

### The Dynamics of Inequality and Habitus Formation: Elias, Bourdieu, and the Rise of Nationalist Populism

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Wilterdink, N. (2017). The Dynamics of Inequality and Habitus Formation: Elias, Bourdieu, and the Rise of Nationalist Populism. *Historical Social Research*, 42(4), 22-42. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.42.2017.4.22-42>

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# Historical Social Research Historische Sozialforschung

*Nico Wilterdink:*

The Dynamics of Inequality and Habitus Formation.  
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doi: 10.12759/hsr.42.2017.4.22-42

Published in:

*Historical Social Research* 42 (2017) 4

Cite as:

Wilterdink, Nico. 2017 The Dynamics of Inequality and Habitus Formation.  
Elias, Bourdieu, and the Rise of Nationalist Populism.  
*Historical Social Research* 42 (4): 22-42. doi: 10.12759/hsr.42.2017.4.22-42.

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doi: [10.12759/hsr.42.2017.4.227-249](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.42.2017.4.227-249)

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# The Dynamics of Inequality and Habitus Formation. Elias, Bourdieu, and the Rise of Nationalist Populism

Nico Wilterdink\*

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**Abstract:** »Die Dynamiken von Ungleichheit und Herausbildung von Habitus. Elias, Bourdieu und der Aufstieg des nationalen Populismus«. This article deals with the dynamics of social inequality and social stratification from a historical-sociological perspective. It purports to clarify basic problems in this field with the help of insights developed by sociologists Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu. I systematically compare both thinkers' ideas on the dynamics of inequality, pointing out similarities and divergences, and critically discuss them. After a summary of basic notions in their work, the paper deals subsequently with the reproduction of inequality in connection with habitus formation; changes in inequality structures over time - more specifically, trends of decreasing inequality (functional democratisation) and increasing inequality (functional de-democratisation); and the causal connections between changes in inequality structures and changes in habitus, mentality, and ideology. The final section of the paper focuses on a current issue: the emergence of populism in contemporary Western societies. On the basis of the preceding argument, I advance a tentative explanation of the rise of nationalist populism in the context of tendencies of increasing socioeconomic inequality.

**Keywords:** Social inequality, power resources, social classes, habitus, populism.

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## 1. Introduction

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In the 1980s, after a long period of decreasing class differences, socioeconomic inequality in the Western world took a turn toward a steady increase. Since that decade, differences in income and wealth have grown in most, if not all Western countries. While top managerial incomes and private fortunes exploded, middle and lower level wages declined, stagnated, or rose only modestly. Moreover, material precariousness among the middle and lower strata increased with declining job security, 'flexibilisation' of the labour market, heavy fluctuations in employment, and cuts in social insurance and welfare spending.

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I wish to thank Bowen Paulle and Behrouz Alikhani for their constructive comments.

The power balance between big private firms, national governments and organized labour shifted in favour of the former.

While this turn toward increasing inequality has evoked indignation and protest among certain groups, it has not led to broadly based class actions or to growing support for left-wing parties who traditionally claim to defend working-class interests. Rather the contrary: in recent years we have seen a turn to the right in many Western democracies, manifested by nationalist anti-immigration parties who claim to represent ‘the people’ in opposition to a political and cultural (rather than economic) ‘elite’ which is perceived as favouring immigration and ethnic minorities. The intriguing question, then, is how to explain this rise of nationalist populism in view of the tendency towards growing socio-economic inequality?

This paper purports to clarify this issue. Before focusing on this current topic, however, I will discuss a set of theoretical questions on a much higher level of generality within which the specific question on the emergence of nationalist populism can be placed: What is, in general terms, the connection between social stratification and class inequality on the one hand and differential habitus formation, mentality, and outlook on the other? How are inequality structures reproduced and how do they change? How do large-scale developments in social inequality and stratification impinge on changes in habitus among different social strata?

In dealing with these broad questions, I will draw from the work of the two social scientists who are, one may argue, the most important theorists on social inequality of the 20th century: Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu. Their theoretical views are similar, even to such a degree that some authors speak of one distinct sociological approach, called relational or processual (Paulle et al. 2012; cf. Emirbayer 1997). Moreover, they share a focal interest in social inequality. Both Elias and Bourdieu were preoccupied with questions concerning the nature, causes, and consequences of relations of unequal power, privileges, and prestige. Both regarded these questions as central to sociology, and had strong personal motivations, connected with their social background and life experiences, to focus their inquiries on these topics (Bourdieu 2007; Heinich 2013).

The first purpose of this paper is, then, to clarify general theoretical issues concerning the dynamics of social inequality with the help of the theories of Elias and Bourdieu. After a summary of basic notions in their work on social inequality (section 2), section 3 will deal with mechanisms of reproduction of inequality, and section 4 with mechanisms of change and development. Section 5 will focus on the question of how changes in inequality structures and changes in habitus formation are connected. On the basis of my theoretical argument, the final section will present a tentative explanation of the emergence of nationalist populism in the context of growing socioeconomic inequality.

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## 2. 'Beyond Marx'

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In their work on social stratification and inequality, Elias and Bourdieu had to deal with the theory that still had an enormous impact on social thought and politics: Marxian class theory. Both claimed to go 'beyond Marx' by, on the one hand, recognizing the continuing importance of class relations as a source of tensions and conflicts in modern societies, and on the other hand, criticizing Marxian theory for its one-sidedness, determinism, and tendency to economic reductionism, and developing a much broader view on the sources and dynamics of social inequality.

