

Seminar: The Philosophy, Sociology and Economics of Class

Type: Blockseminar

Number: 50322

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Participants: P&E Bachelor, P&E Master, BA IWB, BA Economics, MA IWB, MA Economics

Lecturers: Marco Meyer, Carsten Jung

Dates: 26-28 November 2021

Start-time: 26 November, 12.00 s.t.

Overview Deadlines & ToDos

Deadline for applying to give a presentation: 7 October

There are a few short presentations to be allocated, details below.

Email Carsten to apply!

Deadline for submitting reading questions: 21 November

All readings are in the Dropbox folder here.

Reading questions are to be answered in [this form](#).

Seminar Description

Standard economics portrays people as representative households that respond effectively to economic incentives and available information. But decades of sociological and psychological research has shown that people are highly influenced by norms and their environment. From where we work and live to what we consume – our lives are highly influenced by our socioeconomic background or ‘class’. For example, many studies highlight that economic success in life in Germany still depends heavily on the circumstances in which people grow up.

This poses some important challenges to economics and philosophy. How much, if at all, do we need to adapt the homo economicus model in light of sociological findings? How shall we think of meritocracy if life prospects are indeed dependent on someone’s background and surroundings? What would policies to create a fairer and more inclusive society look like?

In this seminar, we will explore these questions by analysing people’s lives from a sociological and economic perspective. We will dip into some classical sociological texts but mostly focus on readings and data on economic lives in Germany today. We will connect the empirical analysis of class to the philosophical literature about inequality.

Lecturers

Marco Meyer leads a research group at the University of Hamburg investigating what organizations have a duty to know, and which qualities help them to fulfill these duties. He also researches the ethics of finance, business ethics, and applied epistemology. He holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Cambridge, and a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Groningen. He received a Master's degree in philosophy from Oxford University, a BA degree in Philosophy & Economics from Bayreuth University, as well as a BA in European History from Bayreuth University.

Carsten Jung is a senior economist at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) in the UK. He leads their work on macroeconomics and structural economic change. Before he was an economist at the Bank of England's Fintech Hub, where he led the work on artificial intelligence. Prior to that, he worked on policy issues concerning the global financial vulnerabilities and systemic risks from climate change. He holds a BA in Philosophy & Economics from Bayreuth, an MSc in Economics from Warwick University and an MSc in Economic Sociology from LSE. He was also a Carlo-Schmid intern at the International Monetary Fund.

Learning Goals

- Understand whether and how inequality of income and wealth are linked to class.
- Describe implications of class relations for health, education, and other real world outcomes.
- Use an interdisciplinary approach to assess inequality in Germany.
- Evaluate philosophical theories of justice in light of social scientific findings.
- Discuss whether Germany is a class society and, if so, what this means for policy.

Agenda

Friday: Introduction to Class

12.00 (we start s.t.)	Session 1: What is class?
14.00	Break
14.30	Session 2: Class in Germany
16.00	Break
16.30	Session 3: Social mobility - does 'social class' drive income and wealth inequality?
18.00	End

Saturday: Economics, Sociology and Social Psychology of Class

09.30 (we start s.t.)	Pro-Con Debate: Germany is a Class Society.
10.30	Break
11.00	Session 4: Macro-economic drivers of inequality and class belonging
12.30	Break
14.00	Session 5: Which psychological processes create and maintain class?
15.30	Break
16.00	Session 6: Social consequences of a class society
17.30	End
19:00	Group dinner (optional)

Sunday: Philosophy and Policy of Class

09.15 (we start s.t.)	Session 7: The Political Philosophy of Class
10.45	Break
11.15	Session 8: Policies for a Class-less society?
12.45	Break
13.45	Pro-Con Debate: Germany needs fundamental reform to address injustices due to its class structure
14.45	Feedback
15.15	End

Reading List

Note on Reading questions: Please submit using the form linked on page 1. We expect answers generally to be not more than 100 words each.

Session 1: What is class?

Any attempt to understand the impact of class on society must start from a clear understanding of what class is. In this session, we will review a few attempts to define class and settle for our working definition.

