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II. SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Social Inequality in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Some Introductory Remarks

Hartmut Kaelble

Why should social inequality be the topic of a session of a *history* congress rather than of a meeting of sociologists and, hence, a section of this book by historians rather than by sociologists? Why should one raise the issue of social inequality in a period of deep worldwide *economic crisis* in which the general public is interested in other themes and in which social inequality is often considered as a preoccupation of the past economic boom? Why should social inequality be treated in a series of papers on *quantitative* history after having become so much a preoccupation of intellectual history and of ideological debates? I shall briefly answer these important and unavoidable questions, then cover the definition as well as some ideas on the long-term change of social inequality and finally say something about the three cases which are dealt with in the following papers, i. e. Sweden, Poland, and the U.S.

1

There is a widespread misunderstanding among historians about who should properly do research on the history of social inequality. Most historians do think that this is the task of sociologists and that they had better read sociological studies for information on this field. This attitude is reinforced by the impression that social historians have rarely published on this topic in a general way. If one looks for books and articles on "social inequality", one ends up, in fact, with the work of philosophers, sociologists or economists such as Stanislaw Ossowski, W. G. Runciman, Pierre Bourdieu, Gerhard Lenski, Ralf Dahrendorf, Simon Kuznets or Jan Tinbergen ¹⁾.

1) S. O s s o w s k i, *Class Structure and the Social Consciousness* (New York, 1963); W. G. R u n c i m a n, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice* (London, 1966); P. B o u r d i e u, *La distinction* (Paris, 1979); G. L e n s k i, *Power and Privilege. A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York, 1966); R. D a h r e n d o r f, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (Stanford, 1959); S. K u z n e t s, "Quantitative Aspects of the Economic Growth of Nations: VIII: Distribution of Income by Size," in: *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 11 (1963); J. T i n b e r g e n, *Income Distribution* (Amsterdam, 1975).

For various reasons, however, this is a mistaken view of the task of historians as well as of their actual contribution to this field. The history of social inequality cannot be written without the contribution of historians (or, alternatively without exceptionally intensive studies of the past by sociologists and by economists). Who else but historians know about the exact strengths and shortcomings of the sources for the history of social inequality, such as tax registers, censuses, rules of etiquette, dictionaries, diaries or letters of travellers etc.? Who else but a historian understands the complex historical meaning of indicators of social inequality, e. g. the factual role of monetary income for the social differences in the standard of living in the past or the meaning of education in the past so different from current educational institutions and so important for the inequality of life chances. Who else but a historian could place the findings on social inequality in the wider perspective of past societies and economies? There is a peculiar role for historians and a particular need for their research in the field of social inequality. Historians cannot be replaced by sociologists and economists in the study of long term change of social inequality unless the latter become in fact historians.

Moreover, the history of social inequality has not been neglected by social historians. A substantial amount of research was done by historians especially in the last fifteen years or so. This research covers many aspects of social inequality, uses many methods, deals with many types of communities and countries. It is rich in many respects. But it is extremely difficult to find, since historians have not yet found a common term, not yet started a debate, not yet established a scientific network in this field of research. Tracing the work on social inequality by historians means investing much time and energy in reading and skimming through large numbers of books. It is like the work of the gold-digger who has to sift lots of sand and flint to find small nuggets²⁾. So it comes as no surprise that the work by historians has been rarely used in sociological or economic research. To draw the attention of historians to this problem and to present their research in a more accessible way to other disciplines is one purpose of this section.

Do we raise the topic of social inequality at the wrong time? Should the historian living in a long economic depression better treat other topics of greater actual interest? No doubt, historical research often has peculiar cycles of debates and new topics. It is often difficult to say whether historians are late or early, since the best time to raise a new topic might be when it is totally out of fashion. In addition, social inequality in long economic depressions is a compelling theme as historians know from former depressions. Anyway, there is substantial, perhaps even increasing interest among historians in the history of social

2) As a report of the studies by historians see H. K a e l b l e, *Industrialization and Social Inequality in 19th-century Europe* (Leamington Spa, 1986).

inequality. It is telling that in the last two years (1984 and 1985) more general books on social inequality have been published than in many years before³⁾. Hence, this section of the book is not an isolated attempt to promote a neglected topic but just one publication among several others.

