Meso-social structures and stratification analysis : a missing link?

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, as 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 a strong resonance in Offe, 1984 and Beck, 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 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 and Lipset (1991) have listed the principal arguments that underpin such postulates, leaning heavily on the idea that since

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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 and 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 the research derived 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 due to 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 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 theoretical sketches opposing "the system" to "the actor" show; this simplifying dichotomy may already allow for interesting theoretical developments as in the case of Crozier and Friedberg (1977) or of Habermas (1981). However, if we think of social reality as being organised in real systems of various kinds ("real" as opposed to "functionally" or

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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 and 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 and Vester, 1998, or Bertaux's, 1996 counter-attack as well as 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 on deductivist research as the only way to do empirical science, his critique of this kind of technically sophisticated empiricism is well argued).

otherwise theoretically defined systems – see Archer (1995) for a development of this metatheoretical distinction), it becomes clear that it is impossibly reductionistic to distinguish only two levels of systemic scope.

The dichotomy may at first sight be sufficient for the classification of theories, distinguishing micro- and macrosociological approaches, although 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 ? 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 systems, extant in other parts of the world? It was not necessary to exaggerate 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

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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.

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 where 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 institutional frameworks organising them, whereas partial systems constitute sectors within a global system and 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.

division of labour). This very general conception is in accordance with any model of social systems analysis (e. g., Parsons and 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 languange 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   Meso-social structures – a blind spot in classical theories of stratification

In order to gain an easy entry into the institutional background of the major dimensions of social stratification or inequality, let us start with a short comment on the most often-used research indicators of social inequality, education, profes-sional position and income, and on the institutional and especially meso-structural ramifications of two of the school system and the economy.

2.1   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

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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 lies 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).

of social stratification, be it for locating individuals or for analysing their mobility;[7] almost as a general rule, they are indiscriminately called statuses. Much can be said, however, about the theoretical differences between them, as well as 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. *The educational* level of most individuals included in the kind of research that interests us here (i. e., non-retired adults) has been set in their biographical past by a highly formalised and selective process of social mobility in a specific organisation called school which is part of the wider school system.[8] The school system may be organised principally on a national or 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 countries, 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.[9] 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

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7   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 the 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.

8   We rarely take into account continuous education, although we actually should do so. 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).

9   Politically speaking, the Swiss cantons can be compared to Canadian provinces, American states, German Länder or French regions; they are 26 in number. Some caracteristics 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).

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 pursue 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 level (and content) of formal education attained: it indicates qualification or skills, it confers social prestige, and it largely determines the accessibility of diffe-rent levels in the job hierarchy.[10] 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 other institutional contexts. Individuals who change contexts experience the social relativity of exchange values positively or negatively.[11] 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 exist between educational status and professional level, 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 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 a 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, overlooks the "distorting" feedback from other sectors of society on this system and its exit levels, and ignores the actual definitions of equivalence between educational and occupational levels.[12]

2. Things are quite different for an adult's *professional position.* It is anchored in an institutional sector, the economy, and corresponds, in principle, to an actual

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10   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).

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

12   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 portions of the population below or above a configuration representing equivalence.

position in the organisational hierarchy of a firm.[13] 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) and 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 attached to a position 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 segregation in the labour market, especially – but not exclusively – along gender lines. These forms of seemingly non-vertical differentiation strongly interfere with horizontal and vertical mobility as well as with hierarchical positioning, but are only rarely taken into account in attainment research.[14]

These complexities notwithstanding, a large number of studies use occupational prestige as an operationalisation of professional position. Thus, an important conceptual distinction disappears: 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).[15] This conceptual confusion

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

14 In Switzerland like elsewhere, the existing sociological analyses of the sexual segregation in the labour market (Charles and 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 Bornschier, 1991a; Lamprecht and Stamm, 1999; or 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 and 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.

15 The prestige scales used in stratification research, such as Treiman's classical one of 1977 or its

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 and Novick, 1979).

3. *Income,* if it stems from paid work, is also directly linked to professional position, 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, whether symbolic, relational, or material. Its nature is not that of a position in a hierarchical structure, but rather of a position in a market.[16] If education functions as a credential, income or fortune signals 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 meso-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 movements (upwards, downwards, sidewards, but also in or out) and also the absence of such movements that people may experience in the social structure – especially in its hierarchical dimension.

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successor by Ganzeboom and Treiman (1996), are almost never questioned as to the possible differences between the internal and the external prestige of the same positions.

16   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 we postulate, in sharp contrast to the perspective of a mass society, 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 a meso-structural mediation, and only rarely will this mediation be so homogenous as to exclude variations in the way in which macro-structural change affects individual praxis and consciousness.