'Getting into' class

The media in this section are not required reading/consumption, but make for a highly recommended and hopefully light way to get into the seminar. We recommend you start by skimming the following article and listen to the following podcast for two very different experiences of 'Making it in Hollywood'. Watch out for why Megan and Harry have an easier start in Hollywood than the writers and actors covered in the article. Write down a few concrete things that account for the differences. We will brainstorm those early in the seminar. Might they have something to do with class?

- Kyle Paoletta - Why it's Harder Than Ever to Make it in Hollywood | The New Republic
- The Journal -- Harry and Meghan, Hollywood Royalty? (Podcast, [listen here](#), 18 min)

To understand what class is about in the 21st century, it is a good idea to start with what it was about in the 20th. The movie [Downton Abbey](#) paints a very lucid picture of the trappings of class in Britain in the 1910s and 1920s. If you are looking for a great movie to watch one evening, don't look further!

Required reading:

- Mike Savage: Social Class in the 21st Century, chapter 1.
- Gosepath, Stefan, "Equality", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *only section 4 on Relational Egalitarianism*.

Further Reading:

- Pierre Bordieu (1987): What Makes a Social Class? On The Theoretical and Practical Existence Of Groups
- Rickens: WHO IS RICH?: [Defining wealth in Germany, where even millionaires claim to be middle class](#)

Reading Q: Explain what social class is to a five-year-old.

Session 2: Class in Germany

Class taxonomies are socially constructed also, and they can obscure as much as they can reveal. In this session, we look at three possible ways of grouping Germans into classes, and reflect on what we can learn from each.

Required reading:

- Income-based approach: [Sueddeutsche: Wer hat wie viel?](#) (read in browser).
- Employment-and-Asset-based approach: A general framework for the analysis of class structure. In: Wright EO (ed.), *The Debate on Classes*. London: Verso, pp.3–46.
- Basic values and beliefs approach: [More in Common: Fault Lines: Germany's Invisible Divides](#), especially pages 4-10

Further Reading:

- Adkins et al. (2021): Class in the 21st century: Asset inflation and the new logic of inequality
- Erik Olkin Wright: A general framework for studying class consciousness and class formation
- Jordà et al. (2016): The Great Mortgaging
- Fink et. al: Unequal Germany (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung) for a geographic lens in inequality

Reading Q: Write down for yourself what group you and your parents belong to according to each of the three categorizations. For the income based approach, think about which quartile of the income distribution you and your parents belong to. We will ask you to share this information anonymously during the seminar (but even this is voluntary), so we can reflect on the distribution in the group. No need to submit anything!

Session 3: Social mobility - does 'social class' drive income and wealth inequality?

Despite the widespread availability of education and free labour markets, in all countries economic success of people often are still strongly correlated with their social backgrounds. In this session we explain various ways of measuring this and we discuss what possible drivers could be.

Required reading:

- *OECD - Social mobility. Introduction*
- Intergenerational Class Mobility of Labour Market Entrants in Germany and the UK since the 1950s

Further Reading:

- Erikson & Goldthorpe (1992)

Reading Q: How good / bad is social mobility in Germany? What are the different causes of lack of social mobility that the two papers highlight?

Session 4: Macro-economic drivers of inequality and class belonging

Thomas Piketty compiled long-run data on income and wealth inequality. He advances the argument that there are certain structural drivers - such as unequal wealth ownership and inheritance - that push societies towards inequality. By doing so, he goes beyond theories that focus mostly on social mobility and educational attainment. In this session we aim to understand how inequality and social class has evolved over the last century, and what underlying drivers are.

Required reading:

- Piketty (2014) - Chapter 7: Inequality and concentration - preliminary bearings

Further Reading:

- Savage (2021) - The return of inequality, chapter 8: 'Cities, Elites and Accumulation'
- Cicerchia (2021) - Why does class matter?
- FES (2019) - Socio-economic disparities report 2019

Reading Q: What are the different social classes that Piketty highlights? What, according to him, are the key factors that determine life chances and inequality?

Session 5: Which psychological processes create and maintain class?

