

Introduction to the Thematic Issue

In sociology, social stratification is an evergreen field. It is moreover a field that itself embraces a vast and expanding range of interests relating to occupational and educational structures, earnings and household income, objective and subjective well-being, poverty, and exclusion and inclusion. It is an area of research that invites us to compare various forms and dimensions of inequality across countries and regions. This issue of the *Czech Sociological Review* deals with several comparative and innovative aspects of social stratification in Central Europe.

As regards sources of data on this subject, there is no recent sociological survey on social stratification in Europe available at present—the last one we can draw on is the ISSP module on Social Inequality from 2009, which was conducted on small samples, while data from the one just fielded in 2019 are not yet available. The regular biannual waves of the European Social Survey (ESS), conducted since 2002 on somewhat bigger samples, are certainly also useful for studying basic aspects of social stratification and mobility, but the topic of social stratification itself has not yet been the specific focus of any wave of the ESS so far.

However, one inviting opportunity exists, which is to mine the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). Since 2005 the EU-SILC has been producing comparative cross-sectional and longitudinal datasets on household income, living conditions, and poverty, as well as on key status variables such as occupation, education, and earnings. Its special advantage is that both personal and household perspectives can be applied. Another data source is the European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS), available since 2004.

This thematic issue assembles a series of prevailingly comparative empirical contributions that are based mainly on statistical sources and ISSP data and focus on the post-communist region of Central-East Europe and specifically the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia (Visegrád Four – V4). The V4 countries are often regarded as a single homogeneous region, though—as the reader will see—they differ considerably in terms of their social structures and trends. Where possible, Austria is added for comparison, as it represents the nearest benchmark country that is linked to the V4 by historical roots but fortunately escaped Soviet rule.

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In this issue, five articles are collected, each focusing on a different topic. Using the authors' words, we can present them as follows.

In 'Social Stratification and Its Perception in Austria and Central-East Europe from 1960 to 2015: Historical Legacies, the Socialist Past, and Recent Developments' Max Haller and Marcus Hadler compare Austria with the Czech

Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary across a long historical period. Using various data sources, they focus on the relationship between changes in the social structure and perceptions of inequality as rooted in past developments in the individual countries. The authors argue that, while state-socialist countries were able to contain income inequality, they were less successful in limiting other aspects of inequality. Austria, on the other hand, was able to avoid severe income inequalities by introducing democratic corporatist institutions and a strong welfare state. Regarding perceptions of inequality, the majority of all four populations see income differences as too large, while their views on the stratification structure differ. In Austria, individuals on average rank themselves in a higher social class than people in the other three countries do and see their society as dominated by the middle class. The opposite is true in Hungary, which sees itself as a society dominated by a small elite, with the mass of the population at the bottom.

Horizontal stratification, a rather neglected dimension of social stratification, is the focus of 'Regional Patterns of Social Differentiation in Visegrád Countries' by Kamila Fialová and Tomáš Želinský. First, they describe the changes in horizontal and vertical stratification in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, devoting special attention to the broader socio-economic context of this development. Using EU-SILC 2006–2016 surveys they examine three dimensions of social stratification: occupation, education level, and income. They assess social stratification developments for various subpopulations based on regional classification and the degree of urbanisation. The results indicate that horizontal social stratification patterns follow different trajectories of development across the four countries, although there are similarities between some of the identified patterns. The findings suggest that the least favourable patterns in the development of horizontal social stratification are found in the Hungarian regions.

Jiří Večerník and Martina Mysíková, in 'Setting Social Status in Couples and in Partners' Budgetary Discretion in Central European Countries, apply a critical approach to the conventional optics of social stratification research—where a family's position is understood as determined by the social status of the male head of the household—and to its parallel in economics and in so doing question the practice of treating households as single units. Using the EU-SILC survey on the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Austria, they show that female primacy has increased between 2006 and 2016 in some criteria—earnings, education, socio-economic category—in all countries except Hungary. Using the EU-SILC 2010 'Module on Intra-household Sharing of Resources', they also test a hypothesis about the link between partners' status split and separate welfare status. The results support the validity of the hypothesis for Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, but not for Hungary and Poland. Along with the personal factors behind social status split, there are also two family-related factors that strongly correlate with the probability of budgetary discretion of couple partners across all the countries: household income and marriage status.

In 'Is Education Becoming a Weaker Determinant of Occupation? Educational Expansion and Occupational Returns to Education in 30 European Coun-

tries', Tomáš Katrňák and Tomáš Doseděl examine the relationship between education and occupation over the course of educational expansion, using EU-LFS data from 30 European countries on educational attainment between 2003 and 2014. They use a multilevel model approach where education is measured in both absolute and relative terms. The results show that when education is conceptualised in absolute terms no change is observed in the relationship between education and occupation. However, when education is conceptualised as a positional good, there is a change in this relationship. Unlike many previous studies on the topic that did not consider fields of study, the analysis shows that the role of study field is changing, with the natural sciences and computer and IT studies becoming more important for occupational status than other fields. The strengthening of education as a positional good is discussed in relation to the theory of task-biased technological change.

Michael L. Smith, in 'Educational Pathways and Their Role in Occupational and Class Attainment in Czech Society', introduces a new approach to the study of the association between education and socio-economic outcomes in the Czech Republic: educational pathways, which are the primary channels of study involving at least two educational transitions with qualitatively different tracks. Based on data from the Czech Household Panel Study, the author follows educational pathways between secondary and tertiary education and analyses the role of eight different educational pathways on ESeC-derived social classes according to parental education, gender, and birth cohort. Based on the ordered logit model, the author computes the predicted probability that specific educational pathways will lead to a specific class status. He finds that the educational pathway approach yields distinct insights into the education-class link that would be masked had we studied only the highest attained level of education.

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Overall, what is novel about this collection of five articles?

First, there is the focus on the historical background of the current social structure in the Central European region, which is marked by heterogeneity within some rooted commonalities (Haller and Hadler). Second, there is the use—hitherto rare—of statistical surveys for stratification empirics (here in Fialová and Želinský, Večerník and Mysíková, and Katrňák and Doseděl). Specifically, the article by Večerník and Mysíková offers an empirical test of the thesis of the individualisation of social status by linking objective and subjective characteristics, and the article by Fialová and Želinský makes use of the advantages offered by the EU-SILC surveys' big samples to examine the otherwise rarely looked at issue of horizontal stratification by regions. And Katrňák and Doseděl's article employs another statistical survey, the EU-LFS, to test the relevance of treating education as a positional good, while it also considers study fields as an important explanatory variable in task-biased technological change. Third, the article by Smith, which presents some of the first results from the first Czech Household Panel Survey, offers an important methodological innovation through a theoreti-

cal extension in that it distinguishes between school track and final educational attainment in relation to the impact of social class.

Statistical surveys and especially the EU-SILC programme with its targeted ad hoc modules open up new horizons for stratification research and may even pave the way for a new generation of stratification empirics. The large samples of these surveys enable far more valid comparisons to be made between and within individual countries than do surveys collected on samples that have barely more than a thousand economically active respondents. Moreover, EU-SILC surveys, collected yearly already since 2005, meet both cross-sectional and longitudinal requirements, when in each successive year one-quarter of observed households are dropped and replaced with new ones. While in this issue only one module was applied, other EU-SILC modules invite further research—for instance, on subjective well-being or the intergenerational transmission of disadvantages. Thus, new research contributions regarding various developments and aspects of social stratification are to be expected.

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