

Globalisation, individualisation and the death of social classes

An empirical assessment for 18 European
countries

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to contribute to the debate on the supposed 'death' of social class in two ways. First, it critically examines the theoretical arguments that link the globalisation process to changes in patterns of social inequality and to class decomposition in advanced OECD countries. Second, it provides an empirical assessment of the claim of the death of social class for various dimensions of inequality and for a large number of EU countries, including Spain. More precisely, this article focuses on class-based inequalities in self-assessed health, educational attainment, social mobility, risk of unemployment and of having a temporary contract, and on class effects on a non-traditional political behaviour such as political consumerism. The empirical analysis is based on data from the European Social Survey and on data of a recent comparative project on social mobility to which data for Spain have been added. The results consistently show that social class is still a powerful factor that affects individual life chances and consumption behaviours. The main conclusion of the article is that the claim that social classes are useless in interpreting patterns of inequality in advanced societies is largely exaggerated.

Keywords: globalisation, individualisation, social class, social inequality.

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INTRODUCTION

The debate on the supposed crisis or death of social class as a fundamental basis for social inequalities is by no means new. Already by the end of the 1950s, Ralf Dahrendorf had entitled a section of his classic study on patterns of inequality and social conflict in industrial society “do we still have a class society?” (Dahrendorf 1959: 246). The early-1990s witnessed two parallel exchanges about the (ir)relevance of class analysis, the first among American and Australian scholars in a special issue of the journal “International Sociology” and the second within British sociology¹. Finally, in more recent years, claims as to the supposed withering away of social class have incorporated the idea that the globalisation process fosters the individualisation of labour and class decomposition (Castells 1996; Pakulski 2005; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). In this view social class, to use an expression of Beck, is seen as a “zombie category” that is totally inadequate for describing patterns of inequality and political action in today’s advanced societies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 203). Contrary to this new variant of the thesis of the death of social classes, there are many studies that show the persistence of the effects of social class on distinct forms of life chances and political action (Evans 1999; Kunst et al. 1998; Layte and Whelan 2002; Breen 2004; Shavit et al. 2007; Cañzos and Voces 2008). These studies, however, tend to focus on a single dimension of inequality, often employ sophisticated statistical techniques and generally make little effort to communicate the results to readers without specialist knowledge.

The high degree of specialisation in social stratification research and an apparent difficulty in communicating its results outside its closed community might be one reason why the view of a classless society defended by globalisation theorists is still so popular in the sociological debate. Taking a different stance, this paper presents a broader and more accessible picture of the persistence of class based inequalities in contemporary societies. It, thus,

¹The principal contributions to these debates are reprinted in Lee and Turner (1996).

complements specialized social stratification research by examining a larger set of phenomena and discussing basic summary indicators of class inequalities.

In more general terms, this article aims to contribute to the death of social class debate in two ways. First, it critically examines the theoretical arguments that link globalisation to changes in patterns of social inequality in advanced OECD countries. In particular, it focuses on individualisation theory, post-modern theory of social stratification and network society theory. From different starting points and with some distinctions, these theories coincide in the view that traditional occupational-based social classes no longer structure objective life-opportunities and neither do they condition political actions in a significant way. Second, it provides an empirical assessment of this claim for various dimensions of inequality and for a large number of EU countries. In particular it also includes Spain, a country that has not previously been considered in comparative studies on class inequalities (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Shavit and Müller 1997; Breen 2004; Shavit et al. 2007). This article, thus, presents comparative findings on class-based inequalities in self-assessed health, educational attainment, social mobility, risk of unemployment and of having a temporary contract, and on class effects on a non-traditional form of political participation such is political consumerism². These new results are based on the data of European Social Survey and on the data of a recent social mobility project to which data for Spain have been added (Breen 2004).

It should be made clear from the beginning that the use of the term “class” follows a neo-Weberian approach (Scott 1996; Breen 2005). Class position is, thus, conceived as a set of structural positions within the labour markets and within firms whose individual occupants share similar life-chances. To the extent that class positions are defined as sharing specific causal components of life chances, one might also expect that members of the same class tend to behave (for instance in the political sphere) in similar ways since they face common conditions for action (Breen 2005). In this approach the interest on class relies in its causal effect on life chances and, through them, possibly on behaviours and preferences. But in this approach the notion of “class” does not necessarily imply any collective action on behalf of class or any class-conscious behaviour (Goldthorpe and Marshall 1996).

With this caveat in mind, the structure of the paper is the following. The next section examines three theories that claim that globalisation and the individualisation process have brought about fundamental changes in the nature of social inequality in advanced societies. These theories coincide in the idea that social inequality is becoming increasingly classless. In the third section, the data, variables and methods employed in the empirical analysis are described. In

² Political consumerism refers to boycotting or buying certain products for political and ethical reasons (Michelletti 2003). A justification of why the study of this political behaviour is particularly important in order to address the claim of the death of social class is provided in section 3.

section four, the results are presented, while the final section discusses their implications for the debate on the supposed death of social classes.

II. GLOBALISATION AND THE DEATH OF SOCIAL CLASS: INDIVIDUALISATION, POSTMODERN AND NETWORK SOCIETY THEORIES.

II.1 Globalisation and the individualisation of inequality

According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, xx) two processes are bringing about an epochal break in the nature of social inequality in contemporary society. The keywords for these two processes are individualisation and globalisation. Regarding the concept of individualisation, Beck (1987; 1992; 1994) refers to a deep transformation of social institutions that frees individuals from constraints and roles conventionally associated with given social positions and allows them to choose the life options they prefer.