2.2 Organisations as hierarchies and mobility channels

We have seen ample evidence for the important role organisations play in the processes of structural placements 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 earns 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, the a privileged or discriminated social category one belongs to. 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 the 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.[17]

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

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17   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 and Shavit, 1997 and many others).

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 left to conclude, other than that we should stop practicing it. However, that is not the thrust of this essay, for the simple reason that 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 can be grasped even by a very restricted set of indicators. It is, then, more adequate to give the criticism an empirical twist by asking what conditions 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 are not, we might wonder what the consequences are of ignoring them. Under certain conditions, it may be reasonably safe to ignore them. So let us try to think about the conditions that might influence the possibility of ignoring part of the relevant variations without loosing touch with social reality altogether.

3   Towards an explicit theorisation of tacit assumptions in stratification research

3.1   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 they may 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 portions 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 of this variable Western and Wright 1994 found 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 situses 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 working world and 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 American "manager" into French *"cadre"* or the other way round ?

4) *Meso-structural phenomena are irrelevant for stratification analysis (obviously the assumption of greatest 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 disappear, since 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.[18]

3.2 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 argue 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.

We shall comment upon each of these below.

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18   Quite a number of other mostly meso-scopic aspects of social organisation are of course,

3.2.1 Crystallisation of inequalities

The principle that contemporary stratification is multi-dimensional is unanimously accepted today, 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 although highly interesting is rarely pursued (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 confused. 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

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"abstracted out" by usual survey research practices, as earlier parts of this essay have shown. We suppose that the three singled out here have a greater impact on results than the others, but this remains to be shown empirically.

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 practice 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 behaviours. 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, information abaut 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 differenciations (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 to be particularly low in present-day industrial societies, the first condition that would justify neglecting meso-structural features in stratification research is not fulfilled.

3.2.2 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, on the contrary, to gain access, often by organising themselves into "groups" 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 greatest 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 hierarchically 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 in the

relationships between macro-structures of inequality and individual locations and conditions. In other words, meso-social structures can be neglected in stratification research in case of 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.

3.2.3 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 may be considered to be irrelevant to the dynamics of mobility and stratification only when there are no pronounced differences between organisations in a society, i. e., when 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 presently, especially in the economy. One needs not be an expert in the history of firms in the last two centuries to assume that organisational structures, policies of human capital management, doctrines and parameters of salary setting, and many other characteristics have undergone enormous diversification, especially since World War II. All these changes directly influence the internal social dynamics of organisations and the hierarchical positioning of individuals in them. Internationalisation and multinationalisation have not made the world of organistions 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 destandardisation, also due to 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 one 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 mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Thus, our third condition is even less fulfilled than the previous two.

4   Conclusion

We are led to conclude that none of the three conditions that might justify ignoring intermediate structures in research 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 low. This structural condition may not remain stable, but it clearly exists 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 and 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, learning out meso-social variations, appears to be a necessary result of structural changes. 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). It seems more promising to work toward the enrichment of theoretical thinking in the sense indicated here.

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 therefore 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.

5 Literature

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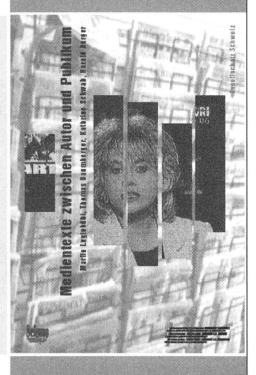Wright, Erik Olin (1978), *Class, Crisis and the State*, London: Verso Press.

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Medientexte zwischen Autor und Publikum
Intertextualität in Presse, Radio und Fernsehen

In der modernen Informationsgesellschaft sind wir auf Massenmedien wie Presse, Radio und Fernsehen angewiesen, um uns über Ereignisse in der Welt zu informieren. Die Medien bilden die Realität jedoch nicht direkt ab – sie wählen Informationen aus, die sie dann verarbeiten und verändern. Dieser Prozess wirft verschiedene Fragen auf: Wie kommen Medien zu den Informationen? Wer schreibt die Texte? Wie werden Informationen verändert? Was weiss das Publikum über den Produktionsprozess von Medientexten? Wie schätzt das Publikum Medientexte ein?

Die AutorInnen untersuchen diese Fragen anhand von Medientexten, ihrer Entstehung sowie ihrer Rezeption auf Seiten des Publikums. Am Beispiel der Berichterstattung zu den Themen «Schweizer Sozialwerke» und «Gentechnologie» gilt ein besonderes Augenmerk der Quellentransparenz und den sprachlichen Bewertungen. Dabei fördern sie brisante Ergebnisse zutage. Mediale Realität ist kein einheitliches Konstrukt, sondern eine Art «patchwork» aus verschiedenen Realitäten. Der Rückgriff auf dominante Deutungsmuster, Bewertungen und Perspektivierungen verleiht dabei der Interpretation der Ereignisse ein gewisses Mass an Einheitlichkeit.

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