Is a book in quantitative history the right place to present studies of the history of social inequality? There is no doubt that a large amount of the research by historians on social inequality in the 19th and 20th centuries is in fact quantitative. To be sure, advanced quantitative techniques are rarely used; many studies of social inequality base their conclusions on counting and on numbers. Since differences in social inequality over time and across societies often are a matter of minor shades rather than of strong contrasts, quantification is imperative. Because social inequality often does become clear only if many individual lives are looked at, quantification is also necessary. It is interesting that one of the most known promoters of the "new" non-quantitative narrative history, Lawrence Stone, recently published a highly quantitative book in the field of social inequality. This does not only show the common sense of this author. It also demonstrates that quantification is very useful or even unavoidable in the history of social inequality.

On the other hand, quantification is not the only way of treating the history of social inequality. What definition of social inequality we use, what research approach we choose, how social inequality was seen in historical times, what demarcation lines and social distinctions were drawn by whom and with what instruments, how the politics of social inequality happened, are all questions which are not answered by quantitative studies. Since the topic of social inequality does lead to non-quantitative methods, we include in this section one article out of three which is less quantitative than the others. For the history of social inequality as for other fields of history, the debate on quantitative versus narrative methods is ill-defined, unrealistic and futile. Quantitative and non-quantitative methods can be and often must be used alongside each other depending on the topic, the sources, sometimes even the training of the audience. The future of quantification in history, after being firmly established, lies in the sensitive and reasonable combination with other, non-quantitative methods. Historical research on social inequality is a good example for this.

3) I would consider three recent books as important new interpretations in the history of social inequality: J. G. W i l l i a m s o n, *Did British Capitalism Breed Inequality* (Boston, 1985); L. S t o n e and J.C. Fawtier S t o n e, *An Open Elite? England 1540 - 1840* (Oxford, 1984); and J. M o o s e r, *Arbeiterleben in Deutschland 1900 - 1970* (Frankfurt, 1985) (*Working-Class in Germany, 1900 - 1970*). A sociological research survey with a certain historical perspective is R. G i r o d, *Les inégalités sociales* (Paris, 1984); and a sociological congress on social inequality with an interest in the past is G. S t r a s s e r and R. W. H o d g e, eds., *Status Inconsistencies in Modern Societies* (Duisburg, 1986).

The history of social inequality is not an established field of historical research with a wide consensus about its basic terms. Hence it is necessary to cover briefly the definition of social inequality. Three approaches are used in historical research. For lack of space I shall simply review them rather than discussing their strengths and weaknesses:

Firstly and usually, historians see social inequality as differences in the standard of living in the broad sense, i. e. not only in the real income, but also in the quality of working conditions, housing, family life and neighbourhood, education, level of health and life expectancy, or of security against crime and oppression. In trying to cover as many of these aspects as the sources allow, historians usually pursue social inequality between social classes and occupational groups or, less often, between men and women, between minorities and majorities, between urban and rural people, and between generations. Sometimes, historians are interested in social inequality only at one point in time and in one place; sometimes, however, they deal primarily with the long-term change of social inequality and its demographic, economic, social, cultural and political reasons. The following articles by Johan Söderberg and by Janusz Zarnowski are good examples of this approach.

Secondly, historians see (sometimes in combination with the first approach) the development of social inequality as the history of social differences in attitudes, life styles and mentalities, or as the history of purposeful social distinctions and social demarcation lines. Once again, the differences are investigated mostly between social classes and occupational groups, but sometimes also for minorities, between generations, between women and men, or between rural and urban people. This approach is generally used for the study of one individual social class, one occupational group, or one minority, rather than for the study of entire societies. Some historians use this definition together with the first one, since they intend to write a *histoire totale*, or since they consider both aspects of social inequality as closely intertwined in historical reality and find it difficult to say whether certain differences of the quality of housing, of levels of education or of health are a matter of cultural choice or a result of standards of living. The following article by Olivier Zunz is a good example of starting from this second definition of social inequality.

Finally, historians sometimes look at social inequalities as social contrasts between two basic social classes, i. e. the employers and the wage earners. All other social classes and social differences are considered or supposed to be secondary. This approach is not only used by Marxists, but also by non-Marxists open toward the falsification of the approach. Two things are perhaps surprising in the actual use of this approach in the research of social inequality in the past:

First, an extremely small number of studies in fact investigates the social *differentials* of the standard of living even between the two social classes which are considered the two most important ones. Generally, the rise or decline of the standard of living of a *single* class is treated rather than its differentials. Second, such investigations are not simply a variation of the study of the standard of living. There is an important European school, inspired especially by E. P. Thompson, which looks at social actions, social conflicts, and social attitudes rather than at the mere material situation. One might even say that this is in fact the strength of the best of the small number of studies on social inequality using this approach.