Elias did so by arguing that social inequality, or, more specifically, social stratification was by no means defined exclusively by 'classes' in the Marxian sense. Social inequality could not simply be reduced to relations in the sphere of material production from which class divisions, such as between capital owning entrepreneurs and industrial workers, emerged. This was not even the case in Marx's own time, during the heyday of expansive industrial capitalism (Elias 2006 [1970], 185-91). Therefore, Elias usually preferred the broader term 'stratum' (*Schicht* in German); this could refer to a primarily economic 'class,' but also to, for example, a ruling group of warriors who base their power primarily on their control of the means of physical violence, or a court aristocracy whose members cultivate a distinct lifestyle, or an ethnic minority whose members are defined as outsiders by the dominating majority (see e.g. Elias 1997 [1939], 20-2, 79-80, 85-6, 301-4, 350-9, 368-70, 430-9). Relations of unequal power are at the root of all forms of stratification. This idea was originally formulated by Max Weber (1922, 631-40), who distinguished between 'classes,' 'status groups' (*Stände*), and 'parties.' Unlike Weber and later sociologists of stratification, however, Elias was wary of making sharp conceptual distinctions between different dimensions of social inequality or stratification, as these dimensions are strongly intertwined; social strata observed in empirical reality, he suggested, are not merely 'classes' or 'status groups' or 'parties,' but mixtures of such ideal types.

Bourdieu went 'beyond Marx' in a different way. He held on to the centrality of 'class' and the Marxian assumption that class divisions are primarily based on differences in the possession of capital. He also concurred with the Marxian terminology by giving the three main class categories distinguished for contemporary French society the names of 'bourgeoisie,' 'petite bourgeoisie,' and 'working classes' (Bourdieu 1984). He deviated from Marx, however, by redefining 'capital' into a much broader concept. In Bourdieu's terminology the concept does not only refer to economic capital, but includes 'cultural capital' (everything profitable that is socially learned, ranging from school knowledge to social manners and cultural taste), 'social capital' (participation in valuable reciprocal social relations) and 'symbolic capital' (legitimate claims of status and authority), to take only the main types distinguished (Bourdieu

1986; 1987, 4; 1991, esp. 238-9). Moreover, modern societies are differentiated into 'fields,' which differ in prioritizing different forms of capital. Thus, while the accumulation of economic capital is the primary goal in the business world, which is the core of the economic field, the acquisition and accumulation of cultural capital has priority in the fields of education, the sciences, and the arts (Bourdieu 1993). At the same time, the fields are interwoven and interconnected, and the different types of capital are convertible into one another. Each type is pursued as both an end in itself and a means to accumulate more capital of the same or other types.

While the terminology differs, the theoretical views on social inequality developed by Elias and Bourdieu are similar. Bourdieu's concept of 'capital' can be regarded as identical to 'power resource' as used by Elias. Both Elias and Bourdieu argue that different power resources or types of capital are interconnected but cannot be reduced to one another, and that they generate various forms of social inequality, which vary among societies and change over time. Power resources are often at the same time intrinsically rewarding privileges, and privileges often function as power resources or forms of capital. Elias and Bourdieu both reject simple cause-and-effect models in which causation is supposed to work in one direction, and argue, instead, for thinking in terms of processes of mutual causation.

There are also strong similarities in the types of power resources or capital that our two protagonists put forward. Thus, Elias (1994, xviii) argued in *The Established and the Outsiders* that social cohesion is an important power resource, to be distinguished from capital ownership and control of the means of physical violence; this is akin to Bourdieu's notion of social capital. Elias also introduced in this book the concept of 'group charisma,' which is similar to Bourdieu's 'symbolic capital.'

There are also striking differences, however. Bourdieu did not include the control of means of violence in his list of capital types, though he dealt extensively with state power in a posthumously published volume (Bourdieu 2012). Elias, on his part, did not mention explicitly school knowledge and formal education as a power resource, which in Bourdieu's terminology is dubbed 'educational capital' (*capital scolaire*), an important part of cultural capital. These conceptual divergences have to do with differences in empirical orientation and research interests: whereas Elias investigated long-term social developments in which violent struggles for political power were essential, Bourdieu focused most of his empirical research on one contemporary, relatively pacified state society, France, in which formal education has become a main determinant of occupation and income chances. As both scholars developed their theoretical ideas in immediate connection to their empirical work, this partly explains the theoretical and conceptual differences.

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### 3. Habitus and the Reproduction of Inequality

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The arguably most important similarity between the two thinkers has not yet been mentioned: their focus on the mental, psychological consequences of social inequality. They both explained and demonstrated how people's personalities are shaped by their position in inequality structures, how inequality goes under their skin, forming their attitudes, outlook, and habits; in short, how it moulds their habitus. This is central in almost all of Elias's work, from *On the Process of Civilization* and *The Court Society* to *Studies on the Germans*. It is just as important in Bourdieu's oeuvre, exemplified most famously by *Distinction* (1984).

