sociology in this respect would show a correspondence between interest in social stratification as a theoretical puzzle and cycles of political discourse, but this is not our purpose here. Since the beginning of the '80s, the relevance of stratification, as a phenomenon and as a theoretical concept, has been questioned not so much - or not only - for ideological reasons, but rather for empirical ones. As early as 1982, this questioning was already insistent enough to provide the central topic for the Congress of the German Sociological Society: "The Crisis of Work Society" (Matthes 1983, with strong resonance in Offe 1984 and Beck

¹ This essay is a combined result of our study of social stratification in Switzerland (Levy et al. 1997), of my related exposure to the strands of actual international stratification research, especially in the two networks of ISA's Research Committee 28 and of Erik Olin Wright's Comparative Project on Class Structure and Class Consciousness and their meetings, and of various contacts with structure- and stratification-sensible qualitative scholars, mainly in German life-course research. Without naming all the colleagues with whom I had numerous fruitful discussions, I wish to express my warmest thanks to all of them for the many critical impulses I received from them.

1986). This may have been a sociological echo to Gorz' earlier (1976) farewell to the working class as an actor of historical change. Dahrendorf (1982), who was best known for his having brought power and conflict back into the conflict-averse era of triumphant functionalism (1959), outshone the others with shattering statements, announcing no less than the end of work's structuring capacities in modern or post-modern societies. In a similar vein but with more nuance, Clark & Lipset (1991) have listed the principal arguments that underpin such postulates, leaning heavily on the idea that since the '60s, social hierarchies in advanced societies count less because of their "decline",² as shown, among other things, by diminishing class voting in Western democracies.

This essay defends the position that the arguments and empirical results of these and other authors with similar claims (see for instance various contributions in the German reader edited by Berger & Hradil, 1990, and several publications of Beck since his much cited 1983 essay) are not sufficiently focused on the basic notions of social stratification to warrant such far-reaching, fundamental conclusions, and that one major reason for the relatively dissatisfying results of current stratification research resides in its ignoring the meso-social structures and their interaction with the macro- and micro-levels of the social order. My line of argument is that

- the main classical theories of stratification ignore the meso-scopic level of social organisation, and so does research deriving from them,
- recent structural changes in Western social structures concern mainly this intermediate component of the social structure,
- the often less-than-convincing results of research inspired by classical theories are explained by their conceptually induced ignorance of these changes and cannot be used as evidence that analysis in terms of stratification should be abandoned.³

We shall examine three empirical arguments concerning the endemic weaknesses of mainstream stratification research that highlight the importance of taking into account meso-scopic processes and structures. But for this exercise, we need to clarify

² Whatever that can mean in a period of increasing unemployment, underemployment, social exclusion and so-called new poverty all over the industrialised world. For vehement rebuttals of Clark & Lipset's analysis see Hout et al. 1993, Manza et al. 1995. Several European researchers have taken similar stands (e.g., in Germany, Geissler 1996, Berger & Vester 1998, or Bertaux's 1996 counter-attack and many others).

³ Another potentially blinding feature of mainstream stratification research may be the predominant thinking in terms of « variables », a formalisation that favours a narrow and static conception of stratification in terms of an unequal distribution of resources, easily transposable to the distribution of individuals along one or several scales, instead of seeing such distributions as embedded in and produced by institutional processes (see Esser 1996 for a general criticism of what he calls "variable sociology" ; while one may question this author's insistence of deductivist research as only way to do empirical science, his critique of this kind of technically sophisticated empiricism is well argued).

beforehand what is meant by « meso » and to illustrate the relevance of this notion in the area of the social organisation of inequalities.

The distinction between micro-scopic and macro-scopic levels of social organisation is quite current in our professional discourse, as is shown by the long-living micro-macro debate and by the more specific theoretical sketches opposing « the system » to « the actor ». The dichotomy allows for interesting theoretical developments as in the case of Crozier & Friedberg (1977) or of Habermas (1981). Can this dichotomy do for the classification of theories, distinguishing micro- and macrosociological approaches ? A keen systematiser such as Collins (1988) finds it necessary to insert an intermediate class of « meso theories », featuring mainly organisations and networks.

But what about the empirical social world ? If we think of social reality being organised in real systems of various kinds (« real » as opposed to « functionally » or otherwise theoretically defined systems as in Parsonian or later functionalism – see Archer 1995 for a development of this metatheoretical distinction), it becomes clear that it is impossibly reductionist to distinguish only two levels of systemic scope. This insufficiency is underscored by the importance of several sociological specialities that focus precisely meso-scopic structures and processes, especially the sociology of organisations, industrial sociology, the sociology of labour-markets and of larger network structures.

In fact, we frequently refer to levels of social organisation « higher », i.e., more encompassing than the micro-scopic level of interpersonal interaction, e.g., when talking about the « institutional » as opposed to the individual or inter-individual level, although we often do not specify which level we are actually referring to. Take one illustration: when talking of education as the product of an individual's participation in a specific, institutionalised field of social interaction,⁴ do we refer to the school class of which this individual is or was a member, to the local or neighbourhood school of which his or her class was an integrated part (along with possibly many other classes) to the regional school system, organised and directed by the appropriate department of the cantonal government (referring to the Swiss context), or to the national « school system » that may have features that distinguish it significantly from other nations' school systems ; or are we even thinking of something like the supranational Western educational system as possibly distinctive from other such

⁴ From a theoretical point of view, it may be sufficient to define any social system as a bounded and structured field of interaction. Bourdieu, in many of his writings, mentions one or two other constitutive criteria, especially the fact that such a field is organised around a basic « issue » (enjeu), a central social good that defines the field's specificity and is at the heart of its internal (power) struggles. For our present purpose, we can treat « fields » or « systems » as synonyms because what interests us here is the fact that they may belong to a whole range of systemic levels, in the image of a Russian puppet. While Bourdieu has a lot to say about the multidimensional nature of social stratification, he does not really focus on this other aspect of social structure.

systems, extant in other parts of the world? It was not necessary to overstretch this example in order to mention five different and sociologically meaningful levels of social organisation in the area of schooling.⁵ The general theoretical axis of what we may call « systemic differentiation » can be seen as a third fundamental dimension of structural and cultural differentiation, along with the two more conventional ones of vertical or hierarchical differentiation (or stratification) and of horizontal differentiation (or division of labour). This very general conception is in accordance with any model of social systems analysis (e.g., Parsons & Shils 1951, Easton 1964, Luhmann 1984), but in the « realist » variant that we advocate here, it owes much to the work of Heintz (1972, 1982).

To summarise this theoretical discussion, I propose the following working definition: we qualify as meso-social (or meso-scopic) all phenomena whose scope is larger than micro-social (face-to-face relations, small groups) and narrower than macro-social, the latter being assimilated, as current sociological language habits do implicitly, to the level of a global society organised as a nation state, or to social systems of an even larger scope (Levy 1989).⁶

2. Three empirical arguments

To bolster the claim of the critical relevance of meso-social structures to stratification analysis, we shall briefly consider three areas: the construction and empirical functioning of socio-professional categories, the empirical importance of gender and eth-

⁵ While not central to our purpose, it may be helpful to mention a distinction between two types of systems and corresponding « chains » of systemic differentiation: While our illustration is based on a « partial » or sectoral system of which several systemic levels can be identified, we might as well have argued with reference to « global » systems. Global systems contain all relevant types of social activity and the institutional frameworks organising them, whereas partial systems constitute sectors within a global system that form its dimension of (systemic) « division of labour ». When we talk of a society, we are characteristically referring to a global, not a partial system.