The crucial elements that set the individualisation process into motion are the relative degree of well-being linked to the economic growth of the post-war period and the simultaneous consolidation of the welfare state (pension system, unemployment benefit and national health system) (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Once economic affluence and protection against social risks are guaranteed, the labour market becomes the active engine of individualisation. Three processes related to participation in the labour market are particularly relevant: increased participation at higher levels of the educational system, increased job and geographical mobility and higher levels of skills at the workplace. Each of these processes forces individuals to take decisions regarding their own future and, thus, to foster permanent reflection on one's own biography. Traditional structures, such as social classes and the family that once shaped individuals' biographies, have nowadays largely lost their regulatory capacity. In this respect it is argued that the individualisation process emancipates individuals from the social relations that once defined their identity as life-long members of a given social group (Ibid., 31).

With the advent of globalisation Beck adds a new element to his theory. He argues that under the pressure of globalisation, flexibility and insecure employment are becoming endemic and mark the life of most people, including the affluent middle class (Beck 1999, 12; 2000, 4). The same is true for unemployment, which has become a mass phenomenon and is not anymore an experience confined to a limited and clear-cut group of disadvantaged workers (see also Giddens 1994). Beck is not really explicit in explaining how globalisation is related to the increase in flexible employment and unemployment and their diffusion across all social classes. One suggested process has to do with the weakening of the regulatory capacity of markets by national states and with

the crisis of the national welfare state in a globalised world (Beck 1999). It is interesting to note that the generalised uncertainty fostered by the globalisation process seems to operate in exactly the opposite direction of that of the generalised protection against social risks guaranteed by the welfare state which was supposedly at the base of the individualisation process³. In other words, the processes underlying the erosion of social classes as conditioning factors of objective life chances (the spreading of unemployment and poverty) operate against the grain of the factors that have allowed the subjective dimension of classes to be weakened (the increase in economic well-being and the spreading of a system of social protection)

Leaving this possible theoretical contradiction aside, the empirically testable proposition one can draw from Beck's work on the effects of the individualisation and globalisation on patterns of social inequality in advanced nations is that social class blurs both as a base of individual identity and political action and as a predictor of concrete individual life chances⁴.

II.2 Globalisation and post-modern classless inequality

According to postmodern theory, advanced industrial societies have experienced a transformation from being "command societies" characterized by socio-political stratification based on the democratic class struggle to "status societies" characterised by cultural stratification (Pakulski and Waters 1996; Pakulski 2005). It is then suggested that postmodern communities are based on lifestyle identities formed by individual tastes and, in particular, on consumption patterns that citizens are free to choose and change as they please. The significant strata

³One might argue that the individualisation process has an emancipatory character to the extent that it frees individuals from traditional constraints and allows them to choose the life-style they like best. On the other hand, the diffusion of the risk of unemployment and poverty brought about by the globalisation process portrays a more gloomy scenario where individuals are obliged to constantly redefine their life-course. Additionally, that individualisation operates within the national country and undermines the traditional social structure from below, while globalisation operates across and above countries.

⁴At this point, sympathisers of the individualisation theory might argue that the attempt to derive empirically testable implications for the relationships between social class and life chances does not do full justice to the complexity and richness of individualisation theory (see Beck himself 2007). In this respect, one might reply that focusing on the relationship between class and social risks is precisely the approach adopted by those empirical studies that claim to find support for the individualisation thesis (Leisering and Leibfried 1998) and that have been subsequently widely quoted by individualisation theorists as evidence for their arguments (for instance Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, xxiv).

in postmodern societies are lifestyle status communities that form around “differentiated patterns of value commitment, identity, belief, symbolic meaning, taste, opinion or consumption” (Waters 1996: 73). While in the past the logic of social stratification was derived from position in the production system or hierarchy in the authority structure within organisations, in postmodern societies the generative principle of stratification is membership in status communities based on lifestyles and consumption patterns (Pakulski and Waters 1996).

Globalisation is not explicitly mentioned as one of the factors that promotes class decomposition (but see Pakulski 2005: 176 and 178). Still, if one considers the processes that supposedly drive the post-modern shift, many of them are conventionally associated with globalisation. In a recent contribution Pakulski (2005: 176), for instance, lists the following processes that supposedly foster the post-modern shift: a) changes in the nature of work that erode the consistency of occupational tasks and homogeneity of occupational categories and bring about an increase in the scope of flexible employment⁵; b) the extending scope of market transactions and the commodification of new aspects of human products and activity such as genetics and software; c) the growing density of social relations facilitated by communication and information technology; d) the proliferation of horizontal networks within and across bureaucratic and corporate hierarchies that break with the traditional logic of hierarchical relations; e) the increased interpenetration of value systems and enhanced pluralism of life styles. At the cost of some simplification, one might, thus, argue that the emergence of elective status and consumption communities as the basic principle of social differentiation is closely associated to the revolution in information and communication technologies that change the nature of work, modify social relations, favour the expansion of markets, transform the structure of firms and prompt pluralism of values and life styles.

It is important to stress that the post-modern status communities differ from earlier status groups such as feudal estates in that they do not have any religious or legal legitimation (Waters 1996). Moreover, they do not imply a shared objective situation or dense interpersonal relationships. They are virtual, imagined communities whose membership is elective, temporal and based on subjective motivations. Examples of these virtual communities are the peace and ecologist movements but also the status group known as “yuppies” in the 1980s. The link in these “virtual” status communities is subjective, constantly renegotiated and largely decoupled from any objective characteristics of the subjects besides their common tastes and beliefs. According to post-modern theory, symbolic consumption defines the position in the social order of contemporary societies and not the other way around. Life chances and life styles (which include political behaviour) are, therefore, increasingly decoupled from the traditional logic of class positions.