Again, habitus is not just an 'effect,' but also a 'cause': maintaining and reinforcing the inequality by which it is shaped. Differential habitus formation is essential to the reproduction of social inequality. Elias made this most explicit in *The Established and the Outsiders*, in which he and his student John Scotson describe the results of their research into the relations between two groups of inhabitants of a working-class neighbourhood in Northern England in the 1950s (Elias and Scotson 1994). The one group consisted of 'old families' who lived there for generations, the other group were newcomers. The first group, the 'established,' was characterized by strong mutual bonds among its members, a strong internal social control with which relatively strict norms were upheld, feelings of group pride ('group charisma') and corresponding negative feelings about the members of the other group, the 'outsiders,' who were stigmatized as inferior, indecent, uncivilized. On the basis of this 'empirical paradigm,' Elias developed a general model of established-outsider relations. Whenever there is a clear power difference between two interrelated groups, the more powerful group will develop feelings of superiority with respect to the less powerful group, attribute negative traits to the members of this other group and avoid friendly, informal contacts with them. The less powerful on their part cannot avoid being negatively stigmatized; when the power differences are large and durable, they tend to accept and internalize the negative stigma, developing feelings of inferiority. It is in this way that the inequality between the two groups is continued and confirmed. Feelings of superiority among the established are not only the consequence of unequal power relations; they become in turn a power resource that helps to maintain these relations.

Based on quite different empirical investigations, Bourdieu elaborated similar ideas about the mechanisms of reproduction of social inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1984). People with different class positions develop different orientations, manners, habits, preferences, and norms by which they judge other people's behaviour. Some preferences and judgements are legitimate; that is, they have more 'authority' than others, depending on the capital or power position of those who express these preferences and judgements. Cultural differences are not neutral; they are differences in cultural



capital in so far as they bring forward differential social advantages and disadvantages. This is most apparent in the educational system. Schools transmit a culture that is familiar to the dominant class, and school achievements are judged accordingly, so that children from this class have the best chances to achieve well at school and to acquire the educational credentials that give them access to well-paid and prestigious occupations. In this way, the educational system serves as an institution of reproduction of class inequality, despite its formal openness and principles of 'meritocratic' selection, which serve as a legitimization of the system by concealing the reproduction mechanism. Besides, even when young people with different social origins have equal educational credentials, those from 'good' families have better occupational chances since their habitus is more adapted to the preferences and requirements of those who decide about their careers, who usually share the same class habitus. All forms of capital distinguished by Bourdieu – economic, cultural, social, symbolic – are to a large extent transmitted from one to the next generation along family lines (though often indirectly and covertly) and, therefore, are vehicles of reproduction of inequality. The dominant institutions of society – the state, the law, the school system – all contribute to the legitimization of class inequality and its reproduction; they exert, in Bourdieu's strong words, 'symbolic violence' (1977, 190-7) toward the underprivileged who, as a result, tend to accept their position as normal and become complicit in producing and reproducing inequality.

All this sounds perhaps quite different from Elias's treatise on the established and the outsiders. Yet the basic argument is the same. The effective negative stigmatisation of the outsiders by the established is what Bourdieu would call symbolic violence. The 'group charisma' of the established is 'symbolic capital' in Bourdieu's terms. Power differences are translated into mental, 'habitual' differences, which express, legitimate, reinforce and serve to continue the power differences: this is the basic mechanism of reproduction that both authors point out.

A few critical remarks are in place here. Bourdieu's concept of 'reproduction' implicitly refers to two processes of continuation, which are not clearly distinguished: the continuation of current inequality structures, and the intergenerational transfer of capital and privileges along family lines. Reproduction in both senses is never perfect: inequality structures always change to some extent, and there is always some degree of intergenerational mobility – the transfer of capital (particularly cultural or, more specifically, educational capital) from parents to children is never guaranteed. The question then is, how strong is the *degree* of 'reproduction' in these two senses in different societies and time periods? Another question is how these two forms of variable reproduction are empirically interconnected – in particular, how individual or collective social mobility (i.e. 'imperfect' reproduction in the second sense) may induce changes in inequality structures and differential habitus formation,

which signify ruptures in the reproduction of structures of inequality; and vice versa. Bourdieu did not deal explicitly with these questions.

Another limitation in the work of both Elias and Bourdieu is that in stressing the adaptive and reproductive functions of habitus, they did not discuss systematically and extensively the possibility that the habitus contains potentialities for resistance, opposition or even revolt, and the conditions under which these potentialities may manifest in actual behaviour (cf. Crossley 2003). I will return to this point in section 5.

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#### 4. Trends and Transformations in Social Inequality: Functional Democratisation and De-Democratisation

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The theories of Elias and Bourdieu diverge more widely when it comes to trends and transformations in social inequality. While both approaches are dynamic, Bourdieu does not seem to be very much concerned with the structure of social developments in the long run. He does describe and analyse certain historical developments, such as the genesis of the literary field in nineteenth-century France (Bourdieu 1996), and the growing importance and strong expansion of formal education in the twentieth century, with its momentous consequences for class relations, social reproduction, and habitus formation. But these changes are not explained from a developmental perspective, which is central in Elias's approach.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Bourdieu does not enter into questions about the direction of trends in social inequality – whether societies become more or less unequal in given periods, and how to explain these trends.