⁶ It should be noted that on the surface, this conception is distinct from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) definition of what he calls the « mesosystem ». He defines this concept as the interrelationships between the various social fields in which a developing person participates, or, more straightforwardly, as the intersection of the family and the peer group (Steinberg et al. 1995). In a more macrosociological terminology, this may be called an individual's participation profile, or, in a less ego-centered perspective, the person's structural neighborhood (Heintz et al. 1978, Levy 1992). The basic idea of distinguishing what could, somewhat clumsily and only in part correctly, be called concentrically located systems of different levels, is the same, however. The main difference is that Bronfenbrenner's definition is centered on the developing individual and his/her « ecology » or (social) environment, quite logically so since his interest is in personal development through interaction with the individual's context. Whereas a more sociological perspective may well focus on the social system instead of the actor, implying its members, but without necessarily thematising them specifically. Moreover, there may be a difference of one system level between what he terms « meso » (e.g., the family or a peer group, sociologically rather seen as microsocial forms of organisation), and what we would reserve the term for. Another theoretician of social systems who developed the idea of systemic differentiation, calling it somewhat confusingly a "hierarchy" of systems, is Barel (1973).

nic inequalities, and the association between friendship networks and social hierarchy. In each of these cases, empirical findings point to the factual importance of meso-social structures that are largely ignored by standard stratification theories. Part of the research I consider here has been directly or indirectly stimulated by the debate over the neo-marxist class categories developed by Wright (1978, 1985, 1989; Wright et al. 1982) and the neo-weberian class typology developed by Goldthorpe (1980; Goldthorpe & Erikson 1992). Notice then that the three examples grew out of stratification research. Following to the objective of the present essay which is to examine the factual credibility of the argument in favour of meso-structures, we shall give priority to the empirical results over theoretical debates.

2.1 The working of socio-professional categories

Wright (1985) has proposed two main typologies that have spurred a rich debate among researchers. Let us look at the results from three studies that have compared Wright's typologies to other ones.

In *Germany* (Federal Republic), Holtmann (1990) has tested Wright's two typologies along with ten other classifications, including a rather pragmatic and descriptive typology of professional categories developed for the German statistical office. Using personal income and other variables as validating criteria, Holtmann finds considerable variation in the different typologies' capacity to statistically explain these variables' variation. It is highest for the variables that refer directly to elements of stratification such as professional prestige (the 12 classifications produce η^2 varying between 50.1% and 14.0%), income (η^2 from 39.3% to 18.7%) and the self-attribution of class (η^2 from 25.7% to 11.3%). The most discriminating classifications turn out *not* to be the ones with the analytically clearest theoretical construction, but rather the pragmatic professional classifications; only the more recent of Wright's theoretically founded classifications attains similarly high coefficients. For a theoretician, these results could be disappointing: it is not theoretical clarity, but a kind of analytical muddling through in classification building that produces the best statistical results ! We shall come back to this apparently negative result below.

The *British* team having participated in Wright's international Project on Class Structure and Consciousness (Marshall et al. 1988) compared Wright's typologies with their main competitor, the class typology developed by Goldthorpe (Goldthorpe & Hope 1974, Goldthorpe 1980), very popular among British and Scandinavian re-

searchers.⁷ Goldthorpe first presented his typology as a scale of social evaluation, but later as a typology of social class, referring to the weberian concept of market chances. Analytically speaking, it appears to be a non-systematic combination of several criteria which correspond only in part to explicit, well-defined theoretical dimensions but can accommodate various groups of professions in a plausible way. Systematic combination of all the considered dimensions would have produced some little occupied or even empty categories. Its construction takes also into account a vast set of partly informal empirical knowledge of the (British) labour market and its structure. Much like the German authors, Marshall et al. find, on the basis of its association with a number of criteria-variables, that Goldthorpe's typology fares better than Wright's.

A very similar finding has been produced more recently for *Switzerland* by Levy and Joye (1993, 1994). Here again, in a comparison of ten typologies, Goldthorpe's classification and a Swiss typology (Joye 1995), somewhat resembling the former but constructed according to a more analytical logic following similar principles as the official French "catégories socioprofessionnelles" (Désrosières & Thévenot 1988), produced consistently higher contingency coefficients, regression coefficients, and η^2 than other classifications.

Thus, analogous analyses in three European countries arrive at the same, somewhat irritating, negative conclusion about the relative empirical merits of class typologies constructed in an analytically transparent way, starting from clearly defined theoretical foundations. Before concluding about the obsolescence of the very concept of stratification, let us have a closer look at how it is operationalised by the classifications compared in these studies. One specificity, apparently innocent, which is common to the classifications of Goldthorpe, Holtmann and Joye may offer a theoretically relevant hint.⁸

In all three cases, and contrary to Wright's typologies, individuals are attributed to a category or a type not on the basis of some specific combination of their answers about individual attributes, but on the basis of their placement in a detailed classification of professions (e.g., the ISCO list established by the ILO). The individual's final classification in these typologies is in fact the classification of the professional *category* to which the individually declared profession belongs. This procedure may be less purely technical than we usually believe; it may add social meaning to individual information in a quite consequential way. Researchers or statisticians who

⁷ Goldthorpe's class typology has, for instance, been used in the widely published CASMIN project embracing 18 nations (Erikson & Goldthorpe 1992, Müller & Shavit 1997 and many others).

⁸ It is important, however, that the reader of this article be aware that we are not engaging in a methodological discussion about measurement scales, but rather in an attempt to make theoretical sense of an apparent paradox in recent practice.

classify occupations know a great deal about the institutional settings that participate in the social definition of those occupations and in the working and living conditions of people who practise them. Their decisions about how to classify specific occupational groups are influenced by this knowledge. Pragmatic classification of occupations into categories like the ones discussed here may very well correspond to a densification of meaning that reflects social, i.e., cultural and structural typification better than the formal operations of recoding that we perform directly on individual responses to standardised questionnaires. Using a classification based on the individual's occupational membership (and implicitly on what is known about these occupational categories) rather than of a mix of direct individual "information"⁹, even if the typology seems analytically blurred, may capture real life situations or market chances better than applying analytically transparent typologies; the former are something like empirically enriched ideal types, the latter mere analytical combinations.

If this explanation for the higher discriminating capacity of pragmatic rather than analytical typologies of class were correct, it would be a first indication that between formally identifiable individual characteristics and societal stratification, there are forms of intermediate-level institutionalisation that matter in the hierarchical placement of people and that are not sufficiently taken into account by our major theories nor by typologies directly derived from them.

