

**SPECIAL ISSUE**  
**«Quaderni di Sociologia»**

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**“Is the concept of social class still useful?”**

**Call for Papers**

**Guest editors**

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**1. The problem**

What are the meanings of the term "social class", which differs even in the works of Marx? Concept formation and the accurate definition of terms are the most important tools for the progress of the social sciences since, they allow for a clearer and finer distinction between different phenomena (Weber 1904).

Can a social class theory help us describe and explain, at least in part, the situation of economically advanced countries in recent decades? If so, which of the theories available on social classes is best suited to the purpose? Is theoretical innovation required?

**2. A term for different meanings and theories**

"Social class" has been a central term in the description and interpretation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century realities - in everyday life and the social sciences. It has been used to describe and explain the structure and development of industrial societies and social conflicts.

Its weakness, from today's point of view, is that it is a collective concept, with a low degree of compatibility with methodological individualism. While it can be used to describe the varying sources of many differences and inequalities, it neglects other relevant ones, such as those associated with gender, ethnicity, religion and generations. It was a *Kampfbegriff*; now it is set

to become a non-existent knight: with indefinite contours, many meanings and uncertain utility. In short: while inequalities of all kinds persist and become more evident, the concept of class no longer seems to be able to describe and explain them.

Since the 1980s, sociologists have proposed complex social class schemes whose purpose is not to explain political orientations and behaviour, but to provide a description of social structure and social mobility (Erickson and Goldthorpe 1992). The most widely used classification in Italy (Cobalti and Schizzerotto 1994) is part of the EGP approach (Erickson-Goldthorpe-Portocarrero). It brings to the conclusion that "class belonging [has] kept its effects substantially unchanged throughout the century" (Schizzerotto 2002, 365). From this point of view, as Weber (1922) had argued, classes are not communities or political actors, but social situations, the membership of which structures life chances and the field of individual decisions.

Such a definition of class does not command consensus in the literature. Various authors have presented alternative definitions. Wright has remained faithful to the Marxian tradition (1997, 2015). Grusky et al. (2005) stressed the importance of occupations as institutionalized socio-economic entities. Parkin (1974, 1978) and Hall (1998) develop the Weberian conceptual couple of "open and closed social relations" in different ways. The concept of "social closure" seems useful to account for the formation of specific legal rules, institutions and collective actions. Mann (1993) has also criticized the concept of an "objective", "latent" or "structural" social class and underlined the relevance of class as a collective and organized actor.

At the turn of the century, a branch of literature came into being on classless (Kingston 2000) and "liquid" society (Bauman 2000). It insisted that the barriers to the aggregation of individuals were disappearing, spatial segmentation was diminishing, social mobility increasing, and the system of social status – such as the feeling of belonging and the homologation of consumption and lifestyles – fading.

In the wake of the crisis of the concept, the Italian Institute of Statistics decided to abandon the EGP class scheme, stating that the growing differentiation in the social structure suggests that the term should be abandoned and new techniques applied. The new aim is to identify social groups based on household units of analysis and to include additional discriminating variables, "leaving aside any hypothesis on the distribution of *a priori* relevant variables" (ISTAT 2017, 53). The decision to replace the term "social class" with the generic term "social group" has also been advanced by other national statistical institutes. The aim of this move is to inductively

identify homogeneous clusters of population (Savage et al., 2013). Research in Great Britain, France and Italy shows a common result: an absence of gaps in the distributions analysed.

While the "traditional" classes may no longer be identifiable, social inequalities nevertheless remain - in terms of income, wealth, prestige and power. Indeed, according to authoritative sources (OECD), they have increased within countries. Social barriers, "distinction" and social closure mechanisms tend to structure inequalities and make them viscous, or even crystallize them.

### **3. Multiple social cleavages: the generating mechanisms**

In classical literature, class provides an explanatory mechanism for inequalities; it is not the consequence of these inequalities. Class is not just a tool for classifying inequalities, but a way to explain them.

The fascination of Marxian class theory lies in its indicating a criterion for defining classes based on a social relationship. Alternatively, social class is defined – with Weber – as sharing the same "market situation". However, since there are different markets, we have to talk about the markets of labour, capital, goods and services (lifestyle and consumption, "conspicuous consumption" and "distinction"). These multiple dimensions are difficult to use to classify groups, because they refer to a continuum of purchasing power. Weber's proposal is therefore suitable for identifying social stratification criteria, rather than for structuring in classes.