These questions have been discussed by Elias in several of his writings. In his *opus magnum* on the process of civilisation, he refers to 'increasing constraints on the upper class' and 'increasing pressures from below' as part of the social transformations that were at the basis of civilising processes in Europe since the late Middle Ages (Elias 2012 [1939], 464-78). In line with this, he introduces in *Was ist Soziologie?* (1970) the concept of 'functional democratisation' to refer to a trend of diminishing power differences in European societies during the last two to three hundred years: a 'reduction of power differentials between governments and governed,' a 'reduction of power differentials between different strata,' and a 'transformation of all social relationships in the direction of a greater degree of reciprocal, multi-polar dependence and control.' Functional democratisation has been the basis of institutional democratisation, which includes the shift from monarchical to parliamentary power and the

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that Bourdieu was only a theorist of reproduction or that his work is a-historical (see for extensive criticisms of such an interpretation: Gorski 2013). Yet he distrusted general statements on long-term developments (see e.g. Bourdieu and Chartier 2015, 58-66; cf. also Calhoun 1993, and Calhoun 2013, esp. 65, note 6).

extension of voting rights to, eventually, all adult citizens of a nation-state (Elias 2012 [1970], 61-3).

Elias explains this development as resulting from processes of functional specialisation and differentiation, in which members of different occupational groups and strata become more mutually and reciprocally dependent on each other, and, related to that, the extension of networks of interdependence. “Chains of interdependence become more differentiated and grow longer; consequently they become more opaque and, for any single group or individual, more uncontrollable” (ibid., 64). As a consequence of these intertwined processes, power balances tend to become more even.

This explanation seems to rest on two general assumptions. The first is that power differentials are a function of relations of interdependence: the less one-sided and more mutually reciprocal the interdependencies between groups and individuals in a given social figuration are, the narrower the power differences. Secondly, it is assumed that functional differentiation and the lengthening of the chains of interdependence imply a movement in the direction of more mutuality, more reciprocity in the relations of interdependence and, therefore, more even power balances. While the first assumption is well-grounded (cf. Emerson 1962; Blau 1967), the second is much more vulnerable to empirical criticism.

If we broaden the scope to places and periods other than Europe following the Middle Ages or the start of the industrial revolution, it is not difficult to find historical developments that contradict this second thesis. Since the emergence of agriculture in some parts of the world, functional differentiation and the growth of networks of interdependence went hand in hand with the growth of power differentials within and between human societies – increasing stratification, growing distance between elites and common people, sharper differentiation between rulers and ruled. For the greater part of human history, we can see a positive causal connection between social differentiation and the growth of networks of interdependence on the one hand, and increasing power differences and social inequality on the other. When societies grew larger and more differentiated, some people could profitably specialize in activities other than the production of goods – in the use of physical force to exploit other people (warriors), in religious knowledge and rituals (priests), or in long-distance trade (merchants), and thereby accumulate power and wealth (Lenski 1966; Mann 1986; Goudsblom 1996a, 1996b; Scheidel 2017).

If there is a connection between functional differentiation and growing networks of interdependence on the one hand and decreasing inequality of power and privileges on the other, it is apparently valid for only specific historical periods under specific conditions. An important condition in Europe since the nineteenth century is that these processes largely took place in the framework of strong and strengthening national states that heavily competed with one another. Within national state boundaries, owners and managers of industrial

firms became more dependent on industrial workers as the demand for industrial work increased, and national governments became more dependent on citizens of all strata of the population, as they were increasingly mobilized for common national goals, particularly in times of war and war preparation. The growth of government expenditures and government control (in the spheres of education, health, infrastructure, social security as well as the police and the army) went hand in hand with the extension of citizens' rights, including voting rights. These changes in the nature of interdependencies on the national level, together with long-term intensive economic growth since the beginnings of large-scale industrial production, led to substantial improvements in the living conditions of workers, which helped them to pursue their collective interests. Literacy, more leisure time, higher wages, better health: these were power resources conducive to the organization of workers in unions and political parties, which were in turn power resources that could contribute to further improvements in their living conditions and to an overall decrease in socioeconomic inequality.

When Elias published *Was ist Soziologie?* in 1970, this development within Western national state societies was about to reach its culmination point. Unprecedented post-war economic growth had made possible the extension of inclusive welfare arrangements in increasingly prosperous societies in which poverty had virtually disappeared and income and wealth differences had become smaller than ever before. Around 1970, there were hardly any signs that this development would stop in the foreseeable future. Like Elias, most social scientists viewed democratisation and the diminishment of inequalities as a consequence and integral part of ongoing modernisation.