2.2 Gender and ethnicity - undertheorised markers of social closure

If our main theories of stratification are built from quite different or even opposed theoretical assumptions, the empirical research strategies derived from them resemble each other to an astounding degree, especially with respect to the kinds of inequality considered. Were one to eliminate education, hierarchical job position, professional prestige and income from functionalist, Marxist and Weberian stratification studies, there would be hardly any instrument left.¹⁰ Yet, if we simply compare correlations with a wide array of variables, there are at least the two mentioned in this

⁹ In fact, this information, usually obtained by standardised interview procedures, is mostly made of self-perceptions asked for in an idiom that is not exactly the individual's everyday language and needs some intuitive translation. Terminological problems may add to the differences because in a standardised interview the ordinary, more or less official name of one's own profession can probably be given with less interpretative effort than classifying oneself, e.g., between « director » and « manager », or deciding how many people one supervises (especially and ironically if this is not part of one's official tasks!), or whatever descriptors we use to operationalise such dimensions as « hierarchical position » or « organisational assets ».

¹⁰ Even when taking into account one major form of ascription, i.e., positional inheritance (or reproduction in Bourdieu's terminology), researchers consistently use parents' education or occupational position or prestige in addition to ego's, that is to say, the range of structural dimensions remains the same.

paragraph's title, gender and ethnic category membership,¹¹ that are regularly as closely or even more closely associated with any of the standard dimensions of inequality than these are among each other.

Let us shortly consider the differential structural - especially professional - positioning of men and women. It is difficult to visualise a societal (i.e., a macro-social) structure responsible for this difference, and most research refers, probably correctly, to some kind of labour market segmentation in order to explain it (primary or secondary sectors, industry types or other groupings that seem to belong more to horizontal than to vertical differentiation and thus define *situses* rather than *statuses*). For a long time, this institutional aspect of the social order remained dissociated from stratification research, but it has received growing attention in recent years (Kalleberg & Sørensen 1979, Kreckel 1983). In her analysis of Norwegian and British data, Birkelund (Birkelund 1992, Birkelund & Rose 1991) shows that men's and women's class distribution (using Goldthorpe's typology) is related to the fact that the seven classes distinguished by this typology are variously segmented, especially in a qualitative way. The differences disfavouring women inside the classes concern the working conditions (such as degree of autonomy, decisional competence, supervision) more than more classical aspects of the labour market (such as firm size, unionisation, career possibilities). This can be seen as a strong indication that women's professional discrimination is constructed on the level of firm-internal treatment rather than on the level of more general labour market functioning (Gottschall 1995).

We shall come back to the organisational theme in a later part of this essay and insist on the importance of gender and ethnic membership for the vertical positioning of individuals. It is indeed striking that such obvious ascriptive dimensions of social differentiation are given hardly any room in stratification theory, although they are present in practically every study on inequality, often mixed with other so-called socio-demographic characteristics that do not seem to merit serious theoretical attention (e.g., Turner's 1984 synthesis of six major stratification theories, probably the most rigorous to have been published up to now, does not even mention keywords like sex, gender, ethnicity or the like in its index). The theoretical absence of dimensions which seem to deserve, according to empirical findings, a key role in the explanation of inequalities, is a serious challenge to these theories' relevance. Despite their obvious empirical importance, they are ignored by the three classical macrotheoretical traditions (about the gender blindness of orthodox stratification research, especially in German sociology, see Gottschall's (2000) excellent analysis).

¹¹ For countries like Switzerland which have (as yet) no significant segment of their population that is "racially" different, ethnicity as used here refers to alien national origin.

The empirical importance of these ascriptive dimensions underlines again the relevance of forms of institutionalisation on intermediate, meso-structural levels. The weberian concept of social closure is an interesting candidate for enlarging our theories' scope in this respect (Cyba 1995 has developed this aspect for gender). Gender and ethnicity play an extremely important role in the social attribution and construction of identities and in social (d)evaluation. However, they cannot be easily thought of as separate hierarchical social structures, in which individuals and groups are placed in the same way as in school, the firm, a political administration, the army or the like.¹² At first sight, it is rather the social control of individual or collective *access* to hierarchical positions in such structures that uses these ascribed criteria, overlooked by stratification theory. However, these control processes imply not only interpersonal stereotypes and discrimination, but often highly institutionalised structural arrangements that channel men and women, or members of dominant and marginalised ethnic groups, differently during decisive phases of their life cycles; they "process" and place them differently, which gives real sense to an analysis in terms of gendered structures (Krüger 1991, 1995).¹³

It seems, then, more adequate to consider the classical organisational forms of inequality to be themselves basically gendered and « racialised », rather than to invent other, supposedly parallel and interfering sex- or race structures for which one would be at great pains to find a defining social good or « enjeu » in Bourdieu's terms. In this sense, one of the most popular terms of feminist analysis should be somewhat more « structuralised » : doing gender (West & Zimmerman 1987) is not only a feature of interindividual performances in every-day encounters, but also a basic means of institutional functioning.

2.3 Informal networks

Stratification theories assume the formation of hierarchically homogeneous categories (estates, classes or social strata) to different degrees, but all of them pose the problem of the existence of groups that are socially and culturally differentiated from each other and defined by their objective position in the structure of social inequalities. Empirical research tries to identify the specific characteristics of such groups especially through analysing elements of "conscience", i.e., perceptions and evaluations concerning social facts, among which inequalities are of course particularly prominent. More recently, other kinds of social phenomena, closer to everyday ac-

¹² Various attempts to do so have remained less than convincing (Middleton 1974, West 1978, Walby 1986).

¹³ In the Swiss context, this is especially so in the case of the viciously stratifying interplay of the sexual segregation of vocational training and of the labour market.

tion, have been integrated into such concerns, such as structures of sociability (Fischer 1982) and life styles (Juan 1991, Müller 1992). Bourdieu (1984) and Coleman (1988) go even farther and consider social capital to be one of the central dimensions of inequality.

Wright & Cho (1992) have done an interesting comparative analysis of American, Canadian, Swedish and Norwegian data about the composition of friendship networks with respect to the basic dimensions that define Wright's class typology, addressing mainly questions of permeability of class barriers by distinguishing inter- and intraclass friendships. Their results allow us to sort dimensions of inequality according to their permeability in the following ascending order: ownership of means of production < education < hierarchical position in the firm (organisational assets). This order obtains not only for the recruitment of friends, but also of life partners (homogamy/heterogamy) and for intergenerational mobility, revealing a coherence that seems to reflect a rather fundamental aspect of the stratification order, common to the four countries in question.

In a Marxist perspective at least, nobody will be astonished to learn - though it is precious to have been able to prove it empirically - that ownership of the means of production constitutes a particularly impenetrable barrier. A less obvious finding is that hierarchical position at work, i.e., organisational power, is the most permeable of these three dimensions, since work organisation is supposed to be the very realm where classes are constituted. The authors explain their finding with reference to the immediate context of the work place which gives room for interpersonal contacts across hierarchical levels, whereas the two other dimensions in their analysis concern - at least for adults having left school - macro-social differences that are not directly related to a situation of physical co-presence and that can therefore be thought to constitute more easily distinct socio-cultural entities.

This interpretation remains untested and speculative, given the absence of information about the real presence of the friends in the interviewees' work situation in this piece of research. Its interest for our purpose is that once more, meso-social structures such as the organisation of the work-place are introduced to explain findings that cannot be accounted for by referring only to macro-structural elements.¹⁴

¹⁴ Let us mention in passing the attempt at developing an alternative stratification scale based on a network or social distance conception of inequality (Stewart, Prandy & Blackburn 1980, Prandy 2000), CAMSIS (Cambridge Social Interaction and Stratification Scale). It has recently been applied to Swiss data (Bergmann & Joye 2001, Bergmann et al. 2002), but so far no comparative data have been published. The construction of this scale is based on distances between occupational categories according to relative frequencies of their co-occurrence in couples living together, so the degree of occupational homogamy becomes a substitute for the direct individual location on some scale of occupational position. However interesting this rationale may be, its operationalisation provokes several questions that can not be treated here.