In the first session, we considered the reasons relational egalitarians object to inequality: because it undermines the equal standing of people. In this session, we will probe the connection between psychological processes and social class.

Required reading:

- Piff et al 2018: Unpacking the Inequality Paradox: The Psychological Roots of Inequality and Social Class (*only pages 60-99 required*)

Further Reading:

- Manstead, A.S.R. (2018), The psychology of social class: How socioeconomic status impacts thought, feelings, and behaviour. *Br. J. Soc. Psychol.*, 57: 267-291.
- Lipps & Oesch (2018) The working class left behind? The class gap in life satisfaction in Germany and Switzerland over the last decades
- Grannovetter - The Strength of Weak Ties

Reading Q: Is there evidence from social psychology that inequality undermines equality of status?

Session 6: Social consequences of a class society

In this session we discuss what the social consequences can be of a society in which people feel they belong to different classes.

Required reading:

- Hochschild (2016): Strangers in their own land - chapter 1: travelling to the heart

Further Reading:

- Sandel (2020) - The Tyranny of Merit
- Martin Hollis (1994) - Chapter 8: Self and roles
- Fraser & Honneth - Umverteilung oder Anerkennung - chapter 1
- Oliver Nachtwey (2016) - Abstiegs-gesellschaft
- Watson et al (2010); Class and poverty: cross-sectional and dynamic analysis of income poverty and lifestyle deprivation
- Lipps & Oesch (2018): The working class left behind? The class gap in life satisfaction in Germany and Switzerland over the last decades

Reading Q: On a society wide level, what do you think the risks are from a society in which people feel like they belong to different classes?

Session 7: The Political Philosophy of Class

In this session, we will look at a famous argument by G.A. Cohen to the effect that capitalism renders workers unfree. The argument is important from a theoretical perspective, because it casts doubt on individualism plus liberal theories of freedom. Moreover, if successful, it also provides a strong argument for why capitalism leads to a class society and renders members of some classes unfree. In addition to Cohen's article, we'll also read a response by John Grey.

Required reading:

- Cohen, G. A. "The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom." *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 1, Wiley, 1983, pp. 3–33

Further Reading:

- Andreas T. Schmidt (2020) Does collective unfreedom matter? Individualism, power and proletarian unfreedom, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*
- Rudolf Schüssler: Sufficiency and the Measurement of Inequality

Reading Q: What, if anything, is wrong with Cohen's argument that capitalism renders workers unfree?

Session 8: Policies for a Class-less society?

To the extent that a class-society is a problem, we need policies to address it. In this session we are discussion policy solutions from the different angles and traditions. You will pick one of the readings and, in the session, present these to each other and discuss. So please pick one of the suggested readings.

A. Pick **one** of the following readings:

- a. [OECD \(2018\)](#), chapter 6.1: Which health and family policies can best foster social mobility?
- b. [OECD \(2018\)](#), chapter 6.2: Which education policies can best foster social mobility?
- c. [OECD \(2018\)](#), chapter 6.3: Which labour-market policies can best foster social mobility?
- d. [OECD \(2018\)](#), chapter 6.4: Which tax and transfers system designs can best foster social mobility?
- e. [OECD \(2018\)](#), chapter 6.5: Which local development policies can best foster social mobility?
- f. Piketty (2018): Capital and Ideology, chapter 17, pages 966-990: Elements for a participatory socialism for the 21st century

Reading Q: Pick what you think are the most important policy suggestions in your paper and discuss how well you think Germany is doing on these? (You may want to refer to things you read in other parts of the seminar or google to check some facts about Germany. But it's absolutely fine to just make a judgement based on limited knowledge. Don't spend too much time.)

Assessment

Attendance-only "Schein" (PE: 2 ECTS): You need to (1) do the readings, (2) do the problem set, (3) participate actively in the seminar

Essay "Schein" (PE: 6/8 ECTS): You need to (1) do the readings, (2) do the problem set, (3) write an essay (4.000-5.000 words). If you give a presentation, this will feed into your grade as well.