This is not what happened after the 1970s. As noted in the first paragraph, social inequality has tended to increase since around 1980, at least in the economic sphere (OECD 2011; Atkinson et al. 2011; Piketty 2014; Reich 2007). We may explain this recent trend with the help of a figurational or 'Eliasian' power-interdependence model, which assumes that (1) inequalities in material and nonmaterial privileges or rewards are a function of power differentials, (2) power differentials are a function of relations of interdependence (as noted above), and (3) interdependencies at different integration levels (such as state and inter-state levels) are interconnected (Wilterdink 2000, 2016). The basic explanation is that with strong and ongoing economic internationalisation and globalisation over the past few decades, interdependencies on the national level have become weaker; in particular, economically privileged and powerful groups and organisations have become less dependent on other groups and organisations within national state borders, including national governments. Globalisation processes since the 1970s, induced by technological innovations in communication and transport, as well as political reforms directed at 'liberalizing' international markets, are a continuation of the long-term trend of the extension of networks of interdependence, but now leading to a *weakening* of

interdependencies on the national scale. With the enormous increase of international capital mobility and the growth and transnationalisation of large private companies and investment funds, the owners and managers of these organisations become less dependent on the workers and the government of a given national state. Unions lose bargaining power when their (potential) members have to compete with workers in other states on an international labour market. Governments become more dependent on international capital flows and transnational corporations as they have to compete for investments and jobs, and are under increasing pressure to make their country more attractive for these ‘global players’ by lowering taxes and labour costs and deregulating the economy.

The trend of growing inequalities is not confined to the economic sphere, but has political repercussions as well. Particularly for the United States, in which economic inequality has increased more than in any other Western country since the 1980s, an interaction between this trend and a growing impact on American politics by business organisations, corporations, financial institutions, and wealthy individuals – through intensive lobbying, financing election campaigns, think tanks, and mass media – has been observed (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Volscho and Kelly 2012; Stiglitz 2012). Such a spiral of mutual causation between increasing economic inequality and increasing political inequality can be observed, or presumed, for other Western state societies as well (Crouch 2004). There are reasons, then, to contend that the trend of functional democratisation within industrial nation-states did not only come to a halt since the 1980s, but reversed in the direction of what some authors have called functional de-democratisation (Mennell 2007, 311, 313; Mennell 2014; Alikhani 2014).

The picture is different when we look at socioeconomic inequalities on a global scale. The historical period in which the trend of functional democratisation within Western national societies was dominant also saw a strong increase of global inequality. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when in the West, mass parties and labour unions were founded which gave a voice to lower strata, Western states extended and intensified their colonial power over large parts of the rest of the world. This was reversed after the Second World War when former colonies acquired political independence, but in this same period the income gap between the rich, mainly Western countries and poor, non-Western countries further increased dramatically.

This also changed since the 1980s. All in all, the gap between rich and poor countries began to diminish, though the economic growth rates among different poorer regions and countries varied strongly. The most striking component of this trend was the spectacular economic expansion since the late 1970s of the world’s most populous country, China, which rose from a position among the poorest countries to a middle-income level. To put it schematically: *increasing* economic inequality *within* countries (in Western, but also most non-Western countries) is accompanied with a tendency of *decreasing* economic inequality

*between* countries (Milanovic 2016). Both tendencies can be plausibly related to globalisation: the extension of interdependencies at transnational and global levels. The relocation of labour-intensive manufacturing industries and the growth of investment flows from richer to poorer countries weakened the position of workers in the rich countries, and contributed to economic growth in poorer regions and thereby narrowing the gap with richer countries. We have to keep in mind, however, that not all poor countries and regions in the world conform to this general pattern, and specific local conditions continue to play a significant role in the chances for economic growth.

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## 5. Changes in Social Inequality and Habitus Formation

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Developments in power relations towards decreasing or increasing inequality on different levels as sketched in the preceding section will have consequences for habitus formation among the groups involved. What are these consequences? Following Elias and Bourdieu, the most general answer to this general question is that members of different groups will adapt their habitus to the changing situation. When members of a powerful group lose power, their feelings of superiority with respect to the less powerful will become more unstable, weaker, and eventually perhaps vanish altogether. And when a relatively powerless group wins power, their feelings of inferiority, their internalized negative self-stigmatisation, will become weaker and possibly disappear. Members of a collectively rising group may even develop feelings of superiority with respect to a more powerful group, Elias argued, as they resort to ‘counter-stigmatisation,’ attributing negative traits to the still dominant but challenged group (Elias 2012 [1939], 472-3; 1994, xxi).

These ideas can be used to explain observable changes in habitus and cultural orientations in relation to the trend of decreasing power disparities within Western nation-states from about 1880 to 1980. In everyday social interactions between members of different strata, status inequality became less outspoken; as can be derived from etiquette books, it became more or less taboo for members of dominant groups to explicitly express status superiority over people from lower ranks, whereas for the latter the social coercion to show inferiority, deference, and obedience toward people with a higher status weakened (Wouters 2007; Elias 2013 [1989], 22-48; cf. Collins 2004, 258-96). Egalitarian ideas spread and became stronger among various groupings of the population, including the upper and middle strata. Functional and institutional democratisation went hand in hand with ‘habitual’ democratisation (Alikhani 2014).

However, as the decrease of inequality took place within the framework of competing national states, these egalitarian ideas and attitudes were often confined to the national borders and coupled with strong national we-feelings, antagonistic feelings toward other nations and the negative stigmatisation of

minorities within the state borders who were defined as not belonging to the nation. The wave of democratisation at the end of the nineteenth century went together with an upsurge of ethnic nationalism, which could stand in the way of institutional democratisation. This was manifested most dramatically in the rise of Fascism – including National Socialism – in Central Europe after the First World War. With its stress on mass mobilization, national solidarity, and a strong caring state, Fascism had undeniably egalitarian traits, while at the same time it was anti-democratic in its rejection of plurality, its reverence for authoritarian leadership, and its definition of other nations or races within and outside the state borders as both dangerous and inferior. It was only after the Second World War, and as a response to that war, that the idea of universal human rights became internationally recognized, formalised, and institutionalised. National we-feelings remained important, however, and continued to mix or to compete with other group identifications.