⁵ A reference in this respect is made to the concept of “flexible specialisation” originally developed by Piore and Sabel (1984). This concept is also important in Castells’ theory (see section 2.3 below).

II.3 Globalisation and the network society

Following Castells (1996), the link between globalisation and changes in patterns of social inequality is due to the fact that globalisation has made possible and stimulated an extensive restructuring of firms and organisations. In doing this, the globalisation process has also favoured a shift in the bargaining power between capital and labour, in favour of the former.

On the one hand, the diffusion of new information technology has entailed deep changes in the production processes of goods and services. Automisation and computer re-programmable machinery have set the conditions in the 1980s and 1990s for a shift from large scale production of standardised goods, to flexible specialisation and differentiated quality production (Soskice 1999). This transformation in the production process has also meant a shift from large to smaller firms and from the hierarchical structure of internal labour markets within firms, to new forms of network associations across firms (Piore and Sabel 1984; Sabel 1991). Parallel developments in communication technology have made the transmission of information between separate and even remote locations increasingly faster and cheaper. Thus, telecommunications and computer-based transportation have provided the technological infrastructure for organisational restructuring such as downsizing, outsourcing to satellite firms and subcontracting (Castells 1996).

On the other hand, the increase in economic interdependence in capital and goods/services markets has prompted managers' search for more flexibility in employment relationships to face international competition and adapt more speedily to volatile and turbulent markets. To this, one has to add that the changes in the production and organisational structure of firms described above, have contributed to a fragmentation of workers and a weakening of the bargaining power of unions. Thus, unions have been less able to oppose the managerial claim for more flexibility. To summarise this point: the organisational restructuring and the associated rise in employment flexibility, that have occurred in almost all OECD countries in the last 20 years, have been allowed by the diffusion of information and communication technologies and stimulated by global competition.

In this view the main implication of these structural changes for class inequality is that the traditional life-long form of employment has eroded away and insecurity of employment is becoming pervasive. The restructuring of the capital/labour relations helped by the diffusion of information technology might take different forms in different institutional contexts. Still, the individualisation of labour and an increase in employment flexibility seem to be a common feature of the informational paradigm. Moreover, there are no clear rules to define the winners and losers in this process. It is, thus, argued, that job insecurity does not only concern the unskilled labour force but it is spreading all over the occupational spectrum (Ibidem 299).

In sum, Castells suggests that the logic of class is increasingly inadequate to make sense of the changes in employment triggered by information technology. The progressive individualisation of work undermines and fragments traditional social structures (in particular that of class, hierarchical firms, corporate bureaucracy) while it gives way to new forms of network organisation.

II.4 Summary

In Table 1, I summarise the central claims, the main thesis and the more specific hypotheses drawn from the three theoretical streams discussed in the previous section.

Table 1: Globalisation and the death of social class. Summary of the main theories

Theory	Globalisation and inequality: central claims	Globalisation and inequality: thesis	Globalisation and inequality: hypothesis
Individualisation (Beck)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weakening of WS - Rise of unemployment and flexible employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individualization and temporalization of inequality - End of class politics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Class does not protect from the risk of unemployment, flexible employment or poverty; - Class does not affect political behaviour
Post-modernism (Pakulski and Waters)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Change in the nature of work, firm, values and social relations - predominance of consumption over production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elective status communities - Complex classless inequality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Class does not affect life-styles and patterns of consumption
Informational society (Castells)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diffusion of information technology allows new forms of social organisation: network. - Change capital/labour power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fragmented polarization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Class does not protect from the risk of flexible employment - Class is not a base of social identity

Source: *Own illustration.*

Table 1 suggest that the three approaches differ in that each of them pay attention to a given aspect of the globalisation process and put specific emphasis on a given link between globalisation and the declining relevance of social classes. According to Beck, for instance, globalisation operates mainly via the weakening

of the regulatory capacity of the welfare state and the diffusion of unemployment and poverty. On the other hand, Castells stresses the role of information technology and the changing balance of power between capital and labour since the 80s, while post-modern theory emphasises the predominance of consumption over production. Still, there is a key common idea that all three approaches share, namely that of the individualisation of labour. In terms of the neo-Weberian notion of social class briefly discussed in the introduction this means that the structural positions that in the past shared common specific causal components of life chances are nowadays increasingly differentiated and fragmented. The three theories, thus, coincide in that the category of class is of rapidly declining value in attempts at understanding patterns of social inequality in contemporary globalised society.

The theoretical bases of the claims made by globalisation theorists regarding changes in class inequalities have already been critically examined by a number of authors (Breen 1997, Goldthorpe 2002 and Atkinson 2007a; b). The following pages are devoted to assessing their empirical plausibility.

III. DATA AND METHODS

In order to test the hypothesis of the death of social classes, I have analysed the effects of social class on different types of life-chances. These are health, educational achievement, social mobility, the risk of unemployment and of having a temporary contract. In addition, I have also considered the class effect on the likelihood of engaging in political consumerism. This relatively new mode of political participation includes both boycotting and buying for political, ethical, and/or ecological reasons (Micheletti 2003). One should note that political consumerism is a highly individualised consumption action. This seems precisely the type of action to which post-materialist and individualisation theory refer to in order to argue that the relationship of social stratification and political behaviour in contemporary societies is changing. According to the post-modern theory of social stratification, patterns of consumption are among the key factors that define the new status communities, thus breaking with the traditional logic of social classes. Along similar lines, the individualisation theory suggests that, in contemporary societies, individuals are free to continuously redefine their identity and choose the lifestyle they prefer. The study of political consumerism seems, thus, particularly suited to test these claims of the death of class politics⁶.