This short examination of three rather different areas allows to bring empirical support to the postulate that in order to understand the relationship between macro- and micro-social phenomena, we should take into account the meso-social processes and structures that intervene between them. We shall now examine in more detail some aspects of such meso-level structures in the area of education and the economy in order to enrich this argument.

3. Meso-social structures – one more blind spot in classical theories of stratification

If stratification is the institutionalised form of social inequalities, we must develop a systematic reflection about how such institutionalisation takes place. In order to make steps in this direction, we can start from the question of the distribution of social goods, be they material or symbolic. In contemporary complex societies, an important part of the main inequalities is controlled by institutional sectors, more precisely by the *organisations* which compose them. We have especially to think of "positional goods", i.e., of the privilege, power and prestige related to the position one can hold in an organisation, be it economic, political, military, ecclesiastical or other. Another kind of social goods is distributed by *markets*, which represent a different form of social organisation; this part concerns mainly goods of material and symbolic consumption. A third form is *networks* that distribute mainly relational goods - the informal access to other persons and to the services, informations and emotions they can provide. Organisations, markets and networks can be seen to be three fundamental and different types of structure (Thompson et al. 1991) that intervene in the social organisation of inequalities. They can be distinguished as to their degree of formalisation: organisations are highly formalised, interpersonal networks weakly, markets in-between. They are neither mutually exclusive nor independent from each other, on the contrary, they are frequently, if not typically, interrelated. Moreover, all three have probably more often a scope that corresponds to the meso-scope level of social organisation than to micro- or macro-social levels.¹⁵

¹⁵ We are often told that markets are being more and more globalised and « freed » from local and interpersonal limitations. To some extent this is certainly true. Nevertheless, many real markets - not only those for consumption goods - are clearly differentiated (spatially and for types of goods). Many markets are in fact regional, especially labour markets – see for instance the 106 MS regions identified in Switzerland by Bassand et al. (1985) that seem to be relevant demarcations of micro-regional entities according to several studies using them even 10-20 years after their identification. Economic and political interests contribute to maintain such differentiations. See also the studies about the importance of « weak ties » (Granovetter 1973, 1983) for job attainment. Levy et al. (1997) found that no less than one third of their employed respondents got their actual job by way of a personal relationship (or at least think they did).

Before we undertake a closer scrutiny of how organisations intervene in inequality, let us specify how we shall use the concept of institutionalisation. The well-known three-fold dialectic postulated by Berger & Luckmann (1966) is of particular interest since it underlines the dynamic aspect and integrates different "faces" of the social order that are often opposed to one another. For these authors, institutionalisation is one phase of three in a recursive process: externalisation - objectivation - internalisation. Thus, three often opposed statements (« Society is a human product » / « Social reality is objective » / « The human being is a social product ») are seen to form a single process.

In the dynamics of institutionalisation (or de-institutionalisation, for that matter), we can distinguish *cultural* and *structural* elements - which we should neither oppose to one another nor consider to be two mechanically related faces of the same phenomenon (see Heintz 1981 for this distinction). It is probably more correct to say that cultural institutionalisation can exist without structural institutionalisation, but rarely the contrary. As an example, we can easily think of values that are culturally institutionalised, but not structurally, such as friendship or goodness. Social consensus about their desirability is high, their importance is often underlined in public occasions and we can observe processes of their cultural reproduction by various means (theatre and tv plays, novels etc.). However, there is no specific social structure or organisation that grants these values' production and distribution (be it equal or unequal). The contrary, structural without cultural institutionalisation, may also exist, but probably only for short and specific periods. Take the importance of paid work for surviving in a market-driven economy: it clearly results from structural institutionalisation, i.e., the way production and distribution of most material and immaterial goods is organised in contemporary societies. This institutional arrangement owes its structuring potential not so much to the cultural or ideological – sometimes even religious – investment in work as a moral or social value (and even less to money) than to work's almost monopolistic role in the mechanism of elementary distribution. The main link between the two forms of institutionalisation is probably the fact that structural arrangements can be legitimated - and thus stabilised - by cultural elements.¹⁶

This minimal conceptual framework allows us to account for the apparent paradox residing in the fact that the same social phenomena sometimes appear to be extreme-

¹⁶ The limited plausibility of structural without cultural institutionalisation is mainly due to the fact that cultural conceptions are frequently used to legitimize existing structures and to de-dramatize the tensions they engender. Thus, it is theoretically unlikely that structures of strong inequality will exist for more than a short while without being doubled by some form of cultural institutionalisation. The resulting parallelism may account for the widespread tendency to confound the two types of institutionalisation.

ly "hard", objective and resistant, and sometimes very "soft", shaky, capable of disintegration without massive intervention of an adverse, well-organised power. Suffice it to recall the spectacular breakdown of the Soviet system. We cannot consider the degree of institutionalisation as stable per se ; it varies sometimes even in the short term. Moreover, it is typically not identical for all actors, but varies according to their structural position and power.

With this conceptual grid as background, we shall now shortly comment on the most often-used research indicators of social inequality and on the institutional and especially meso-structural ramifications of two of them: the school system and the economy.

3.1 Meso-social differences between individual statuses

Among the many forms of inequality that have been studied in modern societies, formal education, professional position and income doubtlessly occupy the central place. In mainstream research and especially in studies inspired by the status attainment paradigm, they are considered to be the essential operationalisations of social stratification, be it for locating individuals or for analysing their mobility;¹⁷ almost as a general rule, they are indiscriminately called statuses. Much can be said, however, about theoretical differences between them, much also about what they "really" operationalise. Let us briefly examine some of the more organisational features of these three "statuses". We shall see that a closer look easily reveals important meso-scopic features that constitute sources of heterogeneity ignored by current practices of measurement and analysis.

1. *Education* has been fixed in the past for most individuals included in the kind of research that interests us here (i.e., non-retired adults) by a highly formalised and selective process of social mobility in a specific organisation called school which is part of the wider school system.¹⁸ The school system may be organised principally on the national or on a sub-national level; consequently, it will be more or less homogeneous within a society, not only with respect to pedagogical quality of the individual establishment and of the diplomas it awards, but also from a structural point of view (Maurice et al. 1982, Allmendinger 1989). Compared to other, less centralised coun-

¹⁷ This statement does not of course imply that status attainment research considers only the three variables mentioned. However, their central position in research and, by implication, in underlying theories, is highlighted by the fact that among the theoretically most important extensions figure father's and mother's education and professional position - i.e., two of these dimensions once again.

¹⁸ We rarely take into account continuous education, although we should do so in principle. It would, however, give rise to the same comments in the present context. In Switzerland, although it constitutes a huge market, it rarely modifies certified levels attained by initial education (OFS 1995, Levy et al. 1997).

tries, the French school system is highly homogenous with respect to the social value of its levels and of the certificates it delivers. Despite its diversity, the system is largely organised and directed at the national level. Switzerland, a highly federalised state (Linder 1994), is at the opposite end of this spectrum. In this country, schooling is not a national, but a cantonal (i.e., State or provincial) competence, and there are almost as many school systems as cantons.¹⁹ So it depends largely on the institutional structure of the polity whether a given certificate has the same social value all over the country or whether this value varies considerably or is not even recognised everywhere within one and the same country.