The intensification of class struggles and the rise of socialism in the nineteenth century may also be interpreted with the help of Elias's argument. Growing class conflicts, he suggests, did not spring from the growing (absolute or at least relative) misery of the working class and a widening gap with the bourgeoisie, as Marx would have it, but rather from an increase in relative power of the working class in relation to the dominant strata. Socialism was, for members of the working class and their intellectual leaders, a way of counter-stigmatising the bourgeoisie and expressing one's own moral superiority, or even (as in the Marxist doctrine) one's superior knowledge about the course of history.

Yet it would be too simple to turn the Marxian thesis on its head and leave it at that. In order to understand in general terms 'why men rebel,' we may start with the assumption that the habitus is usually not a coherent whole, but contains diverging dispositions. More specifically, we may assume that in a stratified society the habitus of the underprivileged and dominated is a mixture of acceptance and rejection of existing inequalities; of deference and conformity toward the more powerful on the one hand, feelings of resentment and animosity on the other (Wertheim 1974, 105-19).<sup>2</sup> Negative feelings and oppositional dispositions among the dominated become more manifest and stronger, one may hypothesize, under three conditions: 1) the power balance changes in favour of the dominated;<sup>3</sup> 2) conflicts of interests between the dominant and the

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<sup>2</sup> In some parts of their work, both Elias and Bourdieu allude to this basic ambivalence (e.g. Elias 2012 [1939], 472ff; Bourdieu 1991, 90-102).

<sup>3</sup> This has been advanced not only by Elias, but also suggested in the extensive literature on social movements and social revolutions with such notions as 'power resource mobilization' and 'political opportunity structure' (see e.g. Snow et al. 2004). Cf. also Elias (2006 [1969], 286-93) on 'the sociogenesis of the French revolution' in the final chapter of *The Court Society*.

dominated become more visible and outspoken;<sup>4</sup> and 3) the living conditions and prospects of the dominated worsen in relation to habitus-induced social expectations.<sup>5</sup>

For the working classes of the industrializing societies in the second half of the nineteenth century, the first and second conditions were met according to several indications. The relative power of the industrial working class increased with growing interdependence between social classes within nation-states and processes of large-scale industrialisation and urbanisation, which created favourable conditions for workers to organise into unions and parties to defend their interests.<sup>6</sup> The power shift in favour of the industrial working class manifested in political measures, such as the legal recognition of labour unions, the regulation of working hours, and the extension of the franchise. In this same period, conflicts of interest between social classes became more visible, as the contrasts between the rich and the poor could be identified increasingly with conflicts in the field of material production between exploiting capitalist owners and exploited workers, whose labour produced the capitalists' profits. This definition of the situation was a powerful motivation of class action.

As a result of decreasing power differences in combination with long-term economic growth, the economic position of the working class improved considerably in the course of the twentieth century, both in absolute terms and in comparison to other classes. This became particularly clear in the first three

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<sup>4</sup> I have advanced and elaborated this idea in my work on the development of property relations and wealth inequality in the Netherlands since the mid-nineteenth century (Wilterdink 2015, 261-7).

<sup>5</sup> This is a core idea in older explanations of social revolutions and rebellions, such as by Davies (1969) and Gurr (1970). While this much-criticized 'volcanic model' (Aya 1990) provides, at best, only partial explanations for actual actions of rebellion and resistance, the core idea itself remains quite plausible. It has been used by Bourdieu (1988, 156 ff.) in his analysis of the student revolt in Paris in May 1968; a basic source of this revolt, according to him, was the growing discrepancy between normative expectations about the value of academic diplomas and their actual devaluation. Another, broader elaboration of this idea is by Barrington Moore (1978), who suggests that feelings of injustice arise when the 'moral code' of perceived reciprocity between rulers and ruled is broken. All three hypothesized conditions deserve, of course, a much longer discussion than can be given in the framework of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> These processes contributing to increasing working class power are part of the Marxian account of intensifying class struggles under capitalism (Marx and Engels 1976 [1848], 490-4). Even the notion of growing interdependence between bourgeoisie and working class is not absent: "The bourgeoisie finds itself involved in a constant battle. [...] In all these battles it sees itself compelled to appeal to the proletariat, to ask for its help, and thus, to drag it into the political arena. The bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education, in other words, it furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie" (ibid., 493). These ideas were not conceived, however, in terms of changing power relations. Marxian theory combines an implicit notion of growing power resources for the working class in the course of capitalist development with an explicit stress on the growing gap with the bourgeoisie.



decades after the Second World War, when fast income growth and the extension of welfare state arrangements led to unprecedented levels of consumption and material security. In this development, parties that claimed to represent workers' interests became, on the whole, more moderate and pragmatic, substituting ideas of a 'mixed economy,' regulated industrial relations, and gradual progress for the prospect of intensifying class struggles leading to an overthrow of capitalism. This ideological change was viewed by some sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s as indicative of the 'embourgeoisement' of the working class: with growing prosperity, its members would increasingly resemble, or even join, the middle classes. Yet, as critics of this thesis pointed out, oppositional dispositions among industrial workers, though hardly radical, did not disappear in this period, and working-class families in Western Europe still tended to remain distinct from white collar middle-class families in work orientation, lifestyle, class identification, and political attitudes (Goldthorpe et al. 1969).