⁶ Caínzos and Voces (2008) have also studied the effects of social class on other forms of political behaviour such as voting, taking part in demonstrations, signing petitions and more conventional political activities (for instance working for a political party). Their findings bear out the persistent relevance of class in conditioning political behaviour.

In the empirical analysis I have used data from the first two waves of the European Social Survey (ESS) for the years 2002 and 2004 in order to analyse the effect of social class on health, unemployment and type of contract. I have merged the data of the two waves and considered 18 countries for which the relevant information for the current study are available. The likelihood of engaging in political consumerism is investigated only using the first wave of the ESS due to the missing of the relevant information in the second wave.

In order to study the class effect on educational opportunities and chances of intergenerational social mobility I have used the data for ten countries (Germany, France, Italy, Ireland, Great Britain, Poland, Hungary, The Netherlands, Israel and Norway) that took part in the international comparative project directed by Richard Breen (2004). To these countries I have added Spain using the data from the Socio-Demographic Survey (INE 1991) and from the survey on Social Classes and Social Structure (CIS 2006). It is important to stress that the data used in this paper refer to the 1990s and early 2000s. They, thus, cover the period to which the defendants of the death of social class refer to in elaborating their claims.

All the analyses include people aged 30 to 60 who were born in the country under study. The exclusion of immigrants is due to the fact that the data from the social mobility project include native subjects only. Moreover, the analyses do not distinguish by gender, although class position is likely to have different implications for men and women. This is because the three theoretical streams examined in the previous section do not incorporate any explicit arguments regarding gender differences in class inequality. Examining how gender and ethnicity interact with social class would have implied a deviation from the main purpose of the paper, that is addressing in a straightforward way the basic claim that social classes as such do not any more structure life-chances and political behaviours in a significant way.

I operationalise social class using the EGP scheme and consider the following eight social classes (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992): service class (which include managers, professionals and large firm employers; I-II), white collar workers (IIIa), self-employed (with and without employees), farmers (IVc), supervisors and skilled manual workers (V-VI), unskilled manual workers (VIIa), unskilled workers in sales and service occupations (IIIb), unskilled workers in agriculture (VIIb). To test the hypothesis of the death of social class, I focus on the top and bottom of the occupational structure and compare the situation of the service class (i.e., class I-II) with that of manual skilled and unskilled workers (including unskilled service workers and excluding farmer workers, (i.e. classes IIIb, V, VI and VIIa) in respect to the various dimensions of inequality. It is important to note that in the analysis of health, unemployment, type of contract and political consumerism class is defined on the basis of the actual or last occupation. Those who have never worked are, therefore, excluded from the analysis. Alternatively, one could have imputed the social class of those who have never worked using the social class of the head of their household. Still, the central argument of the thesis of the death of social class refers to the supposed individualisation of

labour. Focusing, therefore, on the influence of present and past position in the occupational structure seems to offer a more stringent test of the claim of social class⁷. On the other hand, in the analysis of the chances of social mobility and educational achievement, all the subjects are included. This is because in these latter analyses, the focus is on the causal effect of the social class of the family of origin which can be defined precisely for all the respondents.

With regard to the dependent variables in the case of health, I consider self-assessed health. In line with a standard practice in the literature I have constructed a dummy variable that distinguishes between very good and good self-assessed health on the one hand, and less than good (fair, bad, very bad) on the other (Cavelaars et al. 1998; Kunst et al. 2006). The analysis of unemployment focuses on the risk of being unemployed at the time of the survey, while that of the type of contract for those who are employees distinguishes between permanent and fixed-term temporary contract (including those employed with no contract)⁸. With regard to political consumerism, in the first wave of the ESS the respondents were asked, among other activities related to political participation, whether they had boycotted certain products and whether they had deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons during the last 12 months. I, then, consider as political consumerists those who have engaged in at least one of the two aforementioned activities in the last year before the survey. Finally with regard to educational and social mobility inequalities I examine the chances of achieving a university degree and accessing the service class, respectively.

Given the descriptive purpose of the paper, the high number of countries and the broad array of dimensions of inequality considered, the measures of inequality that I use are simple. The basic measures employed in the analyses are relative risks (or risk ratios), absolute differences and odds ratios. The relative ratio compares the probability of given life-chances and behaviours of the service class to that of the working class. This measure is directly interpretable in terms of the advantage that the service class has in given life-chances in respect to the working class. I also consider the absolute difference that reflects more adequately the general incidence of the phenomenon analysed⁹. Finally, I have

⁷ In any case those who have never been employed had to be excluded from the analysis of the risk of unemployment and of being employed with temporary contract.

⁸ For the analysis of the risk of unemployment social class is defined referring to the last occupation before unemployment, for those who are unemployed, and to the current occupation for those who are employed.

⁹ Consider this example. In society A group 1 has a 2% probability of a given behaviour, while group 2 a 6% probability. In society B the same probabilities are 20% and 60%, respectively. The relative ratio is equal to 3 in both societies, while the absolute differences are 4% and 40%. Absolute differences are important in epidemiological studies that want to express the importance of class

also computed odds ratios that are the standard inequality measure in social stratification research. In commenting on the findings I will focus on relative ratios and absolute differences. These measures seem to operationalise the concept of differences in life-chances and behaviour in a more direct way than the odds ratios and their interpretation is also more straightforward (Zocchetti et al. 1997; Holcomb et al. 2001).

