

European Classes

by Milan Bouchet-Valat

Three sociologists analyse the European social structure, looking at the implications of the economic and political integration that has taken shape on the continent. Their approach provides new opportunities for the study of inequalities.

Reviewed: Cédric Hugrée, Étienne Penissat and Alexis Spire, *Les classes sociales en Europe. Tableau des nouvelles inégalités sur le vieux continent*, Paris, Agone, 2017, 272 pp., €19.

While a number of authors have noted with regret that French sociology tends to overlook a class-based approach,¹ recently there seems to have been a renewal of interest in such an approach, this time at European Union level. The book co-written by Cédric Hugrée, Étienne Penissat and Alexis Spire, entitled *Les classes sociales en Europe. Tableau des nouvelles inégalités sur le vieux continent* (Social classes in Europe. An overview of new inequalities on the old continent), was published alongside a special edition of the journal *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*² focusing on the question of the existence of European social classes, to which the authors also contributed.

While the book's radical tone stands in sharp contrast with official publications, it can be considered part of the long-winded line of work developed over almost two decades in European statistical institutes with the purpose of establishing a European socioeconomic classification. It draws on the recent ESeG classification (see boxed text below) that has resulted from this process and which groups individuals according to the position they occupy in the social division of labour. Combined with the increase in available data from large, harmonised statistical surveys, this progress made in describing European societies provides new opportunities for analysing social inequalities.

¹ See, for example, the series of papers published in *Revue française de Socioéconomie*, n° 10, 2012. https://www.cairn-int.info/numero.php?ID_REVUE=E_RFSE&ID_NUMPUBLIE=E_RFSE_010

² *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, "Do European Social Classes Exist?", n° 219, 2017. https://www.cairn-int.info/numero.php?ID_REVUE=E_ARSS&ID_NUMPUBLIE=E_ARSS_219

Whereas existing publications of the European statistical system tend to individualise or nationalise inequalities by measuring the rates of unemployment, poverty and income disparities separately for each country, the authors seek to show that inequalities systematically disadvantage the same social groups and cannot be reduced to their economic dimension. They are based on relations of class domination that span the entire social spectrum and go beyond nations, contrary to what is suggested by a reductive interpretation consisting of confronting countries (benchmarking) or, within each country, “outsiders” and “insiders”, the people and the elite.

European Socioeconomic Groups (ESeG)

Following a report published in 1999, several projects were carried out under the auspices of Eurostat (the European Statistical Institute), with the help of researchers and national statistics institutes with the aim of developing a socioeconomic classification at European level, similar to French socio-professional categories (PCS). After a number of important debates and an initial controversial proposal (known as ESeC), the ESeG classification³ was developed between 2011 and 2014 by an international team led by INSEE and finally adopted by Eurostat for the publication of official statistics on social groups.

In its most aggregated version, the ESeG classification distinguishes 7 groups for the active: managers; professionals; technicians and associate professional employees; small entrepreneurs; clerks and skilled service employees; industrial skilled employees; less skilled employees. A more detailed version distinguishes 30 different categories.

For the authors, the development of political institutions and capitalism on a European scale made it increasingly necessary to conceive class relations beyond the national framework in which they were historically constructed. Can the European Union be considered a partially unified whole, with its own working classes, middle classes and upper classes? Or does the fact of belonging to a particular social class take on a fundamentally different meaning from one country to the next? The book adopts these two perspectives in turn, without really resolving this crucial point.

The first chapter describes the composition of the various EU countries by social class, following a schematic division into working classes, middle classes and upper classes. The next three chapters then describe each of these classes, seeking to highlight the points that are

³ Monique Meron, Michel Amar *et al.*, “ESeG (European Socioeconomic Groups), nomenclature socioéconomique européenne”, Document de travail, F1604, Paris, Insee, 2016.
<https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2022135>

Monique Meron *et al.*, “Final Report of the ESSnet on the harmonisation and implementation of a European socio-economic classification: European Socio-economic Groups (ESeG)”, Paris, Insee, 2014.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cros/sites/crosportal/files/ESEG_finalReport_V10juillet2014_0.pdf

shared by the members of each group across all the European countries. Adopting the opposite perspective, the final chapter then intersects these three classes with nationality in order to bring to light the heterogeneity of classes from one country to the next and propose mergings of classes occupying equivalent positions in subsets of countries.