We can think about additional mechanisms that generate cleavages in contemporary societies. The following list is indicative and not at all exhaustive.

#### **a) Rent in the political market**

In modern mixed economies, in which the state allocates about half of the generated resources, redistribution mechanisms outside the market assume central importance in the dynamics of the social structure. We can distinguish between two main categories of rentier: those whose right to perceive rent derives from accumulated capital, and those whose income depends on redistributive political decisions. While some groups benefit from transfers and use their bargaining skills to obtain them (Olson 1982), others are taxed and develop opposing interests. Conceding advantages to a social group by means of a law involves attributing the costs to taxpayers, whether current or future. We can see this, for instance, in countries that have adopted tax-funded, non-contributory pensions for retired people.

### **b) Ants and cicadas**

Another aspect of the distributive conflict concerns the contrast between those who have short-term interests and want something immediately (the cicadas) and those who have long-term interests and want to protect the future (the ants). This dichotomy largely corresponds to the less well-off classes, who want to improve or maintain their position, and the wealthy classes, who want to defend what they have. Politics is part of this situation. The increase in public deficit increases consensus among the voters, because it allows more resources to be distributed without increasing taxes or duties. Constant deficits increase public debt (and implicit pensions) over the long term and can greatly or totally reduce its sustainability.

### **c) Structural effects of globalization**

A third mechanism that influences social structuring is given by two effects of globalization (Sassen 2007): the insecurity generated by the responses of governments in countries with a mature economy to competition from emerging countries, and the ethnicization generated by migration flows. The latter feeds the presence of groups that are underprivileged because they are latecomers and subject to social closure actions by the native peoples. Insecurity does not exert structural effects so as long it is only a temporary phase in individuals' careers. Instead, it has structuring power when it tends to be reproduced over time and condemns some groups to marginality.

### **d) Structural effects of technological and organizational innovations**

The diffusion of new technologies causes differentiation between professional and operative tasks, as well as a reduction in the demand for the latter. This goes together with an increasing social differentiation between groups with high levels of education and skills, and poorly educated social groups, whose life chances are often precarious. These two groups seem increasingly characterized by different sets of values and political behaviour.

### **Summary of the aforementioned problems in question form:**

- a. What is the most useful definition of the terms "social class" and "social status group"? If there are no breaks in the distributions describing the social structure, is it appropriate to differentiate them by quintiles or deciles, as economists do?
- b. Is it possible to establish a ranking of social classes and status groups? Or is the idea of multiple social cleavages, which generate differences and inequalities regardless of the employment system, to be preferred?

- c. What have the decisive factors been in breaking the link between class/class belonging and political behaviour since the decline of Fordism? Is it a structural weakening of the classes and/or greater autonomy in the political market? Besides the decline of twentieth-century ideologies, what role is played by the emergence of the new media conveying new beliefs and argumentations?
- d. What responses can comparative sociological research give to the following dilemmas: structure vs action, latent social classes vs collective and organized actors?
- e. Which class structuring (or social differentiation) model seems most suitable for the empirical study of a country? Is it appropriate to adopt different models within a country, in order to take into account territorial specificities, such as in the North, Centre and South of Italy?
- f. To what extent have precarization and marginalization become structured?
- g. What is the role of lobbies or distributive coalitions in shaping the tax and social security systems?

On the issues mentioned here in problematic terms, «Quaderni di Sociologia» opens a call for contributions to a monographic section on the topic, edited by Alberto Baldissera and Antonio M. Chiesi.

Those willing to contribute are invited to send an abstract in English (see below). The language of papers will be English.

The editors will make a selection of both theoretical and empirical papers. Their acceptance is subject to the standard criteria adopted by the journal.

### **Timing**

- Extended Abstracts (between 1000-1500 words) and key words: until **31<sup>st</sup> of May 2020** to be sent to the guest editors (to: [alberto.baldissera@unito.it](mailto:alberto.baldissera@unito.it) [antonio.chiesi@unimi.it](mailto:antonio.chiesi@unimi.it) cc: [paola.borgna@unito.it](mailto:paola.borgna@unito.it))
- Confirmation of acceptance to authors: 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020
- Submission of full text: 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2020
- Double-blind review: January – March 2021
- Decision on manuscript after review: 31<sup>th</sup> March 2021
- Revision and resubmission: 30<sup>th</sup> April 2021
- Expected date of publication: October-November 2021