In sum, the empirical analysis consists of a series of cross-tabulations where the independent variables are country and social class (focusing only on the service and working class) and the dependent variables are, respectively, the self-assessed health, the risk of being unemployed, the risk of being employed with a temporary/no contract, the chances of achieving university education, the chances of entering into the service class and the likelihood of having engaged in political consumerism¹⁰.

IV. RESULTS

Table 2 compares self-assessed health for the service and working class members. The first notable result is that in all countries the likelihood of a less than good (fair, bad, very bad) perceived health is higher for the working class members¹¹. The relative ratio varies from a 30% increase in the probability of perceiving a not good health for the working class in Italy to a 140% increase in the case of Greece. If one focuses on absolute differences, the ranking of the countries do change but the substantial disadvantage of the working class is also confirmed. This finding is in line with other more in-depth comparative studies that have consistently shown that self-perceived health is worse and mortality is higher among those in less-advantaged socioeconomic positions (Kunst et al. 1998; Kunst et al. 2006). A recent study has also shown that class inequalities in mortality have widened between the 1980s and the 1990s (Mackenbach et al.

difference for the total disease burden of a country (Kunst *et al.* 1998). For an empirical analysis that shows the usefulness of presenting both relative and absolute measures in order to assess adequately a given health policy, see Fahey *et al.* (1995).

¹⁰ Other factors certainly affect the phenomena under study, in addition to and possibly in interaction with social class. Still, this paper does not aim to provide a full account of life chances and political consumerism but rather to test whether social classes still have an influence on them. Focusing on the bivariate relationships between social class and various indicators of life chances/risks seem to be the most direct test of the claim of the death of social classes. This point is further discussed in the conclusions.

¹¹ A consistent disadvantage for the working class is also found in all the countries if one considers the risk of being hampered in daily activities by any longstanding illness, or disability, infirmity or mental health problems. The results are not shown here due to space limitation.

2003). On the other hand, socioeconomic (education and income) inequalities in self-assessed health seem to have remained stable (Kunst et al. 2005). In any case no evidence is found of the blurring of socioeconomic inequalities in health and mortality in the last decades.

Table 2: Percentages of respondents who assess their health as less than good (fair, bad, very bad) by social class and country

	1. Service class	2. Working class	3.= 2/1 Relative ratio	4.= 2-1 Absolute difference	5. Odds ratio
Italy	30.0	38.6	1.3	8.6	1.5
Czech Republic	31.1	43.6	1.4	12.5	1.7
Germany	32.6	47.5	1.5	14.9	1.9
Hungary	44.8	66.5	1.5	21.6	2.4
Poland	38.1	57.3	1.5	19.3	2.2
Portugal	35.9	54.9	1.5	19.0	2.2
Netherlands	20.2	31.1	1.5	10.9	1.8
Spain	21.5	33.8	1.6	12.3	1.9
Slovenia	34.3	59.4	1.7	25.1	2.8
Norway	15.8	28.0	1.8	12.2	2.1
Switzerland	11.1	19.6	1.8	8.5	2.0
UK	16.7	30.5	1.8	13.8	2.2
Finland	22.3	41.0	1.8	18.7	2.4
Belgium	15.7	29.0	1.9	13.4	2.2
Sweden	17.3	33.1	1.9	15.8	2.4
Ireland	9.4	18.2	1.9	8.8	2.1
Denmark	13.0	29.9	2.3	17.0	2.9
Greece	11.3	27.1	2.4	15.8	2.9

Note: Countries are ranked by column 3; Source: ESS first and second wave.

With regard to country differences, no clear-cut pattern emerges from Table 2. Still, one might observe that Southern European countries (with the notable exception of Greece) tend to show lower class inequality in self-assessed health both in terms of relative ratios and absolute differences, while Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden and Finland) tend to cluster in the part of the table with higher inequality¹². The largest absolute differences (about 20 percentage points)

¹² These findings are remarkably similar to those of a comparative study made with the data of the EHPS for men aged 25-64 in eleven countries (Kunst *et al.* 2006). Despite the differences in the age bracket and the fact that women are not considered, Table 2.2 in Kunst *et al.* (2006) shows that class inequality in “less than good” self assessed health were the lowest in Italy, Spain and Portugal and highest in Greece, Denmark and Ireland.

are observed in East European countries (with the exception of the Czech Republic).

Table 3 compares the risk of unemployment for service and working class members. Far from having become endemic and affecting all social groups indiscriminately, the risk of unemployment does still largely follow the logic of social class. Working class members are, thus, disproportionately more at risk of being unemployed. In most countries the relative ratio is above three. In other words, in the majority of countries the risk of unemployment is more than three times higher for the working class than for the service class. Southern European countries are those where the disadvantage is most pronounced (with relative risk values of about six and seven), while Scandinavian countries (together with the Netherlands, Switzerland and Luxembourg) are those where the disadvantage is the lowest (with relative risk below the value of three).