Sociologically speaking, participation in the organisation called school implies accepting or at least complying with the organisation's values and rules in order to participate in an upward mobility that is strongly regulated. The attained level may be put to use inside the organisation or in the inter-organisational system of schools in order to continue this educational mobility, or its external exchange value can be tested on the labour market. In the perspective of the biographical transition from one institutional sector to another, we can distinguish three aspects of the attained level (and content) of formal education: it indicates qualification or skills, it confers social prestige, and it largely determines the accessibility of different levels in the job hierarchy.²⁰ Once a person has left school, his or her educational status is no longer linked to an organisational position; it remains a personally acquired resource and a social symbol, but it is structurally "disembodied". The person can carry it along, but its value is not the same in institutionally different contexts. Individuals who change contexts experience the social relativity of exchange values positively or negatively.²¹ This is so because the degree-awarding (school) system has only very incomplete mastery over the conditions of exchange of school certificates for occupational positions even in its « own » society; these conditions change as a result of business cycles, technological change, demographic evolution, migration policies etc., and they can be very different among subnational contexts. This means that even though social norms of equivalence between educational status and professional level exist, the coupling – more precisely the biographical forward coupling - of the educational and the economic system is loose enough to maintain a substantial degree of uncertainty

¹⁹ Politically speaking, the Swiss cantons can be compared to Canadian provinces, American states, German Länder or French regions; they are 26 in number. Some characteristics of their school systems are partly homogenised through direct or indirect control by federal government agencies, such as professional education (apprenticeship) and the pre-university degree called the "maturity", leaving nevertheless considerable leeway for specific cantonal implementations. This diversity is somewhat obscured by the use of internationally comparable categories of aggregation for levels of schooling in the national statistics constructed by the Federal office of statistics (see OFS 1992).

²⁰ This is especially true for Switzerland when compared with other countries, probably to an important extent because of the system of generalised vocational training this country shares with Germany and Austria (Levy et al. 1997).

²¹ The experience of loss of the exchange value of one's educational level is especially frequent among immigrants (Levy et al. 1997).

about each individual's real chances to strike a deal on the labour market that corresponds to his or her credentials.

One conclusion from these considerations about the social value of educational levels is certainly that research which does not take such subnational variations into account may have technical advantages, but is conceptually and technically blind to a significant part of the reality we set out to understand. Simply asserting that educational status places persons on specific (professional) mobility trajectories is not wrong but simplifying, in that it filters out the possible infra-national heterogeneity of the school system, passes over the "distorting" feedback from other sectors of society on this system and the exit levels it comprises, and ignores the actual definitions of equivalence between educational and occupational levels.²²

2. Things are quite different for adult people's *professional position*. It is anchored in an institutional sector, the economy, and corresponds, in principle, to an actual position in the organisational hierarchy of a firm.²³ In relation to stratification, we may distinguish the internal from the external aspect of this position. The first concerns the location of the person in the firm hierarchy (with its components of information, power, career perspectives, perspective on the organisation and its environment, etc.), the second concerns the social benefits stemming from that location, especially income, access to occupiers of similar positions in the same or other organisations (one aspect of social capital) but also prestige. Let us take the example of power. According to one's position, one has more or less power over holders of inferior positions and more or less autonomy from superiors. Contrary to education, this resource is related to organisational position and hardly to the person occupying it. It is impossible to keep the power that is attached to a position held in an organisation once one exits from it. The prestige it confers may in itself be a resource for getting access to other positions (in the same organisation, in others from the same sector, or even in other sectors such as the political one). It may be more easily kept as a personal resource beyond actual membership in the organisation.

A special source of heterogeneity, not adequately captured by current measures of vertical positions in the occupational field, are the various forms of labour market segregation, especially – but not exclusively – along gender lines. These forms of seemingly non-vertical differentiation strongly interfere with horizontal and vertical

²² Even if it may be possible to identify factual correspondences, their interpretation as normative or practical equivalences or positional « equilibria » (Buchmann 1991) is not warranted since various processes may have brought significant proportions of the population below or above a configuration representing equivalence.

²³ Although in research practice, we take it often without second thought that the last occupied position may be taken safely as a retired person's actually relevant occupational position, whatever that means.

mobility as well as with hierarchical positioning, but are only rarely taken into account in attainment research.²⁴

These complexities notwithstanding, a large number of studies use occupational prestige as an operationalisation of professional position. Thus, a conceptually important distinction disappears: that between organisational position and what it means in terms of relative power, especially inside the firm, and the cultural evaluation of that position, technically validated in an external perspective (Rytina 2000 makes a good point about this difference, Wrigth 1985 speaks of « organisational assets » in order to avoid the confusion).²⁵ This conceptual confusion by many mainstream researchers may be self-serving as some studies have found that the factors put forth by the functionalist theory of stratification « explain » prestige differences clearly better than income differences (as an example, see Cullen & Novick 1979).

3. *Income*, if it stems from paid work, is also directly linked to professional position which is its major source in the context of modern market economies. Somewhat like education, it also represents a resource that is usually put to use outside the organisation in which it is acquired. Here again, there are two aspects, a symbolic one - income (or financial property more generally speaking) is another source of social prestige - and a financial one which influences how the person can behave on various markets of consumption goods, be they symbolic, relational, or material. Its nature is not that of a position in a hierarchical structure, but rather of a position in a market.²⁶ If education functions as a credential, income or fortune signals rather a kind of entitlement; the oft-postulated universalism of markets notwithstanding, their value depends highly on the social context and even on its short-term changes.

In much of the everyday praxis of stratification research, these three dimensions are uniformly called individual statuses and all their meso-social particularities tend to disappear. The objective of the brief overview above has been to underscore how strongly individual positions are influenced by organisations and other kinds of me-

²⁴ In Switzerland like elsewhere, the existing sociological analyses of the sexual segregation of the labour market (Charles & Buchmann 1994; Charles 1987, 1995; Levy et al. 1997) seem to remain somewhat marginal to « real » stratification research (see the relative gender-blindness of the analyses in Bornschieer 1991a, of Lamprecht & Stamm 1999, or of Stamm et al. 2002). One recent attempt at integrating non-employed persons, and especially married women, into an overall schema of social structure, Kreckel's (1992) center-periphery model (which has not much to do with the world-system use of the same term), has been applied to Swiss data (Lamprecht & Stamm 2000) and appears again in Stamm et al. (2002). Unfortunately, the theoretical potential of this « conceptualisation » is rather limited, especially if the question of status dependency between persons (for women with respect to men, see Eichler 1973) is not explicitly addressed.

²⁵ The prestige scales used in stratification research, such as Treiman's classical one of 1977 or its successor by Ganzeboom & Treiman (1996), are almost never questioned as to the possible differences between the internal and external prestige of the same positions.