General Readings & Reading Questions

- We'll expect you to have read all 'required readings'. 'Further readings' is purely optional, including for your future reference.
- There will be very few presentations in the seminar, and there won't be presentations to recap readings.

- Some of the readings are difficult. Rather than giving you watered-down readings, we want to encourage you to develop a reading skill that will become very handy in your academic life: extracting relevant information and arguments from very difficult texts. Always keep the respective reading question in mind while reading, and focus on getting an answer to that question out of the text. Do not despair if there are parts of the readings that you don't understand. Make a note and ask during the seminar.
- Deadline for Submission of Reading Questions: 2 May.
- You can save the form as draft and continue later. Make sure you note down the URL displayed after you click on save as draft.
- Please answer each question in no more than 100 words

We have crafted reading questions to prepare you for the seminar and give us material to work with during the seminar. Consider answering the reading questions as part of the seminar designed to meet seminar goals, rather than a box-ticking exercise.

Presentations

We have 3 presentations in the seminar. Please let us know if you would like to give one of them - to send an email to Carsten.

For good presentations, we give an essay grading uplift. Alternatively, presenters can get a discount on essay length. If you would like to do one of the presentations.

1. Session 4: The classic - Marx' understanding of class

- Context: This presentation comes in the session of macro-economic (or structural) drivers of class belonging. In some ways, Marx was one of the first to put into practice this idea. We'll explore it in this session
- Reading: Marx & Engels: Communist Manifesto - Chapter 1: Bourgeois and Proletarians
- *Question: What according to Marx/Engels is the key driver of class belonging? How can a class-less society be achieved?*
- Format: No more than **7 mins**.

2. Session 6: Class belonging and well being

- Context: In this session we look at the social impacts of class society. This paper is a case study of the life satisfaction of different classes over time, comparing Germany and Switzerland.
- Reading: Lipps & Oesch (2018): The working class left behind? The class gap in life satisfaction in Germany and Switzerland over the last decades

- *Question: What does the Swiss-German case study tell us about the relationship between well-being, class and other policies?*
- Format: No more than 5 mins.

3. Session 7: Against Cohen on Proletarian Unfreedom

- Context: We will all read Cohen's argument to the effect that workers as a class are collectively unfree. John Gray's article is perhaps the most notable attempt to argue against Cohen.
- Reading: Gray, J. (1988). Against Cohen On Proletarian Unfreedom. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 6(1), 77-112.
- *Question: What is Gray's core argument against Cohen's position?*
- Format: No more than 15 mins.

General guidelines for presentations:

- Stick to the presentation topic
- Stick to the indicated time limit
- A projector will be available
- Presentations should be in English, but don't be intimidated — we'll have an atmosphere which is quite tolerant of less than perfect English; what matters is that you can get your point across.

Essays

Topics: We'll run a short session on possible seminar topics during the Blockseminar, and point out possible seminar topics during the seminar. You are encouraged to come up with your own topics.

General Guidelines

- Between 4,000 and 5,000 words
- English or German
- It is well worth looking at this essay writing guide by former P&E student Matthias Brinkmann -- the standards laid out there is what we are looking for in a good essay: <http://www.matthiasbrinkmann.de/slides/guide.pdf>
- Re-read and revise before submitting. Ask a friend to read your paper.
- We set a deadline for the essay with students individually to fit their needs.

General Structure

- Define and answer a precise research question (check with us!), give a clear answer to the question which you state in the introduction (your thesis), and use your essay to defend that answer.

- Structure essay according to thesis: No paragraph and indeed no sentence that does not help investigating the thesis belongs in the essay.
- When developing an argument, state premises and conclusions clearly.
 - Make sure the argument is valid
 - Anticipate objections to your premises and discuss in the essay
- When using empirical data, explain and scrutinize it
 - Make sure the data is relevant to your argument and explain how that is
 - Indicate the source
 - Do not only report results, but also show awareness of the methodology used
- Summarize your argument in a brief conclusion

We encourage you to look for additional literature. You are not expected to read everything there is on your topic, however. In depth analysis and development of your own sustained argument matter much more. So, read a few things, but then start writing quickly.