Table 3: Risk of being unemployed at the time of the survey by social class and country

	1. Service class	2. Working class	3.= 2/1 Relative ratio	4.= 2-1 Absolute difference	5. Odds ratio
Netherlands	2.3	3.9	1.7	1.6	1.7
Switzerland	0.8	1.8	2.2	1.0	2.2
Luxembourg	0.9	2.1	2.2	1.1	2.2
Sweden	2.5	5.6	2.2	3.1	2.3
Norway	2.2	5.5	2.5	3.3	2.6
UK	2.6	7.3	2.8	4.7	2.9
Denmark	3.6	10.1	2.8	6.5	3.0
Slovenia	3.3	10.6	3.3	7.4	3.5
Poland	6.0	22.3	3.7	16.3	4.5
Hungary	3.3	12.7	3.8	9.4	4.3
Finland	3.5	13.5	3.9	10.0	4.3
Ireland	2.1	9.2	4.4	7.1	4.7
Germany	5.0	22.4	4.5	17.4	5.5
Czech Republic	2.6	12.0	4.6	9.3	5.0
Belgium	2.9	15.2	5.3	12.3	6.1
Italy	2.2	12.7	5.7	10.4	6.4
Portugal	2.4	14.5	6.0	12.1	6.9
Greece	3.0	19.0	6.3	16.0	7.6
Spain	1.4	10.4	7.6	9.1	8.4

Note: Countries are ranked by column 3; Source: ESS first and second wave.

A strong class effect is also found for the risk of being employed with a temporary contract (Table 4). The data from the ESS show that the relative risk varies from a value of 1.4 in Denmark to about four times in Spain. In most

countries the absolute differences are about or above ten percentage points, being particularly large in the case of Southern European countries.

Table 4: Risk of being employed with a temporary contract at the time of the survey by social class (only for those employed as employees) and country

	1. Service class	2. Working class	3.= 2/1 Relative ratio	4.= 2-1 Absolute difference	5. Odds ratio
Denmark	14.2	19.2	1.4	5.0	1.4
Switzerland	6.5	8.9	1.4	2.3	1.4
Finland	14.2	22.3	1.6	8.1	1.7
Greece	25.7	45.3	1.8	19.6	2.4
Luxembourg	7.1	12.6	1.8	5.5	1.9
Ireland	25.6	46.9	1.8	21.4	2.6
Belgium	7.3	13.5	1.8	6.2	2.0
Czech Republic	14.3	27.2	1.9	13.0	2.3
UK	12.6	24.2	1.9	11.5	2.2
norway	9.3	18.0	1.9	8.6	2.1
Sweden	7.8	15.8	2.0	8.0	2.2
Germany	9.5	19.8	2.1	10.3	2.4
Slovenia	8.6	18.4	2.1	9.8	2.4
Hungary	10.0	22.8	2.3	12.8	2.7
netherlands	9.0	21.6	2.4	12.6	2.8
Poland	9.8	26.0	2.7	16.2	3.2
Italy	6.4	22.1	3.5	15.7	4.1
Portugal	8.2	29.3	3.6	21.1	4.7
Spain	10.4	40.8	3.9	30.4	5.9

Note: Countries are ranked by column 3; Source: ESS first and second wave.

Table 5 presents a simple indicator of inequality in the educational opportunities by class of origin, namely, the percentages of working and service class children who managed to achieve a university degree. In all countries the chances of attaining a university degree are much higher for those from service class families (see also Shavit et al. 2007). Again the country differences are notable. Still, even in those countries with lower inequality measured in terms of relative rate such as the Netherlands and Israel, the likelihood of achieving a university degree is double for service class descendants when compared to working class ones. Southern European countries and Ireland turn out to be those with the greatest inequality with an advantage in achieving a university degree for the service class descendants between five and eight times. The absolute difference is above 30 percentage points in most countries. In this case, it is also interesting to comment on the odds ratios which are computed comparing the probability of achieving a university degree for the service class and working class members to

the probability of achieving a compulsory education for the service and working class¹³. In other words, the odds ratio also takes into account the relative risk of stopping at an early stage of the educational system.

Table 5: Probability of attaining a university degree by social origin and country

	1. Working class	2. Service class	3.= 2/1 Relative ratio	4.= 2-1 Absolute differenc e	5. Odds ratio
Israel	31.0	66.0	2.1	35.0	7.0
Netherlands	21.7	49.8	2.3	28.1	6.5
Great Britain	15.4	39.3	2.6	23.9	5.6
Norway	20.2	56.4	2.8	36.2	6.2
Germany	11.9	38.2	3.2	26.3	10.4
Poland	13.6	47.6	3.5	34.0	14.4
Spain 2006	14.7	53.9	3.7	39.2	11.1
Hungary	10.2	52.0	5.1	41.8	23.3
Spain 1991	8.4	45.1	5.4	36.7	13.2
Ireland	9.2	53.9	5.9	44.7	80.9
France	7.4	44.0	5.9	36.6	19.4
Italy	5.4	42.1	7.8	36.7	36.6

Note: Countries are ranked by column 3; In order to compute the odds ratios in column 5 attainment of a university degree is compared to attainment of compulsory education

Source: Breen(2004) and for Spain INE(1991) and CIS (2006).

If one considers, thus, this type of measure of inequality, then Great Britain and Norway turn out to have the smallest odds ratios. This is because in those countries not only do children of the working class perform relatively well in achieving a university degree, but also the advantage of the service class children in avoiding stopping at compulsory education is not so extreme as it is in other countries¹⁴. Finally, if one focuses on the Spanish case, the inequality measured

¹³ This makes for a difference with respect to the previous tables where the odds ratios were computed comparing the risk of a given event (for instance perceiving to have not- good health) for the service and working class with the risk of not experiencing the event (for instance perceiving to have good or very good health). In the case of educational and mobility inequality, the odds ratios refer to a specific alternative to achieving university and entering into the service class. Namely, achieving compulsory education only and entering into the working class, respectively.