This changed in the decades that followed, when manifest class divisions tended to fade away. With the transformation of inequality structures, group identifications changed. Group boundaries were redefined, feelings of solidarity and animosity redirected. This will be specified in the next section, where we deal with the recent rise of nationalist populism.

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## 6. Growing Socioeconomic Inequality and the Rise of Nationalist Populism

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How can the rise of nationalist populism in contemporary Western societies in the context of increasing socioeconomic inequality be explained, then? I will suggest here a tentative and succinct answer on the basis of the preceding theoretical argument.

The concept of 'nationalist populism' (or, for short, just 'populism') is used here to refer to the political ideas propagated by such parties as the *Front National* in France, the AfD in Germany, the FPÖ in Austria, the UKIP in Britain, the PVV in the Netherlands, the *Lega Nord* in Italy as well as the branch of the Republican Party embodied by the new president of the United States. Populism in these different manifestations claims to represent the will of 'the people' or 'the nation' in opposition to a political and cultural 'elite' that sets itself apart from the large majority, serves its own interests to the detriment of the common good, and favours outsider groups of foreigners, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities. Populist leaders claim to voice the opinions of the people, defined as united and indivisible; therefore, their opponents can only be enemies of the people. In its stress on national unity and homogeneity, populism is anti-liberal and anti-pluralistic (cf. Mudde 2007; Müller 2016).

Two kinds of social scientific explanations for the growing attraction of populism in recent years have been advanced: a cultural explanation, which

views populism's popularity as a backlash, a reaction against large cultural transformations in Western societies during the past few decades in the direction of secularization, individualism, permissiveness, cosmopolitanism, and gender equality; and an economic or materialistic explanation, which views the movement primarily as a response to increasing relative deprivation and economic insecurity (Inglehart and Norris 2016). While both explanations find a degree of support in empirical research, they are, at best, only partial, even if combined. The cultural thesis cannot explain why populist movements of the kind and the size that we see today in Western societies, did not arise already in the 1960s and subsequent decades, when the cultural transformations that populism is supposed to be a reaction against were particularly strong. Moreover, not all populist parties distinguish themselves by an outspoken and comprehensive cultural conservatism. While the Christian Right, with its stress on family values and strict sexual morality, is a feeding ground and supporter of right-wing populism in the United States, this is not, or much less, the case in Western Europe. Thus, the Dutch populist leader Geert Wilders (PVV) stresses the national values of gender equality and sexual freedom against Islamic intolerance, traditionalism, and oppression of women (cf. Brubaker 2017).

The economic explanation falls short as it does not make clear why material deprivation, economic insecurity, and increasing inequality would give rise to nationalist populism, and why these tendencies did not lead to more support for, and radicalisation of, established socialist or social-democratic parties (but rather to the contrary), to a renewed intensification of class conflicts, and to mass protests against the growing power and wealth of the corporate rich. True, in recent years there have been, in various countries, waves of radical, anti-capitalist opposition to growing inequality (such as the Occupy movement that started in New York in 2011), but these movements were mainly articulated and supported by intellectuals and high-educated young people with uncertain career prospects. Among the supporters of anti-immigration populist parties and politicians, on the other hand, people with lower educational qualifications and in economically vulnerable positions (manual workers, low-paid service workers, small entrepreneurs) are overrepresented (Inglehart and Norris 2016).

In the broader explanation that I propose here, the recent rise of nationalist populism in Western societies is viewed as a manifestation of habitus changes that are related to transformations in the class structure: processes in which the growth of class inequalities combines with the blurring of class boundaries and the weakening of class identities. With the shrinking of the industrial working class since the 1970s, the decline of labour unions (in membership and bargaining power), the shift toward a postindustrial service economy and the increasing flexibilisation of work relations, 'class' has largely lost its significance as a basis of group identification and political outlook. Instead, and connected with these economic changes, an ethos of meritocratic individualism, which legitimates economic inequality as the result of fair competition on the basis of

individual achievements and merits, has become more dominant. In this ideology, high incomes and large private fortunes reflect outstanding achievements by successful individuals rather than unjust social arrangements. With the power shift in favour of the owners and managers of transnational firms, these members of the economic elite enlarged not only their economic capital, but also their symbolic capital; popular media gave them increasing publicity as models of success to be followed; and the inclination to upwards identification with this economic elite among the less well-to-do grew stronger.

Changes in power-interdependence relations on national and international levels also had an impact on the ideological orientations of politicians and political parties. Neo-liberalism, as it came to be called, with its core idea that government regulation of the economy should be kept to a minimum and that free markets serve the general interest, became the dominant creed. This extended to parties that traditionally claimed to serve the interests of the underprivileged, such as Britain's Labour Party, the Social Democratic parties on the European continent and the Democratic Party in the USA, which accepted and instigated policies of privatization, deregulation, lower tax rates on profits and high incomes, and cuts in social expenditures (cf. Bourdieu 1999, 2001). Whatever one may think of this reorientation, its effect was that these parties could hardly function anymore as objects of identification for members of lower and middle strata, or canalize and articulate their grievances. Progressive parties came to align with 'identity movements' of women, gays, and ethnic and racial minorities, which had a strong base at universities and attracted high-educated people in particular. This only contributed to the growing distance between these parties and non-minority members of lower strata. Terms like leftist, progressive and (in the American discourse) liberal came to be associated increasingly with high-educated, intellectual, and elitist.