²⁶ It is often called "material", but this is of course only correct in a metaphorical sense since the so called real object is rather abstract, namely purchasing power, and what we physically possess are normally only symbols : bank bills, coins, credit cards, or written papers attesting the possession of a bank account.

so-social structures, creating a wealth of structural and cultural variation on this neglected level of the social order. Individuals' locations in social stratification systems, generally considered to be a characteristic of macrosociety, are largely influenced by the hierarchical positions they occupy or have occupied in organisations, and by the relations that exist between organisations or even between inter-organisational systems (e.g., the definitions of equivalence discussed earlier). If organisations represent the predominant form of the administration of power in modern societies, they constitute also the predominant apparatus that regulates the placement and the movements of individuals in the social structure (Bertaux 1977). This leads us to formulate the *general hypothesis* that changes in the economic structures and organisations that control peoples' mobility, be it horizontal or vertical, inter- or intra-organisational, are the main factors governing the movement (upwards, downwards, sideways, but also in or out) and also the absence of such movement that people may experience in the social structure - especially in its hierarchical dimension.

So we postulate, in sharp contrast with a mass society perspective, that to a variable but probably large extent these organisations mediate societal or macro-structural change. Only rarely will such change come to the individuals without meso-structural mediation, and only rarely will this mediation be so homogenous as to exclude variations from the way in which macro-structural change affects individual praxis and consciousness.

3.2 Organisations as hierarchies and mobility channels

Our close scrutiny of the three major status dimensions and their forms of institutionalisation has produced ample evidence for the important role organisations play in the processes of structural placement of individuals. As a corollary, we have to expect that organisational characteristics should have an impact on the outcomes of these processes (see the excellent overviews by Baron 1984 and Kerckhoff 1995).

Let us concentrate on *income* to illustrate this further aspect of meso-structural intervention in stratification. What a person gets depends partly on characteristics that concern him or her directly, such as education, professional qualification and experience, position in the firm hierarchy, seniority, family status, membership in a privileged or discriminated social category. In a less individual-centered view, organisational and other contextual characteristics turn out to be no less influential: firm or administration size and growth, degree of innovation in the firm, firm policy in matters of human resources (for example, concerning the differential promotion of men and women), strength of labour unions, but also the relative position of the specific

industry and region in the national and international economy, are all supra-individual factors influencing individual incomes.

Other components of individuals' position are equally influenced by firm characteristics, especially *prestige*; the prestige of the establishment is partly extended to its employees (compare, for example, a hospital to a prison) whatever their hierarchical position may be. The owner-director of a small cleaning firm will not be considered an equal to the director-general of Ford, and the janitor of a university will easily find reasons to look down on his professional peers working in a subsidised housing complex.²⁷

The general importance of organisations for stratification is easy to formulate : to the extent that most situations of paid work are located in organisations (firms, administrations, etc.), almost all aspect of occupational positions, including other status criteria by way of recruitment practices and the role formal education plays in them, including also pay rules, are deliberately administered by identifiable actors in these organisations. Therefore, organisations are one of the main locuses of the social construction of social stratification. It is all the more astonishing to what extent stratification research ignores this part of the social structure.

The great majority of mobility studies are conducted using individual data stemming from samples that are not limited to a single firm. In doing so – and there are of course very good reasons for choosing this method - they allow the firm characteristics to vary widely, generally without measuring them. Thus, inter-organisational differences are neglected, occasioning considerable loss of explanatory power. This leads us to a question that is rather contrary to current arguments about the dwindling relevance of stratification as shown by diminishing correlations. Given the likely importance of the organisational variables that usually go unmeasured and unanalysed, is it not surprising to get even the relatively modest coefficients we know from actual studies? Is it not surprising that categories as large and heterogeneous as those of worker, employee or manager still cover enough consistent reality to produce the correlations we are used to finding when testing our traditional, individual-centered hypotheses about the relationship between structural position and political attitudes toward or representations of society?

This argument could be developed into a fundamental criticism of mainstream stratification research, leaving little more left than the conclusion that we should stop practicing it. However, that is not the thrust of this essay, for the simple reason that

²⁷ Comparative studies produce growing evidence for important differences between societies with respect to their institutional sectors and their mutual relationships, all elements that equally belong to the meso-structural level (e.g. Schellenberg 1991, Wong 1992, Esping-Andersen 1993, Müller & Shavit 1997 and many others).

for its author, this would not only be overstated, but simply wrong. On the contrary, if we find the results we do find while neglecting so many sources of additional diversity, there must be something quite consistent about the social organisation of inequalities that it can be grasped by even a very restricted set of indicators. It is, then, more adequate to give the criticism an empirical twist by asking what are the conditions that must be fulfilled for this neglect to be scientifically tenable. In order to do so, it may be interesting to recall some of the assumptions underlying most of the research in our field. Several of these suppositions may or may not be correct, and if they are not, we might wonder what the consequences are of ignoring them. Under some conditions, it may be reasonably safe to ignore them, under others not. So let us try to think about the conditions that might influence the possibility of ignoring part of the relevant variations without losing touch with social reality altogether.

4. Towards an explicit theorisation of tacit assumptions in stratification research

4.1 Current assumptions in mainstream research

Despite the conceptual differences between the classical theories of stratification, studies in this field share a certain number of assumptions that remain tacit but operative. Let us briefly review four of these assumptions in order to illustrate this assertion.

1) *A very restricted number of dimensions is enough to account for macro-social stratification (and maybe they can even be reduced to one overall dimension).*

Very often, we do not reflect explicitly about the criteria that could be used to measure the relevance or the centrality of a given dimension for societal stratification. Explicit elaboration of hypotheses concerning criteria of centrality of specific dimensions of inequality could make it easier for us to extend our analytical grasp of stratification phenomena. One single (and simple) illustration: not many studies include the person's or the family's fortune; in most cases this is certainly for practical reasons and not because the researchers judge this dimension to be marginal. The majority of a population may have no assets of this kind (and some proportion of it may even have negative assets, i.e., debts), yielding a highly skewed variable distribution. This technical problem should not, however, replace the theoretical reflection about the inclusion or exclusion of a dimension of inequality. The significance of fortune or propriety (effective or potential means of production) lies in the fact that it is an alternative source of income and of power ; it also highlights an alternative mechanism of social mobility (see for instance the importance Western & Wright 1994 found for

this variable in their comparative study of mobility regimes in four post-industrial countries).

2) *These indicators' meaning is largely homogeneous (across dimensions, time, value-levels, sub-national regions and segments of the population) and does not depend on any encompassing context.*

Do the "same" hierarchical positions and the same situations have the same meaning for all the cases (respondents) we compare, i.e., do they express equivalent situations in stratification (for instance in all regions of a country) independently of their differing economic and social structures? Compare a college teacher working in a large town with her colleague in the countryside, the mayor of a village with one in the national capital, the owner of a middle-sized industrial firm in a central region with an equally « rich » one in a peripheral region : do the two figures of these pairs occupy the same place in their local or regional stratification systems? Can we assume without more ado that stratification is indeed a homogeneous, nation-wide structure and not a regional or local one? It is likely that the study of local stratification systems would allow much finer analyses and a stronger analytical hold on the phenomena related to inequality, as the older tradition of community studies suggests.

3) *The relatively simple operationalisations we currently use in survey research (including censuses) pose no serious problems of validity.*

What do we really know about the relative importance of the multiple dimensions that run across the work world and that may be part of the things we are interested in? What do we intend to measure if we think that we can easily replace institutional levels of education by years in school, or that we can substitute occupational prestige for hierarchical position, or when we simply translate the American "manager" by the French "cadre" or the other way round?

