

## Book review

Maciej Gdula, Michał Sutowski (eds.), *Klasy w Polsce. Teorie, dyskusje, badania, kontekst* [*Classes in Poland. Theories, discussions, research, contexts*], Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Zaawansowanych: 2017: 195: ISBN 978-83-65853-14-1

In modern social studies, class theory is often criticized, especially by scholars heralding the advent of modernity or postmodernity who proclaim the end of class society. The usefulness of the concept of class in explaining human choices, strategies or orientations is frequently questioned. Traditional research based on class analysis inextricably linked to the works of Karl Marx and Max Weber is seen as obsolete, they are opposed to the thesis of the collapse of the traditional class order triggered by social development and differentiation of modern society. Furthermore, the class patterns that still are referred to (e.g. EGP) are criticized for their inability to grasp the cultural and symbolic dimensions of the social structure. One of the best known theoretical responses addressing weaknesses of traditional class analysis is the cultural concept of classes by Bourdieu, which, as Michał Cebula writes, offers a vision of class 'different than it used to be – not as actual segments (large groups), but rather as an expression of the complex processes of resource accumulation...' (Cebula 2017: 34).

However, the concept of class, despite heavy criticism it receives, is not passé, as evidenced by 'Classes in Poland. Theories, discussions, research, contexts'. In the Introduction the Editors emphasize the importance of a class perspective in reconstructing social inequalities and criticism of the analysis of inequalities focused on non-class social strata segments. Such traces can be found in most of the chapters in the book, but the authors do not follow one class perspective. On the contrary, particular contributions are embedded in various paradigms, ranging from classical Marxist approach, accentuating different forms of exploitation as the key factors (Klaus Doerre's chapter), through Weberian perspective with some references

to Marx, representative for the main Polish circle of social structure researchers (Henryk Domański's chapter), to analyzes set in Bourdieu's class paradigm (most other chapters). In all chapters there are both theoretical dimension (methodological issues are covered most extensively in the chapter by Maciej Gdula) and empirical one present, even though that they are not balanced in each piece. In that interesting study, the authors analyze, using concrete theoretical and methodological perspectives, selected aspects of the social life of Poles, Germans and Europeans (Doerre).

The basic concepts are not neglected in the volume. They can be found in Domański's chapter 'Class stratification in Poland 1982–2015'. The synthetic piece departs from the definition of classes, drawing mainly on Weber, but also with some references to Marx. The author emphasizes the notions of ownership and power, but restrains himself from relational positioning of classes. Domański's analysis is empirically set on data from nationwide representative survey research, which allows the author to distinguish six classes in the Polish society. In brief, they can be labelled as: (1) senior management of enterprises, senior government officials and specialists; (2) employees of the lower-level mind (this is a very roomy category, including chiefs from one end, and cashiers at the post office from the other); (3) business owners and self-employed owners outside agriculture; (4) skilled workers, (5) unskilled workers; (6) farmers, including farm owners and farm workers. The author refrains from naming an upper class, explaining that 'it is too narrow to be captured in the study' (it should be remembered that Domański's survey research has always been done on representative nationwide samples of 1000 respondents). Nevertheless, he provides a descriptive profile of the upper class and business class in Poland: they are said to have a common feature made of wealth but differ in terms of prestige and social legitimacy.

Gdula's chapter 'Benefits of class disparities. Classes in Poland and opportunities for social change challenges Domański in a way. While Domański paints the system of inequality in Polish society on the basis of the conceptual scheme of the Weberian-Marxist genesis, in which he has been very consistent for years Gdula applies the Bourdieu scheme expanded with the political science dimension of class configuration in the policymaking process. Instead of six classes founded on the basis of socio-occupational groups (Domański's approach), in Gdula's proposal there are three large class aggregates with a higher class (omitted by Domański. As Gdula points out, in engagement with Domański, the role of that specific class cannot be reduced to the quantitative aspect only. Gdula's stance is deeply embedded in Bourdieu's concept but it is also linked to previous empirical research of the author and his colleagues. The approach offered in the chapter is not interesting in cognitive terms but also inspiring and invigorating, despite some reservations that can be addressed.

Adam Mrozowicki's chapter 'From proletariat to precariat? The class's experience in the biographies of workers and young workers dissected in Poland' reveals the author's affinity with the theoretical and methodological orientation of Domański and Bourdieu, but also – as far as the younger generation of researchers is concerned – with Maciej Gdula, Michał Cebula and Przemysław Sadura. The chapter addresses, on the one hand, the issues of working class identity, seen as the 'lost class' subjected to collective degradation, and, on the other, the issue of 'normalization of precariousness'. The author offers a definition of precariat, by referring to modern, well-known theories, including Gay Standing's, and contributes to the debate on the emergence of precariat as a separate social class, also as a 'class for itself'. The article shows that both in the past research on working class, and the recent youth studies, workers and young people threatened by precarization generally reject the 'framework of the »social class«, referring to the 'moral framework', while describing social inequalities.

Magda Szcześniak's focus is different. Her chapter 'Class images. Images of the class structure in inequalities times of political transformation' delivers a media content analysis. It draws on selected examples observed in the media discourse on the supposed Polish variation of the 'middle class', from which a quite vague image of a segment of the class structure rather anticipated (wishful thinking) than the actual is reconstructed. The author offers some interesting comments about imitation of culture patterns previously absent in Polish society, diffused thanks to TV series, where 'middle class' and manifestations of their social status were shown.

The book under review is definitely a must-read for social studies scholars looking for useful class schemes and interested in other dimensions of social inequality as well. It delivers analyses based on the data from various sources: nationwide representative survey research and studies of selected social groups made on the basis of biographical interviews (Mrozowicki's chapter). It is certainly a convenient point of departure for building a new research agenda – both in quantitative and qualitative dimension – but can also help in conducting analysis of consumer behavior, political attitudes, educational choices or lifestyles.

## References

Cebula M. (2017), 'Analiza klasowa na rozdrożu? W stronę kulturowej koncepcji klas P. Bourdieu', *Studia Socjologiczne* 3: s. 33–69