¹⁴ For instance in Great Britain 26.1% of those with service class origin and 56.9% of those with a working class origin have a compulsory education. In

by the relative rates and the odds ratio has slightly decreased, while it has slightly increased in terms of absolute differences.

The findings for the chances of social mobility and access in the most privileged service class follow closely those of educational inequality (Table 6). Thus, these chances are strongly segmented by the position from which one starts. In all countries service class descendants have much higher chances of staying in the same class of their family of origin than those that working class children have to move up to the service class. The inequality is the lowest in the Netherlands if one considers the relative rate, and in Norway if one considers the odds ratio. This is because the odds ratio also takes into account the relative chances of getting into the working class, i.e. immobility for those from a working class family and downward mobility for those from a service class family.

Table 6: Probability of access into the service class by class of origin and country

	1. Working class	2. Service class	3.= 2/1 Relative ratio	4.= 2-1 Absolute difference	5. Odds ratio
Netherlands	43.9	69.1	1.6	25.2	5.3
Norway	32.6	62.1	1.9	29.5	3.5
Germany	28.0	54.6	2.0	26.6	4.5
Great Britain	29.6	58.7	2.0	29.1	5.0
Poland	22.1	47.1	2.1	25.0	4.7
Israel	22.2	52.1	2.3	29.9	4.6
Hungary	22.0	61.9	2.8	39.9	8.3
France	17.8	55.5	3.1	37.7	9.1
Spain 2006	16.4	54.9	3.4	38.5	11.7
Italy	15.7	57.9	3.7	42.2	21.1
Spain 1991	12.6	50.2	4.0	37.6	12.5
Ireland	15.4	63.4	4.1	48.0	13.4

Note: Countries are ranked by column 3; In order to compute the odds ratios in column 5 access to the service class is compared with access to the unskilled manual class.

Source: Breen(2004) and for Spain INE(1991) and CIS (2006).

Norway turns out to be, thus, the most open among the countries considered because those from service class families have a relatively high likelihood of

Norway the corresponding figures are 23.1% and 51.1%, respectively. On the other hand, in Ireland (the country with the highest odds ratio) only 2% of those with service class origin stop at compulsory education, when compared to 29% of those with working class origin.

moving downward to the working class¹⁵. Irrespectively of considering relative risks or odds ratios, class inequality is much stronger in Southern European countries (including France) and Ireland where service class descendants are about three or four times more likely to end up in the service class than working class descendants and where the odds ratios value are above 10. In all countries, the absolute differences are above 25 percentage points.

Table 7: Probability of having engaged in political consumerism by social class and country

	1. Working class	2. Service class	3.= 2/1 Relative ratio	4.= 2-1 Absolute difference	5. Odds ratio
Switzerland	51.2	66.6	1.3	15.4	1.9
Sweden	53.3	76.9	1.4	23.6	2.9
Czech Republic	25.2	40.5	1.6	15.3	2.0
Luxembourg	35.3	59.0	1.7	23.7	2.6
Finland	37.1	65.0	1.8	27.9	3.2
Germany	36.2	64.2	1.8	27.9	3.2
Italy	11.8	21.2	1.8	9.4	2.0
UK	33.5	61.3	1.8	27.8	3.1
Norway	32.1	58.9	1.8	26.8	3.0
Denmark	37.8	69.4	1.8	31.6	3.7
Netherlands	22.6	41.7	1.8	19.1	2.4
Belgium	23.2	46.0	2.0	22.8	2.8
Austria	22.6	46.6	2.1	24.0	3.0
Israel	14.9	35.5	2.4	20.6	3.1
Ireland	19.7	48.6	2.5	28.9	3.9
Hungary	8.6	22.3	2.6	13.7	3.1
Slovenia	7.1	19.0	2.7	11.8	3.0
Greece	10.7	28.9	2.7	18.3	3.4
Spain	10.2	29.0	2.9	18.9	3.6
Portugal	4.5	18.9	4.2	14.4	5.0
Poland	4.9	26.7	5.5	21.8	7.1

Note: Countries are ranked by column 3; Source: ESS first wave.

¹⁵In Norway 26.4% of the service class members move down to the working class (that also includes skilled manual workers) while 48.9% of those with a working class family remain in the working class. The corresponding figures for Italy are 7.5% and 43%, respectively.

For Spain, overall the comparison for the results of 1991 and 2006 points to a substantial stability in the inequality of opportunities of social mobility, with a slight decrease measured in relative terms and a slight increase in absolute terms.

Finally Table 7 compares the likelihood of having engaged in political consumerism. In a previous section I have argued that political consumerism is a highly individualised consumption action which offers a particularly appropriate case for testing the empirical plausibility of the hypothesis of the death of class politics. Contrary to this hypothesis, Table 7 shows that social class strongly affects the likelihood of being a political consumer. In most countries those who belong to the service class are about twice as likely to have engaged in political consumerism than those of the working class. In the extreme case of Portugal and Poland this advantage raises to four and five times, respectively. Absolute differences are also substantial and range from about 10 per cent in the case of Italy to more than 30 per cent in the case of Denmark.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In order to avoid the risk of over-generalising the implications of the findings presented in the previous sections, it is useful to stress some limitations. First, the analysis does not distinguish the class effect by gender. Second, it is based only on bivariate and descriptive statistics. Third, the data (with the exception of the data on social mobility and inequality in education for Spain) only refer to a particular point in time (the 90s or the early years of the 21st century) and they do not allow us to draw any conclusions on trends of class inequality over time. Still, one might argue that the research design employed in the article is well suited to address the claim of the death of social class to the extent that such a claim neither elaborates on possible intervening variables underlying the (fading) class effects, nor on their possible variation by gender. In fact, the hypothesis of the death of social class is bivariate and descriptive in its nature. Moreover, this hypothesis is precisely developed for the historical period to which the data analysed in this article refers.