4) *Meso-structural phenomena are irrelevant for stratification analysis (obviously the assumption of most interest for this essay).*

In the last section of this essay, we shall pay special attention to this fourth assumption.

Each of these assumptions - and still others - should be cautiously thought through, especially because in current research practice they are not theorised but taken for granted; they are part of our ethnomethods as researchers. The more technical of them seem to be more easily questioned than the more interpretative - it is true that taking them seriously would make our work much more complicated!

However, if we do not confront these complications, we may run the risk that our possibilities for understanding social change gradually disappears, as the majority of presently proposed "alternative approaches" do not really do a better job: interpretation strategies that become ever more individualistic (such as rational choice theory) promise no means of grasping changing structures ; theoretical minimalism that dilutes the notion of social structure to the point of considering it as nothing more than an abstract system of "co-ordinates" (as in Blau's "parameters of social structure", 1974, 1977) is of limited scope when it comes to interpret our findings ; finally, paradigmatic conversion to interpretative and idiographic positions, or generalised culturalism (as proposed by postmodern theorists like Bauman 1992) define away the very phenomena stratification analysis is about. They may all be interesting in their own right, but it is highly doubtful that they can give us a better understanding of the more-than-micro social order.

A strategy aiming at re-integrating some of the tacit assumptions of conventional stratification research into its explicit theoretical framework could be more promising. In the final section of this essay, we develop three hypotheses to this effect.²⁸

4.2 Conditions for the legitimate neglect of meso-structures

Our starting point is the fact that, very generally, stratification and mobility research done in a macrosociological perspective works only with individual-level information without taking intermediate, meso-scopic levels of social organisation into account. Our thesis is not that the neglect of intermediate-level structures necessarily and always generates faulty results. We are arguing, however, that it is plausible that they may be ignored in empirical research only under quite specific conditions. We postulate that there are at least three such conditions. The degree to which these conditions' are fulfilled determines to what extent the neglect of intermediate or meso-social structures in stratification research can still produce reasonably correct results.

The three conditions are the following:

- high crystallisation of inequalities,
- strong vertical closure (i.e., consolidated class barriers),
- predominance of a single model of meso-social organisation.

²⁸ There are, of course, quite a number of other mostly meso-scopic aspects of social organisation that are « abstracted out » by usual survey research practices, as earlier parts of this essay have shown. We suppose that the three singled out here have greater impact on results than the others, but this remains to be shown empirically.

We shall comment upon each of these below.

4.2.1. Crystallisation of inequalities

The principle that contemporary stratification is multi-dimensional is today unanimously accepted, even by such neomarxist sociologists as Wright (1985, 1989, 1994). This principle makes it necessary to elaborate ideas about the relationships between these multiple dimensions, the whereabouts of their change, and their theoretical significance. This kind of exploration is rarely pursued although it is highly interesting (but see Landecker 1981). It may have suffered from the lack of popularity of the concept of status consistency, including the very term « crystallisation », used in Lenski's original article (1954) to designate individual status profiles, with which the notion of macro-social crystallisation as used in this essay could be easily confounded. This is not the place to develop this subject at length, but we would like to offer three illustrative hypotheses using the concept of structural crystallisation, characterising not positional configurations of individuals but the overall macrosocial structure of inequalities, with crystallisation designating the degree of positional correspondence between the most central dimensions of inequality.

a) We can expect that strong and long-lasting crystallisation in a multi-dimensional stratification system (and implicitly little vertical mobility) is one of the structural conditions for class formation "in itself" as well as "for itself". Inversely, decreasing crystallisation dilutes class boundaries. Only in the case of extremely high crystallisation, a single dimension of inequality would suffice to describe the social stratification and any individual's position.

b) We can expect that representations of society, especially with respect to the relative importance of their individual-centered stance, also depend on the degree of crystallisation. Weak structural crystallisation implies the multiplication of diverse individual positional configurations (i.e., of individuals' overall location profiles that we obtain if we take into account all major institutional fields or dimensions of inequality in a given society). This diversity of individual configurations makes it less likely for large numbers of people to experience similar everyday worlds and problems in ways that can lead them to develop feelings of solidarity or a perception of shared problems. This structural and hence also experiential diversity should be particularly present in the middle ranges of stratification where crystallisation is quite generally lower than at the upper and lower extremes. The spread of individualism diagnosed by many authors in recent years may be understood as a consequence of this type of structural change (some remarks in Beck 1986 point to his awareness of

this relationship). It appears as a cultural phenomenon with structural origins, which leads to the further hypothesis that it can be reversible in the case of a re-crystallisation of inequalities.

c) Our last illustrative hypothesis is implicit in the preceding remarks. We can assume that the very relevance of the concept of status inconsistency - apart from the technical problems it poses for empirical analysis (first exposed by Blalock 1966) - depends on the degree of macro-social crystallisation. Only a strongly crystallised stratification system creates the conditions that allow for or even provoke the emergence of stabilised norms of equivalence between positions. Probably, such norms emerge from social praxis much more than from any special agency. They are an implicit and rarely theorised prerequisite for "formal", measured inconsistency (Smith 1996) to take on any social sense, especially the postulated sense of a tension that can motivate specific attitudes or even behaviour. The effectiveness of positional inconsistency for action - and, by implication, a high degree of structural crystallisation - should then be considered a major precondition for the generally postulated differences to appear between holders of consistent and inconsistent profiles.

These considerations are mentioned in order to demonstrate the theoretical potential of the concept of structural crystallisation. As to its relation to the meso-social level of social organisation in the study of stratification, our *first major hypothesis* postulates that under conditions of high crystallisation this level can be neglected with less loss of information than under conditions of low crystallisation. A first reason for this argument is that with high crystallisation (which may be measured by the intercorrelations between the central dimensions of stratification), the conceptual differences between these dimensions count less because empirically, they become interchangeable, as knowledge of a person's position with regard to one aspect of inequality allows us to infer the other positions with a high degree of probability. A second reason is that, according to our hypothesis a), it is likely that a high degree of crystallisation indicates a stability and coherence of inequalities that is conducive to the formation of collective situations sufficiently homogeneous to favour the emergence of relatively stable socio-cultural differentiations (class-specific subcultures) and maybe eventually even of classes in the strong, marxist sense. Under such conditions, the kind of information usually collected in surveys in order to localise the individuals in the stratification (such as education/occupation/income) should be of higher validity than otherwise.

How has macrosocial crystallisation changed over several decades? A plausible thesis states that in industrial and especially post-industrial societies, the constitutive dimensions of stratification are in a process of de-crystallising (Kocka 1979, Buchmann 1991). The inequalities existing along any single dimension do not diminish,

but they become less connected to each other. If crystallisation seems particularly low in present-day industrial societies, the first condition that would justify neglecting meso-structural features in stratification research is not fulfilled.