At the same time, non-minority members of middle and lower classes in Western societies – comprising manual workers, small entrepreneurs, and service workers with low or intermediate educational qualifications – experienced material deprivations and status degradation, which fuelled grievances and resentment. They underwent, we may say, a fourfold relative loss. First, as citizens of rich nation-states they lost part of their privileged position with respect to the inhabitants of non-Western, poorer countries. Second, within their own societies their economic position worsened in comparison to wealthy and high-income groups. Third, with the strong expansion of formal education and the overall upgrading of educational requirements they lost ground – in terms of numbers, economic position, and social status – in relation to the growing stratum of high-educated professionals. And fourth, their position weakened in relation to people who are not counted as belonging to the ethnic-national majority, the overlapping (but not identical) categories of recent immigrants and their offspring, and ethnic and racial minorities. Whereas the first and the fourth developments are connected with tendencies of decreasing ine-

quality on a global scale, the second and the third ones reflect shifts of increasing inequality within national societies.

The fourth development in particular is the feeding ground and primary motive of nationalist populism. Mass immigration from poorer to richer countries as part of wider processes of globalization contributed to the dissolution of class identities, the blurring of class lines and the growth of class inequalities within the richer countries. Whereas members of upper and upper-middle strata can easily distinguish themselves from the large majority of these immigrants, this is more difficult for the less privileged, whose class position is more similar to that of most immigrants. These minority groups became an easy target for grievances and antagonist sentiments, as they were defined as the others who threaten 'our' jobs and incomes, material security, physical safety, and ways of living. Antagonism is reinforced by resistance to 'integration' among groups of immigrants, who often remain strongly attached to their own ethnic group and country of origin, and sometimes embrace a militant version of Islam that defines itself as fundamentally anti-Western. This is a form of counter-stigmatisation that only contributes to negative stigmatisation on the part of the native population.

This downward negative targeting of outsider groups is combined with the upward negative targeting of the (political and cultural) 'elite,' who are attacked for their supposed readiness to allow the outsiders to come in, to protect them and give them special advantages. Populist leaders try to win votes by promising to do away with this elite and 'give the country back to the people.' Among their followers, distrust toward politics and politicians often goes hand in hand with high trust in the new leader, anti-elitism with admiration for the strong man.

The recent rise of nationalist populism reflects not only a change, but also continuity in habitus formation; or, to put it differently, habitus change builds on previous habitus formation that is connected with long-term social developments. The ethnic or nativist nationalism that is at the core of present-day populism is a continuation of national we-feelings that spread in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century in tandem with the intensification of interdependencies on the national level (cf. Gellner 1983; Elias 2013 [1989], 156-68; Wilterdink 1993). Immigration and growing ethnic diversity have kindled these feelings and given them a more nativist character, in which sharp symbolic boundaries are drawn between the national we-group, defined in cultural, religious, ethnic and sometimes racial terms, and the non-native outsiders. This nationalism is now turned against 'the elite,' which is accused of abandoning the national values and neglecting the common national interests.

Nationalist feelings are also strengthened by a perceived loss of national power and autonomy in relation to other nation-states. In Europe, the main culprit is the European Union, regarded by populist parties as an elitist project directed against the national interests. In the United States, the fear of losing

global dominance has provoked similar reactions. In both Europe and the United States, populism aims at the restoration of national power, glory, and autonomy by retreating from organized international cooperation – which may have the paradoxical effect that the nation’s power and international status actually weaken.

There are, of course, important variations in the nature of populism and its social origins between countries and regions. The USA differs from Western European countries not only in its (still) hegemonic position in the world and the relatively strong impact of strict Christian religiosity within the country, but also in the long history of immigration, the strong cultural tradition of meritocratic individualism (‘the American dream’), and the legacy of racism and ethnic-racial dividedness – interconnected features that in turn may explain why the increase of socioeconomic inequality has been stronger there than in Western Europe (Wilterdink 2016), and why there is more upward identification with the wealthy entrepreneurial and managerial class and a more widespread popular aversion to government regulation and welfare state provisions. In several of these respects, however, Western European societies have become more similar to the USA in the past few decades.

In spite of all the country-specific differences, nationalist populism in its various manifestations has common features and backgrounds. With the help of the theories of Elias and Bourdieu, we can understand its rise as manifestations of habitus changes that are rooted in transformations in power-interdependence relations and class structures on national and international levels. Present-day populism in Western societies, we may say, is a flawed revolt against rising socio-economic inequality and functional de-democratisation. Flawed, because it rests on illusions of national homogeneity and autonomy, because it is not primarily directed against the main driving forces and central actors of rising inequality, and because, if successful, it will not reverse tendencies of de-democratisation but rather reinforce them – most directly by excluding minorities. However, the current popularity of nationalist populism points to serious problems, for which no easy solutions are available.

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