With these caveats in mind, one can venture to highlight two general results. First, the empirical analysis presented in this paper shows marked class inequalities in life chances. This is broadly true for all the dimensions of inequality and all the countries considered. Social class also strongly affects the likelihood of engaging in new forms of political behaviour such as political consumerism. On average across countries, service class members are 3.5 times more likely to have access to university education and 2.3 times more likely to have access to service class occupations and 1.8 times more likely to be political consumerists than the working class members¹⁶. On the other hand, working

¹⁶ The figures commented on in the text refer to the median values of the country distributions for the different dimensions of inequality. Thus, 3.5 is the median

class member are about two times more likely to perceive not good health and to have non-permanent contracts and 3.7 times more likely to be unemployed. If one considers absolute differences across countries, these vary on average from a maximum of 36.2 per cent points in the case of access to university education (to the advantage of the service class) to 7.6 per cent points in the case of unemployment (to the disadvantage of the working class).

On the basis of these findings, the claim that social classes are useless in interpreting patterns of inequality in advanced societies seems to be largely exaggerated. Far from being dead or being zombie categories, classes appear to be alive and well. This does not suggest that class is the only key category in understanding patterns of social inequality in contemporary societies nor that nothing has changed with respect to traditional class-based industrial societies. It might well be that class inequalities are partly reducing, as the most recent study of educational opportunities and social mobility suggests (Breen 2004), and that other types of inequality (such as ethnicity based inequality) might emerge as the most decisive in the majority of European countries. Still, the results discussed in the previous section suggest that social class (defined in terms of the subjects' position in the labour market) is still a powerful factor that affects individual life chances and consumption behaviours.

Second, the precise country ranking with respect to the advantage of the service class compared to the working class varies depending on the dimension of inequality considered. For instance in Southern European countries (Italy, Spain and Portugal but not Greece) one finds relatively low class inequality in health but high class inequality in the risk of unemployment. The opposite tends to be true for Scandinavian countries. The attempt to get to a final country ranking is further complicated because the conclusions might vary depending on whether one considers absolute differences or relative risks. To tackle these difficulties and provide a tentative wide-angle picture of country differences, Table 8 presents two indices of the country position in the ranking of the size of inequality for nine countries for which the data are available for all the dimensions of inequality. The two indices are a sum of each country position in the rankings in terms of relative risks and absolute differences, respectively. If one considers, for instance, the relative index for the Netherlands, the value 17 is the sum of the positions of the Netherlands in the ranking of the countries with respect to the different dimensions of inequality measured in terms of relative differences (columns four to nine). The absolute index is computed following the same logic but adding the positions in the ranking of the countries in terms of absolute differences. Column 3 is the average of the absolute and relative index.

value of the distribution of the risk ratios by country that corresponds to Poland in this specific case (see Table 4).

Table 8: Ranking of the countries by the size of the inequality measured in terms of the relative ratio and of the absolute differences (from low to high inequality)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
	Relative index	Absolute index	Average index	Ranking by relative ratio						Ranking by absolute diff.					
				H	U	C	Ed	M	P	H	U	C	Ed	M	P
Netherlands	19	17	18.0	5	1	6	1	1	5	3	1	4	3	2	4
Norway	18	23	20.5	7	2	3	3	2	1	4	2	1	5	5	6
UK	23	24	23.5	8	3	2	2	4	4	6	3	3	1	4	7
Germany	22	31	26.5	2	7	4	4	3	2	7	9	2	2	3	8
Italy	36	30	33.0	1	8	8	9	7	3	1	7	6	7	8	1
Poland	34	33	33.5	4	4	7	5	5	9	8	8	7	4	1	5
Hungary	32	37	34.5	3	5	5	6	6	7	9	6	5	8	7	2
Ireland	39	41	40.0	9	6	1	8	9	6	2	4	8	9	9	9
Spain	47	34	40.5	6	9	9	7	8	8	5	5	9	6	6	3

Note: Countries are ranked by column 3 (Average index); the ranking for Spain for the chances of educational attainment and social mobility refers to 1991; the ranking for UK for the chances of educational attainment and social mobility is actually the ranking for Great Britain; Relative index= column 4+5+...+9; Absolute index=column10+11+...+15; Average index= (column 1+ column 2)/2

Legend:

H=self assessed health,

U = unemployment,

C =temporary contract;

Ed= education;

M= social mobility;

P= political consumerism

Relative index= 4+5+6+7+8+9; Absolute index=10+11+12+13+14+15; Average index= (1+2)/2

Table 8 suggests that one finds relatively lower class inequalities in The Netherlands and Norway and greater class inequalities in Southern and East European countries and in Ireland. Great Britain and Germany rank somewhere in the middle. A clear shortcoming of Table 8 is that one misses data for other countries representative of the liberal and social-democratic welfare regimes. If one could enlarge the comparison to also include the USA and other Scandinavian countries, the final picture might be more refined than that provided by Table 8. Nevertheless, the findings of this paper questions a second (and often implicit) claim of the defendants of the death of social classes who argue that the individualisation process is driving advanced economies towards a common pattern of classless inequality. Contrary to this convergence hypothesis, the differences across countries in the size of class based inequalities are still notable.

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