The book deals with social classes primarily as objective elements (classes in themselves), with the issue of class consciousness and collective mobilisations being dealt with as a secondary factor. The book seeks to provide an overview of inequalities between socioeconomic groups with regard to working conditions, income, education, cultural practices and international mobility. In doing so, it establishes itself as a highly valuable resource on account of the large number of statistics it provides. The abundance of studies cited across a wide range of fields and the concrete illustrations of the phenomena described also make it a useful reference work for all those interested in matters of social classes and inequalities in Europe.

Persistent contrasts between the social structures of European countries

The book is based essentially on the large-scale statistical processing of four major surveys conducted across the countries of the European Union between 2006 and 2015, depending on the case. Despite significant limitations,⁴ this data makes it possible to describe many dimensions of social life using definitions that have been harmonized at European level.

To analyse the data, the authors merge 30 professional groups into three large sets: working classes, middle classes and upper classes. This merging is done to facilitate the presentation of the results and is based on the study of a series of indicators that include household income, level of education, supervision, employment status (public, private or self-employed), working time and working conditions. The subgroups are then described in more detail within each class.

This framework of analysis allows the authors to identify two main sets of countries. The working classes are overrepresented in peripheral southern and eastern Europe particularly on account of the greater presence of industrial and agricultural sectors in the east, and of the traditional, low-skilled tertiary sector in the south. In contrast, the countries in northern and western Europe are characterised by the weight of the middle and upper classes.

⁴ These limitations are due in particular to the rough nature of variables and above all the impossibility of assigning a social class to inactive and unemployed individuals because of the lack of information on their previous occupation. The situations of poverty linked to inactivity and informal work do not therefore form part of the analysis.

The authors conclude negatively with regard to the convergence of European societies towards a common structure. Indeed, the harmonisation of social rights is still pending and the new division of productive labour makes the continent's southern and eastern countries "the workshop, vegetable garden and breadbasket" (p. 32) of the north and the east.

It is nevertheless regrettable that no statistics on the temporal changes to social structures in Europe are provided in support of this statement. More generally, the book repeatedly presents the increase in inequalities on the continent as a foregone conclusion, which it attributes largely to the policies implemented by the European Union, without really having the means to support such an assertion given that the data used relates exclusively to recent years. Yet, as is acknowledged in one passage of the book (p. 35), the trends at play are considerably more complex, and class inequalities in fact lessened in the 1990s before increasing again following the 2008 economic crisis.⁵

Working, middle and upper classes in Europe

The book goes on to provide an overview of the three major social classes.

The working classes make up 43% of European workers. They are defined by their subjugated position, making them vulnerable to the competition between countries that is created by the globalisation of trade and intra-European migrations (particularly work postings). In the south and the east, they are largely made up of small self-employed workers (particularly farmers) whose situation is far more precarious than that of their counterparts in the west, who more often own companies with several employees. Members of the working classes everywhere are more affected by unemployment and precariousness than other classes, with an unemployment rate as high as 14% for unskilled workers, in contrast to 5% for middle classes and just 3% for upper classes. They endure tougher working conditions, lower incomes, lower-grade vehicles and computing equipment, worse access to healthcare and greater difficulty taking holidays, with half of working classes stating that they are unable to take one week off per year. Finally, in a context in which collective mobilisations are declining and labour is intensifying, the members of the working classes declare to be unionised less often (9%) than the upper classes (15%).

The middle classes are the least homogeneous of the three. The authors underline the fact that they are first and foremost a vague political construction that varies greatly, and are characterised in the book by their role as an "interface" (p. 89) between the working classes and upper classes. They are clearly distinguished from the working classes by their cultural practices, though less so by their consumption of goods and, in a limited way, by their level of

⁵ See for example the paper by F. Lebaron and P. Blavier in the aforementioned edition of *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*.

home ownership (72% of members of the middle classes are home owners as opposed to 66% of working classes).