3

Historical research can contribute most to an analysis of the long-term *change* of social inequality, i. e. to the question of the rise or decline of social inequality in the long run. Especially the following papers on Sweden and Poland follow this perspective. It would be highly interesting to describe the main trends of the discussion on the long-term changes in social inequality. For lack of space, I want only to point to three major debates which have dominated research on the change of social inequality.

One major discussion covers the rise or decline of social inequality during the *industrial revolution*. Historians have, on the one hand, argued that the industrial revolution in Europe led to a mitigation of social inequality compared to the sharp social differences in feudal agrarian society. Lawrence Stone has described early modern European society as a huge hill with a high and extremely thin tower on it, with the bulky hill consisting of the mass of poor peasants, artisans, and labourers, and the thin tower consisting of the courts, the large landed aristocrats, and the rich merchants. During the industrial revolution the middle class became much more numerous. The tower on top became more solid and the contrast to the large hill of poverty below less striking. On the other hand, historians with such different basic points of view as Jeffrey Williamson and Eric Hobsbawm have argued that social inequality during the industrial revolution increased distinctly, especially between the rising middle class and the working class. From this point of view, the industrial revolution is seen as the period of most distinct social contrasts⁴). The following papers on Poland and Sweden join this controversy.

4) L. Stone, "Social Mobility in England 1500 - 1700," in: *Past and Present* 33 (1966); E. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire. An Economic History of Britain since 1750* (London, 1968); Williamson, *Inequality*; cf. as other recent interpretations in this debate: P. K. O'Brien / S. L. Engerman, "Changes in Income and its Distribution During the Industrial Revolution," in: R. Floud / D. N. McCloskey, eds., *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, vol. 1 (London, 1981); R. Q. Gray,

A second debate among historians covers the change of social inequality during the subsequent period of *second industrialization*. To simplify once again a complicated discussion, two basic positions can be found. On the one hand, historians have seen the second industrialization as a period of less sharp social inequalities due to various reasons such as the rise of the labour movement, the early beginnings of social policies, the decline of the artisan elite in the working class, the rise of routine white collar workers. Standards of living between various social classes became somewhat less distinct in the period of the rise of large enterprises and the beginnings of state intervention. On the other hand, historians have pointed to rising social inequalities between the concentrated economic and political power of emerging big business and the mass of wage earners, small farmers, artisans and shop-keepers. Once again, the following papers participate in this debate among historians⁵⁾.

The Aristocracy of Labour in 19th-Century Britain, 1850 - 1914 (London, 1981); G. Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victoria Society, Kentish London 1840 - 1880*, (London 1978); J. M. M. de Meere, "Long-Term Trends in Income and Wealth Inequality in the Netherlands 1908 - 1940," in: *Historical Social Research* 27 (July 1983); A. Daurard, "Wealth and Affluence in France since the Beginning of the 19th Century," in: W. D. Rubinstein, ed., *Wealth and the Wealth in the Modern World* (London, 1980); R. H. Hubscher, *L'agriculture et la société rurale dans le Pas-de-Calais du milieu du XIXe siècle à 1914*, 2 vol. (Arras, 1979); F. Marquardt, "A Working Class in Berlin in the 1840's" in: H. U. Wehler, ed., *Sozialgeschichte Heute* (Göttingen, 1974); D. Saalfeld, "Lebensverhältnisse der Unterschichten Deutschlands im 19. Jahrhundert," in: *International Review of Social History* 24 (1984); J. Kocka, *Lohnarbeit und Klassenbildung. Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in Deutschland 1800 - 1875* (Hannover, 1983); H. Rosenbaum, *Formen der Familie* (Frankfurt, 1982); L. Solto, *Toward Income Quality in Norway* (Madison, 1965); V. Zamagni, "The Rich in a Late Industrializer: The Case of Italy, 1800 - 1945," in: W. D. Rubinstein, ed. *Wealth and the Wealthy in the Modern World* (London, 1980); A. Imhof, *Die Gewonnenen Jahre* (Munich, 1984), pp. 107 ff.; H. Kübler, *Besoldung und Lebenshaltung der unmittelbaren preußischen Staatsbeamten im 19. Jahrhundert*; Y. S. Brenner, H. Kaelble and M. Thomas, eds., *Income Distribution in Historical Perspective* (forthcoming).