4.2.2. Hierarchical group closure

One of the less well-known contributions of Weber to stratification analysis, and maybe one of the most interesting, is the notion of social closure; it has recently been highlighted by Anglo-Saxon authors (Parkin 1974, Murphy 1988). Put very simply, this concept concerns antagonistic strategies around the accessibility of relatively privileged situations. The privileged try to consolidate their advantage by controlling or even preventing access to their situation by non-privileged contenders ; the less privileged try, to the contrary, to gain access, often by organising themselves into a "group" in order to use their collective power to enhance their structural situation. Closure may also be the main mechanism whereby inequality emerges in the first place (as highlighted by a nice theoretical parable by Popitz 1968). Thus group closure appears to be a major strategy in the dynamics of stratification. It is not necessarily restricted to a specific dimension of inequality, not even to "inherently" hierarchical dimensions (as in the case of religious endogamy). But in the present context, it is its hierarchy-building and hierarchy-strengthening potential that is of most interest. In the realm of stratification, closure strategies quite systematically build on social ascription. Caste systems are certainly their most « accomplished » form, but they also play an important role in non-caste stratification systems. It comes as no surprise that women, many ethnic minorities, non-nationals and often specific age groups are marginalised by processes of closure, and the different names given to the forces and attitudes involved in these processes - sexism, xenophobia, racism, ageism - often hide their analytically common features. Probably, closure or « neo-feudal » strategies are among the most effective forms of resistance against the generalisation of the universalist or meritocratic mechanisms of social positioning postulated by functionalist theory (including its youngest child, the status attainment paradigm, see, e.g., Bornschier 1991b).

In this paper, we refrain from formulating general hypotheses about the use of closure, its effectiveness and effects, and rather go back to mainstream research on stratification. Our hypothesis that crystallisation is partially produced by closure processes is certainly plausible. It may also be reversed: closure is facilitated and encouraged by crystallisation. Both have their own determinants and are interdependent; the one should not be used as a mere indicator of the other. Closure between hi-

erarchically differentiated groups appears as a second major condition standardising individual position profiles.

Therefore, our *second major hypothesis* postulates that the more hierarchical closure there is in a society, the less meso-structural variations interfere with the relationships between macro-structures of inequality and individual locations and conditions. In other words, meso-social structures can be neglected in stratification research to the extent that there is high social closure.

In several respects (decreasing homogamy, increasing intergenerational mobility, strong flows of migration, etc. – see Kalmijn 1998, 2001), social closure seems to have weakened in the most recent history of industrial societies, at least since the Second World War. It is thus clear that our second condition justifying the neglect of meso-structural features in stratification research is also not fulfilled.

4.2.3. Predominance of a single organisational model

We have seen the primordial importance of organisations for the institutionalisation of inequalities, some tendencies towards de-institutionalisation notwithstanding. In this perspective, we lack a complement to the classical macro-sociological theories in the form of an organisational theory of stratification (Baron 1984, Collins 1988, Ahrne 1990). We are, of course, not able to develop such a theory in the space remaining in this essay, but shall proceed as we did for the two other arguments.

Our *third major hypothesis* is then that variations in the inegalitarian working of organisations, their practices of recruitment, promotion, and firing can be considered to be irrelevant to the dynamics of mobility and stratification only if there are no pronounced differences between organisations in a society, i.e., if a great majority of the existing organisations corresponds to one and the same model.

This is clearly not the case in the present situation; to the contrary, there may have never been so much heterogeneity in the organisational world than actually, especially in the economy. One need not be an expert in the history of firms in the last two centuries to suppose that organisational structures, policies of human capital management, doctrines and parameters of salary setting and many other characteristics that directly influence the internal social dynamics of organisations and the hierarchical positioning of individuals in them have undergone enormous diversification, especially since World War II. Internationalisation and multinationalisation have not made the world of organisations more uniform. These processes have rather enlarged the range of forms and models, even though labour unions have succeeded in

standardising some crucial aspects of practice, at least in some sectors of industrialised countries (think of the standardisation of working, hiring and pay conditions through labour conventions). Structural transformations of the last 20 years have even spurred a new wave of de-standardisation, including through political pressure, under the fashionable heading of flexibilisation. One could certainly lengthen this list of indicators. Neglect of this rather central aspect of the social structuring of inequalities is thus less and less justified. Its likely price is a serious loss of accuracy, a loss that may easily lead to the kind of exaggerated argument against the relevance of stratification cited at the beginning of this essay. Thus, our third condition is even less fulfilled than the previous two.

5. Conclusion

We are led to conclude that none of the three conditions that could justify ignoring intermediate structures in research practice is fulfilled in the actual historic situation of industrial or post-industrial societies. Rather, the opposite is the case: the organisational world seems to be more heterogeneous than ever, social closure seems relatively weak in terms of class or other clearly identified status groups (not, however, in terms of sexism, racism, and xenophobia!) and crystallisation is moderate to low. This structural situation may not remain stable, but it clearly obtains in the present situation, probably plus or minus 20 years. Moreover, there are reasons to think that the organisational world, which appears as a major factor of meso-structural heterogeneity, has become ever more important in modern societies (Sainsaulieu & Segrestin 1986, Perrow 1991). In our perspective, the poor record of classical models that try to explain ideological preferences or political action by the macro-social positioning of individuals, abstracting out meso-social variations, appears to be a necessary result of actual structural conditions. Taking this unsatisfactory working of current models as a reason to dismiss the social relevance of stratification analysis seems at least premature (as G. B. Shaw might have said). A more promising reaction seems to be to work toward the enrichment of theoretical thinking, including a more elaborated acknowledgement of the multidimensional character of stratification (crystallisation, looking for groups defined by specific positional configurations rather than for overall « classes ») as well as the main meso-structural factors that intervene in the stratification process and in each individual's attainment history – organisations, labour markets, spatial segregation, and disparities between neighborhoods, localities, regions, to cite only those examples that come first to mind.

One practical consequence of this argument cannot be developed here, but must at least be alluded to: how are we to change current practices in stratification research,

usually based on nationwide surveys, in order to take it better into account? A first response could simply be to enlarge the array of variables integrated in our analyses, including informations about crucial meso-structural factors characterising the structural environment of our respondents, especially labour-market and organisational variables as already recommended by Baron (1984). Another, more fundamental one could be to develop more sophisticated sample designs, using meso-structural factors as defining dimensions in stratified sampling of respondents in order to test their contribution to overall variation of our dependent variables. A still more fundamental alternative could be to resurrect the design of community studies that would allow to take into account even more explicitly the relevant specificities of meso-social factors, at the price of losing the societal scope of each individual study – a price that may be refunded were it possible to combine several such studies in an encompassing meta-study. Such an enterprise would, of course, cost more than the routine surveys we are accustomed to in stratification research. It would cost more financially speaking, but also theoretically, as a series of difficult questions about the context-specificity of hierarchical measures could not be eluded. But this would also be a new chance to innovate and consolidate our theoretical instruments as well as our understanding of stratifying processes.

* * *

To sum it up: The criticisms this essay addresses to classical theories of stratification and the kind of empirical research they inspire do not aim at putting them aside; the processes of production and of reproduction of inequalities they highlight remain crucial. However, because they neglect meso-social structures, they remain blind to mechanisms that can seriously interfere with the ones they analyse and that must be taken into account in order to understand the stratification processes which are typical of the contemporary situation. It seems, then, that the present situation of stratification research suffers not from over-theorisation, but from its contrary. Replacing macro-sociological approaches by individual-centered ones, or structural by culturalist ones, clearly offers no promising alternative. What we need is an enlargement of our theoretical reflections to encompass all relevant levels of social organisation.

6. Literature

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