The authors consider the upper classes to be the group that displays the most consistency from one country to another, particularly because of their greater internationalisation, which is reflected in their strong support for the European Union. However, the book shows the internal heterogeneity of this group, both among European countries and within each of them. This is evident in terms of comparative income and assets, but is also visible in education levels and cultural practices. However, the fact that this group – which represents just under 20% of workers in Europe – is given more attention than the 1% earning the highest incomes is justified by the fact that

the social order is largely maintained and reproduced thanks to these upper classes organised in concentric circles. (p. 122)

The Scandinavian labourer above the Hungarian manager?

The book's richest and most innovative approach, presented in the final chapter, aims to "go beyond the reductive alternative between national interpretation and continental approach in order to show how class relations are continually being reconstructed through contacts, exchanges and the economic and cultural power relations that develop between Europeans" (p. 158). The analysis makes full use of the available harmonised data, which makes it possible to reflect on individuals alternately as part of a national social structure and a broader European space. It assesses the degree to which classes that are identified in terms of individual professions form groups that are equivalent from one country to the next. This combination of an entry by class and an entry by country is all too rare in sociological studies, which usually contrast classes within one national space, and compare the intensity and structure of inequalities between countries considered as separate units. The approach used here, on the other hand, gives serious consideration to the theory of a growing interdependence between European societies, linked to the development of an embryonic supranational political structure.

The study is based on a classification of groups defined by the intersection of a country and a social class, i.e. 26 countries x 3 classes = 78 groups. It highlights 6 transnational social classes ranging from the upper classes of the north and west of Europe, situated at the top of the hierarchy, to the working classes of the east and the less developed southern nations, situated at the bottom. The working classes of the east are presented as "the drudges of Europe" (p. 160). In Bulgaria and Hungary, for example, between 30 and 40% of the members of rural working classes state that they are unable to afford meat or fish every other day, while this predicament is practically non-existent in the north and west. Between these

two extremes, this approach aims to highlight clear discrepancies within the same social class according to nationality, as well as inversions of positions when comparisons between classes are crossed with countries: the average salary of the Hungarian upper classes is well below that of the Scandinavian working classes. There is therefore little in common between the working classes of the different countries, other than being in a subjugated position within their respective national spaces, which complicates the emergence of a European social movement.

These objective positions become increasingly established through direct contact between individuals from different countries, labour migration, study (Erasmus programme) and tourism. These exchanges pit working-class workers from different countries against one another, and reinforce the “dominated dominators” status (p. 179) of the eastern upper classes, whose members find themselves being managed in multinational companies by executives from the west.

The contribution made by the transnational approach taken in the final chapter paradoxically makes us regret that this interpretation crossing class and nation was not used in the earlier chapters, so as to describe groups that present true homogeneity in subsets of countries rather than defining classes at continent level and highlighting their internal heterogeneity on a case-by-case basis. One might also question the appropriateness of devoting each chapter to a class rather than organising them according to the dimensions of inequalities. Such an approach would have made it possible to identify more systematically the class oppositions that structure the numerous results and references provided. We believe that these comments stress the importance of continuing along the path opened up by *Les classes sociales en Europe* and of constructing a theoretical framework that would enable class relations on the continent to be fully understood.

Further reading:

- Special issue “Do European Social Classes Exist?”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, n° 219, 2017. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-actes-de-la-recherche-en-sciences-sociales-2017-4.htm>
- Monique Meron et al., “Final Report of the ESSnet on the harmonisation and implementation of a European socio-economic classification: European Socio-economic Groups (ESeG)”, Paris, Insee, 2014. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cros/sites/crosportal/files/ESEG_finalReport_V10juillet2014_0.pdf
- Monique Meron, Michel Amar et al., “ESeG (European Socioeconomic Groups), nomenclature socioéconomique européenne”, Working document, F1604, Paris, Insee, 2016. <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2022135>
- Special issue “What Socio-Economy Does to Social Classes, Renewal or Disappearance?” focusing in particular on the question of European classifications,

Revue française de Socio-Économie, n° 10, 2012. https://www.cairn-int.info/numero.php?ID_REVUE=E_RFSE&ID_NUMPUBLIE=E_RFSE_010

- David Rose, Eric Harrison, *Social Class in Europe*, London-New York, Routledge, 2009.

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