5) Recent interpretations in this debate are H. U. Wehler, ed., *Klassen in der europäischen Geschichte* (Göttingen, 1979) (especially the articles by Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Heinz-Gerhard Haupt on France, Sidney Pollard on Britain, Jürgen Kocka on Germany, Hans Jürgen Puhle on the United States); F. Kraus, *The Historical Development of the Welfare States in Europe and America* (New Brunswick, 1981); H. Kaelble, "Arbeiter und soziale Ungleichheit in Europa, 1950 - 1930," in: K. Tenfelde, ed., *Die internationale Forschung zur Geschichte der Arbeiterschaft* (Munich, 1985); W. Fischer, *Armut in der Geschichte* (Göttingen, 1982); Brenner, Kaelble and Thomas, *Income Distribution*; Williamson, *Inequality*; S. Pollard, *The Development of the British Economy, 1914 - 1980* (3rd ed., London, 1983); de Meere, *Inequality*; Daurard, *Wealth*; H. Kaelble / H. Volkmann, "Streik und Einkommensverteilung im Kaiserreich", in: J. Bergmann et al., *Arbeit, Mobilität, Partizipation, Protest* (Opladen, 1985); V. Hentschel, *Wirtschaft und Wirtschaftspolitik im Wilhelmi-*

A third discussion covers the period since 1945. It is a discussion more general among social scientists than just among historians. Once again, we find the view that the social differentials in the standards of living became less distinct especially as a consequence of the final establishment of the welfare state, the unprecedented power of trade unions, the rapid expansion of higher education and of a highly educated labour force, the unique economic prosperity, or as a consequence of political factors such as the wars or basic changes in economic systems. On the other hand, we find the view that social inequalities since 1945 became more distinct between generations, between native and foreign workers, between the average wage earners and the new poor, but also between the new professionals and the traditional industrial workers. The paper on Poland joins that debate⁶).

4

Why should we take Sweden, Poland, and the United States as examples of the history of social inequality in 19th and 20th Europe and America? It is certainly not easy to find historians who are ready to give good papers with new findings or new perspectives on this topic. We tried to find a paper on one of the early industrialized countries of Western Europe and a paper on a Mediterranean European country. This failed. The three papers which follow are, however, not accidental. They represent three different situations.

The Swedish paper by Johan Söderberg covers a country with one of the most rapid industrializations in Europe. Between 1880 and 1913 the Swedish rate of industrial growth was 2,9 % annually compared to only 2,1 % in Europe

nischen Deutschland (Stuttgart, 1978), pp. 67 ff.; I m h o f, Gewonnene Jahre, pp. 107 ff.; R. S p r e e, Soziale Ungleichheit vor Krankheit und Tod. Zur Sozialgeschichte des Gesundheitsrechts im Kaiserreich (Göttingen, 1981); J. K o c k a, Die Angestellten in der deutschen Geschichte 1850 - 1980 (Göttingen, 1981); K. D i t t, Industrialisierung, Arbeiterschaft und Arbeiterbewegung in Bielefeld, 1850 - 1914 (Dortmund, 1982); H. J. R u p i e p e r, Arbeiter und Angestellte im Zeitalter der Industrialisierung. Eine sozialgeschichtliche Studie am Beispiel der Maschinenfabrik Augsburg und Nürnberg (M.A.N.) 1837 - 1914 (Frankfurt, 1982); H. P o h l, ed., Sozialgeschichtliche Probleme in der Zeit der Hochindustrialisierung (1870 - 1914) (Paderborn, 1979); M. K ö n i g / H. S i e g r i s t / R. V e t t e r l i, Warten und Aufrücken. Die Angestellten in der Schweiz 1870 - 1950 (Zürich, 1985).

6) Typical examples of work on the postwar trends are T i n b e r g e n, Income Distribution; K r a u s, Income Inequality; T. S t a r k, The Distribution of Income in Eight Countries (London, 1977); P. T o w s e n d, Poverty in the United Kingdom (Harmondsworth, 1979); A. B. A t k i n s o n / A. J. H a r r i s o n, Distribution of Personal Wealth in Britain (Cambridge, 1978); A. H. H a l s e y, Change in British Society (Oxford, 1978), ch. 2; A. E. A t k i n s o n, ed., Wealth, Income and Inequality, 2nd ed., (Oxford, 1980); H. v a n d e r W e e, Der gebremste Wohlstand (Munich, 1984), pp. 287 ff.; D a u m a r d, Wealth; H. S u p p a n z / M. W a g n e r, eds., Einkommensverteilung in Österreich (Munich, 1981).

in general. The share of the industrial work force grew with a unique rate of 2,1 % annually from 1880 until 1910 compared to only 0,6 % in Western Europe in general. The share of urban population increased by 2,2 % annually between 1890 and 1910, once again one of the highest rates in Europe⁷⁾. Sweden in fact jumped into industrial society. In contrast to other rapid European industrializers, however, the political history of Sweden is characterised by an exceptional steadiness, by soft transitions and by the rareness of major upheavals. Not only did the European wars of the twentieth century afflict Sweden least; the transition to parliamentary democracy was also unspectacular and unrevolutionary in Sweden. Moreover, Sweden had a long, strong tradition of state intervention and, hence, was not characterised by a dramatic and unprecedented rise of government interventions as in other European countries or as in the U. S. In sum, an unusually dramatic industrialization and a political steadiness make Sweden an interesting case for the history of social inequality.

Poland, which is covered in the paper by Janusz Zarnowsky, is an important case for opposite reasons. Predominately agricultural until the 1950's with few, though sometimes early industrial regions, Poland on the whole is one of the late industrializers among the large European countries. Perhaps due to this backwardness (compared at least to Western Europe), Poland's economic development since her independence was rapid. In spite of relatively modest growth rates of industrial production, the share of the industrial labour force increased rapidly. Since the first reliable occupational census in 1921, it grew from 9 % to 35 % in 1970. Even compared to Sweden, the 20th century Polish labour force changed rapidly⁸⁾. What makes Poland, however, a peculiar case for the history of social inequality, is an exceptional series of political upheavals in the 20th century. When Poland became independent in 1919 from Russian, Prussian, and Austrian rule, a certain foreign part of the upper class and the upper middle class emigrated and might have left behind a different structure of social inequality. Only twenty years later, Poland was occupied by the Nazi forces and suffered from one of the most brutal Nazi policies in occupied European territories. A substantial part of the Polish middle class and lower middle class was exterminated in the Holocaust, again with strong and lasting effects on class structure and social inequality. Finally, when Poland became a com-

7) Calculated from: P. B a i r o c h, "International Industrialization Levels from 1750 to 1980," in: *Journal of European Economic History* 11 (1982), p. 294 (rates of industrial growth per capital); H. K a e l b l e, "Was Prometheus most unbound in Europe? Labour force in Europe during the late 19th and 20th centuries," in: *Journal of European Economic History* 16 (1986) appendix; P. F l o r a, *Quantitative Historical Sociology* (The Hague, 1977), pp. 46 f. (cf. also id., *State, Economy and Society in Western Europe 1800 - 1975*, vol. 2, Francfort, 1984 - 86).

8) Calculated from: B. R. M i t c h e l l, *European Historical Statistics 1750 - 1970* (London, 1978), p. 58; for economic growth cf. B a i r o c h, *Industrialization Levels*, p. 331.

munist country another ten years later, a further upheaval of class structure and change of social inequality in Polish society occurred. In sum, Poland is a case in which social inequality was not only affected by a dramatic economic development but also by dramatic political events.

The United States, which is discussed by Olivier Zunz, is important for our theme since it was for some Europeans the most attractive or for others the most repellent, egalitarian model. A "charm of American Life" wrote the British ambassador to the United States, James Bryce, in 1888 was the attenuated form of social inequality. "People meet on a simple and natural footing, with more frankness and ease than is possible in countries where every one is either looking up or looking down. There is no servility on the part of the humbler... . There is no condescension on the part of the more highly placed⁹⁾." Many Europeans before and after saw the United States in this egalitarian way and their own Europe in an unequalitarian way. James Bryce makes clear that he speaks of a specific sort of social inequality. He does not want to say that the social differentials of the standard of living were less distinct in the U. S. than in Europe. He does not deal with this understanding of social inequality which can be often found - as we saw - among social historians. He only says that social distinctions were less clearly drawn than in Europe and that the different worlds of social classes were less separated in the United States. It is this meaning of social inequality which matters in historical comparisons between Europe and America. In fact, it is this meaning which stands behind the following article by Olivier Zunz on the American white collar employees of the period in which James Bryce saw America.

For all these reasons I think the following papers are important and stimulating. I hope they are also the beginning of more intensive and more comparative research on the long-term historical change of social inequality in modern societies.

9) J. Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (New York, 1888), citation from: H. S. Commager, ed., *America in Perspective. The United States through Foreign Eyes* (New York, 1947), pp. 233 f.